



University of
Massachusetts
Amherst

Roughly Speaking: A Performance Autoethnography of Occupation, Aesthetics, and Epistemology

Item Type	dissertation
Authors	Boudreau, Tyler
DOI	10.7275/9911612.0
Download date	2025-03-16 18:46:19
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/20207

**ROUGHLY SPEAKING:
A PERFORMANCE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF OCCUPATION,
AESTHETICS, AND EPISTEMOLOGY**

A Dissertation presented

by

TYLER BOUDREAU

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2017

Communication

© Copyright by Tyler Boudreau 2017
All Rights Reserved

**ROUGHLY SPEAKING:
A PERFORMANCE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF OCCUPATION,
AESTHETICS, AND EPISTEMOLOGY**

A Dissertation presented

by

TYLER BOUDREAU

Approved as to style and content by:

Leda Cooks, Chair

Claudio Moreira, Member

Jenny Spencer, Member

Mari Castañeda, Chair

Department of Communication

ABSTRACT

**ROUGHLY SPEAKING:
A PERFORMANCE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF OCCUPATION, AESTHETICS,
AND EPISTEMOLOGY**

MAY 2017

TYLER BOUDREAU, B.A., WORCESTER STATE COLLEGE

M.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Leda Cooks

Roughly Speaking is a performance autoethnography that explores both conditions of storytelling and narrative strategies for producing alternative interpretations and representations of experience, in particular, the occupation of space and subjectivities. Through creative manipulations of voice and style, this narrative performance attempts to challenge dominant notions of authorship, identity, and epistemology, especially those that mask the situatedness of knowledge production and reproduce systemic marginalization of non-normative bodies, voices, and perspectives. Taking as a starting point the narrative form of identity and building upon the mutually constitutive character of social and personal narratives, with an emphasis on embodiment, performativity, and the postmodern condition, this autoethnography is intended to perform the ideological nature of all narrative construction and the ways in which social discourses and narratives compete both in social spaces and within bodies in the formation and reformation of collective and personal identities.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iv
CHAPTER	
1. PREAMBLE AND OTHER PRELIMINARY MATERIALS	1
A. Preamble.....	1
B. Opening Remarks.....	3
C. Deposition of The Boy: Part 45-1	7
D. People’s Exhibit Number 7	12
E. Deposition of The Boy: Part 45-2	15
F. Vestibule.....	18
2. THE PSYCHATRIX.....	22
A. Shamil	22
B. As the Crow Flies.....	39
C. Oscar.....	44
D. Sinjin	55
E. Trace Tiburon	58
F. The Bridge of Humbaba	66
G. Desert Child	72
3. PACKING INFERNO	81
A. The Ghost, Braz Cubas	81
B. The Question of Fists	86
C. Weightless	90
D. Our Approach.....	99
E. Mother’s Tub	117
F. Demons are Improbable.....	122

4. OPEN MIC NIGHT	131
A. Silence	131
B. Measure of a Poem	141
C. Sword	147
5. TOWARD CAYE ALMA	176
A. Turtleneck Lady	176
B. Outside of Tyler	186
C. The Installation Humbaba	191
D. W. Devising	200
E. Slipping	210
F. Weaving Together	215
G. The Gray Man	246
H. Cradle of a Mushroom Kiss	257
I. La Ruptura	263
J. Caye Alma	274
6. THE ABSCONDERS	296
A. Fleeting Monuments	296
B. Roughly Speaking	304
C. Epilogue	310
APPENDICES	
A. DISCUSSION OF DISSERTATION-PERFORMANCE	322
B. METHODS AND THEORY	327
C. NARRATIVE	388
BIBLIOGRAPHY	421

CHAPTER 1

PREAMBLE AND OTHER PRELIMINARY MATERIALS

A. Preamble

For the record, this statement has not been authored by tyler boudreau. Although there appears to be substantial evidence to the contrary (the cover sheet of this document, for example), we submit that the record is wrong and that the identity of this individual named on the header before you is, in fact, a fabrication. We are here to set that record straight.

Now then, who exactly is this person whose name we're preparing for the proverbial memory hole? Well, that's just the problem, of course. We cannot judge this matter clearly, not yet at any rate. However, the individual in question might simply be thought of as *the narrator*, if this is to be a narrative; or, perhaps *the subject*, if this is an ethnography; or, on the other hand, *the researcher*, depending on the circumstances—the observer and/or the observed.

We, the manipulators of the keyboard, will serve, provisionally, as the collective stenographers of this account, and also the authors in some instances where the facts require segue and clarification, and quite possibly the plaintiffs as well, should our account prove libelous. We want to make it clear from the outset that while we have no intention of representing the facts fairly or without prejudice, we must also acknowledge that the term *we* used herein should not be understood to mark any sort of solidarity or clarity among us.

We are *we* by no greater virtues than those established by the precedents and conventions of a language, which has been imposed upon us, and through which, we are compelled to communicate our forthcoming arguments. There is very little else that we can attest binds us in contract or spirit. We present ourselves here as a sort of class action only because it is a format that is both available to us and best resembles our intent; nevertheless, we will stipulate as well, in advance, that this format does in itself undermine the very claims that have brought us here in the first place.

This next point may be self-evident, but we feel it will be useful to note that whether we work collaboratively or in protest of one another's versions or interpretations of the events in question, there can really only be one set of fingertips on the keyboard at any given time; therefore, we shall consider it an assumption from this point forward that whatever perspective is negotiated by the group is, for one thing, inherently lacking coherence, and for another, cannot be wholly conveyed, because each of us, in our turn, has been given a rather free hand as to the manner in which said perspective shall be expressed on the page.

We have deemed this problem irresolvable; therefore, we find it sufficient to periodically mark these variances with the pronoun *I*. Let the record show that we do not employ this term with any sense of unity; in fact, just the opposite. It is our precise intention—and this may be our sole attempt at precision throughout the document to follow—that the term *I* specifically denote a lack of unity in the very same sense that the term *we* denotes, for us, foremost a lack of solidarity. We intend these pronouns as the permanent markers of impossibility, as the immutable contingency of our relations, and the everlasting divide between and within all of us.

B. Opening Remarks

Our first matter for consideration will be the urgent disposal of what we believe to be the fallacious appellation indicated at the head of this document, namely, the individual who has been recognized as one *tyler boudreau*. A close examination of historical records will demonstrate, sufficiently we believe, that *tyler boudreau*—more specifically the *tyler boudreau* of 71 Webster Avenue—was never born. It stands to reason, therefore, that the same *tyler boudreau* cannot be the author of this document.

We direct your attention to the contents of a deposition that we now submit as People's Exhibit Number 3. Due to the limitations of memory, and the lack of other material evidence, and due to our own forthcoming arguments around the identity of this individual, we will refer to the witness simply as *the boy*. We would like to anticipate here any potential confusion that may arise from this label *the boy*, in part because this individual's gender may become a contested matter in future testimony, but more so because this witness is no longer a boy. That is to say, he is no longer a minor, not that he is no longer male.

Before we delve into the substance of this deposition, we would like to briefly comment on the general nature of this genre known as the *eyewitness account* and the widespread deference it receives over other forms of evidence that are commonly regarded as speculative or circumstantial. We intend to place this matter under scrutiny in due course but for the moment we would like to note our position that the *eyewitness account* rests upon faulty notions of the human capacity to know the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Therefore, in our view, there is nothing left but speculation and circumstance.

One will no doubt wonder why, then, we've taken this deposition at all or why we're presenting it here today as evidence. Indeed, we are faced with something of a philosophical impasse. However, according to various statutes and regulations, a person is entitled to speak in his or her own defense, and so we shall proceed under these juridical (though clearly flawed) obligations, more as a means of rhetorical actuation than any particular commitment to the law. We, therefore, urge you to remember that the boy is no longer a boy and his testimony should be understood as direct evidence of nothing, despite it being given in the first person; rather, it should be taken as a second hand account of events only partially experienced, recalled, and understood.

This will hopefully preclude the objection that this witness could not possibly know or sufficiently express what the boy thought or felt more than three decades ago living under entirely different circumstances and perceptions than that of the present day, from which he has cast his retrospective analyses. We view this evidence as essentially hearsay, but of value nonetheless for its corroboration of the historical records to which we've recently referred.

In short, the boy of 1353 Beacon Street was not born *tyler boudreau* but—verified by birth certificate—*jacob ellison jackson*. (See People's Exhibit Numbers 1 and 2.) This was a name taken from a distant paternal relative, but later discarded for reasons that have not yet been (and may never be) fully illuminated. What we can fairly draw from the boy's deposition is that this abandonment of the birth name was precipitated by the abandonment of the birth mother.

The whereabouts of the birth father (a.k.a. *bio-dad*) is unknown and, in our view, immaterial. Weighing more heavily on the matter, we find that this individual made scant

appearances throughout the boy's life and paid little or no child support. This latter statement jibes with public records held by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (and posted on their website), in which the birth father remains one of the high-ranking *dead beat dads* in the state's history. So, whatever else may be said of him, it may not be said that the man was without achievement.

Returning now to the boy, born *jacob ellison jackson*. When *bio-dad* slipped out the back and left the birth mother two steps from the street with nothing but the bills and a young boy to care for, *jacob* was re-designated *tyler*. There are additional details that have been omitted from this abridged timeline, but we believe this is a fair summation of the sequence of events. We must assume that the birth mother sat the boy down one morning, or maybe she just mentioned the change in passing, "Hey kid, you're not jacob anymore," or words to that effect.

We estimate, further, that the child was approximately three years old at the time, but it's hard to say absolutely because the episode was never recounted, reflected on, or referred to, thereafter. Furthermore, there is no record of any bewilderment or disorientation on the boy's part, just the curious archival evidence of one name or the other (*jacob* or *tyler*) on the backs of old photographs, in which the boy appears unaffected. So we will leave this issue marked for the moment by the question: *How did the boy feel?* and annotate tentatively beside it: *Unknown*.

We would like to mention here that the name *tyler* has a vocational origin. It means, or has indicated in past eras, one who is a tiler, that is, one who lays tiles. For the boy, however, it became clear that in his situation *tyler* was the namesake of spite or some form of retribution. The new name functioned foremost to strip *bio-dad* of his

familial legacy. And through incessant reminders of the birth father's depraved character, the boy absorbed the inescapable conclusion that he was the offspring of depravity.

Over the years, he further gathered that *tyler* was not so much a name but a designation that the birth mother could wield like a weapon and with it invoke this depravity. It further served as justification for a battery of corporal punishments and emotional alienations. The boy's surname *jackson* survived several years longer than *jacob*, until the birth mother found a new man to marry whose name was *boudreau*. The boy was offered a choice: endure *jackson* or become *boudreau*. Or, to reflect his Catholic circumstances, we might rephrase the options in ecclesiastical terms: remain in purgatory or accept redemption.

The boy took the latter option, assuming the name *boudreau*; he did so willingly, even enthusiastically, but it's worth mentioning that he experienced a sort of buyer's remorse, after the fact, when it turned out the new name did not actually alter his depraved status, or change his legal identity, since the birth mother never filed the necessary documents to make the change official. Instead, this nominal transaction produced an indistinct condition in which the boy found it difficult to muster any sense of allegiance with himself. Evidently this new name was not his salvation, and this new man was not God.

C. Deposition of The Boy: Part 45-1

- 1 Q Okay sir, let's try this *again*...for the record.
- 2 A Of course. Gladly.
- 3 Q Thank you. I'd like to return to the events surrounding this
- 4 difficulty with your name.
- 5 A Well...I'd say it started--
- 6 Q It? I'm sorry, what started? Strike that. Please continue.
- 7 A Uh okay...thanks. So as I was saying, I went to this meeting in--
- 8 Q Meeting? What was the function of this meeting?
- 9 A Well that wasn't clear to me at first, which is why I'm having trouble--
- 10 Q You attended a meeting with no purpose?
- 11 A I believe the meeting had a purpose, but yes, that's correct I had no
- 12 particular purpose in attending.
- 13 Q And did you eventually discover it's purpose?
- 14 A Sort of. But I had some concerns before the meeting really got going.
- 15 Q Concerns? Such as?
- 16 A Well, for starters, they asked me my name.
- 17 Q Your name? And why should that be a concern?
- 18 A I don't know. It felt like they were trying to stick me into some
- 19 kind of a box, you know, like, trying to *define* me.
- 20 Q Define you? By your name? You think of your name as a definition?

1 A No, of course not. It's just shorthand, I know, but it does imply a
2 definition.

2 Q I see. And what definition would that be?

3 A Well that's exactly the problem. What does anyone's name really
4 signify?

5 Q Strike that! Sir, I'll have to ask you to refrain from posing questions
6 during this interview. You're going to disrupt the intelligibility of the
7 transcript. I ask the questions and you answer them. This will be
8 indicated by the letters "Q" and "A" on the page. Understand? Good.
9 Now, perhaps you'd like to answer that question yourself. What does
11 one's name signify?

12 A Well I mean...a particular body, I suppose, but the real question is
13 how to meaningfully distinguish one body from another. How does
14 one accomplish that?

15 Q Sir, please limit yourself to responses. No questions. Thanks. So then,
16 how about you tell me. How does one distinguish one body from
17 another?

18 A To my knowledge, there's no way.

19 Q No way? Really? Finger prints? Retinal scans? Blood typing? DNA
20 analysis? Surely these serve to differentiate bodies.

1 A I'd say they function in exactly the same way as the name, just more
2 precisely. Sure, they mark a difference, but they don't establish the
3 character of that difference or its significance.

4 Q That's fine sir, but we're straying from the major concern here. I'd like
5 to establish a correlation, if there is any, between the circumstances
6 relating to your name and the purpose of this meeting.

7 A This is just what I'm saying. There's no real value in a name, so--

8 Q Yes, I get it. Thank you. But what I'm looking for here is *correlation*.

9 A [inaudible].

10 Q Sorry, what's that?

11 A [Witness motions 'no comment']

12 Q Fine. Let's move on to the events of the meeting itself. Perhaps we can
13 illuminate its purpose that way.

14 A Okay.

15 Q Please describe the environment.

16 A A classroom, the usual scene, desks, chairs, overhead lights, etcetera.

17 Q But this meeting was not a class, is that correct?

18 A Correct. The meeting was held after normal school hours.

19 Q And who was in attendance?

20 A Well...it's hard to say...It seems to me, this brings us right back to the

1 same problem as before. Attempting to define bodies.

2 Q Sir...please...just answer the question. Okay?

3 A How can I possibly? What do you want? A list of names? Mugshots

4 maybe? A dozen vials of blood? Fingerprint panels? Genetic codes?

5 Which of these will really tell you *who* these people are?

6 Q Yes, that's very funny. How about you just tell us how the other

7 attendees identified *themselves*.

8 A Well, I suppose I could do that. We took turns introducing ourselves

9 by sharing a story, whatever story we felt would best express our--

10 Q Uh, yes I see. And did you share a story as well? [...inaudible.]

11 A Yes I did.

12 Q Okay. Can you recall what story you told?

13 A I can recall where I began.

14 Q But not where you ended?

15 A Well, not really. The truth is I wasn't able to finish. I ran out of time.

16 Q [Mumbling: *Gee, there's a shock.*] Sorry, strike that. All right sir, how

17 about you tell us where your story began.

18 A Sure. Actually, I've got some of it written down already. See, I was

19 struggling to find a direction, you know, like a coherent narrative

20 structure or whatever, and a couple of the others suggested I try

- 1 writing the story out, in a journal or a notebook or something. So I did.
- 2 Q Great. And, do you have this journal with you?
- 3 A I do. Right here.
- 4 Q Thank you. Please mark this document *People's Exhibit Number 17*.

D. People's Exhibit Number 17

It was curiously balmy, I'd say, for a winter's day in the wake of a snowstorm, but I was only seven or eight years old, so maybe the curiosity didn't strike me till later. The dingy plowed peaks, piled up along the streets, had melted down a few inches by dusk and created currents of gray slush that ran along the sidewalks, eddying in potholes, and rushing down into the gutters. By dark, these murky rivers ran so high they seeped over the tops of my goulashes if I wasn't careful to leap from the curbs, one intersection after another, as I made my way down the city-lit street.

Though many years have passed. I'm relatively convinced of the accuracy of this description because I was pressed repeatedly in the days that followed for these very details by various counselor types and authority figures, all of them certain that the incident would scar me for life. Not one of them grasped the event's true significance for me. Not one of them understood why this should be. Looking back now, this may be because I never said. But what I remember feeling most of all was that I shouldn't have had to say anything.

I've often wondered about that evening, about getting lost, and my decision to disregard mother's directions and go my own way instead of hers. She told me the repair shop was only two blocks away, she said it clearly enough, but I'll admit I had my doubts. Was it stubbornness, childhood hubris, or was it, as I've told myself over the years, the mindset of a survivor believing defiantly, even perilously, in his own judgment over anything or anyone else?

"I forgot my keys," mother said. "Go down and get them and come right back."

In these times, as they are, it's harder to account for a child walking alone after dark. I'm not sure what thoughts or activities occupied mother that made her unable or unwilling to go to the garage herself. But for the moment, let's call it mercy that set me free from an apartment and sent me out on a warm winter's evening to fetch a set of keys. Let's say it was a different era, presided over by a different conventional wisdom. Let's call it good faith, or plain old luck, and leave it at that.

So I went my way instead of hers, and the temperature dropped slightly, and it began to snow lightly. And, I'll admit, as I trudged block after block, I felt a creeping sense of doubt. Snowflakes grew plump and fell faster as I reached a more sprawling side of town. Doubt became panic. Darkness, cold, and immanent consequences closed in and clamped down on my body. Every crease in mother's face twitched in the crumbling mortar of the brick facades. Every passing figure, dark and hunched forward, looked more like bending boughs than humans. And the windows with drawn shades became the eyes of the world, shut tight and fearful. Through the wind, one hears a distant cry...*You are not alone!* And then another voice cries with equal vigor...*You are ALL alone!*

I arrived at the garage, at last, pleased with myself, but just for a moment, till I went inside and discovered it was the wrong garage. Peering quietly through a gaping pane of glass, out into the icy night, I trembled at the thought of trudging home with no keys to account for myself. Reluctantly, I borrowed the phone and called mother, and as I explained the situation, an old man stepped forward and offered his assistance. He pointed to a white sedan, parked by the pumps, and said, "I'll give you a ride." The attendant looked him over and thought it was okay. The old man took the phone and

spoke to mother and she thought it was okay. Mother thought the old man with the white sedan was okay. I thought he was okay, too.

So the old man led me outside and off we went, down the slushy streets, wipers wiping, heater blowing, and then he made an unexpected move, an unaccountable turn down a side street, and into an empty lot. “What are we doing here?” I asked him. The old man brought the car to a stop at the far edge of the lot, pulled up the shifter, and turned toward me. Snow was still falling, gathering, accumulating over the windows. He asked me if I wanted to play. He said it just that way. “Do you want to play?” And I remember thinking it was a strange question for that time of the day. *Play? Play what?*

He held out a handful of coins that glistened like silver in a shaft of sallow light. It was, perhaps, a parsimonious bribe, all things considered, so you may find yourself asking what precisely a handful of silver could have meant to me. It meant precisely this: A bit of candy—nothing more. It meant I could lie beneath the covers in the night, in the dark, in my room, alone at last, at-long-fucking-last, with a bit of candy.

Papillon's, the old nightclub, thumped beneath the floorboards and the muffled revelry rose into my bed and I'd stare through the blankets pulled over my head and nestle deep in the illusion that darkness and silence and sweetness meant survival. That's what a handful of silver meant to me. This is not a story of how bad things can get. They get much worse, I know. So I suppose, it's not really a story of survival at all. But, after all, the nervous system is nervous.

E. Deposition of The Boy: Part 45-2

- 1 Q Sir, um...pardon me for saying...but this story...at least as far as
2 you've told it, doesn't seem to announce its own relevance to the
3 inquiry at hand.
- 4 A Well then I'd say you should mark that *People's Opinion Number 1*.
5 Because in my opinion, it's entirely relevant.
- 6 Q I see. Just out of curiosity...could you ever imagine a story or even a
7 detail, however slight, being potentially, um...*irrelevant*?
- 8 A I guess so. But it seems to me, a story's only criterion for relevance is
9 its *feeling* relevant to the teller. The real issue is how one chooses--
- 10 Q All right, all right, thanks. Moving on. I'd like to refer back now to an
11 earlier portion of the testimony, Part 32-4 of the Deposition, in which
12 you described an altercation that involved you and two other attendees
13 of the meeting. You recall this altercation?
- 14 A I'd say it was a minor dispute.
- 15 Q What was this dispute regarding?
- 16 A I asked the group to explain their process.
- 17 Q Their process?
- 18 A Their storytelling process.
- 19 Q I see. And did they explain?
- 20 A They did.

1 Q What was their explanation?

2 A I don't remember exactly, but basically it was an approach to healing.

3 Q Healing? What sort of healing?

4 A Well it varied, but generally psychological and emotional stuff.

5 Q Trauma?

6 A Mmm...not necessarily, but in some cases, perhaps.

7 Q So what were your concerns?

8 A I said their process was bullshit and their way of telling stories
9 couldn't heal anyone. Obviously, they didn't agree.

10 Q Yes, I can imagine. So this is what led to the altercation?

11 A It was a minor dispute.

12 Q You stated earlier in the Deposition that—and I'm quoting here—“*an*
13 *altercation ensued between me and two other attendees*”—end quote.
14 These are your words, correct?

15 A Yeah, those were my words, then, but now I'd call it a minor dispute.

16 Q Why the change in characterization from *altercation* to *dispute*?

17 A I don't know. I guess when I thought about it before it felt like an
18 altercation. Now it feels like a dispute. I wasn't eating well at the time,
19 I mean when I gave that testimony. I'm sure that cast a pall over all my
20 perspectives.

1 Q Yes okay, but are you suggesting we alter the record to correspond
2 with your swinging appetite? Doesn't that kind of defeat the purpose
3 of a record?

4 A I suppose it depends on what you want the record to show.

5 Q Right. I'm curious...if you disagreed with their process, why did you
6 take their advice about journaling?

7 A Oh, well like I said, I was struggling to find a direction for my story.
8 They suggested a journal might kind of compel a direction, well since,
9 you know, because I'd have to, like, put it into an order, literally.

10 Q These were, in fact, the same two people who you'd just had an
11 altercation with, is that correct?

12 A A minor dispute...yes, that's correct...the same two people.

13 Q I see. And with this journaling, did you find they were right? Did you
14 find a direction?

15 A Um...not really.

16 Q Then what, in the end, did you find?

17 A Well...for one thing...I found myself without a name.

F. Vestibule

We abandoned the place we once knew as home and we journeyed for some duration to an ancient gulf, conveyed ourselves across that gulf, and at the opposite edge we found a desert. The desert unfolded like a topographical map of hunger and desire. In one direction, we saw merciless crags, in another direction breathtaking drifts, and the horizon thrashed majestically under waves of heat and wind. The sun touched the earth, the sand became fire, and we gasped as one voice.

“I have been here before.”

The desert abounds with life. And so it abounds with death. Who sees? Who speaks? Lest we forget to ask. Who will discover whom, in the desert? Who will be hungry? Who will be hugged? Who will survive? We became *we* by no greater virtues than those established by the precedents and conventions of a phantasmic history that appeared ominously at the threshold of our birth, like the black-eyed republican knitting our fates with blood red needles, knitting, knitting, as implacably as wind and fire. By the time our bodies burst out in the world, the vengeance was already sown. In short, we never really knew what *we* meant. We still don't, and don't want to. It shouldn't be a mystery, and yet, we cry the acid why, because we must.

Viewing a vacant lot, on a winter's night, we find a boy huddled against the passenger door inside a white sedan with an old man's kindly eyes smiling after him in silent pursuit. Sallow light seeps through the snow covered windows and falls across the old man's fist of glistening silver alongside his white sagging penis. We don't know how to tell the story from here, other than to say the boy survives. He is very much alive and shows his temper to the old man with a gaze that, for him, is entirely new. He's never

cast or felt this force before. And suddenly the old man appears timid and crumbling, as if his bones are disintegrating beneath his ashen skin. His smile flickers and fades from view.

The story ends here, more or less. But one detail emerges from this encounter that leans against the boy's memory in an unanticipated way. When he opened the door and climbed out of the car, back into the night and the ice and the wind, the old man held out his fistful of silver again, and again it captured a shaft of sallow light. It was apparent in the old man's face, the meaning of this silver had changed, for him, but not for the boy, who was a survivor. A survivor—that's what he called himself. So this time when the silver was offered, he took it. There were still so many cold nights to come, with covers, and floorboards, and muffled music floating up from *Papillon's*, and now the candy he might afford. That's what a bit of silver meant to him.

It was this silver (in fact, just a few dollars in quarters), that alerted mother to the incident. She discovered the coins and pressed him for an explanation. The boy relayed the story reluctantly, and in the days that followed, was pressed again, several more times, by various counselor types and authority figures, all of whom were certain that he'd be scarred for life, if not for their sage guidance. And yet, none of them ever grasped the significance of this incident for the boy. None of them knew one thing about what he'd truly survived, and was surviving still.

Even now, we find this brief encounter hanging in the boy's head like a minor stalactite, dripping slowly, indiscernibly, yet constantly plunking bits and sensations in a well of thoughts, echoing softly, wearing the faintest impressions into his consciousness, eroding the surfaces of his perception as the years pass, and then decades, until his view

of the world becomes shaped, in part, by the shape of the aperture formed by that minor dripping stalactite, slightly elongated over time, but seldom noticed in the darkness. It's nothing! The boy shakes with fury. Completely beside the point! Don't they see? Don't they know by now? This was never intended to be a story of how bad things get. We already know, they get much worse.

Life and death abound, in vacant lots, in white sedans, in borderlands and gulfs, and most especially, in our eyes, in the desert, though I often find it difficult to distinguish one from another. I sat down in a classroom in a circle full of strangers, each one of us sharing our stories in turn, and somebody said to me, "Don't be too sure." A number of others were nodding. It was a minor dispute. I certainly know the difference between *dispute* and *altercation*—believe me. Never mind what I've said before. This was a minor dispute. And I replied to all of them, "There is no such thing as healing. No home. No anchorage. No point on the map." I'll admit, in the moment, I wanted to belt someone in the mouth. So I suppose it's true, it was almost something more than a dispute, *almost*, but certainly not an altercation.

I took their advice, however, and I did a bit of writing. They said, "Let the words fall, let them land on the page however they may, and you just watch what happens when you try to move them around once they've settled themselves into an order. See how heavy they become." Fine advice, fine metaphor, but nothing I should take too much to heart. And as for the heft of a word...

In this digital age, I can place a million words in the palm of my hand and delete them again with equal indifference and less caloric output than the breaths it would take to utter them. I can copy deserts, cut crags, paste drifts and dunes, however endless they

may be, and my story will still unfold exactly as I determine. Here again comes the feeble whispering of Death: “The turmoil of the day freezes in a thousand absurd postures. The little cloud drifting before their glorious sun will darken the earth as long as I please.”

I accept the weight of material circumstances and understand I must abide their rules, to one extent or another. But then again, what is left of the desert now? What remains for me to press my hands against and feel pressing back? Where are the gun trucks and the convoys? Where’s the scorched sand? Where’s the shrapnel that flew out, cut flesh, and lodged itself in vital organs? Where are the hulks and the carcasses and the toppled towns? And the people I knew in the desert, and the people I didn’t know, where are they? Where are their faces and appendages? Where is the muscle and the fat and the bone? Where is the blood? Where is the boy? They’re all gone.

Notwithstanding...I know where to find them.

CHAPTER 2

THE PSYCHATRIX

A. Shamil

I fell in conversation with a teacher of mine, talking about work, sharing a few ideas that I'd been circling around. "This is what I want to do," I said, but he waved me away, as though the ideas themselves were of no consequence, and he answered, "Yeah, yeah...but can you write?" And I knew right away, he being a man of Rhetoric, that this was a rhetorical question, a question that I was neither intended nor authorized to answer. I would not be permitted to determine the value of my own words. Judgment had already been passed, and the conversation came to an end before I could even respond. This was the voice of reason.

So I sought a second opinion from Shamil, the voice against reason, and I told her about these ideas I'd been circling around. "This is what I want to do," I said, but she waved me away, as though the ideas themselves were of no consequence, and she responded, "Yes, but can you write?" And I knew right away, she being a shadow of the fissures, that this was a question of possibility. Not only was I not intended to answer, I was not able to answer. I could never determine the value of my words since they would never amount to a calculable sum. The conversation would never end, only break constraints and reveal new vistas. This, I believe, is the essence of *Shamil*.

Shamil is a recent figure in my life, as both body and calculation. Practically speaking, we're strangers, but she makes impressions on me that are difficult to elude and her appearance is both mesmerizing and haunting. She has only one arm and her head is

crowned with translucent burn scars that cascade unevenly down over her face. Her good arm, wiry and blue with tattoos from her knuckles to an unseen shoulder, hangs from a threadbare t-shirt, and her legs are indiscernible beneath a pair of faded blue jeans, comically baggy and bunched around the tops of two deeply creased suede boots.

I saw her for the first time in a VA waiting room after she flung a chair at the receptionist with her prosthetic arm. The mechanism, still hooked to the chair, detached from her body, sailed over the receptionist's head, and smashed into a window on the other side of the room. The prosthetic limb fell to the floor and lay among the shattered glass, bloodless and still. Before anyone could make sense of the moment or call the police, Shamil was gone. I grabbed her arm from the scattered shards and ran outside to find her. After a few minutes of frantic pursuit, I spotted her standing at the edge of the lot, lighting a cigarette.

As I drew close to her disfigured form, I was abruptly confronted by a current of uncertainty and the unsettling question: How do I present myself to this person? What are the possibilities? Shamil's body confounds language in ways that make it difficult to know which part of oneself to broadcast or to cling to. Her presence disturbs the order of things, displaces assumptions, disrupts contexts, and throws meaning into disarray, enough so that suddenly a tree is no longer a tree, an arm not an arm. Home is no longer a point on the map. So how do I speak in the midst of all that?

Shamil stared at me hard with a cigarette burning wincingly close to her scarred upper lip. Her marred visage alone was enough to make me shudder. I pointed at the cigarette and attempted a civic disposition.

“Hey do you know what they put in those things?” She didn’t answer so I held up the prosthesis and whispered almost inaudibly, “Well anyway...you left your arm inside.”

She answered flatly, “That’s not my arm. I left *my* arm in the desert.”

I felt foolish when she put it that way.

Shamil says the only thing she really misses about her arm is the tattoo she had on it of a Jackson Pollack lithograph—no name, just a number, a copy of a copy—so she lets Sinjin’s son paint another rendition onto her prosthesis, another copy of the copy. I have to admit the boy is talented. He’ll be a fine artist someday. But Shamil never comments one way or the other. She never expresses approval or dissatisfaction. Is this copy as good as the last? Is it identical? You can’t make out an opinion from her face since, really, she has no face to make out. She just straps the limb back onto her body and stares at the boy’s accomplishment.

“Do you ever miss your hand?” I ask her. The thing about Shamil is that she doesn’t mind questions, so I’m always asking her about one thing or another. I say to her, “I think I’d miss my hand because without it I couldn’t write.” Shamil doesn’t answer. She seldom does. So I tend to answer for her. Maybe that’s why she doesn’t mind my questions.

But now I’m more concerned with the previous question...*Can I write?* I have both my hands, after all, so there really shouldn’t be any reason why I can’t. I’ve written some stories in my time, a few poems here and there, a memoir, a number of essays, and part of a play once. I’ve even tried my hand at a novel. I’ve shown them all to Shamil and she looks them over in her usual expressionless way and then hands them back.

“Well?” I ask her, but she never responds and sometimes, I’ll admit, it gets me in a rage. Why ask the fucking question (can I write?) if you’re not willing to answer? I’m increasingly unsettled by this question, and the more I hear it in my head, the more I scrawl feverishly in my notebook. It’s approaching paranoia or some kind of mania. You’re damned right, I can write. Watch this! And I slam down some eloquent shit on the page. I think I might have even said it out loud, just that way, *eloquent shit* before I handed it over to Shamil. I think I must have because this time when she looked it over, she nodded and said, “This is some eloquent shit.”

Shamil is not her given name, not *her* name at all, but the name of a man from the desert, who she said we should call out to if ever we wanted to summon her. It wasn’t a stolen identity, or what the man called an *appropriation*, but maybe a transformation, or a molding of her body into an echo—a fleeting monument, you might call it, hailing the forgotten figures of the desert.

“Don’t call *me* Shamil,” she told us, “Call him. And if he doesn’t answer...”

Then she’d fade away into her customary silence.

“What?” we’d stammer back. “What if he doesn’t answer? What then?”

The trouble with Shamil was that she had no hair, and no arm, and no past, and she moved amidst a struggle that we couldn’t quite fathom, always in the throes of some raging contingency with no apparent beginning or end. And despite my curiosity, and my nagging desire to press a hand upon her flesh and feel it press back, she left me with only a hunch, as though *the hunch* could be a sufficient end in itself. Well, maybe she was right. Maybe she was more valuable to me as an enigma than as an answer to any, or all, of the questions that she’d stirred up inside me. All the same, I should have understood

her desire to vanish from the world from the moment she abandoned her name. It was but the first clasp undone in a ghastly striptease that culminated on the dunes of a small island called *Caye Alma*.

What happened to her real name?

I don't know.

She'd only give us partial stories and cryptic answers like, "I lost it in the desert."

Well, what the hell was that supposed to mean? I couldn't tell you. But to see her disfigured form...her jellied scalp, her flapping sleeve, her blackened eyes...you'd believe...you'd instantly believe her story, however farfetched. She told us her eyes hadn't always been black, that there'd been a time, back in the day, when they were green or blue or hazel gray, I don't know, she didn't say. She wasn't one to explain herself—to anyone—she'd just leave us to steal glances at her from afar and wonder.

But Oscar, who was with us too, had already stopped looking. He said he wasn't playing her game anymore and he didn't give a damn what color her eyes used to be, or how they turned black, and frankly he wasn't even convinced that they were black at all, or, if they were black, he wasn't convinced that they'd changed. Either way, he wasn't convinced of something.

"And you," he turned to me, "What the fuck is going on with you?" He stared me up and down, then let his eyes rest upon my sunken face with scorn. Now this was a scorn, I want to tell you, that was meant to conceal a certain kind of fear, a fear that one feels in the presence of plague or some sort of contagion so powerful it can leap from body to body along even the slightest wisps of empathy.

“Necrosis, Oscar—that’s what it’s called. My flesh is falling from the bone.” I narrate myself in a sickly tone just to agitate his terror all the more. “I’m being eaten alive Oscar. Pretty soon there’ll be nothing left of me, nothing at all, not even a cadaver to bury or to burn.” Oscar shrugs me off, of course, tells me I’m ranting, but that shrug masks a shiver, like the scorn masks his fear, and to tell you the truth, I’m glad that it does.

On the other hand, we had Vannareth or *Big Van* as we used to call him. Before our journey to Caye Alma, he super glued a plastic Mary to my dashboard and stuffed a Bible in the glove box. I don’t remember the man ever being so pious, but then again, I don’t remember much about him at all, except all the ways we revered him. He was built to be a legend, lumbering among the multitudes with sprawling shoulders and long lean arms that stretched from the diamond deserts to the shining seas. He could sleep through any calamity, however raucous or horrific, and then wake up with a glazed indifference and a confounding smile that was both infuriating, and yet, curiously reassuring. There was something hidden beneath his perpetual insouciance that inspired a vague sense of hope. And for that he was our hero.

Now while Van had lost nothing in stature since our days in the desert he was quite evidently withering in spirit. His vast embrace slipped faintly from our brotherhood and his response to nearly every utterance, whether a passing remark or a seething allegation, had descended to a slow and weary, “Yeah man.” The words floated from his mouth like a chant, intoned more for the sake of the sound than for their meaning, and I took them increasingly as his notion of *amen...over and over...amen*.

Although the conversation about Shamil's lost name took place later on—I mean, it wasn't the first thing we talked about when we met—for me, it's the first thing that comes to mind whenever I think about her. I get lost in the question. What can it mean to have no name at all? She told us she preferred to remain nameless and that she'd just as soon never be called to again. Still, sometimes I yell out as long and as loud as I can, “*Shamil!!*” until my lungs give out. And then I wait, gasping for air, and look out into the heat waves rippling across the horizon, hoping that maybe I'll catch a glimpse of her walking, maybe walking towards me. But I know I'll never see her again. She was always walking at a pace I couldn't keep, in a direction I couldn't follow, to a place I couldn't go. And yet I still call out to her.

Can Shamil tell her own story if she has no name? What is the basis of a story other than experience? And what, if not one's name, holds those experiences together? Jacobo Timerman, for instance, wrote a memoir about the dirty days of Argentina and the disappearance of oneself in the realm of torture, and the collapsing of one's universe into moments of excruciating pain. The book is called, *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*.

But that title only holds true while the story remains untellable. It's when he's finally released and renamed, that the memoir can then be written and published and that title can be applied as retrospectively symbolic of that which *might* have been, but ultimately was not. In the cell, he will always have no name, and therefore no narrative, but in the narrative, he must have a name and a history that makes that narrative possible. To tell the story now, he must have always *had* a name, even when he was nameless in a numberless cell.

So, with this in mind, I've taken it upon myself to tell this story and, along the way, call to the Imam of the desert named Shamil whenever I mean to refer to that scarred tattooed body in the back of my truck with the painted prosthesis. We're driving to a small island off the coast of Belize called Caye Alma. We have a map that's marked with a red ink circle, but there's nothing inside the circle, just empty blue sea. We have a letter that's unsigned with a story of blessed water that can heal invisible wounds, like *The Well at the World's End*, and even though we know it's just a story, we're driving on all the same, driving for the sheer possibility that the story presents.

On our journey southward through Mexico I periodically glance up into the rearview mirror. Shamil is curled up in the cargo area like a monk looking out the back window at the ground we've already covered. And Sinjin's boy is quietly curled up beside her still clinging to her prosthetic arm and staring up at her because he won't speak to, or touch, anyone else.

Her face looks like a half melted candle has oozed across her eyes and every now and again I notice her looking up at me. I'll admit that, over time, this has become a comforting experience. But it wasn't always. Where Shamil's unpleasant appearance once made me gawk or quiver, I have begun to find quietude. It's a feeling that has ultimately melted her melted skin from view, and her face has become, in its own way, unnamable.

Beside me in the truck is Big Van slouched back and clutching a Bible that he never reads and staring at plastic Mary to whom he never prays. And huddled into the reflection is Oscar, too, who remains half-asleep with sunglasses on, stirring periodically along the way to cast aspersions at the passing scenery and the people in it. And amidst

all these faces in the mirror, is my own. And I think of this question, over and over... *Can I, or can I not write?* Shamil turns to listen and Sinjin's boy turns, too, running his fingers silently along the copied lithograph on her fake arm. And it's in that moment that something occurs to me.

It's a memory from the desert... a place... a small abandoned town that we found in the Sugar Bowl. It had no name (as far as we knew), no faces, no inhabitants at all, so we assigned it a number, a target list number. *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero*. We called it a ghost town and crept through the streets with trembling trigger-fingers anticipating the worst kinds of encounter. After six days of silence our vigilance sunk into lethargy and the old man wearing silver oak leaves on his collars stood in the courtyard holding court with one boot resting imperiously upon a pile of rusted rifles that we'd confiscated from the locals (who we could not find) and he wore an imperious smile as if to say, *I told you these people were bad*.

On the seventh day, a military-aged male appeared mysteriously in the town with his son, a child, roughly seven years old. The man and his son were holding hands and walking quietly down the street until they came, face to face, with a foot patrol that was shaken from its stupor and so rattled that they nearly emptied their magazines without thinking. But humanity must have gripped them first because instead of empty magazines, the man was given an empty sandbag to place over his head, a shroud to mask his face. We claimed that these shrouds were used to disorient prisoners, but looking back now, I believe that the larger portion of disorientation was ours when their faces fell from view.

He and his boy were flex-cuffed and escorted to the local police station that we'd commandeered, and we put the man with the masked face and his flex-cuffed son into a cell and slammed the iron gate closed. While I'm recounting this moment, Big Van nods his head with sleepy eyes and speaks languidly as we drift southward toward Caye Alma. He too remembers *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero*. He seems to be tumbling downward into the moment as he murmurs his own account of these events. His voice is low and hollow:

The guard, who resembled the shrouded prisoner more than any of us, sat listlessly in the shade of the doorway, utterly detached from his post, staring down into the pages of a strange book, whispering its words as if narrating a dream or a distant memory. "He never tires of the journey, he who is the darkest one, the darkest one of them all." He leaned away from the iron bar gate and he looked away from us.

And inside the cell, from beneath the burlap sack, the father's muffled voice could be heard weeping, "Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city."

And the radio operator who sat close by with a radio propped between his legs and a long antenna shooting over his shoulder, raised his eyes upward ever so often and pleaded, "How long?.....How long?"

And the son inside the cell, un-shrouded, hands bound behind his back, sat beside his father staring at the iron bar gate, staring into our faces, never looking away, and speaking quietly, "Until the cities be wasted without inhabitant, and the houses without a man, and the land be utterly desolate."

And from the crackling radio propped between the radio operator's legs a voice could be heard, breaking apart, barely audible, coming in low and then high, clear and

then raspy, and then gone again. “Lay hold on him, then put a chain on him, then cast him into the burning fire.”

And then the rotund chaplain with ghostly white skin and wire framed glasses would approach on his rounds while intoning solemnly to everyone he passed, “Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.”

And someone else who we didn’t recognize sloped up beside us and peered into the cell and shook his head gloomily toward the concrete floor and said, “You do not honor the orphan.”

And then the guard would drone on again, “He never tires of the journey, he who is the darkest one, the darkest one of them all.”

And the others would follow in turn.

The father. “Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city.”

The radio operator. “How long?.....How long?”

The son. “Until the cities be wasted without inhabitant, and the houses without a man, and the land be utterly desolate.”

The radio. “Lay hold on him, then put a chain on him, then cast him into the burning fire.”

The holy ghost. “Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.”

The unknown soldier. “You do not honor the orphan.”

All at once Big Van stopped speaking and all I could think to do was nod and mutter, “Shamil.”

The Imam, as he was known in a time before this, was a prisoner without a name in a cell without a number in a site in the desert that they called *black*, which meant, I

presume, that it could not *be* in the story—not in yours, or mine, or Shamil’s. The tattooed shadow in the back of my truck was not yet scarred at the time, not yet one-armed.

“Classified,” she said blankly, and she’d say little more about it.

“What do you care about their classifications?” I wondered aloud.

The Imam was an adversary. Shamil was always clear about that. There were brutal inflictions delivered upon his body, and there was a pen and a pad of paper lying on the floor beside him. And with the inflictions there was always the promise that there should be no further inflictions if only he would pick up the pen and write something down.

Shamil heard a voice through the walls shouting at the Imam, “*Can you write?!*” And then came the sound of another infliction. The Imam did not speak and Shamil (who was not yet Shamil) rested her head against the wall outside the numberless cell and thought about that question. *Can you write?*

In one of those rare occasions, in which Shamil would speak, she commented briefly about that site in the desert that they called *black*. She spoke without sentiment. “*Black* means, in essence, a site where nothing is written down, not even the existence of the site itself.” I understand this place as something like a black hole in the consciousness that draws everything inward with great force, creating its own void, growing larger, consuming more and more, until every detail, even light, even ideas are crushed into silence. What is the function of a pen and a pad of paper in a site called *black*? Shamil heard the voice on the other side of the wall shouting again, “*Can you write?!*”

And I think of that teacher asking the same question. This is a question that the Imam is neither intended nor authorized to answer, as if the pen they'd given him had no ink. So, of course, the answer is no, no he cannot write. No, I cannot write. In a site where brutal inflictions are delivered and rhetorical questions are thrown down like gauntlets, an inkless pen and pad of paper are never the implements of communication. They are the symbols of silence. Writing is a potential, at best, an opportunity to listen, to stretch and strive toward another human being. Can I write? I can. The questions should really be, *Will I write? Will I listen? Will I stretch and strive?*

There's no guarantee, never a guarantee, and I suppose that's what creates the possibility we're all seeking—a sign of that which we lost in the desert. And that is why we're on the road to Caye Alma. Oscar believes in the map. Van believes in the *Well at the World's End*. Shamil believes in something else altogether, the ineffable perhaps, something unnamable. And the boy, meanwhile, has the bellicose blood of Sinjin, who is truly the darkest one of us all. I don't know what the boy believes, here and now, as he clings onto Shamil's prosthetic arm, or what he'll believe later, much later, in the distant future, when the only thing left of Shamil is that pink plastic prosthesis and the copied lithograph.

So now I want to tell you the story of Shamil. I want to hear you inside her tattooed, scarred skin, inside her hairless head, inside her one-armed body. I want to hear you calling from that site in the desert that they call *black*. I want to reach into that blackness, through the underground walls, into the cell with no numbers and names, where there are brutal inflictions, and inkless pens and empty pads of paper. I want you to

walk with the Imam and call to Shamil and burn up in fire. I want you to collide with all that and then listen to what comes next.

One night, the Imam and the tattooed one, through mutual assistance, escaped the black site and together they ran away across the open desert, silently, until they reached a point where they must part ways. They shook hands and clasped each other's elbows but neither one smiled. Our shadow in military fatigues looked into the Imam's black eyes and spoke to him for the first time. She asked his name and the Imam replied defiantly, "Shamil." His voice was like a sandstorm. Then without another word, he turned around and walked away. She stared after him as he slowly disappeared into the rising wind and rippling waves of heat. She stared until he vanished entirely.

At last she cried out, "*Shamil!!*" until her lungs gave out. But he was gone.

In the following days, she walked and walked, and the desert sun beat down upon her body as she took her final steps and then collapsed. She wasn't conscious when an American convoy came past and found her lying in the sand. She didn't feel them pull her body up onto a stretcher and load her into a truck. Then there was a moment that she does remember. She opened her eyes vaguely and they asked what her name was and where she'd come from because, of course, in the black site there were no nametapes on uniforms, no identification tags, no record of the place or its inhabitants, no sign whatsoever of either the detainers or the detainees. The place does not exist.

The Americans huddled around her torpid tattooed body and shook her shoulders. She looked up into their hazy white faces, they appeared expressionless to her, and she choked several times and spoke with faint desperation, "Shamil!" The hazy Americans cut away the nameless fatigues from her ink-covered body and administered an I.V. in

that fleshy arm with the Jackson Pollock tattoo. She might have been okay had they made it to the hospital without delay, but there was a string of artillery shells buried in the sand beside the road a few miles ahead—a daisy chain, they called it—and it blew their truck sideways right off the pavement, and it blew some of the pavement off, too. Then the mangled truck caught on fire with Shamil still inside. Her arm with the Jackson Pollock tattoo was partially severed at the elbow and dangling down. But she managed to drag herself from the burning truck, smother the flames on her face with handfuls of scorched sand, and then slowly crawl to safety.

There was another soldier lying nearby, already dead. He was thrown from the vehicle by the blast, leastways his torso was. Shamil managed to work the blouse loose from his legless body. She needed it to tie off her bleeding arm, which she managed to do with her one good hand and her teeth. With the tourniquet secured, she rested her head on the ground, and from a combination of dehydration, a loss of blood, and probably shock as well, she soon passed out. She didn't see the helicopters arrive. She didn't know that she was the sole survivor. And the medical team that deployed from the helicopters didn't know any of these soldiers, or their faces, or their names.

They saw Shamil's faintly heaving chest, her burned head, and her severed arm with the Jackson Pollock tattoo, they looked at the nametape on the tourniquet blouse, and because her own blouse had been cut away earlier, they assumed that the blouse on her arm, and the name on the blouse, were both hers. There was nobody else alive to say otherwise. Added to which, her wounds were serious enough that she wasn't brought back to base, where someone might have noticed the mix up and pointed it out.

Instead, she was transported directly to the combat support hospital, and then on to Landstuhl, and finally back to Bethesda. Nobody along the way knew her personally or was aware that they'd assigned her the wrong name. There was no reason to suspect confusion since she didn't appear on the convoy's manifest. Moreover, nobody at the base suspected anything, either, since they weren't even aware that the convoy had picked someone up along the way. For all intents and purposes, Shamil was a ghost.

Meanwhile, she remained unconscious until the flight home. When she woke up, she was heavily sedated and so only partially comprehended the occasional references to her as *Jackson*. Jackson? The name swum woozily in her head. *Why do they keep calling me Jackson?* She glanced wearily down past her elbow to the place where her tattooed arm used to be. It was gone. And even as she regained her lucidity over the following hours and realized what had happened, she wasn't quite sure how to correct the mistake. The first difficulty was that, as a figure of the black site, she had no verifiable existence in this theater, no performance of duties that she could ever mention, no legitimate claim to an identity at all.

The second problem was that she'd escaped that illegal (or extralegal) site illegally and, furthermore, freed the illegally detained Imam in the process. Officially, she was now an enemy of the State—a terrorist or a traitor, or maybe both. She knew all this, of course, and she felt content in the knowledge that she'd sacrificed her name so that the Imam might have his name back and tell the story of being a prisoner without a name, in a cell without a number, in a site in the desert that they called *black*. This was a story that otherwise could never be told.

At the hospital in Maryland, Shamil was reassured by doctors that her family had been contacted and that they'd soon be arriving. This was, in fact, the family of the dead man named Jackson. (The doctors were puzzled when the family kept referring to their son.) At any rate, the hospital had fitted her with a pink plastic prosthesis and the burns on her head and face had already begun to heal. So Shamil decided to desert the hospital that was functionally no different than the site in the desert that they called *black*. So that is how Shamil became the tattooed ghost in the back of my truck curled up with a prosthetic arm, with a copy of a copy of Jackson Pollack's unnamed lithograph.

Before she rendered herself absent without leave from the hospital, she wrote a brief note and left it on the bed: JACKSON IS DEAD. And she signed it *Shamil*. It was the first time she bound herself to that name. Shamil smiles from time to time at the confusion that her message must have provoked. And it doesn't seem to sadden her at all to think of the family of Jackson who never learned the truth about their boy. I steal a glimpse of her now and again and wonder about this indifference. I want to ask her, *Don't you care?* But I don't dare. This is the one question I'm afraid to ever ask, even if she won't answer. I suppose I'm afraid that someday she might.

B. As the Crow Flies

Whereas, the vehicle of our story is a journey to Caye Alma, and the vehicle for this journey is a white SUV, and; whereas, I have been designated *the driver*; now therefore, be it resolved that I, the driver of this white SUV, will be responsible for designating a route to Caye Alma. This will require some meditation on the strategies of navigation and issues surrounding the calculability of distances between any two points.

The map is an unwieldy depiction, as anyone knows, in many ways more portrait than schematic, so it's open to a range of interpretations. When at the wheel, I'll often hand the map back to Oscar to perform various estimates and measurements, and relay the resulting data back to me. His measuring implement is a folding knife with a glistening silver blade. So all distances figured by Oscar are referred to in these terms. Half a blade, one blade, two blades, and so on. His willingness to convert this unit of measure depends entirely on his mood, which generally declines to the knife.

"How far to the next exit?"

"Four blades." Oscar will answer, and then add, "As the crow flies."

Oscar's mantra of resistance: *As the crow flies*.

And Van follows lugubriously, "Nevermore."

"Yeah Oscar...except, we're not flying crows."

Oscar knows this perfectly well. I don't have to tell him. I've made this point, as a point, many times in the past, so it's not so much a rebuttal anymore. It's more like a refrain of acknowledgement. *Yes Oscar, I see you, I hear you, I recognize your refusal to accept any and all obligations or responsibilities for the navigation of this journey.*

Therefore: We are not flying crows. All things considered, it's an amicable arrangement between us on an issue that was once a major point of contention.

There was a night in the desert that I recall in particular. We were huddled around a map of the AO. *Where?* was the general concern of the moment. Sinjin, still alive at the time, pointed to our destination.

"There," he said, tapping the map and glowering as if we'd done him some wrong by raising any questions at all. So we were left to deduce our trajectory by finding the shortest distance between the point under his finger and our own.

"*Route Jackson,*" we muttered in unison, and the name provoked its usual chill.

"Why on earth do we call it *Jackson*?" I asked. "The road must have had a name before we arrived. Why not call it by its name?"

"*Because* we arrived," answered Oscar. "That's why on earth."

"How long?" Big Van asked with a voice so distant that you couldn't be certain if he was talking about the map, or the ground, or something else altogether.

Sinjin stabbed the map again with his trigger finger. "Roughly twenty clicks. Forty, down and back."

"Forty clicks, down and back," I pondered aloud. "But I wonder. How can we really know for sure? I would think it depends."

Sinjin instantly stalked away, seeing no further value in our conversation.

"Depends?" Oscar snarled. "On what?"

"Well," I rubbed the back of my neck, which was a cue I'd adopted at some point earlier on to announce a differing viewpoint. "I'd think the issue was *time*, rather than *distance*. That is...how long are we exposed to a threat in minutes rather than kilometers?"

What difference does it make whether we go ten clicks or a hundred if both trips take the same time to cover them.” Oscar looked down the passageway after Sinjin, no doubt wondering if he should walk away, too. “So if we examine time rather than distance, it pushes us to consider all sorts of other environmental and cultural factors that might speed us up or slow us down.”

Oscar’s incredulity didn’t concern me especially, nor did Sinjin’s indifference. I don’t think Oscar could be anything other than incredulous. And Sinjin...well...the man was the utter embodiment of indifference. All the same, I directed my subsequent points to Van, who had his own brand of indifference, but not an aggressive one, so I felt more at ease speaking to him.

“If, for example, we were to travel *Route Jackson* during the pilgrimage of Arba’een, then you’d have to imagine it would take at least ten hours or more to cover the same ground that might otherwise take four. That would increase our exposure by at least a factor of 2.5. The distance would be tactically irrelevant.”

Oscar’s grew dour on the dutiful behalf of Sinjin. He spluttered ferociously, “The only thing that’s tactically relevant is that the ground we cover belongs to us. So no matter how many hours it takes, we do the forty clicks, there and back.”

“Yeah man,” Van nodded. But I wouldn’t be too quick to assume that this indicated agreement. You could never tell with Van. I gazed at the map without further comment.

Route Jackson, I should mention, was a relatively straight road, and so, in Oscar’s mind, tactically straight forward. But Sinjin didn’t care whether a road was straight or circuitous. In fact, I think he’d consider the longer roads (in time or distance) tactically

more advantageous, since for him the whole point of our presence in the desert, was presence.

I'd suggested an alternative measure of *Route Jackson*, in the name of force protection, but my perspective might easily have been construed (perhaps accurately) as a pretense, since my reasoning implied a very different relationship to the residents of the area, very different than the straight forward approach. It wasn't that Sinjin didn't understand—he understood perfectly well. That's why he walked away. Well anyway, we did our forty clicks, down and back, just as we'd done so many nights before. Nothing new to speak of there, except for this new gulf between Oscar and me, a gulf that was created in the act of renaming a road—*Route Jackson*.

Our current journey to Caye Alma (different geography, different circumstances, etc.) clearly requires a different approach to navigation, especially with Oscar shouting *as the crow flies* every time I mention the map. Enter Benoit Mandelbrot, the notorious pursuer of fractals in unlikely places—coastlines, for example. And this is of particular interest to me, since we're presently skirting the Gulf coast of Mexico. What does Mandelbrot have to say about coastlines? He says, ultimately, the length of any coastline comes down to the size of the implement one uses to measure it.

If it's measured with a yardstick, for instance, it will turn out to be much shorter than if it's measured in blades, since the blade is smaller and can capture so many more of the curves of the coastline, so much more of the nuance. And if one had a stick short enough to capture the rough edges of atoms, the distance would be substantially greater. Theoretically, this coast could be endless. But since Oscar refuses to alter the attitude of

his knife in accordance with the shifting angles of the ground, since he'll only direct the tip of his blade *as the crow flies*, he deliberately negates all its measuring potential.

“See Oscar, the problem is...” I explain what little I've learned from Mandelbrot. “There's nothing smooth or straight in nature. *As the crow flies* is a fiction of humankind.” Oscar delivers a predictable rejoinder about my sense of fiction and reality, but the truth is, this is the *Route Jackson* problem all over again. Ultimately, whatever measures we decide on, with whatever intentions, those calculations will reveal more about us than they do about the ground we're traversing. The flying crow is never innocent.

C. Oscar

After the desert, Oscar and I skulked around the salty edge of the city or we haunted the porch on the backside of Oscar's apartment, him hugging a guitar, fingers staggered across the cords, and me leaned back in a plastic chair listening. I never knew the man had a creative bone in his body, but I suppose the desert will make a poet out of anyone. He could play, I'll give him that. And I'll be damned if he didn't come up with a few good tunes of his own. But maybe they were only good if you were already in Oscar's state of mind, feeling what he was feeling, in the storm so to speak, where everything's laid out under the howling wind.

"Where'd you learn to play?" I asked him one night, up on his porch as we burned through cigarettes by the pack, just like we did in the desert, staring up into the night sky at the rockets sailing by, like shooting stars. There was something in that smoke that really brought you back.

"My old man played," Oscar said with a couple of light strokes and a long drag. "He was into the old stuff ... The Man in Black and such."

I stared at him confused like he'd just muttered a phrase in Chinese or recited a mathematical proof that I'd never have any hope of understanding. Your old man? Who gives a shit about your old man? The guy's been gone since god knows when and you're reminiscing? It never occurred to me to care what my father did, or what he thought or said, or to emulate him in any kind of way. Why would Oscar want to be like his old man? Why would he want to follow those footsteps? Any footsteps. Fuck footsteps.

When Oscar wasn't roaming the past with his guitar, he'd wander down from his apartment to a small bay called the Sugar Bowl—the same name, coincidentally, as that

rough stretch of ground back in the desert where Sinjin was blown to bits. He'd joke that the bay was his personal monument to all the shit from those days. Although, if you ever saw him stare out into the cold black water, you'd have to wonder just how funny he really found it.

The bay was big enough so that if you stared into its center it would fill your eyes utterly with images that could never possibly be seen in the desert—boats and buoys and whitecaps and such—a panorama that could in no earthly way be connected or confused with that place in the sand. And so, in a way, the Sugar Bowl here was the perfect negation of the Sugar Bowl there, the ultimate anti-memorial. The place where you felt safe from remembering, at least as long as you could keep your eyes trained on the water.

Oscar would lean his face out into the wind and watch the fishermen lined around the concrete rim of the bay casting for flounder and whatever else was swimming around in there. I got the feeling he was waiting for something to burst from the surface, a mermaid or a magic eel, something with the big answers to life, but of course Oscar would never admit to anything like that. He'd scan his old neighborhood collapsing into the vogue and mutter, "I'm staying me—I ain't changing."

Oscar is a man who clings to fates and essences. But then there are all those pill bottles spread across the cutting board on his kitchen counter, a phalanx of capsules and tablets and herbs that he's accumulated and blends in various proportions with liquors of all kinds into his own witches brew. I often wonder if the chemicals bring out more Oscar or less. Do they reveal or suppress? Do they peel back a coating of turmoil and disclose his true essence or, on the other hand, is he bundled beneath yet another coat so that his essence is all the more muffled.

Weeks oozed into months, that swam by like years, and Oscar and I faded from each other's view, out of touch, as we went skulking around our own pale vestibules. I thought maybe I'd seen the last of him, maybe for the best, but then this map arrived at my door, and I knew I'd go looking for Oscar again. We both had the same demons to face, after all, and in a way, Oscar was a demon of mine.

So I went back to the Sugar Bowl, and sure enough, there he was, still standing at the edge of the concrete rim, bagged bottle in hand and a steadfast gaze on the bay. Good old Oscar. He caught a glimpse of me approaching and turned for a closer look. He scanned my body up and down, took a swig from his bottle, and said, "What, did you lose the keys to your fridge?" With a nod I acknowledged the hunger that had overtaken me since we'd last met, and then in place of a handshake or a warm embrace we leaned against the wall together and stared silently out into the black water.

"Man," he shook his head, "this place reminds me of Sword, and Sinjin, too."

Yes...of course they do. The more extraordinary observation would certainly have been that something did *not* remind him of Sword and Sinjin. Oscar immerses himself in their memories relentlessly, threading tributes and eulogies into every conversation, whatever the topic, however removed.

What troubles Oscar most about Sword is that we never learned his real name. To us, he was only *Sword*. At first we called him *new guy* according to custom, until one day somebody yelled out, "Hey Sword!" And there he was, the new guy, standing in his flak vest, just like the rest of us, but scrawled across his shoulder blades in giant block letters was the word **SWORD**. He turned around to see who shouted, and we all laughed. So after that, the name stuck. From then on, he was Sword.

Poor baby Sword...the quietest and shyest among us.

That boy's body should never have donned battle dress. Even the name *Sword* scrawled across his shoulders was a testament to everything askew in the desert. It wasn't even his name, nor were the letters on his back. *Sword* was the handle of some other guy who'd already been to the desert, worn the vest, and since come home. But that was before. It was our time now, and a new guy had the vest, and one moonless night in the desert, in a town we dubbed *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero*, in a hole we dug to observe it, *Sword* disappeared, before the dawn broke, his body was hauled off without a trace.

"Poor baby *Sword*," Oscar moans over and over. "Poor baby *Sword*."

And I nod. I always nod when Oscar reminisces about *Sword*.

"You remember the ghetto?" (*The ghetto* was Oscar's shorthand for *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero*.) "You remember?"

"I remember."

"Poor baby *Sword*. Like the picture of innocence posted in a blind alley. He was the one reason, if reason could be found in a single body, the one reason to stop the madness. And what'd those people do? They dragged off his body, and with it, our one reason." Oscar grits his teeth and glares into the Sugar Bowl. "It wasn't random, like a rocket or a roadside bomb, you know? It was personal. Three boys in a hole, throats cut, and *Sword* dragged off in the night. And why? For what? What could he tell them? What could he give them? He was nobody, just some quiet kid with his nose in a book and his thoughts in the clouds, and what'd they do? They dragged him off in the night. And then they wondered why we stopped talking."

I nod.

Oscar is smart enough to know not to use the disparaging epithets so commonly applied to *those people from the desert*, but he doesn't quite grasp that the disparagement isn't contained within the epithets themselves. He figures he's one of the good guys as long as he never utters the bad words, but I suspect he's unaware of the extent to which his world is built upon silent epithets. On the other hand...maybe he is aware.

Meanwhile, I have to admit that Sword is a difficult memory to reconcile. He did indeed possess a saintly presence that I can imagine would be easy to absorb into one's mythologies of purity, whatever those might be. But the truth is, I knew nothing about the man, nothing whatsoever. I barely spoke to him in the few months he was with us. So, based on hard evidence, meaning actual information about this person we called *Sword*, I think it'd be just as reasonable for me to accuse him of child molesting as call him a saint. I have no basis for either claim.

Whatever qualities we projected on him in the desert, I believe, were based primarily on the physical constructions of his face and his eyes and his body movements and voice and how all those constructions corresponded, through pure coincidence, with our own constructions of innocence. In other words, I believe Oscar's story of Sword to be fabricated entirely from the materials of Oscar's imagination. There was nobody named Sword. There was no innocence.

Oscar raises his bagged bottle to the Sugar Bowl. "Poor baby Sword...Look after him for us, Sinjin."

And for the first time, I do not nod. "I hope to god, if there's such a thing as the afterlife that those two are not in the same place."

Oscar looks me over me suspiciously. "What the hell are you doing here, anyway?"

I tell him about the map, how I'm looking for Van, how I want them to come with me to Caye Alma, and Oscar smiles. It's an easy sell. With Oscar, it's always a good idea to go see Van and that's just what I was counting on. So we abandon Oscar's post at the concrete rim of the Sugar Bowl and make our way to my white SUV. Out of habit, Oscar yells, "Shotgun!" It doesn't matter that there's no one else with us to vie against for position, because Oscar gave up front seats (and driving too) a long time ago, from the moment we touched down on the tarmac, on the homeland at last, no more front seats for Oscar.

Oscar curls up in the back with his guitar, playing old tunes intermittently on our way to Van's place, serenading the sooty stacks and the package stores and all the weathered souls along the way. *While the sun is bright, or in the darkest night, no one knows, she comes and goes...* He creeps along the cords and carries on, woebegone, about Sinjin and Sword, and as we idle through a cobblestoned factory row he peers through the tinted glass at the lined up trucks and moans, "Man, this place reminds me of Sword. Poor baby Sword."

I have no idea how an industrial park could, in any way, remind him of Sword. And then we pass a rusted playground and he says it reminds him of Sinjin. "Good old Sinjin." He tilts his bagged bottle toward a peeled park bench. "Heart of the nation." Oscar never mentions Sword without finagling Sinjin into the reminiscence. But Sinjin is no remedy, I can tell you, just another narcotic that Oscar slaps to the back of his throat like a pill to muffle his wailing essence.

"You remember the ghetto? You remember?"

I nod.

“Sinjin had it figured out. Forget the tanks, he said, forget the trucks. Foot patrols—that’s the key. On the move, always on the move. No patrol bases. No checkpoints. No fucking FOBs. That’s the way you do it. You get out of the wire and you walk. You walk and you walk and you walk, for days on end, through the ghetto, or the farmlands, or the fucking Sugar Bowl. And they’ll never pin you down because you’re on foot, on the move, all the time, not trapped in the streets inside trucks, like beetles in a jar.”

I nod.

“After three or four days of walking, man we were wrecked. You remember?”

I nod. “I remember.”

“Yeah, but it worked, right? Everyone was like...whoa...who is this guy, Sinjin?” Oscar laughs, and swigs, and tosses back pills. “Poor baby Sword. I wish he’d been there to see it.”

I hate to admit it, but there was a kind of brilliance to Sinjin’s method of endless walking. Our occupation of the desert was, by and large, an operation of technologies and mechanization. Our bodies were so deeply ensconced in layers of steel, from the fences of the FOBs to the armor on our trucks, that real movement became utterly stifled. Even the idea of movement was restrained under the intense weight of materiality.

Sinjin’s instinct was to put our bodies in perpetual motion, in contact, engaged to the fullest extent, all our senses interacting in the environment, all the time. Even after days of straight walking, at our most fatigued moment, we were still more attuned to ourselves, and to the spaces we moved through, and to the people we moved among, than we ever were in our trucks, no matter how well rested and fed we might have been.

Oscar laughs. “Remember the brass? Remember what they said?”

I nod.

“But Sinjin proved them wrong. He proved them all wrong.”

And I’d say it was true. Sinjin did prove that the greatest risk we ever took was in detaching ourselves from our bodies and senses. That was his genius, if one can speak of genius in occupation. So when I came home, I drew on that lesson in my efforts to get the sand out of my skin. I’d been thinking about the desert obsessively, doggedly, as though I needed to account for every crag and drift. I thought about Oscar and Van and Sinjin and Sword. I cloaked myself in contemplation, very similarly to how we’d layered ourselves with steel.

No doubt I’ll be inventorying my memories of the desert for the rest of my days, but I’ve come to suspect that memories lose their meaning, or the meaning loses its value, when deprived the backdrop of new experiences. So in order to meaningfully remember, I’m going to Caye Alma, with an emphasis on *going*. The body in motion was Sinjin’s solution in the desert. It is my solution, now, after the desert. And it is this juxtaposition—memories and motion—that I want to capture with words.

Therefore, the journal. I wouldn’t call it a record so much, or a log of events, but maybe a field of negotiation between me and my sensibilities. Call it a cauldron, if you like, bubbling in the elderwood, a stew of flesh and time, where prophesy and history look and smell and taste the same. To write is to stir. Clockwise or counter-clockwise is not the concern. What is of consequence, what is vital, is preventing the separation of ingredients with an ever-stirring implement.

So I stop at a dollar store and pick up a box of pencils for a buck and a case of notebooks for another buck. The clerk at the counter is wearing a purple parka and bulky

headphones, which registers in my mind as peculiar, but the turned-over-leaf inside me is clamoring for a broader view, so I make an earnest attempt at congeniality. The clerk stares perplexed at my notebooks and pencils.

“Whoa...what are you going to do with all these notebooks and pencils, man?”

I feel my shoulders and mouth sloping. We truly are a failed species.

“I’m gonna write shit down.”

And yet...there could be genuine insight in the clerk’s question. For one thing, the pack of pencils are unsharpened. I can’t write a thing. For another, I’m not sure what I’ll write when I do get them sharpened. It’s not until you go to tell your story that you realize just how many options there are for telling it, and how many obstacles, as well. Therefore, the question is crucial. *What am I going to do with these notebooks and pencils?* I go scouring up and down the aisles again in search a sharpener. Of course I can’t buy just one. I have to buy a bag of fifty, in assorted colors, for a buck. The clerk in the purple parka and bulky headphones suggests I use a different color sharpener for every pencil.

Broader view be damned.

“What the hell difference does it make what color the sharpener is?”

The clerk shrugs. “None to the pencils, I guess. But it might be cool to try it anyway.”

I scoop up the sharpeners, pencils, and notebooks, stalk out of the store, shoving the door open, slamming it shut behind me...but here again...I find something uncanny in the clerk’s observation. Suddenly it hits me that the difference between one colored sharpener and another could be truly significant after all. So I test the hypothesis. I

sharpen each pencil, one by one, rotating through all fifty sharpeners, point after point, shade by shade. The implications are enormous!

I may choose to tell a story in a particular way in order to manipulate the readers' understanding of my experience, piecing together words, and sentences, etc., so they somehow correspond aurally and rhythmically to my sense of what really happened in life, but in the end, the story may very well manipulate my own understanding as much or more than theirs. A different shade. A different verb. A colorful clause or prepositional phrase. Will it change our trajectories or affect our comprehension? Who can say? *It's enormous!!*

On the road again to Van's place, Oscar casually produces a .380 Beretta with an Abyssinian handle.

"Whoa! Where the hell did you get that?"

"From under my shirt."

"And before that?"

"A holster by my bed."

"And before that?!"

"Oh," he says, finally capturing the essence of the question. "I took it off a guy in the desert. Don't worry, I didn't steal it. He was already dead." Oscar points the pistol out the window at the passing storefronts.

"*Oscar!!* Can you not stick the contraband firearm out the window, please. I'd prefer to avoid jail for a while...and in the meantime, hold onto my vehicle."

Oscar looks around the SUV, as if noticing it for the first time, and he scratches his gritty scalp with the muzzle of his pistol. “Yeah...sweet ride, man. Looks like the space shuttle.”

My head hangs and I sigh because the truth is I hate this damned SUV.

“Well, I guess at the time...I don’t know...I thought my life was going in a different direction.”

“Oh yeah? What direction was that? The moving business?” Oscar chuckles and points his pistol back out the window. “Sweet ride, though.”

And right there, there in a gesture, in one hand wrapped around a contraband firearm, you can see the problem with every story that Oscar will ever tell about the desert. Sword’s innocence and Sinjin’s tactical brilliance are only absolute in Oscar’s fabricated universe, a place where *those people* of the desert are rendered something other than human and their homes are intrinsically *ghetto*. Oscar believes that the voice and the gun are one, his only means of survival.

The stolen Beretta with the Abyssinian handle is the medium he trusts, his last resort, and it hangs by his head in a bedside holster, and through it he chants *Sword* and *Sinjin*, *Sword* and *Sinjin*, encomiums and accolades, and yet I never see Oscar in this universe he’s created, or in the stories he tells. I don’t see the Oscar of now, the man standing at the edge of the sea, staring into the Sugar Bowl, into the anti-memorial, the place where you’re safe from remembering.

D. Sinjin

Sinjin...Fucking Sinjin. His name alone and my stomach punches out.

Sinjin got the kiss of Betsy Ross. Blown to bits during a search with a toxic hard-on that'd make an Abrams tank look impotent. Not even the explosion put a dent in that thing. It just lay on the floor like an unexploded dud half-buried in the sand. They laid him to rest somewhere in the Crazy Mountains of Montana. Well, anyway, what little we could find of him and ship on home from the desert. That must have been a sight to see. Out there in the brush and dust, a lone hole in the ground where they could drop in a near empty peace box with a mason jar full of body bits sloshing around inside. What the hell could they have possibly said to eulogize a guy like Sinjin? And I can't even guess who'd have come to listen. He wasn't a man you'd call beloved.

Meanwhile, the rest of us...we weren't attending. We were still back in the desert at the time, traipsing outside the wire, into the heat, scouring for red dots in the Sugar Bowl, searching for patches of scorched sand, milling around the OP, or racing through vacant towns. Whatever. And you know we all had our opinions and our own versions of his death but—funny—nobody I can remember could ever quite call Sinjin gone.

How could we talk about it, about Sinjin, about him dying, if we couldn't even agree on the circumstances? Well of course, at first, we didn't talk about it, at all. But after a while—and I can't say how this happened exactly—the episode grew into sort of a fable, like a mystery play, and we drew on its visceral power more than its historical accuracy. The hard facts, so to speak, well they just didn't matter anymore.

Even his body *no-longer-living* was convoluted in the desert, where people were never referred to as *dead*. We'd say they were *fallen*, as if they'd stumbled on stairs or

slipped on the proverbial banana peel. The fallen declared themselves through our silence while we gathered in formation and ceremoniously called out their names in triplicate, like the carbon copy forms that tell you what you owe, and we'd wait for them to answer as if we didn't know they never would, and when it was over we'd place their boots in the solemn ranks of *the fallen*.

It was all a morose facade if you ask me, with their grave voices and their rigid faces, and their fucking bugles blowing. They missed it, they missed it all. They missed everything they should have felt and seen and sucked in. They missed an opportunity to hear what can only be heard if you listen in just the right way. They missed it because they didn't really want to know. But we had an answer, a method, a rite of our own. So before the men of science, or brass, or cloth, could get their hands on the bodies, *our* bodies, and whisk them away in black plastic, and prep them for their dance with Betsy Ross, we'd do our own dance, on the spot, in the flesh, with whatever flesh was left.

But now, Sinjin was different. His death in particular seemed too difficult to enunciate and impossible to sanctify with any off-hand ritual. There was something incomprehensible about it, or unpalatable, or unintelligible, something our minds wouldn't permit. I wonder sometimes if even the system could fully absorb Sinjin's demise, if the bureaucrats, deep in their distant machinations, could fathom the desert without Sinjin's essential madness in their midst.

They didn't know him, not personally, not like we did, and yet they knew they needed him—his kind. And so they told themselves, and everyone else, that they loved him. And I suppose in their own fucked up way, they did. Sinjin was, I believe, the desert itself, the heat, the sand, the roaring engines, the spent brass, the burlap sacks, the flex

cuffs, the night vision, the burning shit, the bloody frayed utilities, all of it, all in a man, in a single raging body.

And so when I tell you we were mired in the desert, even after we left it, we were inherently mired in the memory of Sinjin as well, in his life, his presence, and his overwhelming force. Sinjin and the desert bound themselves together and formed an unpickable scab on our minds, an indelible coagulation of gray matter, scar tissue on the skins of our souls. And it was in that encrusted state that Sinjin's memory stuck ever since we came home, like a barnacle on a rusting hull, clung to the insides of our skulls and fouling our dreams.

We weren't horrified by Sinjin's death or shocked. We'd seen death before, plenty of times, too many times. And we certainly weren't stymied by grief. I doubt there was a human alive who'd call Sinjin a friend. What can I say? It was like an ineffable gladness, a peach of relief with a pit of doubt...like maybe...just maybe...he was coming back.

E. Trace Tiburon

He's known as Trace Tiburon, Tracey by some, or Tracer by those who knew him in the desert. It's his name now, but it wasn't always. I suppose that's only perpetuated his spectral disposition. Just call me *desert child!* That's what he tells people. It's all he cares to say about himself anymore. Whatever else he's been in his life has been scorched by the memories of that place.

"This is who I am," he'll rage in dark rooms or into the mirror. "This is who I've become." The real question, the one he wrangles with all the time, is whether to say so, whether to talk about it, whether to let people in, or let himself out. Do I open the door to the desert? He can never quite decide. He's constantly ripping it open and slamming it shut, not minding whose fingers might be caught in the jam, including his own. Sometimes he'll leave the door ajar and peer through the sliver of light. But you know, it's not always easy to tell which side of the threshold you're on.

The people who knew him back home, they said he started sliding downhill from the day he got back from the desert. But that's not really true. The fact is, he was on a downward trajectory his whole life. But I'll admit, since the desert, he did take on a noticeable proclivity for risk. And I mean, he wasn't just reckless with his body, and he was certainly that, and it was painful to watch, but he was reckless as all hell with his heart, too.

He'd dig up a bottle of whatever the hell was on hand and start surfing the net for bad news, mainlining tragedy, scrolling through grisly pics like junk, all the horrid images you could imagine, and he'd wail like a newborn left for dead in a dumpster, and drink himself into the dark side of his mind until eventually he'd pass out on the floor

with tear tracks stretched down over his face like dried riverbeds. It's like he went out of his way to find the shit that was going to hurt him the most, like he didn't have enough shit of his own to work through already.

“Oh the walls of Qalqilya! Oh the graves of Babylon. Oh the severed limbs, the severed souls, the severed dreams, and the swelling prisons and swelling spleens, and the poisoned livers, and the festering gangrene on every appendage of liberty. Oh the hungry children and the huddled masses. Oh the this and oh the fucking that. On an on he went, moaning for humanity, but all the while the desert was looming and Sinjin was bearing down. Trace couldn't hold it out forever, not with the grimmest photos he could rummage.

He was prepared to venture down into the abyss from the moment he took sight of that map but he didn't move, not right away. He sat on the idea, dwelt on the map, ran over the plan again and again, but he stalled when it came to calling Van. I'd hardly have to look at him, shoot an expectant glance, and he'd nod and put up his hand and say, “I know. I know. I'm gonna call.” But he wouldn't call, and another week would pass, and then a month, and then six. “I know. I know.” And that's all he'd ever say. He was afraid, I think, afraid of something. So instead of picking up the phone, he kept on with his moaning and groaning and drinking and dreaming and his obsessive staring at that damned map. All I could really do was stare along with him.

But Trace finally did put in the call. It was late one night after he'd submerged himself in a bottle of tequila that he'd stolen from the VFW. Well actually, a few other things transpired between the tequila and the call, but Trace couldn't remember any of that. The local police, however, were only too happy to piece things together for him

while we gathered our thoughts in a jail cell. Trace was leaned back against a smooth white wall with his eyeballs rolling in and out of his head, trying to surface from the tequila. He was muttering with his head lolling side to side and his jaw hanging slack.

“Shouldn’t I be gaunt? Shouldn’t I be starving all the time? Shouldn’t my cheeks be hollow and my face sunken? Isn’t it only right that I should starve?”

Since coming home from the desert...no, actually this started sometime while we were still there...he stopped eating. He didn’t mention it to anyone, or give any particular reason, he just stopped. *Hunger is good*, he’d whisper to himself, again and again, when he thought nobody was listening. *Hunger is good*. That was his mantra. That was his prayer. Oh, he’d eat a little something here and there to keep his legs moving, but just enough to feel his heart beating, breaking down the grief, and pumping the fix of despair into his blood vessels, pushing it deep into his organs and his bones, until his body, inside and outside, was as torn as his mind.

“I am torn!” he’d burst out suddenly. “I’m as torn as an awe-struck apartment building, as torn as an anonymous limb lying amidst scorched sand and broken glass, as torn as a country in the throes of liberation, as torn as a child from its parents, or a people from their homeland in the wake of freedom and democracy, as torn as the pages of all the holy books on earth, burning in blue fire together and becoming ashes combined with the dusty remnants of a cremated humanity!”

And I suppose that’s just how he wanted to look, like the land and the people and the ashen faith all etched into the surface of his body. That’s why he stopped eating. His eyes and cheeks were sinking into his skull like they were tied to the weight in his head and drawn in by an irresistible force, like a black hole in the center of his mind sucking

and mauling all the life he had to give. His body looked like a folding chair, with a t-shirt draped over top, and a pair of patchwork jeans pulled up the legs. Even his boots managed to look like they were about to float off his feet and drift downstream.

He looked up from the stainless steel bench he was sitting on, peered out through a wire-glass window in the steel door and he said, “I feel like my whole life is the night. You know what I mean, man? I want to talk it out. Talk it right out my head. I want to say what I’m feeling, like an appendectomy, and cut it the fuck out!” He leaned forward, rested elbows on knees and ran those spindly fingers through his patchy hair, which, he’d been deliberately cutting off in uneven chunks with a pair kitchen shears.

I said to him, reflectively, to ease him back to the reality of our situation, “Trace, I think...in this particular moment...you might be missing the point.”

He settled himself against the wall again and a sloshed smile spread across his face, and he crooned, “I’m feeling good, you know, like Nina fucking Simone, all achy and shit but bad at the same time.”

“Mmmm. Except Trace...*you* are not free.”

So there was still that to deal with.

Trace complained about the fuzz for a while. “How come they’re always shaking me down, man?”

“Trace, you bounced off a parked car and plowed into an ice cream truck with a fifth of tequila running through your blood. You had snow cones sliding off your hood when the police showed up. It wasn’t a shake down.”

Trace grimaced and grabbed at his ears. “Fucking cops.” Then he lost track of his thoughts, winced, and mumbled, “Hunger is good,” and he patted himself down for

cigarettes. “*Fuck!* These fucking keystone motherfuckers stole my smokes! I’m getting a lawyer, man. I’m gonna sue their asses.” He shouted at the wire glass window, “I’m gonna sue all your asses!”

“How’s it going there Nina?”

“Fuck that bitch,” he snapped. Then he looked at me hopefully, “You got any smokes?”

“You know I don’t.”

“Yeah...well...just thought I’d ask. You know what they put in those things?”

“You’ve mentioned it.”

“It’s fucked up, right?” And with that, he leaned back against the jail cell wall, retracted his arm like a folding ruler, and extended it down again into his jeans pocket, dropped his shoulder a little, and got panicky for a second. I could see his hand searching around those big baggy pockets. Then the old smile. I knew that smile and, sure enough, out it came. The map.

So we had this situation with the map...

That’s the map Trace couldn’t let go of, not for his life. It showed up on his doorstep in a ragged yellow envelope like a herald angel singing—hark motherfucker, this here’s the way. He pulled it out and held it up in front of his face and his eyes went psychedelic like he was tripping on cactus, or staring into one of those hypnotic watches, swinging and swinging the way they do, until he was totally sucked in, entranced, prepared to follow that damned map wherever it wanted to lead him.

He kept the map in his pocket all the time and he’d pull it out whenever he got a chance and spread it across his lap and stare into it like a row of tarot cards and start

rambling on about destiny. I couldn't shake the man or talk him down from the great pilgrimage he got into his head. "I gotta go," he said, over and over, "I gotta go." It sounded nuts to me and I told him so, but he wouldn't listen.

Upon closer inspection, I discovered the map didn't actually show Caye Alma. No dot, no mark, nothing official to let anyone know there was really a piece of land out there in the ocean, nothing but a small, red, hand-drawn circle.

Trace tapped the crooked circle. "Right there. That's where we're going."

"But there's nothing there, Trace. The circle is empty."

"Yeah, I know. That's the point." Then he picked up the notebook that accompanied the map and motioned with his finger for me to wait while he read. He flipped from one worn page to the next and eventually started reading aloud. "The island...hold on, here it is...the island can't be seen..." I watched his eyes batting around the page. "There's some kind of rock formation that accumulates a mist...like...it traps a cloud or something. And from the mainland...*Caye Alma can't be seen.*" He snapped his fingers at me and announced triumphantly, "That's why it's not on the map."

"So you found a tropical island where it's always cloudy? What is it, some kind of tourist attraction?"

"There used to be pirates there," he said touching the page. "You know, back in the day. Pirates. They'd hide out."

"And what? Bury treasure?"

"Better than treasure." Trace smiled mysteriously.

"Better than treasure?"

"Better than treasure. And not buried by pirates."

“Hold on. Why are we are we talking about pirates?”

“I’m just saying, they used to go to Caye Alma because you can’t see it from the mainland. That makes it a good place to hide out.”

“So, who’s hiding out? And who the hell wrote this journal, anyway?”

Trace shrugged. “It’s unsigned.”

“Wait, what? Unsigned? What do you mean it’s unsigned? You mean, like...it’s anonymous?” I laughed out loud. “Trace, let me ask you a question. Have you lost your mind? You get a letter from nobody and a map to nowhere and, that’s it, you’re ready to pack a duffel and journey down to the Black Lagoon?”

Back in our bare white cell, Trace licked his lips, arranged the map on his lap, and marveled at it like an ancient scroll. The paper was soft with creases that could no longer be smoothed, like the valleys and mountains it depicted, bunched and hollowed earth created by imperceptible shifts beneath the crust. The feel of it in his hands created quietude, like the mere promise of peace was respite enough from the turmoil in his head.

Trace tapped the map with a knotty finger and said, “This...” Then he stared across the empty white space, nodding slowly, agreeing deeply with whatever thoughts he hadn’t yet brought to words. He kept tapping. “This is *me* talking.”

“But how do you know? How *can* you know? Wouldn’t you have said the same thing a year ago? And before that, and before the desert, too?”

His eyes drew magnetically to that small circle on the map, out in the water, drawn clumsily or maybe on a rough surface. It circumscribed nothing. Inside that crooked red circle was only empty blue space but there was something there he had to find. He pulled

the map close to his face as though that something might appear. “I know,” he whispered frantically. And his body shook.

Then a fly flew by.

Trace’s eyeballs darted after the fly, zigging and zagging around the cell. “Behold!” he laughed suddenly, his eyes bouncing around in his head like his last two marbles. “Here they have us in this smooth-bore box, no rhythm, no texture, no shadows, not a one, and in flies a fly. You couldn’t smuggle a spare breath into this place. How the hell do you suppose this fly got inside?” Then he snapped his fingers in answer to his own question. “It’s a prophet. That’s what it is. A prophet fly.”

The fly landed on his map, pattered along the coast, rubbed its legs together periodically, lapping up the salt on the map from the sea air or maybe from all the sweaty fingers that held it over the years. It flitted north then south until it reached that crooked circle. And there it stopped. Trace looked up, astonished. “Holy shit. Did you see that dude? It *is* a prophet.” His torso sprung erect and he smiled in the face of this revelation, but just as quickly he collapsed back against the wall, and his smile curdled away. I could see the poltergeist slide show popping and flickering in his eyes.

“I fucking hate flies,” he muttered, and raised his arm slowly, and flattened his hand. “Back to the desert with you, prophet fly!” He had to laugh a little though. He had to. None of us could ever swat a fly anymore without thinking of old Sinjin and laughing a little. He shook his head. “Fucking Sinjin and his junk.”

But before he could strike, the steel door swung open and a voice bellowed in from the hall, “*One call!*”

Trace looked up, dragged himself to his feet, and said, “I’m calling Van.”

F. The Bridge of Humbaba

Vannareth! Oh Vannareth! What's happened to you, brother? We come to your apartment, leap over the porch, through the foyer, and up three stories, two steps at a time, giddy for the reunion, only to find your remains, a cadaver, slumped back on a shipwrecked couch, indifferent to the entourage of flies it attracts and the heavy funk it produces. This is you Big Van? This is the man we revered? Where on earth are you now? God knows not here. Out on the Chiquita trail, maybe, combing the jungle for the ghosts of Macondo, reminiscing under the chestnut tree? No...no, something's amiss. It smells like a crime scene to me. But what crime? Homicide? Abduction? A confidence scam? If so, who's been taken?

And how should we conduct our investigation? What is the appropriate mode of inquiry? We have the testament of your apocalyptic habitat to review, the desiccated fungal matter wedged into the cushions beside you, a mantle of debris at your feet, and a sweatshirt hanging over the window performing the duties of a shade with its arms stretched out and nailed into the drywall, hood hanging down over chest, and sparkling spikes of sunlight piercing past its fringes into the room. What can we surmise from this?

Oscar snaps his fingers several times in front of your face and shouts, "Hey! Hey!" Your eyes twitch. Then I spot the saliva on your lips, and a thin stream of mucus slips down from a nostril, a jaw muscle tremors, a vein on your temple throbs briefly and fades, and now I know, *the cadaver* is just a show. You haven't abandoned hope yet. So of course, we have questions. What's going on? What's happened to you, brother? The cadaver turns its ashen visage toward ours, raises its eyelids half way, breathes faintly, and finally groans.

I've been busy.

I'm a sick man, a wicked man, an unattractive man. And yet you keep looking at me, looking to me, but never looking after me in the aftermath, or the afterglow of that sallow light on the Bridge of Humbaba. I know what you want, what everyone wants, a taste of the blood, even a drop on your lips makes you shudder and smack, but you'd lap it from a fountain, or drink it from a cup, if you could.

My liver hurts. You won't understand this, of course, but I understand. I need certain substances to understand—opioids, psilocybin, soma, and others such things with which you're not familiar—so you can't see what I see, or feel what I feel, particularly in your liver. The liver is, therefore, my organ of understanding, the point at which chemicals are processed into knowledge. And so, when I tell you my liver hurts, you may conclude that I understand very well, and I hear every word as clear as a bell, pealing in my head, the tolls of six thousand dead, echoing through the night on the Bridge of Humbaba. But I'm not repenting, or asking forgiveness, or believing in your brotherly love.

Just look at us here, crammed in a white SUV, fumbling with marked maps, unsigned letters, and vague recollections of the desert land, as vague as the logbooks we once kept, filled up with entries by individual hands, pertaining to the actions of all hands, so that every page looks like a field of gnarled grass, letters slanting left and right, standing short or long, clustered together like shivering children or spread apart like forlorn adults. And while we notice the discrepancies in this mosaic of characters, a panorama of variations, we lump them together and call it *the record*, as though the

variations make no difference whatsoever, as though it wasn't our hands that composed the blooded entries of their log.

You've forgotten the Bridge of Humbaba, haven't you? And you forgot that the name itself, *Humbaba*, was stolen and used for our ends, taken by force, like the river, and the land and the literature, and everything else. Even the wind was stolen, just as Noah stole the ark from Utnapishtim, purloined after the fashion of our time. Following in these footsteps of liberation, I snatched a page from the log, tore it clean from the binding so nobody would notice it missing. The curious thing is, nobody ever did. A whole page gone from the record, this page in particular, and nobody missed it, not for a minute.

I stole the page in which entries were made regarding the incident of Sinjin's demise, the moment he became one of *the fallen*, when he was blown to bits. I gave thought to this page before I tore it out. What does it say? Who does it serve? Is it indeed a record of Sinjin's last hour? Or is it more like a scrim pulled over our eyes so that we witness nothing but black figures on a white sheet with no color or depth or detail, so that Sinjin's death appears as nothing but flailing silhouettes? The paper itself feels false between my fingers. Even the markings look like forgeries, too pristine, too absolute, as unnaturally smooth as the pale blue lines on which they were written.

Getting back to my heist in the desert land, you may recall the man known as the *Unit Historian*. There was a bunker on the base where he worked, collecting and collating the records of all operations and compiling them into a uniform chronicle, the official story of what *really* happened. This practice of historical accounting transforms annalistic log entries into a sterile narrative that not only performs the obvious ideological labor but

also tends to erase its own process of becoming. History would never be made if we were to witness the crude dissections of our own stories, like organs, and the subsequent sewing together of the pieces like body parts, so gory a sight that would be.

The *Unit Historian* stayed in this bunker around the clock amidst infinite stacks of pale green logbooks that formed tottering walls around his body through which he could scarcely see. He was barricaded behind these records so completely that his whole world seemed comprised of nothing else. And one by one, he would take them down, look over their pages and variations, and in some suitable manner tie them into the master narrative, or discard them outright. And here we have the scene of the crime.

I needed to distract his attention, so I requested to view another book from another time. Give me July, I said. No, make that January...from the previous year. He didn't even flinch or double take, just shifted his course, unperturbed and efficient, and moved toward the indicated stack. In the meantime, I had my eye on the record in question, the record of the night on the Bridge of Humbaba.

It was easy to spot because the binding was covered with brown bloodstains from our hands when each of us held the book and scrawled in our accounts from various vantage points. It was Sinjin's blood, not ours. And the sight of the bloodstains on the book, at that moment, in the bunker, made me want to grab it and run away, right off the FOB, over the Bridge of Humbaba, and straight to the center of the Sugar Bowl.

The historian scanned one of his great green walls of records and in an instant, when his head was turned away, I snatched that bloodstained book from its stack and threw open its cover, skipping through its pages with frantic fingers to find Sinjin blown to bits. It wasn't difficult, of course. It was the last page with any markings. The rest of

the book was left blank. Customarily, these records are filled up to the end and signed out: *In the year of our Lord*. But not this one.

It must have seemed unfathomable to record another line, another character of any kind, beneath such an epiphany: *Sinjin was blown to bits*. Ah, but those were not really the words written in the log—*blown to bits*. I'm using them now because they're the words you've chosen to remember. But that's not what the record shows. It tells a much different story, a story I can't abide, or bear to imagine stitched indifferently into that insentient corpus of the desert land. So I tore the page out. And nobody missed it, not for a minute.

What did we see on the Bridge of Humbaba? Is the scene coming back now? First, the incongruous SUV, glistening white, in the night, on a gravel road, approaching our position. It came to a stop under the sallow light amidst the glistening concertina and swirling sand. We could hear the river trembling, and the generator rumbling, and the radio crackling and spewing requests for reports, and more reports, and more reports still. We saw the shadows of wild men creeping from the darkness like scorpions with machine pistols, returned from land of gazelles. That's what we saw. But what did we feel?

Sinjin watched the scorpions closing in and his nostrils flared and he said what had already been said before, "One step across that line, that suggests the line dividing the living and the dead, and unknown sufferings and death. And what is there? And who is there? There, beyond that field and that tree and the bridge with the moonlight on it. No one knows and one longs to know and dreads crossing that bridge, and longs to cross it and find out what there is on the other side, just as one must inevitably find out what is on

the other side of death. That is how every man, even if he does not think, feels in the sight of the scorpions.”

Call me a thief, if you like. Yes, I stole the page, and distorted the text, and used to the words for my own ends. I see the rage flashing in your eyes. *There were no damned scorpion men—that’s not how it went!* But I suspect it’s not the facts of this case that are troubling you. And it’s not the ownership of words or the correctness of memories that we lost. What we lost, and what’s been irrevocably severed from these words and memories, is their congruity.

What we *felt* in the sallow light on the Bridge of Humbaba, if nothing else, was the approaching impossibility of any order at all, any ownership or authorship, and any attempt to narrate the story uniformly. We felt the ground slipping under our feet. The incongruity came on like plague and we trembled even more than we did in the face of scorpion men. Because there’s no sign of depravity graver than incoherence, no circle in hell deeper than for those who offend unity. What can we surmise from this? The safest thing is to forget. Therefore: There was no Bridge of Humbaba. No scorpion men. And Sinjin was not blown to bits. If you don’t believe me, go check the log.

Oscar and Trace enter an apartment, find a cadaver, and instantly mourn, and cry *Big Van!* and make silly observations in a journal about a crime scene. What could be more cadaverous than a history without blood? Or more inconceivable than blood without bodies? Or more preposterous than a bundle of notebooks and pencils purporting one hand? So, yes, there was a crime. I stole the journal, like I stole the log, and the words, and the characters, and their coherence, too. Why? Because there is no line dividing the known and the unknown. And the blooded body has no words of its own.

G. Desert Child

Van placed one condition upon us before agreeing to come to Caye Alma. “I’ll go,” he said. “But first, I want to find Sinjin’s kin, whoever they are, wherever are. I want to talk to them. If we don’t do it, who will?” *Who will*, indeed. Certainly not I. And Oscar doesn’t drive. So I suppose the ultimatum was justified. I’ll admit, the proposed detour stimulated a small but penetrating ripple of curiosity. What sorry clan was compelled to call themselves *kin* to the mighty Sinjin, specter of the desert, heart of the empire? Thankfully, not I. And yet, who? Through some scouring of records and a number of calls, we located an address on the outskirts of Dover.

“What, Delaware?” Oscar pulled the map in for a closer look. “I didn’t think anyone was actually *from* Delaware.”

“His wife is, apparently. Or widow, I guess.”

That settled it. We drove down to Delaware, exchanging a few jocular speculations on our way. Who would ever marry the likes of Sinjin? How would she look, or carry herself, or speak? What could we possibly talk about? I couldn’t picture an abode of any design matching my impressions of the man we knew in the desert, so I had no concrete expectations, *per se*, but I was honestly startled to finally reach the city and find the house on such an unremarkable street. This can’t be it.

“Where’s the concertina?” I mumbled.

Oscar couldn’t hold back a titter of his own. “And the sandbags.”

The shabbiness of the neighborhood wasn’t alarming. It struck me as normal enough as neighborhoods go. The irreconcilability, for me, seemed more in the *idea* of Sinjin having a home at all. Rapping on the rotting screen door elicited an awkward blend

of anticipation with the required solemnity of the occasion. Who would answer the door? What would we say? In what manner could we offer our condolences without reeking of insincerity? In the end, we said nothing. Nobody answered. Nobody stirred. We peered into a darkened window and it looked as if the house had been vacated. Then someone yelled out from behind us.

“She’s not there!” We turned around and saw a woman across the street leaning out of her own rotting screen door. “Hasn’t been there for...” The woman shrugged.

“Where’d she go?” Oscar yelled back.

The woman shrugged again.

We looked at Van as if to say, *Well? What now?*

And Van looked back at us as if to say nothing at all.

So it seemed we’d be pressing on to Caye Alma unimpeded by any obligation to Sinjin’s widow. Another peach, another pit. We filed back toward the truck and as we did I spotted Shamil peering intently from the back window of the SUV at the woman behind the rotting screen door. And then the woman called out to us again, this time more urgently.

“She left her boy here!” We all stopped short and turned around.

Her boy? Sinjin’s boy? Sinjin has a boy?

The woman pushed her door open, stepped to the edge of the threshold, and nodded inward for us to come see. We stared dumbfounded until she waved us in. “Come on then!” Walking across the street I glanced back at Shamil who was still motionless, still peering through the window. Her face never revealed a great deal, of course, the scars distorted her expressions too much to be comprehended through conventional signs, and

yet there was a steadiness in her gaze that caught my attention and made me wonder what she was thinking. It might be said that this was the quintessential question of our whole journey: *What was Shamil thinking?*

Inside the woman's house, a pallid boy sat in the corner of the den scribbling on the backs of flyers and in the margins of a catalogue.

"He likes to draw," the woman told us as we all stood watching him. "That's about all he does." She shrugged again. "He doesn't speak much."

And if he did speak, I wondered, what would he say? I figured those lines in the margins were the characters of his story, whatever his story was. When I was a boy I didn't do a lot of talking either, at least not to people. I had toy people, and the toy people talked to each other. I don't remember the content of these conversations but I have a distinct memory that their meanings were metaphorical. It was like a crying for help in code so that maybe nobody would ever know it was a cry for help at all. How could they ever know? And why would anyone cry in code?

The woman explained that the boy's mother left one afternoon without a word to anyone. Sinjin's son sat in the front yard scribbling until dark and stayed on the stoop waiting quietly for her to come home. He waited for hours, into the night, until this neighbor, the woman, happened to notice his shadow stirring under the streetlights. She took him inside and let him sleep on the couch.

She didn't call the police, she told us, in case his mother came home. If they found out she'd abandoned the boy, he'd be without any parent at all and hurled into the social service machinery indefinitely. The woman kept the child and held out hope that his

mother would come back. But she didn't. And so Sinjin's son was still there in the den scribbling when we arrived.

The fact is, we've all lost our mothers in one way or another, and each of us carries an artifact of sorts to remind us of something we once had. Or maybe it's a cry in code for something that was never there. I have a few old photos of a young woman with clear eyes and a hopeful smile. This was a time before I was born. The smoothness of her skin only heightens my sadness. Oscar bears a scar across the bridge of his nose that he claims he earned in the desert, but we all know that's not true. I suppose that's his code.

Van has plastic Mary, a code I can't begin to decipher, nor do I want to. Shamil has lost everything of her past and her identity, too, so I assume that must include her mother. But she has no artifact, no code at all that I can detect. Maybe that's a code in itself. And now it seems Sinjin's boy has lost his mother, as well. I looked at his scribbles in the margins and wondered what his code might be.

Van said the boy should come with us, which was clearly a mistake, but he insisted in much the same way he insisted on plastic Mary assuming her post on my dashboard, in much the same way he insisted we come to Dover. He presented the idea as non-negotiable. The woman agreed with Van's promise that we'd find the boy's mother. Between the rest of us, the issue was debated, but looking back at the conversation now, I think the entire performance was something like a tragedy, where you already know from the start that everyone's going to die; nevertheless, you feel yourself hoping that maybe this time around it'll play out differently.

Taking the boy with us was sure to end badly but, as Van pointed out, leaving him behind would be like skipping all the acts and the rising action between here and there, only to arrive at the same tragic conclusion, and all that much sooner.

“Funny thing about him,” the woman said as we gathered up the boy’s belongings. But she didn’t finish the sentence.

“What’s funny?”

“Well...” she scratched her head and shrugged, yet again, as if this was the only way she knew how to communicate the slightest complexity, and her eyes drifted around the room, evading or searching for something. “I don’t know. It’s like...it’s like he can read your mind or something. He always seems to know before you tell him.”

“Know? Know what?”

She kept shrugging and shrugging, nervously now, and it was starting to make me nervous, too, and I wanted to grab her by the shoulders to make her stop. She sighed heavily like the question was a great burden. “Well...I guess whatever it is you’ve got to tell him. The boy already knows.”

Oscar was stunned by this news and he studied the boy, a slow grin spreading across his face, and he nodded enthusiastically. “Sinjin’s kid can read minds?” He yelled across the room, “Hey kid! I’m thinking of a number, between one and ten...no wait, that’s too easy...between...7.3 and 9.46!” The boy’s face flinched upward but then fell shyly away to the flyer in his lap. “Okay, how about this one. I’m thinking of a color between olive drab and mauve.”

“Oscar! Mauve?”

“It’s not really like that,” the woman said. “It’s not that specific.”

Oscar ignored her. “Hey kid...”

“*Oscar!!*”

Oscar shook his head, still grinning. “How do you like that? Goddamned Sinjin’s kid can read minds.”

The woman tried to explain it again, but it didn’t matter because Oscar was already set on his own conception of the boy’s powers, something along the lines of ESP or telepathy or something physiological like that, which I think must involve very specific notions of what exactly a thought consists of, for it to be transferred from one mind to another. Van was clearly taken in by this revelation as much as Oscar, but his impression of the gift was, on the other hand, more supernatural. He said something about *speaking souls*, something I imagine must transcend language and knowledge in the humanly sense.

I’m neither scientific nor spiritual. So for me, the story fell flat from the start. The boy can’t read minds. Providence or precognition...whatever...just different strains of the same opiate. And yet, despite my resistance, I’ll admit allowing a haunt to run through my body when I looked over the silent scribbling boy. I thought I knew something about him, something deeper than what shone in those deep blue eyes of his, and now with the suggestion of telepathy or speaking souls, I couldn’t prevent myself from entertaining the possibility that I really did know something about him, something that the boy had already transmitted to me.

Van looked at me with a knowing smile and nodded. “Yeah man.”

When I was young, younger than this boy, by a couple of years I think it must have been, I used to suck on my curled index finger the way some kids suck on their thumbs.

The dentist said it would make my teeth protrude if I didn't stop soon. So mother urged me to stop, and when I didn't stop she resorted to more coercive measures. And when those measures failed, too, she tied my hands behind my back with a dishtowel and sent me to bed. I can't remember crying. Maybe I did cry. The truth is, I can't remember any emotional response at all. My memory of this moment is almost entirely visual. For example, I remember sunlight streaking through the window into dusty rays angling past me as I lay in bed with my hands bound behind my back. Beyond that...nothing...no feelings at all.

But there in this woman's house, when I looked at this child with his small body, and small arms, and small hands, and small fingers, I had to fight back a surprising assault of tears. I suddenly saw this boy lying on a bed with angled rays of sun shooting past him and his arms bound behind his back like mine had once been. I would have had to be very small, wouldn't I? I'd have to be small for my arms to be tied with a dishtowel. An older boy's arms would have been too big to get the towel around. So I must have been very small. The thought of this boy, tied up as I was, made me shake and clench my fists.

Why did that memory burst into my mind at that particular moment? I don't know. I had to turn away from the others to avoid answering for my tears. How could I answer for tears that had no emotional origin, or at least none that I could recall or speak to? And while I stood there with my back turned and my head down, I wondered if the boy could read my mind. Could he see me now, as a child, bound up in bed? What might my thoughts convey about the experience of bondage? Would he only *see* me bound up? Or would he *feel* bound up himself? Would he interpret the situation differently than I did or

would my interpretation be bound with the experience, just as my hands were bound with a dishtowel?

And what if I'd been communicating with mother when I was still a child? What if our souls were indeed speaking to each other in that moment? What might those ageless phantoms be saying? Would they be shouting back and forth? Would it be a struggle? Is there power among spirits in the same ways as with embodied beings? Perhaps my soul shook its head sorrowfully at hers while her human form tied the hands of mine with a dishtowel, and maybe I muttered, *You do not honor the orphan.*

With that, I turned to Van and said, "Yeah fuck it, let's bring the boy with us."

So we left the woman's house and crowded ourselves back into my truck, Van in front as usual, Oscar in back. Shamil watched the boy closely as he moved cautiously in through the back door, and I noticed he watched her, too. They watched each other and though neither one spoke, neither seemed disturbed either. Shamil beckoned him to the cargo area and he climbed over the back seat and positioned himself opposite her, staring first at her scars, until he noticed her prosthetic arm, and then he stared at that.

Shamil remained watchful and expressionless, which I thought might be frightening to the boy, but he didn't appear frightened. This silent interaction carried on without any movements until Shamil abruptly detached her plastic limb and handed it over, and this I thought would certainly be frightening. But the boy took the arm without any perceptible alarm and studied it with the sort of curiosity that I'd call typical for a child his age. He turned it, flipped it over, drew it close to his eyes, then pulled it away again, and ran his fingers along the metal hook. Then he made an interesting observation, I thought. I noticed his gaze batting back and forth between her prosthetic arm and her real arm.

Shamil raised her arm and offered it to the boy for closer inspection and comparison. He took her blooded arm, painted blue, in one hand while holding her prosthesis, painted pink, in the other. And what was curious to me was that he seemed increasingly drawn to her flesh and all those tattooed designs that covered her skin, until the prosthesis simply dropped from his grip and fell to the floor beside him. And with his freed hand he traced the blue ink lines with his fingers from her elbow to her knuckles as if they held him in a trance. Shamil looked down over the boy without any particular reaction, but I believe there was a reaction all the same, because where her gaze was normally fixed outside the rear window, it was now fixed on him.

I thought to myself...the boy really does have powers.

CHAPTER 3
PACKING INFERNO

A. The Ghost, Braz Cubas

At the mention of marks on the world, I feel my appendages stretched out as if by the four horses of time. Pyramids pull one way, sand mandalas another, worms nibble toes, and ghosts take hands. “Ghosts?” Van interrupts, sitting up, suddenly alert. I answer him, as though we’ve been speaking for hours on some other topic altogether. “Yes, I think installation art shows a remarkable commitment to process. As soon as it’s done making, it’s dismantled forever, never to be witnessed or touched again. A near perfect representation of life and death.”

Van nods in agreement, which naturally I’m pleased to see. He begins fishing through his duffel of books. And I go fishing for more nods. “Tattoos as well, express acknowledgement for temporality, always rendered on a decomposing canvas.” Van nods again and repeats, *Ghosts*. “I suppose,” I continue. “Maybe...but then again, ghosts have no tattoos.” He pulls out a paperback and flips to a page that he’d folded down beforehand, runs a finger to a passage marked in his mind for just such an occasion, and quotes the following statement by the ghost, Braz Cubas:

“Frankness is a virtue most appropriate to a defunct. In life, the watchful eye of public opinion, the conflict of interests, the struggle of greed against greed oblige a man to hide his old rags, to conceal the rips and patches, to withhold from the world the revelations that he makes to his own conscience...But in death, what a difference! what a relief! what freedom! How glorious to throw away your cloak, to dump your spangles in

a ditch, to unfold yourself, to strip off all your paints and ornaments, to confess plainly what you were and what you failed to be. For, after all, you have no neighbors, no friends, no enemies, no acquaintances, no strangers, no audience at all. The sharp and judicial eye of public opinion loses its power as soon as we enter the territory of death.”

Now there’s something immediately off-putting about this passage. But Van has been good enough to agree with me throughout this conversation and I feel somewhat obliged to return the favor. So I nod. I catch the critique slipping off the tip of my tongue with my teeth, and instead of responding to the ghost, Braz Cubas, I reflect on this habit of Van’s to communicate his perspectives through the written works of others. Would we call this appropriation? And if so, is it done in the interests of vanity? Not necessarily. With centuries of recitation under our pedagogical belts, systematically devaluing the individual’s voice, it’s a wonder anyone speaks at all.

Observations are inherently suspicious if not accompanied by one or two important names, titles, and dates in a pair of parentheses at the end of a paragraph. This unfortunate phenomenon is captured nicely by Ralph Waldo Emerson: “Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not say ‘I think,’ ‘I am,’ but quotes some saint or sage. He is ashamed before the blade of grass or the blowing rose. These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are” (*Self Reliance*, 1841).

And if you’re not convinced by Emerson, then consult *The Conference of the Birds* and observe the hoopoe say to the nightingale, “Forsake the Rose and blush for yourself!” Whatever one’s opinion of roses, it’s apparent that a skillfully placed reference to a great philosopher is always more welcomed than any philosophy of one’s own. So I can

sympathize with Van and understand why he'd be willing to displace his own voice with the voices of notable others. But I'll have to admit that the passage Van quoted a moment ago by the ghost, Braz Cubas, is bugging me. Might I make a subtle point without causing offense? Perhaps through a brief anecdote I can get this off my chest.

I met a man in the desert many years ago. He'd lived in there his whole life and when the invasion began and the fighting approached his town, he and his family watched from afar, until the fighting was not so far anymore, until it was upon them and engulfed them, and then as suddenly as it arrived, it was gone again, and a gritty wind blew over the bodies and the rubble, and black smoke poured from steel hulks and swirled up in faint wisps and disappeared. Such towns as these are curtly referred to as the *aftermath*, an epilogue at best, a mark of the end. The town and the people in it are wrapped up with a few haunting images, a tragic passage or two, and the book is closed.

However, for this desert man and his family, the smoking steel hulks did not mark the end of an epoch, but a doleful beginning. When the hulks were no longer smoking, his son, a boy of seven years or so, took an interest in the mangled armored skeletons and began to climb on top, and inside, and underneath them. It's not unusual for children to find a tank exciting, any tank, even an obliterated tank, even if that tank serves as the memorial to the town's stifling namesake: *Aftermath*.

When I met this desert man, his son was close to thirteen years old. The boy had long since lost interest in the old hulks and the family had moved to a new city. But their situation was not good. I had very little in common with this family, little to rally around culturally. Only by chance, we discovered that we'd both been in that old town, *Aftermath*, the year of the invasion. Both of us had witnessed the smoking hulks and yet

our stories resisted connection because the ending of my story implied the erasure of his. This was a problem with no simple remedy. It's not always easy to change the end of one's story without altering its value. To recompute the point of conclusion is to invite new judgment and with it maybe a larger portion of culpability.

What the desert man didn't know when he lived in *Aftermath*, what he learned later on, was that the ordnance used to pummel those tanks into smoking hulks was made with, among other materials, depleted uranium. The bombing of the tanks left behind several hulks with radioactive residues, undetectable, unannounced, unaccounted for, and the children came clambering, unaware of the radioactivity, week after week, months on end, until their bodies were contaminated, too.

The desert man's son was blind when I met them. His hearing was deteriorating, his flesh decomposing on the bone, organs failing one by one. The desert man rested his hand softly on his son's sloping shoulder. I held back my tears. And the boy's mother offered tea. Tea. She offered tea. What could I do? I accepted the tea and in return offered a gangling apology. Then I caught a glimpse of them wondering why. Yes indeed, why?

What are the dimensions of my contrition? What are my responsibilities? And, therefore, what makes me sorry? If only I could find the boundary between the actions I must own, and those I cannot. After all, I didn't discover the element now known as *uranium*, I didn't assign it an atomic value, didn't invent the process for depletion, didn't engineer the ordnance that employed it, didn't drop it on any tanks or towns, didn't even know there was such a thing till now. Nevertheless, I was there, there in the *Aftermath*, and in the end, my story denied theirs, in a most malicious way.

The desert man's mother, an elderly woman, was also in the room when we were having tea. She had thoughtful eyes and eventually asked me, "Why were you there?" It was clear she wasn't asking me why my country had come to the desert. It wasn't that sort of conversation. She wanted to know specifically what reason *I* had for participating in events that would produce such things as smoking hulks with radioactive residues and the deteriorating bodies of children.

How could I answer? Would it have been sufficient to say that I'd been toiling with this very question since I came home? Not likely. Again I said, "I'm sorry." My body felt crushed by a weight, part of whose mass was comprised of a guilt for feeling crushed at all. In a year, the boy would most likely be dead, and I'd be alive telling stories. The desert man knew there was no alternative for me. His face expressed sympathy, as if to say with hospitable eyes, yes, it's true, you have no right to feel crushed, and yet, you must feel crushed. That is the only legacy available to you now. So please...have more tea. What choice did I have but to accept his hospitality.

I wonder again about the ghost, Braz Cubas. What was it he said? Death is the territory of narrative freedom? But no audience means no language, and no language means no story. Death isn't just biological failure. You might say that the death of a story and the death of a body are one and the same thing. I believe this ghost, Braz Cubas, is wrong.

"It's not literal," Oscar snaps at me in Van's defense. "There is no Braz Cubas."

Oh but there is, there is. There's the Braz Cubas who lives here and now in Van's body, who speaks with Van's voice, who meditates, remembers, and tells stories, all on

the back of Van's silence. Van is the ghost here, embalming his own corpse with a duffel of books, and marking his own end with the epitaph of a small winner.

B. The Question of Fists

Sorry what?

I said...why do you keep calling him *her*? Just a minute ago, you said *her* and before that he was *she* and I'm asking why?

Who are you talking about?

Shamil, of course. Shamil. The man you keep calling a woman.

Well, because she's a woman.

So I'm asking, why? What makes you think he's a she?

This is a strange question. I'm not sure how to answer. I'll admit, I've been assuming Shamil is a woman, but until now I hadn't considered why. I'm trying to think up an indisputable response and simultaneously wondering about the burden of proof? Who is it on and how might one judge? By her mien? Her gait? Her sartorial style? The pitch of her voice? The size of her shoe? Shamil is neither nurturing nor passive. She doesn't simper or swagger or display any particular tendency towards modesty or moxie, sympathy or sensibility, or any reiterative style that I could recognize in a consolidated sense. And even if she had a trait among many, that stood out from the rest, I have no idea how I might measure this attribute with such a mercurial scale as *gender*.

I'm watching her now, from the corner of my eye, to see if she'll respond to one pronoun or the other, *he* or *she*, with offense or affinity. What will her face reveal? This turns out to be a cumbersome strategy at best, maybe impossible, because for one thing Shamil doesn't respond to much of anything we have to say, nor does she join in our

conversations. And for another, her facial expressions are difficult to discern beneath her burned skin. We don't really comment about her in her presence, so the opportunities are scarce for evaluating her reaction to one pronoun or the other.

We might just wait and see which bathroom he enters.

Yes, we might do that. We might kick in the stall and catch her with her pants down. Is that what you'd like to do? Catch her with her pants down? Or did you have something more violent in mind? The violence of the inquiry itself doesn't immediately occur to me but I'm catching glimpses of the fear beneath the question. I'm struck by the harshness of not knowing. The question is raised like a fist, drawn back in fury, or the performance of fury...but really it's fear. It must be. So the question is more like a bulwark of shame, gilded with audacity, concealing and deflecting all that we'd rather not concede. When did uncertainty become so dreadful?

So why don't you just ask the question? Ask Shamil. Just go up and say, "Hey Shamil, are you a woman or are you a man?" At any rate, what do we care? Why do we ask at all, even quietly amongst ourselves, why do we wonder how Shamil might answer the question, are you a woman or are you a man?

Will you even believe the answer? If she says *he* or if he says *she* or if they say *neither* or *both* or whatever other possibilities there might be...will you believe? Or will you remain intractable until you hear the answer you wanted to hear all along? Is the question itself beyond reproach, so inviolable that it guarantees the answer, any answer, one that you could truly live with and rest easy?

All right, fine, but why not just ask. Either way, why not ask?

Well of course I'm not going to ask Shamil, are you a woman or are you a man? What if Shamil, instead of answering, were to ask the same question in return? What if she were to throw back the burden of proof? On me? On you? What would you do? Would you be willing to answer? Would you be willing to provide evidence? Or would you be insulted by the question? Invaded? Imposed upon? Violated? Perhaps Shamil will kick in the door and catch you with your pants down. Or maybe something more violent will come to mind.

And even then, even with your protestations and your pants down, even penetrated by the question of genitalia, with a knee on your neck and a dishtowel around your wrists, even when you bleed and you cry...even then...will Shamil believe you? Do you really want Shamil to ask you that question? Are you a woman or are you a man? Or would you prefer she kept walking?

None of our salvos back and forth gets us any closer to resolution with respect to the practical problem of pronouns, and which one to use when referring to Shamil. So why not just ask? Why not ask Shamil, who understands perfectly well all the limitations and constraints of the language, why not simply say, "Shamil, which pronoun do you prefer? Shall we say *he*, or shall we say *she*, or is there some other term or category that you'd like us to use when referring to you in conversation? What shall we call you?" I think that seems fair enough, a reasonable manner of speech, reasonable that is, as long we don't concern ourselves very much with other questions, such as, who is permitted to ask whom, however reasonable the manner of speech, however polite?

Well, it doesn't matter anyway. We'll never ask. And even if we were to ask Shamil for an answer or a preference, the question would still be raised like a fist, since polite

words, reasonable manners, even genuine care doesn't acquit us of our curiosity. We are not purged, or absolved, or freed from a framework, outside of which we have no deep desire to exist. We're culpable for our questions, not just this question, but all question for which we covet an answer.

So I may say *she* and you may say *he* and we may, at some point along the line, change our minds, or agree. Who knows? And meanwhile Shamil may not care either way. Who can say? Shamil walks endlessly and talks sparingly and usually only to people, not about them, and so conveniently sidesteps the entire problem of pronouns. However, I think it's fair to point out that if Shamil ever chooses to acknowledge a third party, that is to participate in political life, within this particular language packaged with its pronoun problem, then sooner or later, Shamil will be confronted by the very same question that we are confronted by today. There is no escaping this, not even for Shamil.

But I believe that Shamil, who is not really Shamil, will never answer our questions nor ask us our genders, or our preferences of pronouns. She does not know, or care to know, or make us objects of desire. She is not struck by questions, nor does she raise them like fists of fury or fear. She refuses both resolutions and stylized repetitions. So the question at hand will never be posed. We will shout at each other, and shoot questions back and forth, and grope desperately for consolidation, but we will never ask Shamil:

Are you a woman or are you a man?

And so I'll call her *he*.

And so I'll call him *she*.

And all the while, Shamil will be walking.

C. Weightless

Before the desert, when we were still maneuvering through domestic woodlands, imagining ourselves in the grips of future glories, we used to refer to *the count*. That is, the total number of people in a given outfit—squad, company, battalion, etc.—*the count*, which was naturally figured in *bodies*.

Example: What's *the count*? = How many *bodies*? (And vice versa.)

And: We've got twenty *bodies* heading back to the rear.

Or: Give me ten *bodies* for a working party.

This was an acceptable practice in training, for imaginary maneuvers, imaginary assaults, imaginary casualties, and so on, but it became a problem when our operations turned real-world and we found ourselves in the desert with real casualties piling up. We could no longer identify the living as *bodies*, because now that word was being employed strictly for the dead.

This wasn't merely a concern over clarity (i.e. being clear whether one was receiving a count of survivors or fatalities). It was, foremost, a matter of propriety. In the military culture, within the domain of honor—that is, who is honored before whom—the dead always outrank the living, and with events unfolding in the desert as they were, the word *bodies* now demanded a higher measure of reverence and solemnity. We couldn't disrespect the memories of *the fallen* by equating our own sentient flesh with their flesh, decomposing on our behalf.

Was I personally convinced by this language play to disregard or disbelieve my own corporeal existence? Certainly not. But the issue did come up one afternoon in the camp mess tent (as we suffered the unpleasant combination of Cornish hens and

tortellini). There was a young gunner in our ranks, greener than most, yes, but about as contrary a character as I'd ever met. His nametapes read *Conway*, but he preferred *Clyde* after the unfortunate ball player, David Eugene, whose career as a pitcher was cut short by the institutional neglect of a woebegone arm. Our own Clyde was compact and wiry and always struggling to use up an overabundance of energy that vibrated frantically through his nervous system.

Clyde's natural habitat was the opposing view, opposing whatever or whoever was at hand. So naturally he opposed our presence in the desert on some fundamental level, although he never expounded on that point. He routinely dismissed the whole expedition as *fucking bullshit* (his words not mine) and he'd leave it at that. But before the desert even came into our horizon, back when we were still doing our woodland maneuvers, he used to complain bitterly, at every troop count, that he was not a body.

"I'm not a fucking body," he'd argue. "I'm a human fucking being." He said it every time there was a count and I can tell you there were a lot of counts, everyday, but I never saw anyone, on any occasion, pay the slightest attention. It was just Clyde being Clyde, doing what he does in his natural habitat—disagreeing and taking umbrage. On the other hand, I never once witnessed even the mildest interest or concern with this human-body distinction. I suppose it seemed too obvious to bother with.

I'm sure nobody doubted our individuality, as human beings, but at the same time, everyone (except Clyde) understood that the use of the word *bodies* in this particular context was simply part of the culture of uniformity. *We look the same. We talk the same. We act the same. We are indistinguishable bodies with an indistinguishable purpose.* That's what we signed up for, we all knew it, so there was no great offense taken when,

from time to time, we were referred to as *bodies* in that institutional way. But later on, when we shipped off to the desert, and the word *bodies* became officially prohibited for the living and reserved for the dead, Clyde reversed his position and now in the mess tent took new umbrage at the redefined value of his existence.

“I’ve got a fucking body, okay? I’m flesh and fucking blood, not fodder for their fucking ballistic escapades.” With that, he leaned forward and sunk his teeth into the shimmering Cornish hen (which distinctly resembled, if you ask me, a curled up oozing fetus).

Once again, the response to Clyde’s protests was phlegmatic. “Uh huh...” Or words to that effect. Nobody doubted our flesh and blood and, therefore, our mortality. No one was naive enough to have overlooked the riskiness of our business. All causes come at a cost, and in this case the cost was going to be a few of our lives. Expendability was inherent to the roles we’d assumed. That’s what we signed up for, we all knew it, so there was no great offense taken by this rhetorical disembodiment.

“I’ll get my body back when I’m dead.” Oscar deduced.

Clyde lowered an unsavory gaze on his plate. “That’s fucking bullshit.”

And I agreed. Oscar really could be daft sometimes. And he wondered all the while why his lot in life had become so carnivalesque, as he impaled tortellini, one by one, with a glistening knife and splashed them with Tabasco, like so many severed ears on a spit. A tribute, I suppose, to the thousands of tympanic membranes ruptured on Route Jackson.

At that very moment, an anecdote sprung to mind that I thought might help Clyde make his point. And why not lend poor Clyde a hand from time to time? He seemed like

such a lonely soul. I cleared my throat and started directly into the narrative without preface or segue.

“I once saw a man riding a bus with his boy to Coney Island.” All eyes turned to me and I pretended not to notice their smacking red lips and glistening chins so as not to distort the meaning of my story with an expression of nausea.

Clyde assumed that I, along with the rest of the world, was against him, and shook his head miserably. “Bunch of fucking zombies around here.”

I ignored him and continued. “I was sitting toward the back of the bus and I saw a father pull out of his jacket a folded stack of dollar bills and hand them to his son. ‘There you go son,’ the man said, smiling. ‘There’s twenty dollars for the park. Spend it however you like.’ The bus went creeping along through Flatbush, and after a while the man caught a glimpse of a commotion through the rear window.

“I heard a few horns and screeching tires, myself, so I looked back, too. Dollars were swirling around in the air and people were dashing out into the street to catch them. It turned out that the boy was peeling off his bills, one by one, and sliding them out the window and watching them sail away. And when he discovered that people would run out into traffic to catch them, he thought this was a lot of fun. So he peeled off a few more, and a few more, and out the window they went. By the time his father realized what was going on, the boy was down to his last dollar.

“The man snatched the bill away from his son. His face was red hot and he shouted, ‘What the hell are you doing? You just threw away nineteen dollars!’ The boy stared back at him without answering. Clearly he had no better explanation than the obvious

amusement of it. But the father kept after him. ‘Well?’ The boy shrank down and finally whimpered, ‘I...I don’t know.’

“The man shook his head in disgust. ‘Well, that’s it. That’s great. That’s all your money, gone, nineteen dollars into the wind.’ It’s funny...I could see those words *into the wind* stirring inside the boy’s head and pulling his eyes surreptitiously toward the back window to see if the bills were, in fact, still blowing in the wind. I was kind of curious, myself. We both snuck a peek past the furious father, through the window, in search of any swirling bills remaining, but alas no, they were all gone.

“So there was this father, still shaking his head and grumbling, ‘nineteen dollars in the wind,’ over and over, and his son slunk down beside him with a confused look on his face. And really, who could blame him? After all, his father told him he could spend the money however he wanted. The man had already figured the money for gone, so what did he care if it went to cotton candy, fried dough, and roller coasters, or into the wind from the back of a bus?”

“Yeah,” Clyde agreed, immediately identifying with the oppressed child. “What the fuck did he care? Fuck him.”

That was the end of my story. I looked optimistically at Clyde, and Oscar, and Van to see their reactions. They went on feasting indifferently and, admittedly, I was disappointed that they weren’t more astonished by the profundity of my tale. I genuinely loathed the idea of an expository afterword but, for a storyteller, the only thing worse than having to go back and explain one’s story, is seeing it’s meaning vanish entirely into the oblivion of incomprehension. Therefore, I begrudgingly explained.

“You see,” I said, trying to mask the didactic angle, “it’s all about value. Sure, the dad knew the money was already spent...*but*...he’d hoped his son would get more value back for his dollars. Of course the boy didn’t understand this because he didn’t know the dollars had any value at all, at any rate, he didn’t know their economic value. They were just slips of paper to him. So he created his own value. But he had to learn their value in his father’s terms, in society’s terms, before he could understand his father’s anger at seeing them tossed out the window, and understand why people would be chasing them into traffic.”

Clyde shook his head. “Fucking guy...took his kid’s last dollar. That’s fucking bullshit. That’s what that is.”

Van added that cotton candy, fried dough, and roller coasters would all make his stomach sick, individually or in combination, therefore, the boy did exactly as he’d have done. “I’d pay nineteen bucks to see people jumping into traffic.”

Oscar nodded. “Yeah man.”

And I agreed, too...kind of...I guess, in a way...but then again, not so much. Our alignment felt flimsy. For instance, on what grounds did Clyde and Van side with the boy? A sick stomach? The inalienable rights of a child? And Oscar’s agreement was just another expression of allegiance, not a stake of his own. There was a little something in each of these positions that I could relate to, but then again something else that I couldn’t. The truth is, our agreement was provisional at best, superficial, resting on incompatible premises. In fact, I don’t think we really agreed at all.

“I’m talking about *value*. The value of a dollar. The value of a body. Where does the value originate? Where does it go? Do you really believe, *to each his own*, while we

sit here eating Cornish hens and tortellini in a place where no such things exist? Carbines on the shoulder, pistols on the hip, cordon and search on the plan of the day...do you really believe it's neither here nor there—*bodies, not-bodies*—whatever word suits the situation?"

"Are we still talking about Coney Island?" Oscar asked.

"I think you're missing the point."

"So...no kid on a bus? No dollars bills flying out the window? Nobody jumping into traffic to catch them?"

Van yawned and stared up at the top of the tent. "I'd pay to see that."

Clyde retreated to the familiarity of bitterness and suspicion. "I bet he's never even been to Coney Island."

The conversation was pretty much derailed at this point with no hopes of getting back on track. I didn't have the stamina to follow up with another explanation, for the previous explanation, and I let my frustration express itself indecorously.

"Why don't you go sit with your own people, *Conway*?"

It was an unnecessary rebuke and I instantly regretted it. Clyde never sat with his own squad and I didn't need to ask why. I knew perfectly well. At the time of this conversation in the mess tent, his squad had already been in a fight, just one, but it was before anyone else had seen any action, and coincidentally (just his bad luck), Clyde had been detailed that day for sentry duty, so he missed out.

The squad came back in the wire bearing those fabled red badges, coveted and admired for generations on end, and suddenly Clyde's camouflage appeared shamefully pristine. There were men who'd wear their utilities threadbare and falling apart, month

after sweaty month, without surveying them for a new pair, all to preserve those precious ruddy stains. Among his own people, Clyde had lost the privilege to speak or so much as open his mouth on any topic, however mundane. Nothing could be *fucking bullshit* anymore, not from his lips, not from his eyes, not from his body. He was among the unchristened now, sartorially clean, so fraternally unclean, and therefore forbidden to evaluate anything, ever.

He sat silently among the other members of the squad, all muttering their vague truths back and forth like monks. He sat and he sat with his viewpoints suppressed until he couldn't take the sacred muzzle any longer, and that's when he joined us. We hadn't yet been baptized at the time so he was free, once again, to judge and express anything he chose. With us, he was permitted to deem the whole world *fucking bullshit*. Whatever he wanted to say, he could say, but only with us.

I noticed, from afar, this flock of holy men had a hierarchy of its own. Some had more right to speak than others. The unspoken rule (literally unspoken): Nobody speaks in the presence of those who've seen or done worse or lost more. Each one of these holy men sat in stoical deference to another, all the way up to the head of the table, and all of them, including the bloodiest, deferred only to the most stoical of all...*the fallen*.

(Nobody is entitled to speak before them.)

Now, if Clyde had been with his squad on that baptismal day, if he'd been bloodied as well, he might have felt differently about this unofficial hierarchy. But feeling himself pinned beneath the weight of the silence, he began to question it. I could see it in his eyes, how much he wanted to shout, *This is fucking bullshit!* I suspect we all felt that

way, to one extent or another, which kept us at a distance from the holy men. After all, we weren't the ones who'd established this social order.

And yet, despite our misgivings, I further suspect that we continued to believe in the order. Beneath our resentment, we believed that the silence was somehow correct. How could we not? What would be the point of enduring the desert if not to be baptized and eventually earn our places at the table, and mutter vague truths, and demand the silence of others who'd not yet seen or drawn blood? Under the circumstances, how else might we become valuable enough to speak?

I've told this story before, by the way, many times, to many people, this story of the sacred squad and the muted throngs around them. And every time I tell it, somebody thinks it's a metaphor. No. It's not a damned metaphor! Don't you see yourselves at memorials and parades, in the presence of sacrifice, don't you hear your thoughts squelched while the bugles blow, and the flags are folded, and the shimmering medals march by? Don't you feel yourself bound by the hymnal chords of silence?

And from the sallow throning I get that old accommodating smile and the old knowing nod. "Yeah...but it's appropriate. Don't worry. No one has forgotten your lives." Well, if that's true, it's only because there's nothing left to forget. The bodies were redacted. The violence was made mythology. And all the while nobody was permitted to speak. Only *the fallen* in flag-draped coffins are authorized to give an opinion, and they seldom express reservation. And so, in the ethical equations of the desert, count after count, body after body, the value of human flesh was figured weightless.

Oscar rolls his eyes as usual, mutters, shakes his head dismissively, right along with the sallow throng. *Yeah, yeah*, he says, but meanwhile here he is, right beside me in the white SUV, on the road to Caye Alma, in search of some value to attach to his own flesh, to his own story, to make his own life matter. Is it gold? Is it truth? A blessing? Forgiveness? A fountain of youth? Really, the material doesn't matter. What matters is value. That's what our search is about in the end—*value*. So, sooner or later, whatever we find, we'll have to ask ourselves this: Who decides what it's worth?

D. Our Approach

You could call it a ghost story. I would. We were still carrying on, still in the flesh, and yet we felt weightless, like we made no impressions on the world whatsoever. Our lives forgotten, our thoughts, even our bodies seemed invisible. And we fell in with others who were forgotten, too, or who wanted to be. We were all ghosts in that sense, dwelling endlessly like so many souls of the psychatrix.

Now I have no supernatural notion of myself and I don't actually believe I'm a spirit—not yet, at any rate. It's more like a feeling or a hunch that my life is lifting away from my body like a balloon. Either death is at hand or it's not. I don't know. But I've got a suspicion that the spirit inside me doesn't care, that it won't wait for death, and that at any moment I'm going to experience a disembodiment of some kind. And I walk around with this nagging question: When that time comes, who will be left inside my skin? Who will *I* be?

“No man is an island,” Van recites solemnly, because he believes that it fits in the moment. But which moment? What are its dimensions? The *moment* is essentially a void,

inherently and indefinitely without form. So who can say? And meanwhile Oscar is racing through a litany of constitutional materials regarding statutes of limitation, jurisdiction, areas of responsibility, and so on. How shall we classify these questions? Inquiry? Examination? Interrogation? In any case, all further dimensions to articulate.

Oscar throws up his hands desperately. “Just how many tolls of this bell are we accountable for? How much diminishment can one body sustain?”

“No man is an island,” I repeat inwardly, hesitantly, as if abruptly accosted by unreliable and unsubstantiated testimony of unknown origins, and I suddenly suspect that that is precisely what I’m trying to do—not *find* an island, but *become* one. To *be* an island. And so, you might say, our approach to Caye Alma enters the conversation under questionable circumstances.

What are we doing here? What are we talking about? Why the ambivalence, and the quest, and the rambling performance? Oscar claims this is nothing more to him than a meaningless escapade with no other end than to occupy his time since he has nothing better to do anyway. Van says less, of course, but anyone can see the certainty in his stride no matter how languid his carriage. I’m flipping the map, over and around, searching for that little black arrow and the words that say, *You Are Here*, so we can at very least orient ourselves and ramble with some sense of direction.

Isn’t that why we joined the gun club in the first place? Because we were lost, just like we’re lost now, hurtling recklessly over hill and dale, looking for that mythical land called *Belonging*. *Oh Belonging!* There is no place more divine, however bloody, however covered with casualties and ghosts. There is no country, no land, and no sweet chariot coming for to carry me home.

We heard all the stories revered over the ages, all the great epics, and we engorged ourselves, year in and out, with gripping accounts...of a Bonham or a Baumer or a Bowker, or a Billy Pilgrim or a Buddy Wyman, or a Dodd, or Yossarian, or Bolkonsky, or a Henry Fleming, or a Robert Jordan, or a Robert Lee, or a Robert *whoever*, any Robert will do, in whatever country, crisis, or conflict...glorious, just, ignoble...who really cares?

With no more than a taste of the awe that such stories inspire, tragic or comic or thrilling, we welcomed the glossy brochures that fell into our laps, just like this map, filled with appealing pictures of others, on their way, too. But to where? And from where? Nobody knew and none of us asked. So I'm asking now. From where and to where are we going? What do we hope to find in the dunes of Caye Alma? I sure as hell hope it's more than a metaphor.

"I was never lost," Oscar disputes. This while waving a pistol out the window of a moving SUV.

And I speculate in return, "If I could live out my days in another state, I'd do it, without a second thought."

Van traces a finger methodically over a dusty dashboard, down onto plastic Mary, caressing her body, from her wan canted face to her faux wooden pedestal, and he asks, "Which state?"

Oscar presses his finger to a temple and states empirically, "Nebraska."

"Nebraska? No man...I mean a state of mind...an alternative consciousness, a chemically induced island, a state of emergency, oblivion, confusion, something that makes no sense at all, like the State of the Union, or a state of affairs in which one can no

longer state, credibly or positively, the final status of one's existence. Give me a dissociative drug so I can dissociate myself from the State altogether with its boundaries, bodies, points on the map. No regimes. No walls. No citizens or aliens. No common sense, common prayer, common law—I want to be permanently anesthetized from everything common. That kind of state.”

“Mmmm. Sounds like Nebraska to me.”

“Yeah man.”

Okay fine.

Meanwhile, behind the wheel of a white SUV, I sail over ridges, through valleys, across pastures, consuming the serpentine highway as fast as I'm able without throwing us over the rail or into pursuit by the speed-trapping troopers that infest every roller and bend, just waiting for their chance to enforce ludicrous limits that, for the record, have nothing to do with velocity. The swaying, reeling, tortuous motion of my body puts my mind into a serpentine state as well and I pass unexpected vistas and dilapidated signs, both of which swirl in my head to the point that I can no longer be sure which thoughts bear material reference and which do not.

In the midst of this winding, I fall unexpectedly upon two concerns: *existence*, in the first place, and in the second, *existing*. The two seem to me separate matters, and generally unfathomable, or anyway deeper in fathoms than I could ever descend, and yet the gravity of *doing* pulls me down faster and harder than *being*. What do I care about the basis of my distress? The daily burden. That's my chief concern. Can I pack the load? Day after day, can I pack the load?

I've heard it reported to the public with curious persistence that those of us shipped off to the desert suffered fewer deaths in comparison with previous conflicts, because of technological advances in both equipment and medicine; therefore, more of us survived, albeit many without limbs or peace of mind, many traipsing around the planet, wondering just how many more days they've got left to pack this load. For some, even one more day is too many to bear, and so, by their own hand, they bring that vital count down to zero. For others, the approach is less direct.

I suppose if I have any hopes of building this job-lot of inklings and occurrences into a coherent statement or persuasive argument, I'm going to have to dig a little deeper and think a little harder, but now's not the time, not now while I'm sitting in an SUV, behind a white knuckled wheel, with a gas pedal pinned. Ahead of me lies a highway, full of its own twists and inclinations, a highway that I'm trying to navigate in a six thousand pound vehicle with a propensity for the straight and narrow. No, now's not the time for deep contemplation and argumentation. The questions of technology and longevity will have to wait. Added to which, I've just spotted a figure ahead on the side of the road.

Now who can this be?

Even at a distance, as barely a shadow, this person reveals a distinct lack of character. And my impressions are not improved as we draw closer. It appears to be a man leaning against the guard rail beside a bicycle, and waving, presumably for assistance. He certainly doesn't look like he's worth much of my lost concentration. I can already feel myself wandering back inward to the thoughts from a moment ago that were swimming around my head like little gray tadpoles in a murky pond. Now what was the point that I was steering towards? But the man and his bicycle grow larger in the window

and I feel my boot lift involuntarily from the gas pedal, and the SUV glides onto the gravelly shoulder until, at last, we come to a halt beside him.

The most noticeable feature about this slumping man on the side of the road turns out to be his bicycle. It's painted all white, even the tires, the seat, the handlebars, and cables, like it's been dipped in a vat of Elmer's glue. There are small bunches of wilted flowers bound to the frame with frayed colored yarn, and a piece of white cardboard torn in half and stuck inside the spokes of the painted front wheel with the handwritten words. At the bottom edge of the placard, where the cardboard is torn, there are fragments of additional words, the tips of more characters, scrawled out in marker, but there's not enough showing to make out the rest of the message.

This bicycle man conveys a dingy impression at best...sunburned arms, chopped soiled hair, a dusty short-whiskered face, cargo khakis, black leather boots, and one of those synthetic shirts that wicks away moisture from the skin. One pant leg is cinched at the ankle with a bit of frayed yarn, the same as that which holds the wilted flowers onto his bike. It's not a striking presentation, I can tell you. Nevertheless, I'll admit that I'm drawn to him in a haunted sort of way like how one might regard a condemned building.

I notice Oscar, out of the corner of my eye, tucking his pistol away under his shirt before running down his window. "How's it going?" he calls out to the stranded cyclist and I can't help snickering and thinking up a few sarcastic retorts on behalf of the bicycle man, who hasn't offered any reply of his own. He stands stoically with an unremarkable frown, casting vacant glimpses up and down the highway, a gesture I think perfectly captures his predicament. I smile sympathetically and run down the passenger window and shout across Van, who remains catatonic.

“Where you headed?”

Bicycle man steps sideways a bit so he can see my face and says, “Not sure.”

Not sure? Well, what the hell is that supposed to mean? How can he be not sure? Is he *not sure* because he has no destination? Or is he *not sure* where this particular road leads? “Not sure?”

He points pathetically down at the flat tire on his white bicycle and says, “Wherever you’re going will be fine.”

“Not sure we’ve got room,” says Oscar, slouching low, making no attempt to size up the SUV, so it’s perfectly clear that he isn’t referring to space, but position.

But then Shamil speaks up from the back and alters the order of things.

“Put the bike in here,” she says. “I’ll get out.”

Alarmed expressions fly about, startled eyes, confusion, fear, etc....the kinds of reactions you can expect when the order of things is disrupted.

“Get out? You mean, like, get out and not get back in?”

“I’ll walk.”

Walk? What does she mean walk? Walk where? I turn around in time to see Shamil unlatching the cargo door while Sinjin’s boy cradles her prosthesis tightly, conveying his own distress. She nods at him as if to say, *You can keep it*. I reiterate my concerns, though this time out loud. “Walk? Walk where?”

Shamil comes around to the driver’s side of the truck and sticks her tattooed arm in the window, which I take as her request for the map. I hand it over. She scans it briefly, hands it back, and points to a dot in the middle of nowhere. “There. The next town.”

I look at the dot. “That’s not a town. That’s a dot. I doubt it’s got a postal code. It doesn’t even have a name.”

“I’ll be at the dot,” Shamil answers without inflection.

Bicycle man suddenly notices Shamil’s face and her missing arm, and his mouth falls open, his eyes widen, and he chokes back a gasp in the way that everyone does when they first see her. None of us pays attention to these types of reactions anymore. We’ve become almost as immune to the horror as Shamil. Anyway, at the moment I’m more concerned with this nameless dot on the map.

“Hey!” I yell after Shamil. “It’s like...fifty miles or something!”

“About a blade and a half,” Oscar estimates. “As the crow flies.”

But it’s too late. She’s already walking away, off into the dusty coils ahead, in just the way I imagined the first day I met her.

Great. Now we’re abandoned. Left behind with this unremarkable man and his white washed bicycle. I glare at him till he notices my annoyance and mumbles pitifully, “Sorry.”

Sorry? He doesn’t look sorry, or sound sorry. How could anyone believe such a gangling apology? Contrition, I say, if it’s genuine, should be felt fiercely and declared vigorously. If you’re *not sure*...well...then you’re not sorry. Oscar and I load the bike into the cargo area.

“Where’d you get this piece of junk?” I ask him, looking over the bunches of wilted flowers tied to its dented frame.

He helps arrange the front wheel and answers absently. “Found it in Pittsburg.”

“Pittsburg?”

“Yeah...somebody left it sitting on a street corner, not locked up or nothing, so I figured it was free.”

Oscar stares at him skeptically. “You found a junk bike in Pittsburg, and now you’re riding it down a country highway...” he looks around “...*here?*”

Bicycle man looks around, too, to be sure he is in fact *here*. “Yep.”

“You’re just not sure where you’re going *from* here. It that it?”

“Yep.”

We load ourselves up in the white SUV. Oscar assumes his usual position in the back seat behind Van. The boy arranges himself in the middle with a pencil and a journal that he’s been using as a sketch pad. Bicycle man leaps into the seat behind mine with a suspicious burst of alacrity. I make the obligatory introductions.

“That’s Van. I’m Trace.” Oscar introduces himself, irritably, with one hand resting under his shirt.

Bicycle man grins. “You guys got any food? I’m famished.”

“Hunger is good,” Oscar grumbles.

Then Bicycle man flinches toward the windshield. “What about *him*...who’s he?”

“Who’s who?” I know who he means, of course, but I’m feeling obstinate.

“Him.” Bicycle man points down the road with a paralyzed gaze.

“Him? Where? Who do you mean?”

Oscar knows what I’m up to, becomes impatient, and finally intervenes. “*Shamil*, his fucking name is Shamil.”

“*Her!*” I shout back abruptly and then gasp, surprised by my own outburst.

Bicycle man rubs the back of his neck. “*Her*...huh,” as if he’s genuinely interested, but the interest is fraudulent, no doubt, just a clever performance to see what sort of conflict he might incite. He’s studying our faces, watching our contrasting expressions, turning his eyes back and forth between us, making a study of us like beetles in a jar. He rubs his neck again and says, “I could have sworn she was a *him*.”

“It’s a point of contention,” Oscar grunts.

“So...her name’s *Shamil*?”

“No, *Shamil* isn’t *her* name. It’s the name of a man from the desert— an Imam.”

More neck rubbing and overblown pondering. “I don’t get it. Why’d she take a guy’s name?”

“She didn’t *take* the name. She doesn’t *use* the name. Forget it, it’s hard to explain.”

Van emerges from his cryonic stupor and peers across the landscape with savage eyes as if stunned to discover himself still in the craven old world. “Where are we?”

“The middle of nowhere,” I mutter, jamming the gas pedal down, peeling off the shoulder and back out onto the highway.

“I think this is actually Kentucky,” bicycle man says.

Van presses a hand flat against the window. “Where are we going?”

“A place called *Dot*.”

My blood’s running thin, I can feel it, my energy’s draining, my brain’s gone berserk. I’m scowling and scanning the horizon for *Shamil*. Where can she be? I feel a folding in my stomach, a mixture of longing and nausea, and an urge to shout out, *Shamil!* as long and as loud as I can. But I don’t. I hold the shout down, while Oscar zeroes in on the torn placard tucked in the bike’s white painted spokes.

“*In-loving-memory*...for who?”

Bicycle man looks back into the cargo area astonished, as if he’s never noticed the sign before, not once, all this time, pedaling for months on end, state after state, never seen the words, never heard of such a thing as *loving memory*, and he shrugs.

“Um...not sure.”

Not sure? Again? Clearly he’s lying. Clearly. Of course he’s lying. Not sure? It’s impossible. “What’s your name anyway?” I ask this unremarkable bicycle man.

“I go by Wieland.”

“You go by Wieland?”

“Yeah, that’s what I call myself.”

“So it’s not your real name? When did you start calling yourself Wieland?”

“When I got back from the desert.”

“You were in the desert?” Oscar sits up, suddenly more curious, and I notice his hand comes out from under his shirt.

But I’m suspicious. I want to know more about this nom de guerre, *Wieland*. “Why *Wieland* in particular?”

“I’m not really sure. I saw this lady at a bus stop in Buffalo with a book in her hands, eyes glued to the page, and she had kind of a frightened look on her face. I figured it must be a pretty good book. It was called *Wieland*.”

“*That’s* the reason you decided to call yourself *Wieland*? Because it was frightening a woman at a bus stop? So what’s your real name?”

He winces but eventually responds slyly, “Well...I guess if I told you that, it would kind of defeat the purpose of having a new name, wouldn’t it? Sort of like...*Shamil*.”

I'm stunned that this idiot has just compared himself to Shamil, while *he's* riding and *she's* walking, and now I know he's lying, about everything. Everything he says is a damned lie. Meanwhile Oscar, so committed to the facts as he pretends to be, doesn't appear in the slightest bit troubled by this particular fiction. He's found someone else who's been to the desert. That's all that matters to him. I can barely contain my exasperation.

"What is that...synthetic?"

"Whuh?"

"Your shirt—is it synthetic? Wicks away moisture, right?"

Bicycle man pinches a bit of material from his chest and stares down at it.

"Ummm...not...really...sure."

Well, of course he's not sure, naturally, but Oscar doesn't care. Suddenly the difference between synthetic and natural makes no difference at all, none whatsoever. He doesn't care about wicking and moisture. Never mind that the body's made up of more than half water. He doesn't care about the consequences of our fabrications. So he changes the subject altogether!

"What were you doing riding a bike way the hell out here?"

Bicycle man wrinkles his brow. He thinks about this question deeply, slowly, or at least he pretends to, and all the while Oscar is waiting patiently. I can see the anticipation expanding across his face, and bicycle man finally gives him an answer, the best possible answer—I mean *best* if he wanted to grab Oscar by the neck and pull him down into the abyss of all things unfathomable.

"I was looking for my country," he tells Oscar.

Oscar's eyes bulge and twist. He's instantly entranced by the very idea of looking for one's country. "What do you mean by that?"

Bicycle man shrugs. "Not sure."

"Are you sure of anything?" I bark back at him.

His eyes float, and his voice descends, and he shrugs again. "Just not sure. It's like...I don't know...I served my country...came home...and I realized, I didn't even know what my country looks like. Never seen the people. Never seen the land. Wouldn't know the difference between Tennessee and Tasmania if it wasn't for TV. So how do you serve that?"

"Yeah..." Oscar nods, contemplating, murmuring, "How the hell *do* you serve that?"

"So I spotted this bike in Pittsburg and it got me to thinking. Hey, maybe I can find it on this thing."

Oscar's at the edge of his seat now. "So? Any luck?" Just listen to the longing in his voice. He's almost pleading. It's pathetic. He really does want to know. *Where in the world is my country?* He might not admit it, he might not say it out loud, but he knows, just as well as the rest of us know...the Sugar Bowl sure as hell isn't home. Not in the sand. Not in the sea. And our journey to Caye Alma isn't some vacuous occupation of his time.

"*Any luck?*" I laugh viciously, almost chuckling. "*Any luck?* Well...seeing as we're driving through the middle of nowhere, to a town called *Dot*...evidently not."

"I think this is actually Kentucky."

Oscar gazes out the window. "My granddad was a Kentucky man."

Van weaves in another unintelligible quotation, clearly not intended to be a genuine contribution to the fabric of the moment. And then Shamil comes to mind again, like a dream or a distant song. *My dear Shamil*. Where is she now? Why haven't we passed her yet? Not seeing her makes me nervous. She must have taken a path off the highway, gone cross country, found a less circuitous approach.

How long will it take to get to the *Dot*, Shamil walking, and us careening along in a white SUV? How great a difference will it make? There's really no point in wondering now. I can't concentrate anyway. My legs grow heavier by the minute, my head throbs, my hands shake. The aching spreads into spaces and protuberances of my body that I forgot all about or never knew existed. If I was alone I might just allow my tears to burst through this damned sacred levee of restraint. Everyday, *every-single-day*, the question remains the same. Can I pack the load? Can I survive another night? Another day? Another hour? Can I pack the load? Or will this be the moment I succumb? Under the daily burden of such torment, the world itself becomes an apparition. Every-single-day...Can I pack the load?

In a grasping attempt to distract myself from the strain, to push through the next leg of life, I return to the earlier concerns of technology and longevity. Now what was it I was saying? I struggle to recall my thoughts from before. But it's no use. None of it makes sense anymore. It's as if all those little gray tadpoles were startled and scattered to the farthest reaches of the murky pond in my head and are now unfathomable. And my notes, like those of the dying Malone, annihilate all they purport to record.

The only thing I really remember now is what it felt like to *have* an idea. But I can't remember the idea itself. I may have had the beginnings of a good point. Who knows? I'll

never find out now because the ideas were assembled within an unarticulated miasma of sensations that gave the pond its shape, and my thoughts a context. But now the miasma has disappeared and reformed into something else entirely. It seemed very logical at the time, like a dream one recalls in the break of the day, but the dream is fading, and I can't get it back. My context has become a body in pain.

Setting aside my cerebral diversions leaves me, once again, in the presence of Shamil. *My dear Shamil*—where is she now? Yes I know, walking, but where? I've got no idea and that makes me tense and I shift in my seat, and meanwhile the urge to shout to her nags on. Clearly this has nothing to do with communication, as in a connection between two human beings. She'd never hear me anyway, shouting at the top of my voice from the window of an SUV. Not at this distance. Not at this speed. And even if she could hear, would she come? Would she shout back? Would she even turn her head? There's no need to wonder. I know perfectly well. Nevertheless, the urge to shout nags on.

A voice from behind me says, "Whoa!"

"What'd you say? What? Are you talking to me?"

In the mirror I see Oscar and bicycle man both leaning over the boy's sketch book.

"Incredible. He's got a gift."

"Right?"

"How does he do it?"

"I'm telling you brother," Oscar says with a haunting tone, "Premonitions run from this kid's pencil."

Brother? What the hell? Now bicycle man is his brother? This is who Oscar has elected his kin? There is some truth, though, in what he's said about the boy's drawings, these so-called *premonitions*, always portraits of us, comprised more of shades than hard lines. At some point along the way we fell under the suspicion that all our fates were foretold in the boy's notebook, and after a while we even became hesitant to approach his productions at all, as if we could hear some whispering derisions inside ourselves...taunting us...*Do you dare?*

It was all just a joke at first. Nothing so ominous. The boy was like a mascot. Cute. Clever. No need to take a rough sketch of a face so seriously. But gradually our feelings about the images and their reticent creator subtly evolved into a palpable reluctance. What do we see in these portraits that gives us pause? Certainly not answers. Nothing so grandiose as *truth*. Perhaps a glimpse of what's missing in ourselves, which leaves us reflecting uncomfortably: *Where do we stand?*

The discomfort is never articulated explicitly. It tends to be conveyed through the mildest critique, each of us responding to his own portrait in turn. "It's definitely good..." one person might say, encouragingly, like a pat on the boy's head, easing into the unfavorable end of the evaluation, speaking ever so slowly so as to come across thoughtful rather than mean-spirited. "I think the nose is a little off. Or maybe it's the lips. I don't know. Something's not quite right."

And then everyone else instantly jumps to the boy's defense, "No way man. He nailed you. He totally nailed you."

"I think the hair is wrong. Or the ears...they're high. And look at the shape of the eyes...no, those aren't *my* eyes."

Everyone else: “No way man. He nailed you. He totally nailed you.”

Again and again, each one subjected to the page continues to oppose his own representation. “Nah...not really...not exactly.”

“Face it man, he nailed you.”

There are two exceptions to this ritual: Shamil, whose face the boy never draws, and Sinjin, whose face he draws frequently, but nobody ever disputes its accuracy.

We’ll crowd around the page and look at Sinjin’s face and marvel in unison, “Damn son, that shit’s dead on.”

The boy’s position has shifted over the miles from mascot to saint, a saint bearing powers, not merely as clairvoyant, but as architect, drafting our fortunes in his notebook, favorable or not, with placid eyes and furious fingers. Certainly one wonders how a drawing could ever portend someone’s fate. How could we have come to a point where we really and truly believed that a glimpse of a sketch, black and white, by the hand of a child, is the same as a glimpse of ourselves...of our souls...of our ends? The answer again and again: Perhaps it’s better we don’t ask. So the boy’s productions remain unapproachable.

Onward we rush, down the winding country road. I spot another furry carcass flash by, another crimson pelt on the asphalt belt of civilization, and whisper to myself perfunctorily, “Bless her soul.”

“Whose soul?” bicycle man asks.

I realize, too late, I’ve spoken aloud and search for a passable explanation for my roadkill prayer. Incredibly, I’m rescued by Van, who’s suddenly perked up and listening.

Good old Van. Well, it doesn't surprise me. Any mention of the supernatural is guaranteed to grab Van's attention.

"They call me Nature or Pandora. I am your mother and your enemy. But do not be afraid. My enmity does not kill. You are alive. I wish you no greater calamity."

I can't speak to the relevance of the passage Van's quoted, I've long since stopped trying, but I'm pleased to see that it has successfully distracted bicycle man, who nods in agreement.

"Hell on earth."

"Tell me about it," Oscar agrees. But this isn't genuine agreement. Knowing Oscar, it's just another pledge of allegiance, another oath to another soul. He's always swearing oaths, so desperate he is to stand united with *somebody*, anybody at all. But bicycle man has misinterpreted Oscar's oath as a literal request to tell us all about his mother.

"Well..." he says. "Mother had a tub."

There's a weary strain in his voice. I imagine it's intentional, meant to foreshadow some impending doom. Okay fine. I'm always ready to be enraptured by another person's tragic account, if for no other reason than to feel the aching of my own tragedies.

But seriously...whose mother doesn't have a tub?

E. Mother's Tub

The tub is painted white, or ivory, pure at one time perhaps, but broken chips reveal the cast iron body beneath its coat. Mother's tub hunches on four feet, like an animal, ready to pounce from the tiles, black and white, cool to the skin, striking to the eye. The tub has no curtain. There is no need. There is no shower. There is no money. There's only a flimsy rubber hose that plugs into the spigot, and one crouches inside the crouching tub on cold dark mornings and struggles desperately, almost panicked, to cover every inch of one's naked bristling skin with hot water.

Where is Mother's Tub found? In a bathroom, of course, at the end of a dim corridor that runs deep into an old apartment building with an exterior of unpointed bricks and splitting concrete, and interior walls with wisps of crayon graffiti, and floorboards that creak, and ceilings that hang with peeling paint, and bare bulbs on chains, and webs abandoned by their mothers. At the mouth of the dim corridor, through a doorway, over a rusting gas stove, one peers at a poster that hangs in the gloom with curled corners, a painted image, a title and scattered words and dates, all insignificant, and yet they create an eerie impression.

Babes in the Wood. Two tender bodies, naked and plump, hugging helplessly beneath a gnarled tree. Their forms forebode or enchant, depending on what one wants to find—a subtle stroke, a rending fate, a radiant composition, scathing commentary—whatever you desire. But the poster functions foremost as an element in the bricolage that must be engaged by the psyche before proceeding down the dim corridor to the bathroom where Mother's Tub waits.

Since living in that old apartment, so many years ago, I've found that when I shower, especially in the chilly morning hours, a phantom flies out from the head and throws itself upon my face and shoulders, gathers in my hair, trickles down my back, and makes my skin prickle amidst flashing memories of that crouching tub. No matter how hard one tries, one knows the water cannot cover the entire body and so, at any given moment, there is always some portion of the body, some patch of the skin, some limb, a flank, a knee, some part of oneself that is left out in the cold. Consequently every muscle shakes. A slight turn of the knob makes the water hotter, and another turn, and another, further, hotter, as if a scalding chest and a freezing back could ever amount to warmth.

Nevertheless, in the early hours, in the winter months, when the windowpanes are thick with ice, this is the only reliable refuge from the nipping air that occupies every corner of one's body and abode. There is something terrifying in feeling the water's warmth wane, as the basement boiler drains, a looming end to the comfort it provides. Then one is forced to tighten the valve, to cut off its flow with a free hand and flee, and finally face the frigidity of the world, bare-skinned and trembling.

It's ironic, I think, that this phantom is my cloak, the only place I feel truly safe from harm. And yet, despite the warmth that pours forth from the shower head, or out from the spigot in Mother's Tub through a flimsy rubber hose, I know in my bones, like I know nothing else, I know that from this same spigot comes cold. And one stares at the ivory cross handles, in the phantom's embrace, and asks the acid why? Why does the water run both hot and cold? Of course, of course...because it must.

There is a truth that's hidden inside this crouching tub, and while it is an awful thing to bear, it is one's only access to this truth, precisely because it is hidden, because it

is crouching at the end of a dim corridor, because there is no other way to know that this is the human condition. But once the journey is made, one knows with absolute certainty, when walking the street, across town and country, across the desert, across a border, one knows like one knows nothing else, that underlying every encounter, every glance, every touch, every oath, absolutely everything, lies upon a truth that can only be found in Mother's Tub.

Let me offer a few hard facts, material circumstances, physical details, because there is a primacy of reason that reigns in these times, in these parts of the world, to the extent that one's conclusions cannot be taken too seriously without some concrete data to evaluate. Therefore, take these: The tile floor hits elbows and knees and skulls and never gives. This is a hard fact. The rounded edge of Mother's Tub can be gripped in moments of distress. And the towel rod will squeal. And the plaster walls, papered and painted, coat after coat, year after year, thump faintly under beating fists, but will never lose a cry. These are just a few hard facts, among many.

At one point in my adult years, I was introduced to a book by Elaine Scarry called *The Body in Pain*. I tote it around like some do their holy texts, and read it repeatedly, chapter and verse, stewing in the words and the implications that, in my opinion, owe no particular allegiance to their author. I value the work for its resonance, for its truth, for its literary quality, but not really for its revelations. The revelations were already known. Already felt. Already inscribed in the skin of humanity. I carry the book to remind me that the body in pain does not belong to me alone. And that can be a valuable reminder.

In the spirit of this evaluation of concrete data, let me share a passage from this text that often comes to mind: "Just as all aspects of the concrete structure are inevitably

assimilated into the process of torture, so too the contents of the room, its furnishings, are converted into weapons: the most common instance of this is...*the bathtub*.” And now I know. I am not alone. Mother’s Tub was not her creation. Mother marches in a history of tubs. “The room, both in its structure and its content, is converted into a weapon, deconverted, undone. Made to participate in the annihilation of the prisoners, made to demonstrate that everything is a weapon, the objects themselves, and with them the fact of civilization, are annihilated: there is no wall, no window, no door, *no bathtub*.” The bathtub disappears. It becomes what it is not.

Under icy water, eyes go haywire so really there is no sight, just the flickering vision of whipping appendages. Every muscle contracts spasmodically. Bones feel brittle. I don’t know what the heart is up to but I suppose it must be racing. Lungs heave, tighter and tighter, in rhythmic succession, but they cannot release under the cold assault. And yet curiously there are cries that vanish in the whiteness of cries. Despite the pandemonium, there is an inexplicable sense of paralysis that overcomes consciousness. Life becomes still, or seems to anyway, a strip of film held in the hand that can only be viewed, frame by frozen frame. And when it’s all over, as the heart settles, and breathing calms, and shaking slows, and numbness falls down like a phantom, one’s whole body asks the acid why? Why does Mother run so hot and cold? Of course, of course...because she must.

In the shower, alone, I feel the phantom run its searing hand across my eyes, the hot water slips down my spine, and I feel safe from harm in some fragile way, but then I shiver and I cannot forget or suppress those *Babes in the Wood*, hanging in the gloom over the old gas stove. I recognized the sadness in their faces, as if I knew something

about their circumstances, something of their past or future, something of their thoughts.
But I didn't.

I never knew what brought those babes to the woods, or to the kitchen in that old apartment, or what was to become of them later on. It never occurred to me to ask. I felt strangely content, contemplating them as they were in the moment. Still, I sensed their fate from their sad eyes, and in the way they huddled in each other's arms, beneath the branches of the gnarled tree, in a similar way that I huddled beneath the flimsy rubber hose of Mother's Tub. We all saw each other, all of us huddling under the shadow of the only enduring truth we'd ever known. And every cold morning since then, we find each other in the darkness, and together we ask the acid why?

And the phantom lays its lips upon our heads.

Because it must.

F. Demons are Improbable

“It is related O demon, that there lived in a certain city two men who dwelt in adjoining houses separated by a common wall. One of them envied the other, gave him the evil eye, and did his utmost to hurt him. He was so obsessed that his envy grew until he could hardly eat or enjoy the pleasure of sleep. But the envied did nothing but prosper, and the more the envious strove to injure him, the more he throve and flourished.”

We stand together in the remnants of a courtyard in a town called *Dot*. Trace ambles out to the center of a quiet traffic circle and directs his longing down a central artery that runs from the heart of this withering municipality to its outskirts. He waits for Shamil. He waits ill-prepared for the inevitable. Shamil is not coming back. His hands are deep in his pockets, fingers wrapped around his precious map, no doubt, his shoulders hunched, his head hangs low, his shirt flaps wildly from his body in the gusting wind as though from a slack whipping clothesline.

Oscar stares at a rustic theater dedicated to Stonewall Jackson. There's a corroded monument in the courtyard and a plaque conveying a brief but resplendent account of *The Legend of the Lost Cause*. Posted on the door of the rustic building is a notice announcing an event to be held on this very night. That hardly seems possible. Who would ever come? Oscar draws near for a closer look at the monument, the plaque, and the notice on the door. He reads it aloud to the rest of us. *Stories from the Desert. Open Mic Night. 7PM*. He turns around, intending to comment, but stops to admire the child who's sitting in the grass beside Stonewall Jackson with Shamil's prosthesis in his lap, sketching upon it a copy of the lithograph once tattooed on her lost arm.

The stranger, who Trace refers to as *bicycle man*, who refers to himself as *Wieland*, stands beside me and together we draw in the panorama of dilapidation.

“What becomes of the envied and the envious?”

“The envied moves away, to another land, and tries to start his life anew, where his success will not be in view of the envious. But stories are resilient travelers, you know, and soon the envious hears all about the continued prosperity of the envied and so sets out to find him and exact his revenge.”

“What exactly is he avenging?”

“He’s another *Lost Cause*. And inherent to any lost cause is a longing for revenge.”

“Does he ever get it?”

“He visits the envied at his home, who welcomes him inside, and when nobody is looking, the envious pushes him down into a well and leaves him for dead.”

“A modern age Montresor and Fortunato?”

“Neither ancient nor modern...Hell hath no age and no history.”

“How can that be?” the stranger asks but in a tone that precludes any answer. He produces a package of cigarettes and a glistening silver lighter. Trace immediately involves himself with the ritual, gestures his request to partake, and the stranger offers him a cigarette poking up from the pack in accordance with the customs of hospitality.

After the ceremonious first smoke is inhaled, Trace studies a glowing ember and says to the stranger, “You know what they put in these things?”

The stranger takes a draw of his own and raises his eyebrows. “Tobacco?”

“No...right...but I mean *in* the tobacco.”

“Like nicotine?”

“Yeah but nicotine isn’t an additive. It’s a constituent part of the tobacco itself.”

The stranger flicks off the excess ash and shrugs. “Okay...not sure.”

Trace becomes instantly exasperated and shouts at the stranger. “What is that your fucking mantra? How can you be not sure? All the cigarettes you’ve smoked? All your time in the desert?” The stranger stays quiet, as if he’s witnessing more than listening. Trace carries on. “Man, it’s sand! They put fucking sand in the cigarettes.”

“Sand?”

“Yeah man...sand. I mean okay, I was skeptical at first, too, but then I figured, hey they use tar, right? If they can put fucking tar into cigarettes, why not sand? Think about it.”

The stranger continues smoking, in all probability not thinking about it at all. Trace continues smoking as well, probably thinking about nothing else, but keeping his eyes trained, all the while, down that central artery out to the peripheries of *Dot*.

“So, what do we think about *this*?” Oscar holds up the notice now torn from the rustic door. He’s striding over to the rest of us, scrutinizing the announcement, dwelling on the probabilities of a traveling story.

“Desert stories? Really? Is that how it works? Just throw ‘em a few anecdotes so they can say they know all about it?”

Trace lets himself be torn from his horizons and sandy cigarettes long enough to engage the dispute. No obsession could ever prevent Trace from voicing an opinion. That’s his true obsession. And no opinion of his achieves value till it’s sounded. For Trace, the idea of an *idea* without locution is inconceivable. Silence is oblivion. His interminable critique of everything is a frantic grasping for life, clawing inch after inch,

hour after hour, day after garrulous day, revealing his desperation with every passing word. He directs his disquisitions mainly toward Oscar because Oscar is fool enough to listen. At the moment, Trace's struggle for existence lies in the notion of a traveling story.

"Why not? We are the witnesses, after all, aren't we? We're the ones who went through hell. What'll become of the desert...of our memories...of us...if nobody testifies?"

Oscar's arms plummet wearily to his sides. "So you're saying my duties have just been extended to public historian?"

Trace leans toward the announcement, studies it briefly, thinks over the possibilities. "Yeah fuck it. I'll tell these people a story."

"Which story?"

"Does it matter?"

"Well, if it's intended to be testimony, and that testimony is provided to reach a verdict, then yes, I'd say, it matters."

"Fuck it. I'm gonna tell a story."

"It's not till seven. That's like eight hours from now." All attention is drawn to the child sitting in the grass beneath the *Legend of the Lost Cause* making his marks on a plastic prosthesis. "You want to wait here eight hours?"

Trace returns his attention to the horizon. "Fuck it. I'm not going anywhere."

Oscar conveys the gravity of more elemental needs. "Well anyway, I'm famished." He looks around the vacant square and steps off lively with no specified destination. He yells over his shoulder, to nobody in particular, "Want anything?" Nobody replies. It

doesn't matter though...*reply, not reply*...we all know by now what the answers will be. Replying is beside the point. Oscar wanders off in one direction. The stranger lifts his white washed bicycle out of the SUV, and pushes it off in another direction.

“Where you going?” Trace asks him.

“Not sure,” he huffs bitterly and, without further salutation, disappears.

Silence ensues...*silence*...as in a cessation of our verbal projections on one another, a moment to listen to the sounds of the earth and recognize them as extensions of ourselves, and vice versa, and recognize humanity as something other than a great archipelago, with each island under siege by every other, and all of us struggling endlessly to retain our positions on the map and our places in history. A single phrase of silence is worth every volume in the Library of Babel. But this brand of quietude proves too much to bear for the excitable likes of Trace Tiburon.

He turns to me and asks, “Whatever happened to the envious? I mean after he pushed his enemy into the well?”

I appease his curiosity. “More surprising is what happened to the envied. Unknown to the envious, demons lived down in that well, who for their own reasons favored the envied and caught his body as it descended. After some discussion amongst each other, the demons delivered him back up to the well's edge with a gift, a spell, that would bring him greater fortune than ever before.”

“Demons are improbable,” is Trace's response. But then...he sees...from a dipping white fire on the distant edge of our unnamed dot appears a silhouette and Trace's eyes bulge and twist as if *he* is the one at the bottom of a well staring helplessly up into the

blinding light. *Shamil* escapes his lips like a final breath, one last *amen* before he settles indefinitely into mother's deepest tub.

Demons are improbable. I agree. But not impossible.

Oscar returns with chicken and rice soup. He has a bowl for each of us and plastic spoons and paper napkins. We settle in the courtyard together and eat. But Trace declines, says he's not hungry, says he'll smoke instead, and peers sidelong at us to see if we'll be stunned. We're not stunned. He whispers a few words to himself, as though we don't know the words already, as if we might be stunned to hear them. We won't be stunned.

"Of course you're hungry," Oscar tells him. "You're alive. By definition, you're hungry."

"That is a very narrow definition of life."

"It's not narrow. It's precise."

"God, what is that stuff anyway?"

"I already told you what it is. Chicken and rice soup."

"It looks like maggots in urine."

Still not stunned. We've heard Trace's repulsive descriptions of every fare imaginable. Only the child pauses to examine his soup more carefully. Oscar goes on slurping, with exaggerated satisfaction. "Maybe...but that's not what it is."

Trace detaches his attention from Oscar and the soup and trains his eyes on *Shamil's* approaching figure. He glances my way as if to say, *You see? I told you she'd be back.* But time may tell him a different story. Maybe then, he'll be the one who's stunned. For now, it's Oscar's turn to ask about the envied and the envious.

“Does the envious ever find out that revenge eluded him?”

“He does. With the spell that was given to the envied, he saved the life of a king’s daughter. In so doing, he secured a high position in the king’s court, which eventually delivered the crown upon his own head and the king’s daughter to his side. It was as king that the envied encountered the envious once again, years later. But rather than demand retribution or punishment for the attempted murder at the well, the king bestowed the envious with generous gifts and sent him on his way.”

“Wow. That was decent of him,” Oscar says.

I tell him, yes, in fact the narrator of the story agrees. “He says, ‘O demon, consider the mercy of the envied on the envious...instead of punishing the envious, he forgave him and treated him magnanimously.’ And then the narrator weeps and recites a poem that ends with the following verse: ‘He who seeks forgiveness from above should pardon the offenders here below.’ But the demon is not impressed by the story, or the tears, or the poem, and replies, ‘I will not kill you but in no way will I pardon you and let you go unharmed.’”

Smoke pours from Trace’s nostrils. Without taking his eyes off Shamil, he nods. “I agree with the demon. The story is dubious.”

“In what way dubious?”

“The narrator takes us for fools and the story is intentionally evasive. We’re presented with two characters—*the envious* and *the envied*—two different men, but both are defined by the deeds of just one. We hear all about this first man, how he’s consumed with envy, and acts on his envy, even attempts murder in envy. But we don’t really know

anything about this second man who's only visible attribute is *being envied*, nor do we know the conditions of his relentless prosperity. The story reveals nothing about that.

“Are we really expected to believe that all his wealth was the product of blind serendipity or that he became king of a country by sheer luck? Are we expected to believe that demons at the bottom of a well are at the bottom of his incredible fortune? And are we, meanwhile, expected to believe that this envious man's financial poverty is strictly the result of his moral poverty?” Trace shakes his head, draws in smoke, blows it back out, and finally delivers his verdict. “Demons are improbable.”

Oscar licks his gleaming yellow lips. “I think you might be missing the point.”

But it doesn't matter now. Shamil is upon us.

Shamil's mystique is untrammelled by the miles. Whatever we find in her face or her body or her clothes that looks careworn now, was careworn long before we met her. For Trace, this is evidence of an ancient source of meaning. For Oscar, it means nothing. For me? Well, what do I care about meaning? Shamil offers no signs or words of recognition. It seems we're not so meaningful to her either, except maybe the child, who she regards quietly. When the child sees her, he leaps up to present her with the newly decorated prosthesis. She holds it up for a moment and stares at the boy's accomplishment without comment or expression, and then silently attaches the limb to her body.

Trace hands her the announcement torn off the rustic door. “Desert Stories. Open Mic Night. We were thinking about going.”

“*You* were thinking,” Oscar corrects him.

“I was thinking I might share a story.” Trace stuffs his hands in his pockets, looks down at the ground, kicks up some dust. Then his eyes come back up to the marred visage of Shamil. “Will you come?”

Shamil nods with steady black eyes. “Yeah, fuck it.”

CHAPTER 4
OPEN MIC NIGHT

A. Silence

In the curmudgeonly theater on Thibodeaux Ave with flaking walls and threadbare seats, a man stands alone, on a dark stage, before a black curtain, under a single spotlight mounted above, a desolate shaft of incandescence and dust pouring down over his waxy form. He's wearing steampunk sunglasses, a wool winter hat, and a white thermal shirt, upon which are black letters haphazardly painted. He's the third in a line of skulking silhouettes gathered up at the edge of the stage under the red glow of an exit sign, people who've come from all over to share their stories, or poems, or whatever else has inspired them to make the journey.

I try to make out the letters and discern the solitary word scrawled across this man's chest, but I can't because the material hangs loosely from his body in uneven folds and the characters are crooked, so the message remains inscrutable. Well, what's the use in that? The man breathes into a standing microphone. An uneasy silence settles over us—*the audience*—as he stares outward, lips falling, heart beating, fingers trembling...I mean, I guess...or maybe not. There's an uncomfortable vibe rippling through the auditorium, as we await his first words.

It seems as though he's also waiting, waiting for something, although I'm not sure what. Maybe he's waiting for just the right beginning to come to mind. So now we're all waiting, in silence, together, silence that's not really silence because our heads are filling fast with expectations, and assumptions, and emotions, and all sorts of peripheral sounds

that I can't name precisely but that add to the din of the moment. This silence...this is the performance, right? I think it's got to be and I believe others are arriving to some similar conclusions because the breathing seems to come easier now. Okay, so this is all part of the act. Got it.

Across the rows, there are quiet clearings of throats, and somebody shifts in his seat, and the seat screeches the way those old theater seats do, but nobody seems to mind. It's all good, yes all good, as we ease into this man's performance of...well...whatever it is. Silence? Is it silence he's performing? The silence of the dead? The silence of deeds done and gone? The silence of the silenced? Well anyway, fine, whatever, it's all good.

Wait. What exactly is meant by this word *silence*? It must be a metaphor, right? It must be because clearly there's no such thing as an absence of sound, that is, an absence of acoustic vibrations, and pressures, and stresses, particle displacements, currents and waves moving along one medium or another—those activities never cease. The issue might then be reception. What elements might inhibit a given transmission?

Or maybe we're dealing with interpretation. Yes, the vibrations arrived, I heard what was said, but I had no means to interpret, no context, no mechanism for understanding, and so the sounds were categorized: *Silence*. Well, in any case, it does seem to me that this idea of silence is a no more than an idea, a dream, a fantasy...or worse...a lie. Which means this man in steampunk sunglasses and his performance of silence is also a lie. So now I'm suspicious and I watch him more carefully.

He's hunching forward slightly, clutching the microphone close to his frowning mouth as though he's about to speak, but no words come out. He looks rather sad, I think, although, it's hard to say since his eyes are still concealed. What the hell's he got to be

sad about? I wonder...but no...actually, I don't care. To be brutally honest, I'm bored. My mind is already wandering.

So, if silence is a metaphor, then what does it represent? For me, silence is the desert that expands voraciously across the earth, consuming respiratory matter and moisture and meaning until there's nothing left but the glistening sand. How long has it been since this silence began? I'd say it's been about a minute, or maybe less, and I catch myself yawning.

I'm embarrassed by the yawn, I mean based on my sense of propriety, not for any special concern with this man on the stage. I try to suck in the yawn with a fast gulp of air before anyone notices. Has it been that long since he started? A whole minute? Maybe it's only been twenty or thirty seconds. I don't think he's blinked, or shifted his weight, or looked left or right. He doesn't appear to be concentrating on anything or anyone, just gazing haplessly into the darkness.

What the hell is this? It's idiotic, that's what I think. Or is it stage fright? Maybe that's what it is. I once saw an amateur comedian freeze up at the mike before he could open his mouth. People started laughing. They thought it was part of his routine. Then the comedian, apparently horrified by the laughs and overwhelmed by his fears, leapt off the stage and ran out the exit, never to be seen again. Everyone watched him go, at first laughing limply, clapping faintly, then tapering off, not really sure whether all this was intended to be funny or not. Could it be I'm witnessing another occasion of a panic-stricken performer?

Let me see now, how long has it been? Maybe two minutes, give or take? I peak down at my watch, but of course the hands tell me nothing since I don't know where they

were when this wild rumpus started. And now, what's worse, I can't keep myself from peaking down, again and again, but no matter how frequently I check my watch, I never remember where the hands were the last time I looked, so I still don't know how much time has elapsed. I'd estimate that this has been going on now for three minutes, or maybe four, roughly speaking. But the hands don't appear to be moving at all.

I'm suddenly awash with perspiration and other aches, cramps, itches, and cravings, all flicking my parietal lobe, and all of this silence has kindled a desperate desire to shout out with vengeance. Shout what? Shout how? Anything! Anything at all! Whatever story I can think of. And that makes me wonder. If I were the one on stage right now, before a black curtain, behind a microphone, under a spotlight, confronted by an audience, which one of my stories would I choose and, therefore, which stories would I not choose?

No, not the sniper and the shot that rings out in his head for years. No, not the child who's force fed cooked spinach through tears, throws it up on his plate, and is then forced to eat it again. No, not the old man and his sagging white penis and his fistful of glistening silver. No, not the young dog, lounging beneath a refrigerator truck, curled up against its wheels, sleeping softly, dreaming with fluttering feet, until the truck starts up, rumbles forward, and crushes the dogs hips to pieces and leaves an agonizing shriek of pain echoing eternally inside my head. No, not the panic that radiates through my guts long after mother's tub or her heavy hand could ever seize me again. No, not the young body limp on the ground, clearly dead—*clearly*—despite the desperate faces and the attempts at resuscitation...despite my official indifference.

No, these aren't the stories I'd choose tonight. I'm not afraid of these stories, not anymore. But tonight, there is another story I want to tell. The problem is, it's not yet a

story, not one I could name or articulate. It's nothing but a mixture of flickering agitations, clashing recollections, sound and light and impulses tumbling through my mind, all of them waging to be noticed. Potential stories struggle incessantly with each other for legitimacy, inside and outside one's body, and memories struggle, and signals and signifiers rushing around one's head, they struggle, too, each bit of sensory data struggles furiously to make itself known, to be heard, to be part of the story that's told, and the body that's seen, and the experience that's felt.

In a renewed effort to focus on the performance at hand and prove my decorum, at least to myself, I train my head and eyes on the silent man on stage, but before long my attention fades again and I find myself wandering off on a tour of the other faces in the audience. I see concern. I see wonder. I see various expressions of...something...but I'm not sure what it is. Is it sympathy? I see a woman staring back at the silent man, imitating his melancholy. Her face is as vacant as his and I think there might even be a tear in her eye. But why? Why would she cry? I'm curious. No, I'm not really curious. I'm annoyed.

I lean over to Oscar and whisper, "What the fuck?"

Oscar whispers back, "Hey, the man's got a right to remain silent, right?"

Fucking Oscar. Well, what the hell does he know about silence? And how long has this been going on, anyway? There are a few more more clearings of throats and it makes me want to clear my throat, too, just to add to the presence of *us*, the audience, the people who this silent man has evidently forgotten all about—*us, the audience!* I notice Van's eyes are nearly closed. That's fitting. But of course it doesn't mean they're currently closing. His eyes are always nearly closed. However, he does seem to be contributing to the swelling languor of the audience.

I peer over my shoulder again and scan the crowd, this time searching faces in particular for further evidence of sleepy detachment. I check my watch again, this time as conspicuously as possible. Never mind decorum now. This is a gesture of outright defiance. Once again I've forgotten where the hands were before, so the gesture is nothing *but* a gesture. Well maybe it hasn't been so long, after all, because there are still quite a few people who appear genuinely captivated by this nonsense, and how long could that possibly last?

The steampunk griffin at the mike stays his parsimonious course, delivering not so much as a peep through the wire, not a word, or a wail, or a musical number. Any damned thing would be welcomed at this point. Frankly, I'm a little dubious about the sincerity of this audience. I suspect their fascination is actually just another show for the benefit of themselves and for the wax man on stage. The only alternative that comes to mind is that time has stopped altogether and these people's faces are literally frozen in rapture (which would solve the mystery of my watch, by the way) or maybe they're just as waxen as he is.

I notice Shamil is among the engaged. And so is the boy, who leans up against her. But in this case, the engagement makes sense. I see the silence, reflecting back and forth, as though between two mirrors, and the likenesses of Shamil and the man on the stage bend and repeat and diminish in the distance of each other's eyes and eventually vanish from view. This is no pose. They're not faking the silence, but together making it, molding it into an echo or maybe a fleeting monument of the unmentionable moments of the desert. Of course, I recognize these whispering ruminations as nonsense, or not-yet-sense, in the same way that one recognizes an impending story, not-yet-formed, but one

has to acknowledge the particles and the data do exist, floating and clustering and bouncing around inside one's head. This is the moment before saying. *This* is the silence.

I comb further into recollections from decades past, searching for combinations of words that will prompt a story: Muggy marches, misty parade decks, corroding first aid kits leaking iodine, linoleum corridors reeking of pine oil, boot heels worn and smooth and olive wool racks, well decks piled with sea bags and bodies, waiting for the word...waiting for the word...waiting for the word. What does any of it mean to me now? Are these the stories I want to tell? No, not these.

I notice a woman in a turtleneck sweater sitting in a distant seat looking back at me, though I can't tell why. Her face is difficult to discern in the darkness. She's already looked over her shoulder in my direction, several times before, and I'm beginning to feel uneasy. What the hell does she want with me? Well? What do you want with me? Stop staring! Pay attention to the man on stage! But now that I think about it, she might be staring at Shamil. And that seems more probable, of course, but it doesn't excuse the staring. In fact, it's worse. Hey! Keep your fucking eyes to yourself. Don't you know it's impolite to stare? You think she's ugly? Well let me tell you this, *turtleneck lady*, there's no sketch of your soul more precise than the one you draw on the world with your own gaze. Everything you see in her face is that which you've already sown.

Then again...what if this expression of hers isn't revulsion, but obsession? Could it be that turtleneck lady finds Shamil...alluring? A prospective paramour? An object of desire? A bizarre fetishization of burn scars? Turtleneck lady turns around again and...yes, it's true...her eyes are leering, pluming with lasciviousness...but wait...no, it's not Shamil this woman is looking at, after all. No. It's the boy. And now I'm nervous.

What does she want with the boy? Oh my god, not paramour, but pedophile. Our situation is growing bleaker by the minute. Speaking of minutes, I check my watch again. The hands still aren't moving. It occurs to me that the battery might be dead and that would certainly explain things.

The Asheville Rambler was oh so right when he wrote, "Each moment is the fruit of forty thousand years." Although, in my opinion, he went on to demonstrate that point a bit too effectively. Imagine, forty thousand years of prologue, just to arrive to the beginning of a story. Unspeakable. So if you're not the Asheville Rambler, you find a few details to prune. And as you clip away the millennia, you suddenly notice all the bodies falling down around your feet, all the faces, and the lives, and the limbs, including your own.

It becomes painfully apparent how many stories must be cut away just to make a single story speakable, and how much silence is required for that one story to be heard. It seems to me now that the choices themselves are the most important things to notice. Every choice presents dire implications. Even the act of choosing, the ability, the authorization, all of it, implies something urgent, if nothing else, it implies that these stories are not natural, but naturalized.

Does anybody remember Eudora Welty? Remember her speech at Harvard? It was the first of the Massey lecture series, 1984. She explained that as a child she was inclined to listen *for* stories, not just *to* them. And it was this ability, this instinct, to discern stories within and throughout the mundane moments of daily life that led to her skills as a writer and later earned her a Pulitzer Prize. So, how exactly does one listen *for* stories? I can only assume that one must already be conditioned to recognize a story, to understand the

idea of a story, and understand oneself as a person who may tell a story, who may make those dire choices, and decide which details and bodies to highlight, and which ones to prune away.

If the making of stories is eventually a struggle for presence, then clearly there is some advantage to being one of the tellers. So looking back to Eudora Welty and her account of a child with a natural ear for stories, I suspect that what she was describing wasn't instinct but access, not process but privilege. If one looks back on one's childhood years and recalls a small storyteller, one may be glimpsing the enfranchisement that was there all along. The alternative is the void, the silence, the crushing darkness, where one cannot be perceived by any sense, by anyone, including oneself, and I don't think it would be melodramatic to imagine such a void as tantamount to death.

Am I dead? And what about this character on stage, standing smugly behind steampunk sunglasses, before a black curtain, under a spotlight, with an audience who will listen whether he speaks or he doesn't...is he dead? Is our silence a fake after all? Is our struggle for presence a charade? And our stories of *I*, are they really in jeopardy? Are we truly grappling with the void, to be seen, to be heard, to be recognized as a legitimate thread in the fabric of reality? Are we being crushed in the darkness?

Hey, you in the shades! Are you really going to stand up there and play dumb? This is more than I can stomach. I'm going up there myself. If he can claim center stage for some unknown duration, with some unknown purpose, propped up by a microphone like a mannequin with a wool winter hat, then so can I. Except I'll give them a story. I don't know which story. But I'll show them what's at stake when one tries to place oneself inside a story world. This is not a task that should be underestimated or shirked. Take the

risk! That's what I say. Put the struggle on display! Get up and declare, *Here I am, jellied scalp, bloodied hands, coagulated gray matter and all!* Then scour the moments inside your skin and choose a detail, *choose*, this one or that one, whatever one you like, and there you'll have the beginning of a story.

B. Measure of a Poem

I've run out of time. I'm just starting out and I have no more time. The night is upon me. The microphone is waiting. You are waiting. My story was made and unmade, then made and unmade again, each draft more mystifying than the last. I found an old book of poetry, and read a poem to myself for inspiration. I was inspired. When I finished reading, I dropped the book in my lap, aghast by the knot of truth that I'd glimpsed, and gasped to myself, *God damn...that was some eloquent shit*. It made me want to cry, and try out my own hand at poetry. So I picked up a notebook, slammed down some verses on a page, and when I was done, I dropped the whole notebook in a trash can and set it on fire, for the obvious reason. No knots of truth.

People encouraged me, though. They said, no brother, you're wrong. That's your truth. Don't turn your back on it. Don't measure your truth against the saints and sages. Tell your story how you feel it, and it can't be anything *but* true. I was encouraged. So wrote out a story—I called it *my truth*—and when I was done, I dropped it in the trash can, into my little heap of truthful ashes, and I set it on fire.

To be clear, the issue wasn't an inability to acknowledge some sort of value in my feelings. Okay fine, my feelings are valuable. Got it. The issue, as far as I could tell, was finding a way to put those feelings, whatever their value to me, into a story, so that other people could listen and maybe recognize their own truths, in the way that I recognized my truth in that old poem. I'm left now with some serious doubts about the possibility of a story called *truth* or a truth called *mine*, and I'm wondering, furthermore, about the measure of a poem.

The plot only thickens here because, after all, I'm supposed to be telling you a story about the desert. I did make some concerted attempts to write one, by the way, but as I ran through draft after platitudinous draft, this question about the *measure of a poem* kept pushing itself onto the page as though this question must underlie any story I could ever tell about the desert. I went—I experienced—I felt—and then I came to a point where I wanted to talk about it in such a way that it could be felt similarly by others.

The question seems inescapable. Just how does one go about measuring poems? How does one evaluate? By degrees? Meters? Volume? Force? How many pounds for this poem, how many for that one? Apparently the problem is in the question. The moment the rulers were broken out, the truth was lost. But the bigger problem now (for me), is this sneaking suspicion I've got that I'm the last one to figure this out. The music has stopped and I'm standing here alone without a chair, on a stage, with a microphone, and an audience, and no story to tell. Meanwhile, the desert is looming in my imagination. And you're still waiting. And I'm out of time.

If we can say, at least provisionally, that *stories* are about making meaning and that *truth* is about building community around particular meanings, then I suppose the only story I have left to tell is how my story has lost its essence and its ability to connect me with anyone. I should start with a rough sketch of the narrative as it was formed in my head in the beginning of this process. It takes place years ago, while I was still in the military.

I was asked to consider an assignment in a mountainous region of the desert. I'd be joining a cadre of sorts and our mission would be to establish some rapport with the local inhabitants who generally organized themselves within a tribal system. We would then be

tasked to teach them how to build and train a modern army in order to combat the undesirable element spreading into the region. The job held some appeal for me, I'll admit, for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was a quietly stirring curiosity about these mountain people.

But it occurred to me one night, while considering this assignment, that no empire in human history had ever managed to permanently dislodge this particular group of people from this particular piece of ground, though, over the centuries, many had tried. Now *why*...I wondered...why couldn't these powerful modern armies retain control over an undeveloped territory and its people once they'd occupied the land?

My guess, eventually, was that however primitive these tribal people might have appeared, they must have had a vastly more complex understanding of the terrain than their modern occupiers ever could. Perhaps for them, the land and the flesh were not two things but one, extensions of each other, bound by a common logic that, in turn, lay beneath whatever conceptions of survival they might have imagined.

The modern armies, unfurling their flags over every clime and place, would never have such a relationship to one piece of ground or another and so could never match this level of terrestrial sophistication. To forces like these, different terrains mean nothing more than different tactics, different equipment, different doctrines, etc.. The land is always an external object, a foreign body for conquest, not a part of one's own being. And now we were offering to teach these people how to hold their land? Suddenly the assignment seemed preposterous. We might be better off going there and learning from them how to become the land.

After stewing on this question a bit more, another motive came to mind for our little cadre scheme. Perhaps these locals (intransigent as they tended to be) could be sold on modernity. If this could be achieved, then the game would be altered. It would be another game, altogether, on another field of play. If the modern empire could detach these tribal inhabitants from their tribal customs and memories, which would naturally include an inexplicable intimacy with the land, if they could be made beholden to technology, if they could break these tribal bodies from the visceral knowledge they carried, then they'd be forced to engage the modern armies on terms in which they would be fatally disadvantaged. And they'd be lost.

Here, I should tell you, is where the narrative encounters rough waters. On one hand, I wanted to present these suspicions as a means to illuminate the real power in *design*. The masters of the game, the jurists, the architects, the mad men of the world, they know it's all about design. From their perspectives, it doesn't matter who wins or loses, because whoever does win will have done so according to and within the rules and the bounds already set down, and the masters will gain their spoils without ever having to play. In other words, take your pick—messiah or behemoth—same black magic, same bloody show.

On the other hand, it became obvious, as soon as I started composing, that my story fell within another variety of the very same structure. I was attempting to engage my experience in the desert through a narrative design, not of my making, that subordinated my own feelings and understandings of that experience to a particular aesthetic standard, which if not met would prevent my story from ever being heard or recognized. The

measure of a poem emerges again. Inconspicuous rules and bounds set down in the shadows, producing a canon, as if from common sense.

There they are, those ghostly judges, placing one poem on the altar of truth while tossing the next aside onto the heap, which is labeled *the heap*. This one yellow matter custard dripping from a dead dog's eye, that one ending in a factoria as one in a million unseen. One poet with blue eyes lies in a hard falling rain, another with brown eyes laments a white moon and white lighting, and still another stands asunder at the borderland calling out across the wilderness with an untamed tongue.

This inequitable distribution is justified by the rationale that *art is not anything*, and in the effort to draw this very distinction, the master's house is erected and reinforced all over again. Ah! But in working through my story, this was only the first problem. The second problem arose in the reactions I saw in people's faces when I described the first. It looked very much like the knowing smiles I'm seeing right now in the audience. *Oh what, that problem? Master's house, master's tools, etc, etc...yeah, we knew all about that already.* What? You did? Well, what is it, a private fucking club? How come nobody told me?

Suddenly I'm feeling like a runny-nosed, wide-eyed, fourteen year old kid whose written a gushing sonnet about my first glimpse of love and I'm going around reading it to people like I just came across some crazy new shit. But I'm not a fourteen year old kid with a sonnet. I'm an eighteen year old kid with a rifle, handed to me by the very people who now smile and tell me they knew about the problems all along. So now I've come home, come to a point where I want to talk about what I've experienced, and I find

myself in this endless cycle of condescension, with each party convinced that the other just doesn't get it.

Not only is my *truth* failing to resonate with anyone in this all-knowing, tight-lipped club (*truth*, meaning a view that these experiences in the desert are cause for urgent inspection and radical adjustments to the social design that created the experiences in the first place); additionally, there doesn't appear to be any fervent consensus on the necessity to examine the obligations and culpability of a population that systematically educates every new generation with the same faulty narratives and then nods knowingly when people like me come home from the desert with silly gushing sonnets.

In that I have no means to connect myself with this community, I conclude this: I have no truth. I have no story. And I suppose I'll remain without truth or story until it's my turn to participate in the silent grooming of the next generation of riflemen. And when they ship off to the desert, or wherever else they go, and then come home again with their own gushing sonnets, I'll nod knowingly...and smile...because I'll finally be in the club and I'll have my truth and my story back again.

C. Sword

Sword...poor baby Sword.

I want to tell you a story about a small town in the desert. It didn't have a name. Well, I'm sure it did have a name, but we didn't know what it was. So we gave it a number, a target list number. *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero*. The trouble is, I'm not sure where to begin this story, which is more or less the trouble I'm having in my life. The trouble with beginning. I don't strictly mean I'm having trouble identifying a point of departure, as in a chronological moment from which subsequent events should unfold. But there does seem to be something missing here, something that comes prior to making the decision, where to begin.

In other words, it sometimes feels to me as though the beginning of a story should just appear in some magical way, and just *be*, based on whatever events one would like to illuminate. However, I have a suspicion that I'll need to create whole worlds, a whole universe in fact, and fill it up with context, just to reach the point where, finally, there can be only one logical beginning, where all other beginnings make no sense at all. In which case, the process of world-building would have to be the process of beginning-building as well (and vice versa), and therefore the process of everything.

I've been told repeatedly that *the story* is healing and that I should make every attempt to put my experiences into a narrative to help organize my thoughts and emotions. The advice goes something like this: Write the story down. Give those unruly thoughts and emotions an order, a physical order, and they'll lead you to some conclusion. So I've taken this advice, and I've been writing. But I seem to have the same problem on the page as I have in my head—constantly floating amidst tangents and

details and scattered moments and dialogues, none of which imply a direction or destination or deliver any point. I'm not sure that this is what they meant by healing. Evidently *healing* and *meaning* are intended to coincide.

I apologize. I've lost the thread of my story. Let me get back to *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero*. Now...where to begin? Well, for one thing, we had a young rifleman with us called Sword. Poor baby Sword. He wasn't really a baby, of course, just new to the outfit, and his name wasn't really Sword. That was just a handle. We never did learn his real name. He carried around a book, one book, I don't remember which book, or by whom, we never learned that name either.

But the mere presence of a book of any kind in the desert, I can tell you, was a noticeable detail in itself. I do remember him reading one line repeatedly in an uncertain murmur. It went something like...*He never tires of the journey, he who is the darkest one, the darkest one of them all*. I don't know what it meant, or where it went, this journey of his, but clearly it stretched somewhere beyond our horizons. We could see that much in his face.

Sword had a saintly persona. Anyway, that's the jacket we fit him into. And didn't we feel so much more saintly ourselves for having done so? Yes, I can affirm, we did. What was it about him that we found so saintly? His tone? His presence? His absence? It's true, he was never quite there, always more on his own dark journey than on ours. On the other hand, there was Sinjin, who hardly noticed Sword, or his book, or his reading aloud. Oh but you need to understand Sinjin to know why that matters. Because it does—it matters. I think it matters.

So...Sinjin. How can I explain Sinjin? How do I explain a man like Sinjin if you've never been to the desert, never seen the sand, never felt it on your tongue, in your nostrils, against your skin? Well anyway. Old Sinjin. He finally got the kiss of Betsy Ross. Fucking Sinjin and his junk. Blown to bits during a search with a toxic hard-on that'd make an Abrams tank look impotent—

I'm sorry. Yes, I digress. I do it all the time. But how can I not? The desert abounds with the dunes of digression, and the sand makes no sense without Sinjin, and Sinjin makes no sense outside the desert. So that's what I'm doing...stage-setting, character-sketching, world-building, playing *God* if you will, creating a universe all my own, all in the fleeting attempt to establish a single scene and find an entry point for Sinjin, so you know why it matters that he never noticed or heard the saintly words of Sword.

I know, I know. I'm not making sense. Let me see if I can cut this prologue down. *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero* was abandoned, a ghost town, or so we thought. It turned out, however, that many of the residents, those who hadn't fled, were in fact hiding in various nooks and crevices around the town, in secret rooms and underground spaces, hoping, I suppose, that they could hold out until we decided to leave. But we didn't leave.

Then one day, a man climbed out of his hole, or wherever he was hiding himself, and he said fuck it, I'm taking my boy for a walk, or some sentiment to that effect. Anyway, we captured them, slapped on the flex cuffs and the sandbag hoods, and threw them in jail. Well, it wasn't technically jail, I mean, not in the juridical sense, not so far as we were concerned. Then again, maybe technically it was a jail—*their jail*—but we were only using it as a temporary detention facility, not a jail, not in the juridical sense.

But you see, this was a turning point for us in *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero*. Now we knew...we weren't alone. And so started a search. After all, if they were hiding, there must be a reason. I imagine, between a combination of the inevitability of being discovered, waning resources, fatigue of hiding, and so on, several more inhabitants of *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero*, cramped or emboldened, finally renounced their positions of concealment and joined in the strolling of the streets.

I wouldn't have called the town bustling, at this point, but it was certainly moving along, albeit with a conspicuous melancholy that seemed to perpetuate the town's ghostly disposition. The question at hand was this: What to do? Locking everyone up in our non-judicial jail became less feasible with every passing day and every new arrival. As far as I could tell, no particular decision was ever made. No action ever taken. So the endless strolling and patrolling continued, day after sweltering day.

However, there was mounting concern amidst the brass that an attack on our position was imminent. Sinjin grumbled it wasn't imminent, it was fucking obvious. That's just how he said it, too—it was fucking obvious. There would definitely be an attack, probably sooner than later. The question remained: What to do? Well, wouldn't you know they decided to establish several *observation posts* around the town. These were holes dug in the ground, where the less fortunate among us would spend weeks on end observing. It's funny how often their tactical calculations resulted in exercise for our shovels.

From that point forward, a substantial portion of our days were spent sitting in a hole observing the inhabitants of *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero*. They didn't reveal much interest in us. Although, on occasion, someone would approach our hole and ask us

what we were doing. I remember this striking me as sort of a dumb question at the time, but to be fair, I guess I can see how sitting in a hole in the ground, in the middle of a town, for days on end, could be viewed by an outsider as somewhat peculiar. And the truth is, after a couple of weeks of observing, it seemed a little odd to us, too.

The reality of this kind of duty is that, after a while, nobody gives a damn. The brass called it *complacency*. And they reminded us, ad nauseam, that complacency kills. As if we didn't know our own lives were in jeopardy. Nevertheless, they painted the words *COMPLACENCY KILLS* across a great slab of concrete, twelve feet high, and set it down with a crane outside the entrance of our command center to shield against shrapnel. The red stenciled letters would stare us all down, whether coming or going, and send us away with its ominous counsel. But to tell you the truth, this idea that complacency kills never motivated us very much. And it wasn't long in our hole before we began looking for something to do other than observe, something more stimulating to occupy our minds.

It turned out, I had a book of my own, stashed away in my cargo pocket from sometime before. I'd been toting it around for I don't know how long—we didn't change clothes often—and one afternoon I felt it pressing against my thigh. I must have felt its binding poking me a thousand times before, but this time it caught my attention. I pulled it out and was a little surprised, I'll admit, to see which book it was. Now I don't want to alarm you or give you the wrong idea. It's not as if this book had some sacred value to me. This was not my holy text. Like Sword, I just happen to like books, and this particular book happened to be the one in my pocket when we found ourselves bored stiff in a hole. Okay so...it was *Romeo and Juliet*.

The truth is, I'm not so enthusiastic about Shakespeare, not then, not now, and to be brutally honest, I'd say I carried it around more for appearances than any genuine passion for poetry. On the other hand, I also believe I may have stumbled upon a pedagogical remedy for the ongoing epidemic of apathy encountered in the classroom. Stick those boys and girls in a hole in the desert for a month and then throw them a copy of *The Tempest* and they'll be crying in iambic pentameter in no time: *Come unto these yellow sands, And then take hands...* I don't remember the rest. But you get the idea.

I know all this sounds like a rant, another digression of no use whatsoever, but I believe these details are essential for understanding what happened to Sword in the town designated: *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero*. We did our time in the hole in shifts. I did mine with Oscar and Van, and another man named Fisher. I'll need to explain Fisher shortly—he was a kleptomaniac, a crucial factor in this case—but for the moment, I just want to point out that Sword was on a different shift than ours. And of the greatest consequence (as you'll soon see), was the presence of *Romeo and Juliet*.

It's difficult to declare with any certainty, now, which detail should be regarded as the originating point of this story. Sword? Sinjin? Shakespeare? Fisher? Oscar and Van? Maybe me? Again, I do realize this is the difficulty of all storytelling. I'm not shedding light on a new problem here. *And yet*, it does concern me to think how each of these possible points reels backward in time along vastly different trajectories and leads to places and times and events that are literally worlds apart from each other. And that's precisely what produces my yearning to create an entire universe and a whole history prior to identifying a singular beginning for this story.

Now, if you'll just bear with me, let me tell you about *Romeo and Juliet*. For a few days, after having found this paperback in my pocket, I read the lines to myself, in my head. Well, mostly in my head, but maybe I whispered a bit, too, because I do like to feel the words moving around in my mouth and hear them in my head. At one point Oscar shouted, *shut the hell up*, so I must have been reading some of it out loud. And I see him out there now, nodding his head, so you can believe me, it's true. But this gave me an idea. What if we were to *all* read the play...out loud...together? What if we were to put the play on, right there in the hole, performed the scenes, gave the speeches, acted out the parts, everything! And why not? What else have we got to do?

Oscar suggested we might try *observing* for a while. And right there, I knew I had him. Because, of course, I had two powerful allies in boredom and time. It was just a matter of wearing him down with a few lively pleas and performances. I gave him the old Prince Escalus speech, by the way—*Rebellious subjects, enemies to peace!!*—and so on. I have to say (humbly) I fucking nailed that speech. Van didn't involve himself right away. He wouldn't. But Fisher...Fisher was instantly intrigued. I believe that for Fisher, being intrigued by nearly everything in the world, went hand in hand with his kleptomania, like the fish that can't resist a glimmering lure.

There was no object that didn't sparkle in Fisher's eye and summon his longing. Later on—much later I mean, long after our sojourn to *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero*—Fisher lost his arm to an IED. Actually, he lost it in surgery at the combat support hospital, and we often joked that if given half a chance his amputated arm with its sticky fingers would have crept across the operating table and stolen the scalpel right from the surgeon's tray, the very scalpel that severed the arm from its body. If there was one man

among us who knew the true meaning of *liberation*, it had to be Fisher. And that was a handy aptitude as our production took shape and we came in need of a property man.

It probably sounds as if I've gone completely off track from my story of Sword and Sinjin, but I truly believe that this is a crucial preface to the ends that apprehended us all. For the moment, in the hole, in the context of our play, the issue was *WHO* would take on the role of Romeo and *WHO* would be Juliet. Oscar said, "If you think I'm gonna be Juliet, you're fucking crazy." I mentioned, in response, that I'd already memorized most of Romeo's speeches and what a waste of time it would be to throw away all that work. This wasn't actually true, by the way. I hadn't memorized any of the speeches. I thought, in the moment, that it was at least worth a shot to say that I had, but soon realized this angle was doomed since, after all, the point of performing the play in the first place was to consume time. So, with this argument failing on its face, I attempted another approach, which went along the following lines:

Historically speaking, back in the day, whatever day that was, there were no women permitted on stage. All the roles were filled by men. You'd have to figure, then, that only the best actors could manage the female parts. So let's find out...Oscar or me...which of us is the better trouper? Van and Fisher can judge. Now, of course Oscar's no fool, so he understood my maneuver right off the bat...*however*...I believe the seed of competition was planted, germinated, and nourished by a series of points I delivered impromptu in our hole, oriented primarily on the performance of *love*. And so...

The issue isn't masculinity or femininity. The issue isn't gender at all. It's not biological, or genetic, or sexual, not even romantic. *Romeo and Juliet* may be a play about love, but *LOVE* is nothing more than an orthographical expression for a quantum

mechanical phenomenon that occurs between subatomic bodies. The gender of these two players is, in my view, completely incidental. Yes, they happen to be boy and girl. Yes, they happen to use the language given to them to express their so-called love, a specific form of romantic language, a heteronormative language perhaps, but nevertheless, just language. Mere words. To embody the celestial bond that transcends words, now *that*, I say, *that* takes true skill on both their parts. But given all the impediments and constraints put upon us by this binary sensibility, I say that the role of Juliet requires of a man far greater mastery of his body than Romeo ever could.

I think Oscar would have to admit my case was persuasive, if not in reason, certainly in passion. The trouble was, somewhere along the way, I'd begun to persuade myself. By the third or fourth day, we were quarreling over Juliet, as fiercely as two plagued houses, and, consequently, the question I'd posed from the start—*Who's the better trouper?*—was taken in earnest, and the competition began with Fisher and Van sitting as the judges of our performances. Oscar won, if you have to know, although I'm fairly sure the judges were biased, because frankly, I nailed those fucking speeches.

But, as the saying goes, the show must go on. And so, on it went. We decided to do the play piecemeal, focusing on one scene at a time, not necessarily in order. We rehearsed diligently, in our amateurish way, but there was never a particular performance designated as *the performance*, *the final act*, because there was never an audience to watch us other than ourselves. So we made our own distinctions between what was practice and what was real.

When we felt the performances powerfully enough in our bodies, we'd simply agree that the scene had been accomplished and move on to the next. Even Oscar would have to

admit, this was invigorating work. By the second act, we'd begun using props, occasionally deviating from the text, attempting various improvisations, modernizing scenes, making them our own. We were jumping around the hole and shouting verses back and forth. I guess it was just a matter of time before we attracted somebody's attention. Unfortunately, the first somebody to take notice was Sinjin.

He stalked up to the hole, shotgun in hand, and demanded to know what this theatrical dust up was all about. We fell dumbly on line with sloped shoulders and dangling arms and muttered in one voice, *Nothing*. He warned us with his black beady eyes and his pudgy jowls that we'd better get back to the business of *observing*. So we picked up our weapons with drooping mouths and assumed the obligatory posture of a sentry on post—part vigilant, part servile—until Sinjin seemed satisfied enough to leave us alone. Oh, but let's not forget. We were experienced thespians by then. The vigilance and servility... just another show! No sooner was he out of sight, than we were back to our feud on the streets of Verona.

The next afternoon, one of our patrols was passing by during the third act. Van as Mercutio was dictating his own epitaph. *Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man*. The squad formed a semi-circle around one side of the hole, peeled off their helmets, mopped their brows with semi-rolled sleeves, and asked us what was going on. "Wait, let him finish!" yelled Fisher. And Van finished the speech. It was a solid interpretation. A solid reading. "Yeah fine," they said, "but what the hell's he doing?"

They questioned us because, in fairness, who ever heard of such a thing as thespians in a hole, a band of brothers bandying about in the throes of a Shakespearean tragedy, in the middle of a modern day occupation? Nobody, for the love of God, nobody ever did,

because it's absurd, preposterous, outlandish behavior. So the question was reasonable and, in return, we gave them a reasonable explanation.

“We're doing a play...*Romeo and Juliet*.”

Would it blow your minds to discover that not one of these soldiers, with their bristling carbines, sheathed bayonets, blood-stained utilities, and deeply creased suede boots, not one of these leather necked youths looked in the least bit stunned? They reacted as though this were the very thing to do, completely natural, if one happened to be stuck in a hole in the ground in the middle of a desert town. Clearly their work, endlessly walking, was no more thrilling than ours, endlessly observing.

Yes indeed, they were so intrigued by this idea of an actual play being performed right there in *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero* that they asked if they could stay and watch. In fact, they wanted us to start from the beginning so they wouldn't miss any of the action. We agreed, of course, because after all what performer can resist an audience? “Who's playing Juliet?” one of them tittered obnoxiously. I immediately launched into my, *It's not about gender* speech, which was basically lost on them, but they nodded deferentially, and murmured, “Yeah, cool brother.”

So for the next few weeks our routine consisted mainly of rehearsals and performances for these passing patrols. The word had spread by then and other patrols, running on other rotations and routes, started making their way to our hole, clear across town, just to see the show for themselves. Consequently, we had to start over several times because nobody wanted to miss the beginning. They'd sit on the edge of the hole with their legs dangling down, their weapons slung, and their faces misshapen with wonder.

And every time new spectators arrived, they'd inevitably look over the scene and grunt under their breath, "Who's playing Juliet?" and then I'd run down my argument, point by point, all over again, *It's not about gender!* The funny thing is, after a while, the earlier arrivals, now devotees, began adopting my position as their own, taking up the claim, even delivering the argument on my behalf. Soon, when somebody new turned up at the hole and asked about Juliet, at least three or four others would shout back, "It's not about fucking gender dumbass!"

But here in the story, right about now, a collision of elements occurs, and a question arises that I can't put off any longer. What could Sword have possibly known about our acts of *love* performed by day, while he with his despairing eyes observed a thousand and one nights under the faintest light of enchanting constellations and a magic moon? He had his book and I had mine. But I suppose the sky was too dark to perform his pages in the zero hours of Zulu time. So we were lucky, one might say, Oscar, Van, Fisher and I, we were lucky to have had the sun shining on our shift. And Sword, saintly though he might have been, was not lucky. Nothing more and none too soon. Just lucky.

As gatherings tend to do, ours grew, and became a spectacle, not only for the passing patrols, but for the passing locals, as well, who must have marveled at our gaze as it turned away from their bodies and became curiously fixated on our own. You could call it a phenomenon if you like, or a new variation on the mystery play, and certainly a violation of our mission, a fundamental disturbance to the task at hand, a task which, quite honestly, I'd lost track of months beforehand. They must have scratched their heads and wondered: Why come all the way to the desert just to admire yourselves?

One morning, a local man, moving loosely in a faded coat and tie, approached, probably to ask this very question. Fisher and I were choreographing another duel, lurching and parrying left and right, with Van and Oscar looking on, making baseless observations. Our collective role as *observers* fully abandoned by this time, we scarcely noticed anything outside our six foot domain. We took no notice of this man standing at our perimeter, until he spoke. “What are you doing?” In retrospect, I believe his voice was kindly, I think it was, but we fell back anyway into embarrassed silence as if he were the second coming of Sinjin descending with fury and judgment.

But no. Not this man. How odd. He wore a cunning smile. This question of his—*What are you doing?*—was it judgment? Or could it really have been uttered as an authentic expression of curiosity? I’d been in the desert so long, I forgot such a thing existed. I don’t think he was interested in our operational disposition...as in...how does this hole serve your mission? But Oscar, being Oscar, assumed an official demeanor and told him we were posted there to *observe*. Hearing the word, *observe*, spoken out loud for the first time in weeks, suddenly drew our attention to the exterior world and we peered in unison over the parapet, out toward the street and the strolling inhabitants as if for the first time in our lives. You mean...you want to know our opinions?

“It’s a play,” I told him. I’ll admit I said it with a mild tone of defiance. “*Romeo and Juliet*...you know...Shakespeare?”

“Oh, yes of course,” he answered quickly. “I know Shakespeare, certainly. And *Romeo and Juliet*...ah!” His cunning smile spread subtly into a long crescent of lips and teeth and his fluency threw me off guard. Oscar took immediate umbrage and asked the man, “Well...what the hell are *you* doing?” I suppose it was his attempt to grab back a bit

of initiative. The man's face became pensive. "This is a long story, my friend. It's difficult to know where to begin." My blood was still pumping from the duel with Fisher, and I wanted to get back to it. There were still scenes to rehearse before the afternoon patrol arrived. I was in no mood for a tortuous response to a simple question. *What brings you to our little hole in the earth?*

"I was a professor," he began. "Not anymore, of course. This was many years ago, many miles from here, at the university, in the city on the other side of the desert, beyond the river, where the gardens have hung for millennia." *Good god, he's going to give drag us through five thousand years of context before he gets to the fucking point.* Fortunately, he spared us the nuance and arrived to the twenty-first century within the next couple of sentences. "My concern was the fate of our books."

"Books?" Oscar snorted.

"Why? Was someone going to steal them?" Fisher asked eagerly.

"I fear," the professor smiled again, more wistful now than cunning, "that that would have been the best of possibilities." His face fell as grave as sped Mercutio. "Those which enter libraries through rooftops are not bibliophiles." There was some confusion produced by this cryptic remark, but the professor moved quickly on to the part where he'd conveyed carloads of books, back and forth across the desert, trip after trip, day after day, from the university to his home in *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero*. "My house is filled with books," he said, "every room, wall to wall, floors to ceilings, filled with every type of book." He spoke triumphantly, but then fell off with nostalgia. "It was just a fraction of our collection."

"You stole them?" Fisher beamed.

Seeing this enthusiasm, the professor's cunning smile returned. "Of course!"

Fisher nodded, as if to a kindred spirit. "Yeah man."

At this, the professor burst out melodiously, "Do you know something? I have a translated copy of *Romeo and Juliet*! You must see it. I'll bring it here tomorrow." Oscar rubbed the back of his neck, which is what he does when he's thinking, or at least when he wants to appear to be thinking because, I suspect, somewhere along the way he learned that rubbing one's neck is a gesture that denotes deep contemplation. So, standing in our sandy pit, after some very dramatic neck-rubbing, Oscar looked up at the professor and said, "Wait—what? Wasn't Shakespeare English?" Everyone agreed that he was. Yeah...pretty sure...think so.

Oscar squinted and spoke in a neck-rubbing tone. "So why would *Romeo and Juliet* need to be translated?" To this, the professor raised his finger and answered, "Ah...because you see, my friend, many people here do not speak English." We stood dumbfounded, all of us rubbing the backs our necks in synchronicity, taking pause at the profundity of this observation, and nodding as though the professor had just revealed the riddle of the sands. Oh yeah...that's true...right!

The professor's visit was cut short by an exasperated reappearance of Sinjin, whose eyes bled with suspicion as he scoured our bodies and scanned the hole, and our postures, and the placement of our gear, and the state of police, and the status of supplies, and so on, until finally his inspection landed on the professor. He scrutinized every inch of his body, from his worn wingtips to his dusty blazer, and then on to his buoyant face and his black eyes and hair, up and down, up and down, and at last, when Sinjin seemed satisfied with his establishment of *presence*, he turned back to us. The professor backed away

gently, perhaps reluctant to witness the impending attack on our position, waving and nodding courteously, and calling to us, “Goodbye my friends.”

I think it was definitely better that we hadn’t been discovered caressing one another with tender phrases of forbidden love, but Sinjin looked now as if he’d caught us at something far more reprehensible than any cloying sonnet could ever be. “*My friends?*” He spewed mocking incredulity like hellfire, then snapped a glance over his shoulder as if he might catch the professor sneaking up behind him with a hooked dagger. He turned cautiously back toward us and eyed us again, up and down. “What do you think you’re doing?” Our shoulders fell miserably, in accordance with custom. “Uh... Winning hearts and minds?”

Sarcasm was never a prudent tenor with Sinjin who bestowed upon us an unreserved and foreboding reminder that these people...*these fucking people*...were not our friends. Really? I thought they were? I thought that’s what we wanted them to believe. Isn’t that what we’ve been telling the folks back home? No such commentary was actually delivered, of course. Sinjin wasn’t much for dialogue. But I could feel him reading my thoughts as if the words were scrawled across my face. “What the hell did he want?” We shrugged our sloped shoulders, staring sorrowfully down at our boots.

“Nothing...I don’t know”...the usual exchange.

Now I’ll tell you, as frightening as Sinjin could be, we had no intention of heeding his warnings. We’d been in the desert long enough now to draw a few conclusions of our own. No sooner did he disappear than we were back to our real work, battling furiously, maneuvering back and forth along the bulkheads of our hole, baffling each other’s hearts with lyrical banter and blows. Mind you, our swords were imaginary, which didn’t bother

me in the least. I've always been as content, if not more so, living inside my head than in the real world.

But Fisher became suddenly dissatisfied. "We need real swords," he announced, "for the story to make any sense." And he scanned around for a substitute to our imaginations, creeping across the hole (like a cat burglar, I thought), and then pouncing down on our radio. "Check it out!" He unscrewed the antenna and folded it just right, then threw himself into an exuberant pose and shouted, "Avast!"

Van was amused. "Yeah man."

Oscar was reluctant. "But Fisher...if you take the antenna off the radio...the radio won't work."

Fisher stared down on the radio for a few long moments, apparently working through the pros and cons of the device, and finally shrugged, "Fuck it. Who needs it?"

What can I possibly tell you so that you'll understand how such a statement could ever make sense? Because, to us, in the instant of its utterance, it did make sense. Fisher's proposition was so far outside our common logic that it could only be interpreted as insanity or genius. And which of these is ever chosen—insanity or genius—is always a matter of chance, always decided arbitrarily, always supported by so many layers of abstraction and circumstance that there's really no way to say for sure—insanity or genius. The question, then, becomes this: What is the ultimate *value* of our interpretation? What are the material risks and consequences of using this antenna as a sword instead of as an instrument of communication? Naturally I have my own opinions on this question since I know what events follow, but I'll let you hear them and decide for yourselves.

So, stretching our minds beyond the limits of the hole, or *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero*, or the Sugar Bowl, or the whole damned desert for that matter, we considered this radio, *this fucking radio*, sitting idly in the sand, and it suddenly struck us as the most useless prop of all useless props in our charade of observation. But the antenna! Now *there* was a prop with real potential. And we used it with all our hearts to perform a play. Never mind Shakespeare. Never mind *Romeo and Juliet*, the children of privilege, and a most ludicrous melodrama, a dubious tragedy of a ruling class shortened by two. Whatever! The *play* had become more than their stories. It became ours. I could almost feel Verona crumbling into the gulf of time and *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero* erected atop its ruins. And this hole, the crevice of time, became our theater.

What can I say? We were happy. It was the happiest we'd been in the desert, maybe even before the desert. We'd discovered the joy of performing and with it filled up our stomachs like wineskins. If you find our elation hard to believe, then try to imagine the will one must summon to create...anything...anything at all...the impulses and sensations that arise with any artistic endeavor, and imagine them flowing inside your body while your body is in a place such as the desert, a place that was, for us, art's opposite.

To feel...literally *feel* in a physical way...the vitality of creation swelling up inside one's skin, where the currents of destruction have been surging so long and so hard, it was a feeling akin to rebirth. What do I care about fucking Juliet and fucking Romeo? They were just names, text, characters on a page, until we filled them up with our own blood. And if you can imagine all that, imagine as well the disappointment we felt when we discovered we'd never set foot on that stage again. The night fell. The curtain dropped. The play ended.

Those early morning turnovers were always conducted beneath a blanket of lethargy and gloom. Our figures moved against a deep blue scrim as silent silhouettes, dropping softly into the hole, and climbing back out, nothing passing between us but sluggish murmurs and nods. This night in particular came at a time long after diligence had died and our vacuous inspections of gear and equipment had been abandoned both in practice and consciousness. I suppose this is what they meant by *complacency*, the illusion of permanence, the taking for granted that one's present conditions will remain indefinitely unchanged and, therefore, that diligence is innately superfluous.

According to the bloodstained log, our turnover was completed at 0317. At 0400, another entry was made. It was the final entry of the log: *Nothing significant to report*. Poor baby Sword. By dawn, his body was gone without a trace, his team was dead, throats cut, and the hole was no longer a post, but a grave. A passing patrol discovered the scene and delivered a detailed report to command.

Outrage billowed up through the ranks, from the bottom to the top of the totem pole, every last member of the unit incensed and champing for revenge. All our nuanced attitudes about the desert coagulated into a single unyielding temper. An investigation was launched. Civil affairs, engineers, human exploitation, combined action, intel, special ops, and a horde of vehicle and foot patrols swarmed the ground making inquiries all over town about Sword's missing body.

Nobody knew. Nothing was said. The residents of *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero* were evidently as mystified by the dead as we were. I'll admit, I was overtaken by a vicious skepticism and an inferno raging inside me fueled by grisly descriptions of our fallen comrades, crumpled bodies in blood soaked sand with staring eyes that seemed

entranced by the revelation of death. So steady was their gaze, it was rumored that they'd been doomed to remain in that hole indefinitely as ghosts, observing the desert, observing the human race, observing every calamity and calm of the planet for billions of years, until finally, overcome by the accumulating density of the sun, it would plunge into fire and everything would become ashes and dust, and then we could say, at last, that the post was truly decommissioned.

Speaking more concretely of the investigation that ensued, there were no clues found except a few unauthorized soda cans and gedunk wrappers drifting at the bottom of the hole among the crimson bodies. The team's personal effects were collected and brought back to basecamp. I saw Sword's book set preciously down onto a sleeping pad, amidst the slippery swirls of a poncho liner nestled beside his pack. Where was Sword now? Poor baby Sword. And without his book. What was this book anyway? I stared at one end of its canary binding peering out from a fold in the poncho liner, but I didn't dare approach. And I can't say why. Something in its presence forbade anything but a distant gaze.

I sat quietly in its presence, stealing glimpses from afar, as though it were alive, the only living witness to the brutal deeds that had occurred the night before. I found myself muttering the lines that I'd heard Sword recite so many times...*He never tires of the journey, he who is the darkest one, the darkest one of them all.* The words had been eerie before, just another part of Sword's enigmatic presence, or absence, but now there was a mystery at hand, and I got it into my head that the solution lay in this book. If the book was a witness, then the pages were its testimony. "Who?" I asked the little book, cautiously, courteously, from across the room. "Who is the darkest one of them all?"

Did I say just a moment ago that I suffered a vicious skepticism? That I was champing for revenge? But why? I can't let this pass without examination. As I've said from the start, I didn't even know Sword, never knew his real name, or anything else about him. And the others in the hole, with their throats cut, I knew even less about them. What was the basis of my rage? Could I really say *camaraderie*? If so, then what is the basis of camaraderie? My *countrymen* back home were dying everyday, beaten, raped, shot, starved, deteriorating from disease, abandoned without hope or care, thousands upon thousands, body after body, and I never once experienced one instance of rage. And now...I was savage?

Sinjin was savage as well. He delivered a fiery sermon concerning loyalty. "Never leave our own behind!" he thundered. And to fuel our fury, he produced the radio recovered from our bloody hole and set it down before us with brute precision. "Look," he said, pointing to the missing antenna. "They disabled the radio before our boys could call for help." *Boys*? I'd never heard Sinjin use the word *boys* before. Now they were boys? What next? Saints? Oh yes! They were saints. Sword embodied the best of us, the innocence, the virtue, the courage, everything pure in humanity flowed through his veins. His body, therefore, must be recovered at all costs so as not to allow this sacred flesh to be desecrated at the barbarous hands of the people of *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero*.

All the while, my question lingered...I mean the question from before, about the book. *Who is the darkest one of them all?* I'd intended to conduct an inquiry of my own into this very matter, but then there was this question of our missing antenna to deal with. You've got a hunch about the antenna, don't you? A theory perhaps? Yes, it's true, I've harbored a few of my own. I imagine Oscar and Van did as well. But we never spoke of

it, despite our stealing eyes and nagging minds wandering in the general direction of the ever-longing Fisher. Why not speak of it? Why not search? Why not demand to know? If Sword's life was indeed so precious, why not simply ask the question? Was it Fisher who took the antenna from the hole? But right there, when you feel the words moving around in your mouth, you realize the stakes of such a question.

What if Fisher did, in fact, steal the antenna? We don't know for sure because we never asked, but what if he did? What if we could somehow prove without any doubt that those throats would not now be cut, that Sword's body would not now be missing, if only Fisher had not stolen that antenna? Could we fairly hang the blame around his neck, and then, in doing so, find virtue in ourselves? Could we rest easy in our innocence? The trouble was, we were once again confronted in a most aggressive manner by the riddle of beginnings.

If the stealing of the antenna was marked *the beginning* of this story, then perhaps we could have our virtue and our innocence. But we know that Fisher did not write the play, or bring the book, or incite its performance. We know he didn't order the hole dug, or deliver us to the desert, or designate this town *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero*. We also know that if any of these other deeds were to become *the beginning*, then the albatross must be hung around someone else's neck. Maybe Sinjin's. Maybe Shakespeare's. Maybe mine. We did not ask the question—*Did Fisher steal the antenna?*—because, in the end, we didn't want to know.

But as you can see, this left a void in our story. What is the meaning of this attack on our position? If not the antenna, if not Fisher, then what? We couldn't assign meaning to Sword's missing body without first deciding on a beginning. There was a period

during which we felt especially lost. *What is the meaning of it?* We asked ourselves, over and over, in a stupor of grief. *What is the meaning? What is the meaning?* Of course, it was Sinjin who provided us with a meaning we could use. And I don't need to tell you what that meaning was, because you already know. Just the way we already knew. He didn't have to invent a meaning. He only had to invoke it. We were already primed to concur.

He might just as well have pulled out a play from his cargo pocket, with speeches and duels already scripted for centuries past, long before our hole was ever dug in the desert. A beginning was established with preset trajectories forward and backward in time, and plotted on this line were three throats cut and a body dragged off in the darkness. You ask why it rains? Well let me explain. There's evaporation, condensation, saturation....stratocumulus, cumulonimbus, and so on...you understand, all part of the electrical dance between protons and electrons, the inevitable struggle between good and evil.

Where there lies a void in consciousness...that vacuum of desire and fear...we will always find an amalgam of mystical and natural forces condensing into a source of knowledge that is simultaneously inexplicable and inescapable. And the power of the void always lies in silence. If Sinjin were to ever acknowledge his meanings as *choices* rather than natural phenomena, at that very instant, he would find himself lost at sea in a lifeboat with me, searching for an anchorage. Sinjin's meanings and his choices were irreconcilable and, therefore, unmentionable. Consequently, they were not mentioned. What is the meaning of a stolen body and three throats cut? We didn't ask. But then again, we didn't have to.

So now, with us positioned as protons and protagonists in this quavering fray, it was our time to move. And we began another search, this time though, not for *others*, but for *our own*. The reinforced regiment displayed itself to *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero* in all its glory, colors and troops like feathers fanned out across the land, boots on the ground, aircraft swarming above, armor trolling the streets, posters pasted ubiquitously, all of us with arms and bolts locked, beating every proverbial bush, scouring every inch of the town to its limits and beyond, out into the Sugar Bowl, conveying our intention with unwavering severity never to cease until the body of poor baby Sword was recovered.

Oscar, Van, and I were part of a detachment deployed to the outskirts of town, which amounted to a lot of wandering abreast through the open desert, combing the brush, kicking up dust, scanning the horizon, and trying in earnest to remember what the hell we were looking for. I don't mean to say that we'd forgotten about Sword—no, of course not—but this activity seemed somewhat disconnected from his disappearance. I got the feeling that we'd been assigned this duty as a comment on our commitment to the mission. Well that seemed a little unfair. Why should we, in particular, be identified as unfaithful?

A dawn in the desert is something to behold, a time of the day in which I could easily forget...*everything*...even my own presence and perspective, like witnessing infinity. Even the wind, the wind which in the desert does not blow but moves with the force of a continent, even the wind is not enough to jar one's sense of separateness. You are not you. I am not I. There is no we. There is only the desert, and a rising sun, and the shadows that stretch unapproachably across the earth, and of course that unrelenting

wind. All of these details, I'll admit, suggest in hindsight a conscious embodied being, a point of reference, but in the moment, one becomes lost in the universe, no anchorage, no awareness. All beginnings vanish in the Sugar Bowl.

It was on a morning such as this when we were trudging along the northern edge of *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero*. This was three days after Sword disappeared, three days of weary searching. Once the magenta hours had passed, and the sun was near its zenith and white, the day glared, the temperatures blistered, and the ground expanded beneath our boots. Disenchanted by this time, I shouted, "Look for an arm stuck out of the sand!"

Oscar was kicking a stone, the same stone he'd been kicking for at least two clicks, just to see how far he could keep it going. The stone would tumble and skip ahead leaving faint tracks for him to follow. I dragged my boots like a five year old, wondering how long a trail I might leave behind me in the sand. Van appeared to move across the Sugar Bowl without making any impressions at all, no footprints or trace of his existence. Sinjin with his shotgun scrutinized our progress from the passenger seat of a gun truck that crept behind us with its knotty tires grinding my trail into its own.

God forbid anyone else leave a mark in the world.

"God forbid," Van moaned.

"Two clicks in this fucking heat," I griped. "They're going to need a search party to find the search party."

"Never leave our own behind," Oscar agreed.

"God forbid."

Why in hell should they doubt us? What reasons did they have? We showed up, after all. We did their biddings, put ourselves in harm's way, dug their holes and sat in

them for weeks. Where did they come off doubting us? After a while I assumed a sort of retributive doubt toward them, the brass and Sinjin too, not to mention this whole searching business, which was beginning to feel as much like a charade as our observation post. Did they really expect to stumble across Sword's body out in the open sands of the Sugar Bowl? Did they even care? Well, I can save you the suspense, and tell you right now, we never did find Sword. And I didn't detect any particular grief in their faces, just the usual bugles blowing and their solemn call to Betsy Ross.

That was the crack in the facade, right there, where the truth burned through like Willie-Pete. The search was never a search. It was never about Sword. It was an unapologetic exhibition of sovereignty—period. I announced this deduction in the desert and I remember Oscar nodding, “Yeah man,” as if to say...*Fuckin' a, what else would it be?* Well, I don't know...maybe a search. And at that precise instant a question fell between Oscar and me like a twelve foot concrete barrier with red stenciled letters that stared us both down and asked, *What is the good in searching for Sword?*

Poor baby Sword, the quietest and shyest among us. To find the good in the search for his body, we needed to understand the meaning of its disappearance, and to understand the meaning of his body's disappearance meant another search for another beginning to our story. Who on earth was Sword? Who was the darkest one of them all? What secrets were hidden in that precious book of his? What history and context did it hold? I had to know. I became obsessed. I raced back to basecamp, back to our berthing, and found the little book still resting majestically in swirls of poncho liner on a sleeping pad stretched out on a concrete floor.

Finally, I mustered the courage to approach the book, to touch its pages, to gaze upon its script. *Who was the darkest one of them all?* If I scoured the book the way we scoured the desert, if I could find these words, and the sentence that contained the words, and the passage that contained the sentence, and the chapter that held the passage, and the narrative that held them all together, then I might at last find the solution to Sword's riddle. I skimmed the book lightly at first, but with no luck. Then I perused more carefully, a chapter here and there. But still the words eluded me.

In the end, I resorted to a systematic immersion into the text, with the intention of presenting myself forcefully to every phrase and act until I found myself face to face with the darkest one of them all. I read and I read all through the night and into the next day. I kept reading, furiously, frantically, thrashing each page with my eyes, grasping at the sentences like brittle branches dangling above my sinking fingertips, until I reached the final passage, the final words that fell over my face in a most chilling way. I read them out loud, perplexed and terrified.

“And hardly had she left her bed and become able to walk again without pain, hardly had the children returned from the homes of the neighbors, when she began to have her fifth child.”

What could it mean? I tell you, it made no sense. I read the book again, and again, just to be sure I hadn't somehow missed the page, but each and every time I found no trace of the darkest one of them all. I'm certain Sword read that exact line, out loud, right from those pages. I swear that he did. But no, it wasn't there. And I kept arriving back to the same chilling conclusion, with no better sense of who in the world was the darkest one of them all. Could it be that these words had never been written? That Sword had just

made them up himself and uttered them arbitrarily with his face hung down in a random book? If so, then this book was not witness at all. It bore no testimony, supported no verdict. It was nothing but a book.

I would never find the answers to my questions in the pages of Sword's book. I could not admit the implications of our play in the hole. I was left, then, with the savage Sinjin. I was left with a savage self. A savage that was conjured and dispatched to protect me from the barbarous hands of culpability. When we weighed the values and the material consequences of our performance, when we placed in the balance the sword and the antenna, and weighed one against the other, when we accepted Sinjin's void, his version of our story, we failed to anticipate the beginning that would follow.

On our last day observing, before Sword's disappearance, the professor came back to present me with his translated copy of *Romeo and Juliet*. "Of course there are many translations," the professor told me. "This one was the first of its kind by a most fascinating poet of the nineteenth century, Najib al-Haddad. Born in Beirut, but lived and worked in Alexandria until he died at just thirty two years old.

"The book that you now hold fuses two stories together, *Romeo and Juliet* and a much older Arabian poem with a parallel theme, titled *Layla and Majnun*. *Majnun* translates—roughly speaking—to *madness*. In this story, a young man named Qay, falls in love with a woman, Layla. Layla also loves Qay, but she is obligated to marry another man, and so their love must remain unconsummated and adrift. Qay, ruined and forlorn, abandons his home and community to live out his life in the solitude of the desert. And with a stick he scratches poems of love into the sand. The people say that he's become possessed by madness and so, henceforth, he is known as *Majnun*."

“Majnun,” I agreed. “Madness in the desert.” And Oscar and Van both nodded, “Yeah man.” I accepted the professor’s gift and offered a cigarette in return. We smoked together and then, because I couldn’t think of any words to properly express my gratitude, I said to him, “I’m sorry.” Clearly he didn’t comprehend my apology and I couldn’t think of any explanation to make sense of it, so I told him that in our country it is customary to apologize for reading books. I could tell by his expression that he still didn’t understand. So we smoked another cigarette rather than speak anymore.

Poor baby Sword...the quietest and shyest among us. Of course, miscalculations and misapprehensions are inherent to human knowledge, inherent to life itself, but the difficulty in confronting this certainty in the course of daily life is that one becomes viciously suspicious of all origins, and all stories, and all trajectories, and the infinite worlds through which they run. And so I am left permanently disoriented and destined to wander, to remain endlessly adrift, to be ever-restless and resigned to the nomadic mind, and ultimately to sink into the quicksand of beginnings.

CHAPTER 5
TOWARD CAYE ALMA

A. Turtleneck Lady

The lights come up in the auditorium, people are lifting themselves sluggishly from the old screeching seats, murmuring to one another, sliding on parkas and scarves, although I don't know why, it's not so cold. The faces are weary with translucent complexions, random sprouting hairs and warts and clogs, decades of texture all over their skin. Their hands are crooked. Their heads are gray. Their eyes are...what are they? Not sullen. Not morose. Pensive maybe? Well, who can say? And I'm not feeling so vivacious myself.

“What the hell was that shit about Sinjin?”

Trace is gaping haplessly over the scene and rubbing the back of his neck, which is something he does when his blood's running low, when the warmth of his pharmaceutical blanket starts to slip from his face, to reveal his naked body to the world, to reveal the naked truth to him. I can always tell when he's ready for another dose. He can't stop his body from shaking.

He's wearing three different flannel shirts with the collars all flapping around his neck like little pennants in a whirlwind. His buttons are misaligned, as usual, shirt tails draped unevenly over his frayed baggy jeans. I used to think he was just oblivious, completely unaware that he looked like a walking discount rack. Now I know, it's all part of his crazy little show that he puts on for the world, so meticulously haphazard, he'll never accidentally button his buttons right.

“Trace...Trace!” But his mind is elsewhere and he’s nudging me.

He whispers, “Hey, see that lady? Over there...the one in the turtleneck sweater.”

“I see her.”

“Yeah, she’s been eyeballing the kid all night. I think she’s some kind of freak.

Look...look at her! She’s leering.”

“Trace, she’s probably looking at Shamil. It’s not everyday you see...you know.

You gotta figure, kind of hard not to stare.”

“No, I thought that at first, too. But I’m telling you, she’s looking at the boy. You got your Beretta on you?”

“What? You’re gonna pull a gun on her?”

“No, I’m saying...in case.”

“In case what? In case she turns out to be the Widow Ching? Trace, what the hell is wrong with you? Take some fucking pills, smoke a blunt, chill out.”

I notice measure-of-a-poem man walking by and somebody says to him, “Thank you for your service.”

Trace rubs his neck again and shakes his head. “Fuck that. What is that anyway?”

“It’s what people say, Trace.”

“No...no, it’s not what they say. It’s what they don’t say. All that guy did was read. He didn’t get up and speak his mind, he didn’t put himself on the spot, so we could connect with the man he is now...*right now*. No. He just held up a piece of paper and regurgitated some old shit from some previous time in his life. Might as well have been someone else altogether.”

“I think we’re talking about two different things.”

“Exactly my point. Two different things.” Trace’s eyes are trained over my shoulder on the turtleneck lady who’s still lingering near the front of the auditorium. He digs out a fistful of grit-covered pills from the depths of his pocket, nestled within the folds of his map, no doubt. He scarfs them down and shakes his head vehemently, frowning, mumbling, but it’s not clear what he’s disapproving till finally he starts seething again.

“A story is about presence, about process. It’s about making choices in the body, in the moment. Otherwise, it’s nothing but rhetoric. I don’t give a rat’s ass what he thought about the measure of a poem yesterday, or last week, or a year ago, in the comfort of a chair by a crackling hearth. Are we really expected to believe that he hasn’t had a single new thought between the time he wrote and tonight? *What’s going on right now?* That’s the real question. If you ask me, he was as silent as that other one with the hat and the sunglasses. He just masked himself with composition instead of shades.”

“I thought we were talking about his service.”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass about his service either.” Trace lets his head fall to one side and roll around his shoulders, tendons crackling, eyes slipping up into their sockets, and he rubs the back of his neck again. Then he slaps me on the back and nods urgently toward turtleneck lady. “Hey look...she’s coming this way.”

“Trace, what was that shit you were talking about Sinjin? You don’t give a rat’s ass about his service either? That’s your best opinion of the fallen? You don’t think—”

“You got your Beretta?”

“Trace!”

“Van...Shamil,” he whispers with rising urgency, his eyes are flaring, as if to mark an impending attack. Both Van and Shamil have remained seated to this point, Van slouched back and dozing, Shamil erect and concentrating on a now abandoned microphone. They hear Trace’s panicked call and both rise slowly, torpid and cautious respectively, and move to his side. And this, I believe, is the whole reason Trace wanted them to come to Caye Alma in the first place.

Where it comes to the territory inside his head, Trace is a fearless explorer. I’ll give him that. There is no precipice he won’t leap from, no rock face, however sheer, he won’t scale, no desert, however vast or desolate, he won’t cross, just so long as these remain metaphors for the topography of his imagination. But if one so much as opens a door to the fresh air of *real life*, he recoils. Despite his verbal barrages about presence and bodies, he remains utterly ill-equipped for the muscular journeys of life.

For Trace, the threshold to any new space, of any kind, is a borderland too frightful to approach or even dream about. He’d rather live out his days in solitude, imagining things inside a room of his own where his expeditions don’t include any real exertion or human encounters. And then one day he discovers a map, and a letter that beckons him across a real border, in fact several borders, international borders. He could never have conceived such a journey on his own, however active his imagination, and he would never have actually considered going without Van. *Big Van*.

I know Trace would have gladly left me behind if it were possible. I don’t give him the same sense of comfort that Van does, even with my Beretta. It’s not about ability, per se, not my ability to handle a tough situation or, for that matter, his own ability. To be perfectly honest, based on what I’ve seen of them both—Trace and *Big Van*—I’d put my

money on Trace every time to act courageously in the face of adversity. That's the truth. But Trace doesn't believe it. He believes in the legend of *Big Van* more than he believes in himself. *Big Van* is nothing but an idol. In the end, *Big Van* won't save any of us.

The twist is that Trace also believes that *Big Van* holds me in greater esteem than himself. Trace is a skeptical guy and that's probably a good thing. Skepticism is healthy but it can be administered in unhealthy doses. His doubt is so powerful, self-doubt in particular, that he can't possibly imagine himself worthy of love. Now there's a word he wouldn't expect to hear from my lips—*love*.

Well, I understand love as little or as much as anyone else. And I'm not afraid to apply my sense of it, one way or the other, to put it to practice. But Trace is afraid. He can break down love in his mind into subatomic particles and give lengthy orations on gender or language or whatever else, and that's exactly what makes it impossible for him to actually experience it in the visceral way he professes. It keeps coming back to his terror of thresholds.

So naturally he can't imagine Van loving him. And he can't love Van in return, not the way he describes this so-called love between *Romeo and Juliet*, two characters in a book, in a hole, in the desert. He can only admire *Big Van*, worship him, squint up at his mighty stature and conjure up mythical fables about majestic stoicism. *Big Fucking Van!* Whatever.

So, that's why Trace needs me, or why he thinks he needs me. He's got it figured somehow that Van would never traverse the planet just for his sake. But he might do it for mine. Yes, it's true, Trace would have liked to leave me behind. Although, if he's

honest, which he always claims to be, then he'd have to admit that he'd also have preferred to leave himself behind, too.

Turtleneck lady is upon us.

Trace has become so engrossed with his own toxic meditations that now he doesn't even notice her.

"Excuse me," she says with an keen drawl.

Her hair resembles a basket of snarled gray yarn, likely the same yarn used to knit that oversized sweater of hers. Her skirt looks like wrinkled burlap or hemp, her boots pink patent leather, strung up to her knees with black laces, and her glasses round-framed with thick lenses that make her eyes bulge. I can already tell she and Trace are going to get along just fine—another rambling rummage sale.

"I liked your story," she says to Trace, although not with a smile. Her tone is even, analytical, not in the least bit effusive. And this is what catches Trace's ear. Despite his constant bemoaning society's relegation of *the poetic*, Trace is always more receptive to an icy critique than any remark he regards flowery or fulsome. She goes on to say, "Was it your intention to negate your own point?"

Trace scratches his head. "Um...yes."

Turtleneck lady follows up sharply. "So then that would be another layer of negation, wouldn't it? A fabricated miscalculation."

"Um...yes?"

I notice his eyes begin melting into the glassy swells of hers. Was he really preparing to pull a gun on this woman a minute ago? Here it is again...the famous mist of infatuation that accumulates around Trace in the most unpredictable moments and places,

with the most unlikely characters. His face has remolded itself from vicious skepticism to blind rapture. Ha! Good old Trace.

She turns to Shamil and the boy and nods with a gentle smile. "Hello."

Shamil nods in return without a word. The boy clings to Shamil. And turtleneck lady studies them both intently before turning back to Trace. "Was that a true story?"

Trace confirms, yes, every bit of it true, with a preposterous air of valor. And turtleneck lady listens as he rattles off another nine yards of fiction. I'm tempted to dispute the accuracy of his laced vignettes, but opt instead for the exit sign, which I notice Van, Shamil, and the boy have already found. It's clear enough, anyway, that neither Trace nor turtleneck lady have any use for my tedious commitment to factuality.

We all wait in the SUV for close to an hour before Trace finds his way out of the old rustic theater, still walking and talking with turtleneck lady. Now this calls for some heckling. Trace is such an easy target. I can't help myself. He crosses the lot and climbs into the truck feigning a heavy disposition, which is his usual strategy for avoiding all discussions of anything romantic.

"So?"

Trace looks back at me as if he's astonished to find someone else in the vehicle.

"What?"

"What do you mean, *what?* Did you get her number? You got a date?"

"A date? What the hell are you...whatever." He turns back around and stares out the windshield at turtleneck lady, who's climbing on a bicycle in the distance and pedaling off into the darkness of *Dot*."

“Come on Trace...that muppy hair, those buggy eyes, the hot pink boots. I bet she’d be an epic shag.” Trace hates it when I talk like this—*hates it*—which is exactly why I do it, just to poke at his crazy. It’s as if all his mythical dignity is threatened by the mere acknowledgment of intercourse...*sex!*...as if he didn’t know that that’s the real demon lying at the bottom of every human well. Oh, he’s no prude, no celibate, I can tell you that. And he’s sure as hell not a saint. This is just another show, another fabricated miscalculation. His relentless critique of every-fucking-thing is always conspicuously lacking some good old vulgarity. It’s just another blind spot, another threshold to fret.

And yet...wait. I look him over again, and notice the shadows cutting crags into his face, and I see now...the weight is real. What is this? Trace’s head is always heavier than his body, *always*, but I’ll admit I’m surprised this time, only because I thought he’d been enjoying his moment with turtleneck lady. After all, they’d been talking for close to an hour.

“Hey. What’s up? What’d she say?”

Slowly. “I’m not...totally sure.” A pause. “She asked about the boy.”

“Uh oh. That sounds ominous...you mean like...in a freaky way?”

I wait. Van waits. We’re all waiting. Still nothing.

“Trace!”

“Uh, yeah...I mentioned his...you know, his gift.”

“The drawing?”

“Well yeah, that too.”

Van slides himself up in his seat. His eyes are fully open now. Trace has our attention.

“What’d you tell her? Did you say something about his mother?”

“No, not really. But I think she got the picture. She’s a social worker or something.”

“Oh man! Trace!” Van and I look at each other. “She’s probably off calling the cops right now, telling ‘em how we abducted a kid.”

But Trace shakes his head. “No, I don’t think so. She was more interested in his...*ability*...you know, the mind-reading thing. She wanted to hear all about that.”

“Really? And what’d you tell her?”

“Well, like what we’ve been saying all along. How he can read minds.”

“And she believed you?”

Trace drifts off again into gazing and fiddling with his misaligned buttons.

“Trace!” Now I’m feeling some alarm myself and wondering if we’ll actually make to Caye Alma, or if I’ll be doing life on a chain gang in some country prison, trying like hell to avoid a night in the box. I look back into the cargo area. The boy is clutching Shamil’s tattooed arm. His eyes are shut. Shamil’s head is rested against the glass. Her eyes are shut. “Trace!”

Trace comes back around. “Mind reading. Yeah...she believed me. But she said it wasn’t really mind reading. She called it *body reading*.”

“Body reading?” I repeat.

“Body reading?” Van repeats.

“Body reading.” Trace repeats.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Trace continues to stare out the windshield and his voice drones and vanishes like an echo. “She says it’s like, sensitivity, like being aware of other beings, other bodies—

hyper aware—a kind of high powered radar that picks up...I don't know...odors, sounds, movement, muscles twitching, eyes shifting, hormones radiating, whatever, everything, anything, in a split second, without a word spoken.”

Trace turns to me suddenly and bores his eyes in mine. “He reads *bodies* Oscar, not fucking minds. He senses things, all kinds of things...like danger...especially danger. She says it's a faculty you find in prey animals...*in fucking prey animals*...and people who've experienced trauma.” And here his voice becomes solid again, and clear, and hard, and cold. “*Children*...who've experienced trauma.”

And all our eyes are shut.

B. Outside of Tyler

“What *exactly* is an installation?”

Trace spots an animal on the road ahead whose guts have been ground into the asphalt by a dozen passing cars over at least as many days. Only its tail flutters around now like a fuzzy windsock stuck to the street.

“Bless her soul,” Trace murmurs beneath a breath...*as if*...he doesn’t want to be heard. But of course, he doesn’t have to murmur at all. If he truly didn’t want to be heard, he could have kept the thought to himself, inside his head, and nobody would have known. But instead he murmurs, so we do know. We know that something has been said and that we’re not meant know what it is. *Bless her soul, bless her soul*...over and over, with every passing carcass. He’s a damned fool.

“It’s art,” Van answers. “The kind you put your body inside, so instead of consuming the art, the art consumes you.”

I don’t really know what he’s talking about but I’m reassured by this unexpected bout of lucidity. Journey-wise, there’s no way to cross the border between the U.S. and Mexico without crossing Texas, and Van tells us there’s no way he could cross Texas without passing through Tyler. He has people there. People? Really? What people? Who are these people to Van? Family? Friends? Colleagues? I never figured the man for having any people at all, none besides us anyway, but now he says he has people, and apparently they do installation art in Tyler.

“Not *in* Tyler,” he clarifies. “Near Tyler...outside of Tyler.”

Through a little map work, I see that *near* is not exactly the word for it, but *outside* certainly fits, by at least a few blades. I suppose in a place as big as Texas (and

the desert, too, for that matter), you gain some flexibility in your sense of near and far. So that's where we're headed...somewhere *outside* of Tyler.

Pressing south on 65, Trace bursts into a tortuous analysis of Kentucky dogs. "You need to understand what we're dealing with." He scans the grassy median, and over the guard rails along both sides of the highway, hoping I suppose, to spot a prowling dog to provide some visual evidence. "Kentucky dogs are known for their particular suspicion for any species conveying itself on a bicycle. I can tell you now, this is not a mode of transportation they appreciate. And they charge off their porches with incredible ferocity to make this viewpoint known to anyone brave enough to pedal by."

"Dogs chasing bicycles? That's your breaking news?"

"Right, but in Kentucky they don't just chase the bicycles. They actually want to catch them, and sink their teeth into flesh, and tear a body limb from limb. And they've worked out a few tricks over the years to increase their advantage. They'll lie in wait at the peak of a hill, or on the far side of a valley, and they'll ambush you right as you're climbing the steepest grade, vulnerable, tired out, no way to pick up speed, and the only way to escape is to turn around and go back the way you came." Trace shakes his head. "You see what I mean? You just can't make headway in Kentucky."

"If you're on a bike."

"So wait..." Trace turns to Van. "Who'd you say lives in Tyler?"

"Not *in* Tyler," Van repeats. "*Outside* of Tyler."

Despite the dialogue at hand, we're not really talking about Kentucky dogs, or Tyler, or installation art, or furry souls ground into the highway. No. We're talking about Sinjin. Trace will keep right on with his incessant blathering about every variety of

minutiae, however mundane or idiotic, maybe all the way to Caye Alma, speaking in code, and avoiding the principle issue on his mind, the elephant in the SUV. I know he believes he's discovered some unspeakable truth about Sinjin, based on the hasty assessment of his new friend, turtleneck lady.

As if turtleneck lady knows one damned thing about the desert, as if she knows one damned thing about Sinjin, based on Trace's ludicrous version of *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero*. Naturally, his story didn't include the part about Sinjin being blown to bits, blown to bits because he stepped across one threshold too many, on all our behalves. He went first and we went after. So he was blown to bits and we survived. And now, in the comfort of a body intact, Trace thinks he knows something terrible about Sinjin. What if it turns out that the boy is just a good guesser? But I suppose that wouldn't be tragic enough for the miserable likes of Trace Tiburon.

Trace wants to live out his life like a sad fucking song, so fearful that a solitary laugh, or even a smile, might offend the sanctity of his tears. I don't know what wonderful treasure Trace hopes to unearth in the dunes of Caye Alma, maybe something to pull against his unfathomable gloom, maybe something that feels like unalloyed joy. But I doubt such a thing could exist. Just look at him. Look at his body falling apart. Even if we did dig up some magical feeling, I doubt he could summon the strength to lift it from its hole or lift himself out of his own hole. His sad song is no shovel—I can tell you—it's more like a locked up trunk, heavy with chains and sand.

So onward he drives, mile after mile, town after town, spewing rivers of absurdity, like the fifth finger of death, which he insists some poor devil ate, leaving the rest of us with four. And the candidate on TV with his arms stretched out in the air

describing the biggest fish, or a killer squid, or the greatest generation, or the vastest desert...one myth after another. But never Sinjin. Never the boy. Not even Caye Alma comes up in conversation—the biggest myth of them all. And when he's tired of filling the air with opinions and critiques, he fiddles with the amber prayer beads that hang from his neck, and he whispers his secret prayers.

“Shouldn't my features be burnt by the desert? Shouldn't my visage be wasted, my mood wretched, and my heart filled with sorrow?”

We hit Texarkana, and Shamil sits up abruptly to make another cryptic announcement. The SUV becomes instantly silent. We wait.

“Pull over,” says Shamil. “I'm going walk.”

“Walk? Walk where?”

“I'll find you.” It's not a promise. It's never a promise with Shamil. Everything's spoken as a matter of fact, as though it's already happened, and all we need do is catch up.

Finding us in the middle of Texas seems improbable but Trace pulls over obligingly.

It's Trace who offers promises now. “We'll be waiting in Tyler.”

“Not *in* Tyler. Outside of Tyler.”

“Right. Outside of Tyler.”

Shamil climbs out of the cargo area and scans the horizon with menacing detachment. The boy becomes distressed. He's clutching the prosthesis, calling after Shamil with pleading eyes, and before Shamil can close the cargo door, he flings the plastic limb aside, leaps out beside her, and takes hold of her tattooed arm.

We clamor after him, “Hey! Hey!”

Shamil makes no attempt to dissuade the boy. Nor does she makes any attempt to acknowledge him. She pulls her arm free, faces south, and steps off down the road, with the boy skipping intently after.

We clamor again. “Kid, stop! You can’t walk. You’ll never make it. It’s too far!” We all look at each other, confused and alarmed, and horrified by Shamil’s indifference as she continues walking without so much as a word. “Kid, stop!” But he doesn’t stop. Not only does he follow Shamil’s lead, but assumes Shamil’s disposition toward us and ignores our calls completely.

Then...in a remarkable and rare instance of solidarity...Trace, and Van, and I, all together...*surrender*. In this moment, we agree on one thing. One thing alone. There is no chance, no possibility, that we will ever *ever* put our hands on this boy, or force him back into the SUV, or tell him what he must or must not do. This is an absolute, felt absolutely, in and with all our hearts. So, with these options unanimously ruled out, without so much as a word between us, we are left with no recourse but to sigh, defeated by the boy’s will, and proceed on our way without him. And pray that Shamil will serve as faithful guardian.

As we pass them by, Trace and I shout urgently from the window, “We’ll be waiting in Tyler!”

“Outside of Tyler,” Van reminds us.

I take hold of the Abyssinian handle and try to decide whether to be worried for the boy or relieved to be rid of Shamil—the corpse in our cargo area, consuming our

spirits. I can breathe again, now that our SUV is no longer a hearse, but I'm stifled by the thought of Sinjin's boy following in trace of the walking dead.

"You think they'll make it?"

"Oh, they'll make it," Trace nods. And onward he drives, spewing absurdities...

"The thing about these cigarettes is that nobody really knows about the sand."

C. The Installation Humbaba

Into the silence and the curious canopy of the pine savannas, many blades outside of Tyler, outside of everything it seems, sloughs and bogs loom at the edge of imagination, the impossible red wolf skulks with his spurned companion from Fouke, the slender glass lizard blinks, the bald eagle broods on fragile eggs, vesper bats shout and flutter about charred trunks, and all eyes peer out at the white SUV as it creeps into the territory in search of a vaguely described clearing where Van's people reside.

When at last the clearing is found, what is most prominent among the human constructions on display is a wooden hangar, so ancient and decayed, it looks as if it must have preceded the very technology it was built to shelter. A sunken ark, perhaps, from a failed attempt to survive the flood, rendered visible again only when the waters finally seeped back into the earth. In any case, hull or fuselage, church or magazine, it lures the eyes, begs curiosity, roils sedimented fears, and makes one gawk and wonder. What is there beyond those doors?

There is a house in the clearing, as well, in equal disrepair. And a garden blooms outside the house, presenting, in contrast, a dazzling array of blossoms. On the ground beside a bed of blue evening primroses, there's a man in a floppy hat and silver framed

glasses, lying down, nestled in the soil, and holding a small book up to his face. His lips are moving, presumably reading from the book, though from a distance the words are indiscernible, and periodically he stops, glances at the primroses, and offers a smile.

At another edge of the clearing is an orange tent, faded now almost to white, with its door flapping open and closed by the exertions of an indeterminate breeze. There's a woman crouched down beside the tent with a wrench in one hand, and in the other hand, two pieces of rusted metal, pipes maybe, slender shafts, or some other bits of scrap pulled from an abandoned hulk. Her hair is tied back and faded like the tent, her t-shirt torn and loose, her pants so mottled with blotches of paint, it's impossible to say what material they are. Plastic glasses teeter on the tip of her nose. One cigarette rests on her lip, burning, while another remains in reserve behind her ear. At the sound of the crunching gravel beneath the tires of the white SUV, she turns her head, rises, pushes her glasses up with the wrench, and stares. The wrench and rusted shafts fall to the ground.

Van's toes touch the ground before the SUV stops moving. He's out the door and moving slowly toward the woman, and she moves slowly toward him, like two freighters on a collision course. At impact, we see Van towering over the woman, but it is her body that carries the greater force, knocking him back a step. Her arms swing up over his neck like steel cables, while his arms hang limply by his sides, then slowly rise, and his hands settle gently on her ribs. What words are spoken? We do not know. We cannot understand the inaudible murmuring between them.

The old man nestled by the blue evening primroses does not move from his position nor does he seem aware of our presence. He is still reading from his book and smiling occasionally at the flowers. The indeterminate breeze closes and opens the faded tent

door. Eventually the woman leads Van back to us and she is introduced simply as *the one who does installation art*. Her glasses have slipped back down to the tip of her nose and offer an unobstructed view of her crystal gray eyes.

She doesn't say hello, but instead bums a cigarette and leans forward for a light. We provide the light and take notice of the image on her t-shirt—a tattered American flag with a banner across it that reads: *Made in Honduras*. The old man is later identified as *the doctor*, but no further explanation is provided. We wonder about his reading to the primroses, but we dare not ask. He may be a lunatic and it wouldn't be polite to bring that up. There is a growing desire, however, to find out what book he's reading. What verse might be powerful enough to make the flowers bloom?

We do not mention Caye Alma. The artist does not mention her installation. It's not clear if there really is any installation, but we suspect that if it exists, it must be inside the ark. We wander around the clearing without any stated purpose. The artist bums another cigarette and again leans in for a light. We oblige her while eyeing the cigarette still resting on her ear, which is being saved, we presume, for some special occasion. What occasion might that be? We cannot guess.

She delivers a brief explanation of the local flora and fauna, addressing herself primarily to Van, and periodically referring to the conditions of *Father Nature*. This term emerges several more times in subsequent exchanges. *Father Nature?* One wants desperately to ask what this means, but the artist could be a lunatic, too, and she carries a wrench, so we decide it would be safer not to bring it up. She eventually mentions Van's letters from the desert. This is news that we find more astonishing than the behaviors of both the doctor and the artist combined. Letters? What letters?

Periodically, she alludes to the installation that she's been working on for over a year. Our eyes turn surreptitiously toward the mysterious ark. She notices this and confirms our suspicions—*yes, it's in there*. Then she bums another cigarette. And yet, she conveys not so much as a *thank you* in return, or any indication of curiosity about what has brought us to this remote clearing in the pine savannas, or where we're headed when we depart. She remarks simply, *If a picture is worth a thousand words, then one of Van's letters must be worth a thousand pictures*. Letters? What damned letters?

Later in the day, coffee and rice is served. The doctor joins us and brings with him a stunning conviviality. Unlike the artist, he's very curious about our journey. We describe the map and Caye Alma and he responds enthusiastically with an incredible fable about a sea captain on a similar quest as our own. The doctor's voice becomes deep and slow, we suppose to correspond with the eerie mood of the tale.

This ship, he says ominously, is eventually caught in the equatorial doldrums, and after a month of drifting helplessly under a beating sun, their rations are exhausted, their water is exhausted, and finally their hope is exhausted. Every member of the crew, having surrendered to their impending fate, finds his own place on the deck to curl up and sink into one final dream before the longest nightmare begins.

The artist watches attentively as he tells his tale. She sips her coffee, smokes her cigarette, pushes up her glasses from time to time, and smiles faintly, but doesn't seem to be listening to the words. It's not clear what the relationship is between these two, the doctor and the artist. Curiosity is upon us again. Who are these people to Van? And who is Van to them? And by the way, what was that book he was reading to the flowers? And while we're on the subject, what happens to this captain and his crew?

The doctor answers cheerfully. *Every man on board dies.* This doesn't exactly sound like a cheerful outcome. Moreover, it begs an important question. If everyone dies, how does this story ever come to be told? The doctor nods in agreement. That afternoon, a wind arrived from the south, or maybe it was from the east, and it swept a blanket of clouds over the ship. The sky became black, rain poured down for days on end, and soaked those bodies through. The doctor grows quiet and still as though performing the death for us to see, as though we've never seen death before.

The artist seems satisfied with this conclusion and places her hand on top of the doctor's. Then she turns to us, and bums another cigarette. Without thinking, we mention the cigarette still propped majestically behind her ear. Does that one ever smoked? And she answers as though she's explaining the postal schedule. *Not as long as the planet's still infested with chivalry.* Then she leans in for another light.

While leaned forward and awaiting our valiant compliance, her t-shirt falls forward and reveals a crimson strap running over her shoulder that bears a haunting resemblance to the crooked red circle drawn on the map around Caye Alma. What is this? What is this color? What is this line that crosses her shoulder? An indiscriminate breeze flies over our skin and eyes, into the crevices of consciousness, down through the crust, through the mantle, into the core of our being, and our bodies heave with desire till every surface of the world becomes crimson and—

Hey buddy...how 'bout that light.

Jarred from our dream, we awaken to find her still waiting with crystal gray eyes staring through an angled shaft of dusty sunlight. We shake off the torpor, offer our glistening silver lighter, and she takes it. *Say...I don't suppose...have you heard about the*

sand? Evidently she hasn't heard. She leans back in her chair looking at us over the top of her glasses as if we're the lunatics, then slides them back up and rises from her chair. She pats the doctor on the shoulder, who begins clearing dishes, and she motions for us to follow her back outside.

There are still more questions to be asked about this lost ship and its dead crew with soaking bodies, but the time has come to view the installation. We follow the artist across the clearing toward the sunken ark. A pit fills one's stomach as the ark draws near. One knows there is suffering ahead, like one knows nothing else. Surely the suffering will pass, it will be fleeting, it must be, but the idea of existence beyond that point, the idea of a future is practically impossible to conceive in the present. How can one see anything beyond the threshold of terror? It must, therefore, be everlasting. And yet we follow the artist across the clearing, because we must witness the terror for ourselves, because of course, the truth and the terror are one.

The artist describes various strategies for accumulating materials for the installation. There are thrift stores and junkyards outside of Tyler, and there are other abandoned properties scattered around the pine savannas with usable structures and machinery. And many useful things may be found elsewhere amidst father nature. Again, with this *Father Nature*. What is this? I would have thought *Mother Nature*, isn't that right? Isn't that what we say? *Mother Nature*? So why father? Her crystal gray eyes are upon us like leopards, but she walks on, unperturbed, and answers with the same postal schedule tone. *Maybe if y'all started thinking of nature as a dude, you wouldn't be so quick to rape the land.* Then she bums another cigarette.

It becomes impossible to keep our eyes from stealing across her shoulders in hopes of another glimpse of that sensual crimson strap. Her torn t-shirt with the American flag and the Honduras banner flaps every which direction under this indeterminate breeze, every direction except the one we'd hope for, the one that might reveal that crimson strap to us one more time, even one split second. Our yearning spreads all the way down to our fingertips. They wriggle and stretch for permission to reach out and tug, the tiniest tug, on her already stretched out collar, one brief look, one small—

Wait what? What'd she say a second ago...*Y'all*? Well what's that supposed to mean? *Y'all*. Hey listen lady, we never raped any land. We're from the city, okay? There's no land to rape. So...you know, for the record...we never raped any land. She looks at us unconvinced or unimpressed or both. This while she smokes our last cigarette, from our last pack, with her own cigarette still immaculately perched upon her ear as though on a pedestal.

The clearing has been crossed. We stand before the ark's entrance. There is nothing left lying between us and the unknown inside. The artist flings her cable arms over Van's shoulders, plunges gray crystals into his eyes, and draws out his breath with her own. She lets go of him, turns around, and pushes open a door revealing to us a shaft of darkness from within. We shudder at the sight of it. She steps forward, through the threshold, allowing her body to be swallowed by the black innards of the ark, and she vanishes. There is nothing to do now but march in behind her.

The door swings closed as we creep into the void, inching through the absence of light, our bodies bumping together, our hands reaching outward, our ears pricked, our eyes searching, our minds searching, our feet sliding carefully over a dirt floor, inch by

inch, mile by mile, into the depths of another world. The artist is no longer with us, that much we can feel. Her presence has faded. The terror of the void builds until we can no longer take another step. Wherever she's gone, we cannot follow. So we wait, our bodies pressed close together, our breathing heavy, our arms hanging. There is not a word.

Suddenly static fills the air. A garbled voice calls. Frantic beeping. A long low tone. More garbled voices prodding the brain. Static hissing. And then all of this falls abruptly beneath the whine of an engine turning over, and over, until it catches and rolls and gnashes and roars. Our hearts and breathing succumb to the cacophony that rages inside the blackness. We feel each other's bodies tremble and each other's fingertips stretching lightly toward one another as if begging permission to pull each other close, but simultaneously holding back, fearing to make such pleas known. There is not a word.

A single light blinks on. A shaft of fluorescence falls from a portable fixture standing twenty feet high. The light hits the ground and gently rises back up into a sallow mist that dissipates gradually as it reaches back up toward the pitch atmosphere. The scene is illuminated. An old green generator rumbles chaotically near the base of the light. Coils of concertina glisten and wrap around the earth and vanish beyond the threshold of luminescence. A radio leans against a wall of sandbags, blinking and crackling, emitting its tormenting garble. And there, at the edge of the light, two sets of iron girders rise up in parallel angles, and are connected with further iron girders, and further still, leading off into the unseen. All together, these objects form *The Bridge of Humbaba*.

How? How is this possible? We can see each other's faces now, staring helplessly, blinking toward one another occasionally, perhaps to confirm the reality of the scenery by

witnessing ourselves in it. We begin to creep forward again, inch by inch, closer to the bridge, and closer, and closer. The dirt scrapes beneath our boots. The heat becomes noticeable, wraps itself around us, and draws sweat from our pores and soaks our shirts. The generator rumbles on mercilessly. The radio crackles and calls our attention to a hole in the ground surrounded by a sandy parapet. What? What is this? Inch by inch. But still, not a word.

The hole. The horror. We close in with the hunkering shadows. Only wisps of amber mist drift into the hole and reach its dirt floor. We squint into the abyss. What is there? Down there at the bottom of hole? What is it? The sand is streaked and splattered with black marks. We squat at the edge, stretch arms and hands over the parapet, and try to touch the marks at the bottom of the hole, but our fingertips can't reach. It's too deep. We have no choice. We must lower our bodies into the hole to discover the meaning of these black marks.

One by one, silently, we drop ourselves into the hole, inch by inch, we crawl downward to the bottom. Our fingertips dig into the dirt floor. We clutch fistfuls of sand, black and moist, and press them to our noses and cheeks and lips. We cast our gaze up to the dimly lit girders and the glistening concertina. We sit down in the hole, shoulder against shoulder, and listen to the rumbling radio and the cackling generator. What lies beyond that bridge? We once longed to know. We once ached to know. Now, we only ache to know what lies before the bridge.

Our shoulders huddle closer and tighter, our arms wrap each other up, our fingertips grip each other's necks, and we lean our heads forward, touching them together, as we once did with the fallen. Where are they now—*the fallen*? What happened to their

soaking bodies? What holes do they occupy? Closer and tighter, inch by inch, our fingertips dig into flesh, and sand, and blackness, and we whisper together. *Poor baby Sword. Poor baby Sword. The quietest and shyest among us.*

D. W. Devising

The quavering threshold is upon us. Days dwindle to hours. We near the looming borderland where the Rio Grande meets razor wire and watch towers, search lights and surveillance cameras, fences of rod, and red-eyed coyotes with double-aught buck, and whatever else the infinitely entangled imagination can conjure. We move south toward the Brownsville port of entry in a white SUV, me, Big Van, and our back seat mariachi performing clever covers of the Man in Black.

Love is a burning thing. And it makes a fiery ring. Bound by wild desire. I fell into a ring of fire.

For some, conveying one's body through a checkpoint of whatever sort is no cause for distress. And, all things considered, we should be among that sum. But there are gnashing memories that must be confronted at the approach of any checkpoint or border. For us, there can be no crossing of a bristling state boundary without traversing the contiguous domains of fear and regret.

I fell in to a burning ring of fire. I went down, down, down, and the flames went higher.

And then there's Shamil and the boy to consider. What's become of them? Where have they gone? It was decided that milling around outside of Tyler was an untenable plan, an errand of greater proportion than any of us could withstand. The consensus,

which sprouted from silence, was that sooner or later we'd find them, or they'd find us. But which will it be? Sooner? Or Later? Once we pass through the port, it seems unlikely we'll ever meet them again. So I suggest we stop somewhere before our crossing and make a few decisions.

And it burns, burns, burns...the ring of fire...the ring of fire.

We convene in a highway diner, tucking ourselves away in a booth in the back, where we can avoid the attention of curious strangers. Big Van slumps over the table, staring out the window. Oscar scans the menu, as if it's not obvious what he'll find.

I initiate the conference. "How far do you think they got?"

"What makes you think they're still together?"

"Shamil wouldn't leave the boy in the middle of nowhere."

"Oh no?"

Our server arrives with more effervescence than our northern temperaments are accustomed to. Oscar orders eggs, Van gets a coke, I say I'm good. But I'm not good. I'm incensed by the suggestion that Shamil would abandon the boy. No way Shamil abandons that boy. No way.

"Maybe Shamil didn't abandon the boy. Maybe the boy abandoned Shamil."

This is an idiotic remark, designed to provoke, not reveal new information. I'm going out for a smoke, I say. But before I can slide out from the booth, a young guy with floppy hair and a canvas coat drops himself into the booth opposite ours and says, "Hey." He has the anatomy of a mosquito with boots and relentless eyes. You just know he's not going away. "Where y'all from?"

Y'all? This is no Texan, I can tell that right off. Not from here or anywhere else in particular. A drifter. That's my guess. With a phony accent. So, what does he want with us?

He points to my cigarettes. "Got one you can spare?"

I hand over the pack bitterly.

He takes it and smiles. "W. Devising." We watch him closely without offering our names in return. He helps himself to a few smokes and hands the pack back. "Y'all headed cross the border?" He doesn't wait for an answer. "Yeah...you got that gettin' outta Dodge look in your eye." He stares at Oscar's plate with its eggs and toast vanishing by the second, which evidently puts him in mind of a moment from the past that he feels important to enough to relay to us.

"I had this buddy once, damndest thing, claimed he could eat any food, no matter how hot. Scotty bons, habaneros, tepins, ghosts, goddamn anything. We passed this roadside egg shack in Arizona, went in for some breakfast, and they put a chili pepper omelette in front of him with a sliver of jalapeño on top. My buddy rolled his eyes and laughed. But I tell you, he didn't get through half that omelette before his nose was running and he was sniveling like a baby. I started ribbing him, saying, hey man what's wrong, what's wrong? Egg got your tongue? He couldn't believe it. He shook his head and said he was sure as hell coming back someday to find that little egg shack in the desert. Damndest thing."

Oscar's eggs bring a different story to my mind. When I was a kid, I stomped on a frog in the street and its guts burst out from under my sneaker and slithered into the cracks in the asphalt. That's what Oscar's runny yolks look like to me—frog guts.

W. Devising points at the eggs. “You oughta try those with Tabasco.”

“That’s your story? Spicy eggs?”

“My story? Nah, that ain’t my story. My story...well...my story’s that I’m a dead man. W. Devising is a ghost.” He adorns this teaser with a mysterious smile. Then changes the subject to give the teaser teeth. “Man, I could use a plate of hash. You know what’s good on hash? Tabasco? You ever try Tabasco on hash? Cow tongue, too. Tabasco on cow tongue—brother that’ll blow your mind.”

I hate the fact that teasers are effective no matter how stupid or obvious they are. You know damned well they’re made to suck you in, and you know just as well that whatever it is you’re getting sucked into is going to turn out to be bullshit, and yet you go right ahead and let yourself be sucked in, all the while mocking its stupidity. *This is so dumb. I know it. I just want to find out where he’s going with this.*

“Okay...so? What makes you a dead man?”

“Me?” The teasing continues, but he knows it’s a delicate performance. One tease too many and he’s lost us. He looks into our eyes and sees the moment has come for the hooks. “I was in the desert, a special det in the mountains.”

“The desert?” Oscar rearranges himself to listen more carefully. The hooks are in.

“Yeah...in the mountains. You?”

“No. We were in the Sugar Bowl.”

“Never heard of it. Anyway...” W. Devising leans back in his booth, with a confident smile and a kicked up boot, and he sets the scene. “Up in the mountains, you got snow. People don’t know that about the mountains. The snow. That’s the real enemy.”

I notice his accent, whatever it is, wafts in and away, through various regions and dialects, and ellipses, contractions, and cusses come and go randomly, and form an odd lyric that draws us into the texture of his tale. It's a rhythmic concoction of fantasy and propaganda that throws us aslant, rendering our anchorages increasingly opaque the longer we listen. Whether any of this is real or not, we can't say, and for now we're content not to ask. His voice becomes ghostly enough to let us believe whatever we want to.

"We had a basecamp in the high country, on the border, the badlands, the vicinity of goatherds, poppy bandits, and RPG renegades, and we'd go out in teams on patrol. But then there was the snow, always the snow, and a cold that bites harder than bullets. In the basecamp they lit barrel fires, from time to time, to boost morale (god knows not to keep us warm), and all the fools would crowd around, rubbing their hands together, wobbling like penguins. But the smart ones stayed away."

"I take it you were one of the smart ones?"

"I'll tell you this, brother...your body will die from the cold, there's no doubt about that, but it's the *getting* cold that hurts. Over and over, day after day, getting cold. That's what kills your spirit. So the smart ones stay away from the fire, and keep their bodies numb and struggling, and their heads in the game, and in the end they survive. But of course, there's always a limit, always that boundary between numbness and death. And we found it.

"At that time of the year, with the snow falling daily, bed upon bed, drift after drift, patrols came down to nothing, nothing but endless trudging. No heads to keep, no game to be in, just the long walk. And we'd peer across the distant peaks, through the white

wind and glare, and see the ghosts of ourselves, bounding along a hazy ridge, like wild markhors, and dropping out of sight. So what do you think happened? We lost our way.

“Suddenly, the whole world was gone. No basecamp. No home. No point on the map. Nothing we could touch, or approach, or even imagine, with the white wind howling and pushing us down into the banks, and filling our eyes, and driving us back, and side to side. And we were howling, back, cursing at first, then repenting the curses, but neither got far. They sailed off together, curses and repentances alike, into a current of snow and wind, and we knew, soon enough, we’d be one of the voiceless, lifeless, bodies in the drifts. Ghosts on the ridge.

“We staggered for hours, and then by some miracle, as abruptly as the world had disappeared, it reappeared again, anyway a morsel of it. In the distance, through the wind, barely visible, there it was, a solitary cottage. This was no mirage, no dream. We could smell the fleeting cinders, and taste the ash, and see the wispy vapors. Smoke. Fire! We lunged forward, step after step, inch by inch, the cold pressing into our bodies as quick and determined as we could press our bodies toward the shelter. The only question was which would reach its destination first? Life or death?”

W. Devising halts and lifts his eyes, which had fallen during the telling of his story. His phony accent is back, or anyway it’s more pronounced again. “Y’all think you know the answer to that question, don’t you? Because, well...here I am telling the story, right?”

I’m not sure why the sound or the shape of his words, steady, fluctuating, drawled or sharp, should function as a test of the story’s veracity. In what way does truth depend on an accent, whether genuine or fabricated, sophisticated or provincial? It’s an irritating question, and since I have no good answer, I’ll let it be. As to the other question, this race

between life and death, W. Devising is correct. I would go along with the assumption that since he is here, telling the story, life prevailed.

W. Devising's head starts to droop again and his accent dips back below the gloomy surface of his tale. "But that wasn't the only question to be asked, and I'm betting you know what that question is."

"Who lived in the house?" is Oscar's guess.

"Exactly. Exactly god damned right. Who lived in the house?" W. Devising's accent creeps up again and then slips back. "Trouble is...the first time we thought to ask that question wasn't till later in the story. See what I mean?"

"Yeah sure. You didn't think about who lived in the house while you were freezing to death outside. Seems understandable."

"Nah man. That ain't it." W. Devising's mosquito arms quiver, and his eyes search our faces, and he fiddles with an unlit cigarette. "This is what I'm saying, brother. I want to tell you a story, a true story, how it *really* happened, and how it *really* happened is that we didn't think to ask that question—*Who lives in the house?*—till later on. But now, here I am, trying to tell you the story, and in the story we ain't got to the house yet...except...I already got that question in my head—*Who lives in the house?* I can't *truly* put myself in the same state of mind I was in when it happened. I can't feel what I felt or see how I saw. I don't truly know what made me think what I thought. So I gotta fake it. I gotta fake the not-yet-knowing. There's no way to tell you the story without faking it." He stops short and searches the pockets of his canvas coat, though it's not clear for what.

W. Devising is bringing up a familiar concern, that all stories are told in retrospect, and all decisions and events are interpreted and linked in hindsight. Fine. But verbalizing this fact in the midst of a story, in the moment of telling, and then on these grounds deeming his own story a *fake*, unable to reflect reality or factual history, is disturbing to the ear. There are some truths, however plain, that we'd rather not be reminded of too frequently. The retrospective fabrications of *all our stories* is certainly one of them. For W. Devising, the possibility of a true story is coming apart at the seams, and when he throws this impossibility in our faces, we can feel ourselves coming apart at the seams, too.

“Well, I guess you figured out who lived in the house when you knocked on the door.”

“We never knocked on the door.”

“You didn't knock? You just...went in...uninvited?”

“Yeah well, I guess y'all know something about that too, right? Anyway, there was nobody home.”

“Nobody home? A lone cottage in the mountains, the middle of a blizzard, a roaring fire, and nobody's home? How can that be?”

“Don't know. All I know is there was fire. We crowded up and let ourselves fall under the spell of the flames. I never felt so empty of thoughts in my whole life. Not a word in our mouths or our heads. Only silence.” W. Devising waits. He waits...and he waits...and he lets us feel as much silence as we might in a highway diner in Brownsville, Texas. “But you know...it's damned hard to tell a story with no words.”

“So who lived in the house?”

W. Devising shrugs. “Don’t know. Never found out.”

“I don’t get it. How can that be?”

“What—you never fell under the spell of a fire before? Never got lost in the glowing coals while they shift and tumble and dwindle away? Never so scared of the chill on your back that you barely felt the burn on your face? Then brother, you never been cold. We melted like wax men, bodies and limbs drooped down and piled on top of each other, and we fell into a sleep so deep, and so long, that by the time we woke up, the blizzard, and the night, and the morning of the next day, were all gone. There was nobody home when our eyes closed, and nobody home when they opened again.”

Of course, there were a lot of questions to be asked of W. Devising. And he agreed, yes, there were indeed a lot of questions. A lot of panic, and confusion, and accusations slung back and forth as the team revived. But the worst of the confusion was yet to come. It’s true, there was nobody in the house when they arrived, or when they dozed off in front of the fire, or when they woke up again. But somebody had been there while they slept. Somebody freshened the fire, which was still crackling nineteen hours later. Somebody left meat, hanging on a spit above the flames. Somebody placed a pail of water by the hearth. But for this hospitality, they paid a heavy price.

“And that was the moment,” says W. Devising, almost triumphantly, “That’s when we looked at each other and, for the first time, asked the question, the question that’s been sitting on the tip of your tongue and mine since this story began—*Who lives in the house?* We looked around the room and realized that in our headlong pursuit for shelter, we’d inadvertently found our tomb. All our weapons, and all our boots, were gone.”

W. Devising sees our faces twisting and bulging with bewilderment and he puts up his hand and nods. “I know...I know. Here I am. So how could it really have been a tomb? But that’s what I’m trying to tell you, brother. I’m a ghost. And there’s nothing real about this story.”

Questions accumulate on top of questions that never achieve voice, but linger nonetheless in the not-silence at the tips of our tongues.

“Man, you don’t really expect us to—”

W. Devising points out the window. “Hey is that y’all’s SUV out there? Looks like you got plenty of room. Mind if I tag along?” He leans his mosquito body forward and rests his eager eyes on ours, and we just know this guy’s not going away without taking some blood with him.

Tag along? Man, you don’t really expect us to—

Before Oscar or I can shoo him away, Van intercedes with a slurp of his Coke. He rattles the ice, stares in the cup, and says, “Yeah man.”

Yeah man? What’s that supposed to mean? Like...Yeah man, I mind...or...Yeah man, come on down to Caye Alma with us...or...Yeah man, that’s a great tasting Coke...which is it? With Van you never know. Typically, we don’t bother asking. It never really mattered before. But it matters now. I’m not sure I want this W. Devising character tagging along, with his curious accent and his far-fetched tales, and it’s clear that Oscar’s not keen on the idea either. But we’ve never really said no to Van. It’s not a practice we’re accustomed to or a precedent we’re prepared to set. Therefore, we relent with a baffled Yeah man of our own.

W. Devising's tragic demeanor vanishes without a trace as though he's never had a forlorn moment in his life. He kicks his boots back down under the table, straightens the canvas coat on his mosquito frame with frenzied movements, but he's suddenly halted. His eager eyes become viscous with wonder, as he peers through the window out at the lot to the back of the white SUV.

“Whoa.”

All heads spin to see, and there in the glare of a noontday sun, leaned up against the white SUV, we find the untrammeled Shamil. And leaned up against Shamil we find Sinjin's untrammeled son.

E. Slipping

We've slipped, past the border, out from the comfort and discomfort of our own country, and now steal into the country of others. The terrain, and our foreignness in it, is regrettably familiar. But this time we know. This is the day and the place, where finally we know that our journey begins, where all the old voices and their melancholy and bad advice are left behind, where *we* do the striding, deeper and deeper into the world, where *we* are determined to do the only thing we can do, where *we* save the only lives we can save.

The onslaught of unknowable countenances and glistening sand pursues us into the shelter of brittle recollections, hastily gathered and bound together like loose sticks, leaning precariously, and more vulnerable to the elements than we'd care to admit. Oscar slips down into his seat, casting aspersions at the passing scenery, and the people in it, and lamenting his burning ring of fire.

Van is slipping, too, but from where, and to where, it's impossible to say. He gapes haplessly through the windshield at the highway, at the passing painted lines, and his lips move inaudibly, as if counting them up. He clears his throat and voices a phrase from a page or a few words joined together in some manner that fascinates his tongue, and he suddenly cries out, *Our bodies were soaking!* Then silence. What does it mean? Van says he doesn't know. Oscar leaps to his defense. That's not what he said. He said it doesn't mean anything, because it doesn't.

I believe this is cause for concern. I ask Van his name, just his name, if only to test his lucidity, his faculties, to see if he knows, just his name. He answers *Van* without hesitation. So there's no cause for concern, after all. But then, to be sure, I ask a few more questions. Where were you born? *I was born in the desert.* Where do you live? Where are you now? Where are you going? To these, he gives the same reply, repeatedly and with a tone of increasing agitation, *in the desert...in the desert.* What else do you remember? I mean, besides the desert. He cries, *Our bodies were soaking!*

I'm slipping, too, under rocks and tufts of grass, into the soil among the worms, rooting downward for cooler foundations. I'm slipping into the promise of Caye Alma. Slipping into a map and the vision of a magical island off the coast of Belize. One wishes the boy would draw another portrait, so we might catch a glimpse of our slippages and where they're all leading, but he's abandoned his notebook now and only draws on Shamil's prosthetic limb. I fear he may be slipping as rapidly as the rest of us. W. Devising, now seated behind me, has slipped into an eerie chronicle of his last days on the mountain.

“No guns...no boots. Even if we could get back to base, even if they sent out a search party, how would we ever explain? No guns...no boots. No going home after that. We fell to arguing bitterly, shouting, shoving, punching, until the food and the fuel ran out and the fire was extinguished. Then we fell to our knees on the warped wood planks, into a dreaded silence, huddled into the hearth, blowing frantically on the last of the smoking embers nestled into heaps of ash, until they slipped from orange to gray, and then we waited. We waited for the cold to push its way in.”

This is a sketchy one, this W. Devising, with his slender arm flailing from the window in a rushing wind. I'm not sure what to make of him. In this case, though, I think I understand what he means—waiting for the end or a miracle to come. I know that eventually Shamil will climb back out of this white SUV and start walking again. It's just a matter of time. She may not find us. We may not find her. I want to build up the courage to ask her not to go. I want to make enticing promises and persuasive arguments. I want to make poetry and art and music, anything that might move her to stay. I want to ask her, *Don't you care?* But I don't dare speak, or intervene, or stand in her way. So Oscar serenades her on my behalf. Good old Oscar.

The taste of love is sweet, when hearts like ours meet. I fell for you like a child, oh, but the fire went wild.

And Van carries on with his own eerie chronicles. “We slept in worn canvas tents and the rain fell so hard and long that the ground overflowed, and the water rose up around our bodies in the darkness, and we lay trembling through the night, half submerged, rain slapping down against the fabric, we lay there waiting, waiting for dawn, waiting for a command or commandments, waiting for the water, by the laws of physics

or the grace of God, to finally recede, all night waiting and shivering, too damned stupid to climb out of our tents and stand up.” Van grips the back of his own neck and grits his teeth. “Our bodies were soaking, and for the love of God, all we had to do was *stand up*.”

“What does it mean?” But Van doesn’t answer. Either he can’t tell, or he won’t say, or I can’t hear or comprehend. It remains a moment in the memory, adrift, amidst the flotsam and jetsam of his mind, or mine. The words linger...*Our bodies were soaking, but we didn’t stand up*. Meanwhile, W. Devising describes every horrifying detail of a body freezing to death. And Oscar strums his guitar louder and louder, desperate to drown out the din of our slipping, singing at the top of his lungs.

I fell in to a burning ring of fire, I went down, down, down, and the flames went higher. And it burns, burns, burns, the ring of fire, the ring of fire.

There’s some truth in it, isn’t there? If we can’t rally around music, then what’s left? Although, I’m not sure about Oscar’s repertoire. “What about Tina Turner? Can you play something by her?” Oscar’s incredulity is irrelevant, to me, along with his presumption of authority on musical matters, based solely on the fact that he bears a guitar while the rest of us do not. That makes no difference to me. I’m in the mood for Tina Turner. I like her song, *Better Be Good To Me*. Play that one. I always sing along and imagine myself talking to God. Of course, I can’t actually sing but I’m willing to chant out the lines as an unmelodious protest.

Prisoner of your love! Entangled in your web!

And then Van stuns us all with a monotonous verse and a protest of his own.

I was born in the desert, I been down for years, Jesus come closer, I think my time is near.

Oscar bangs harder. *And it burns, burns, burns, the ring of fire, the ring of fire.*

And I shout at God. *That's how it's gotta be now. Cause I don't have no use for what you loosely call the truth and I don't have the time for your over loaded lines.*

Shamil hunkers down in the cargo area, out of sight, as if she's still in the desert in the site that they call *black*, listening to us shout back and forth, with red faces and flashing teeth: *CAN YOU WRITE?* And W. Devising illustrates the anatomy of hypothermia with such excruciating clarity that even Jack London might be impressed. We can't help but shiver.

And Van drones on through the lyrics of his new theme song with a tenacity we've never witnessed. The words gust like gritty wind that scathes one's skin. *I've traveled over, dried earth and floods, hell and high water...to bring you my love...to bring you my love...to bring you my love...to bring you my love...to bring you my love...to bring you my love...to bring you my love...*

He can't break from the line, he can't find the next verse, he can't put the words to any tune, he can't vary the pitch or the meter, he can't move on, he can't pull himself off the record, the needle in his head keeps slipping and skipping...*to bring you my love...again and again, without end.*

F. Weaving Together

Logistically speaking (and financially too), resources are waning. Our strategy has been to purchase basic supplies in whatever small towns we find along the way and drive on in search of suitable camp sites. Lost in the language of the land, it's difficult for us to distinguish the names of one town from the next and consequently we regard all of them as unnamable. And yet, all the while, we know it is we who are the unnamable ones in this scene.

We've stopped in one such town to pick up odds and ends and Oscar strides up beside me and says "Hey." Together we lean against the hood of the white SUV like the way we used to lean against the concrete rim of the Sugar Bowl. Here and now, squinting silently out across the landscape, it feels as though a thousand years have passed since then. The nearness of Oscar and our quiet reflections reminds me of the bond we once had, a bond that has long since eroded. Whatever connection we have today rests firmly on the foundations of a distant past, and the only language we have to communicate with is more foreign to me than the language of this land. I've become a stranger inside and out.

Oscar turns and speaks. "We got a problem. We should talk about it."

What? I'm dumbfounded. Oscar acknowledging a problem? Is it possible? And he wants to talk about it? I'll bet he's swallowed too many meds and now he's swimming in nostalgia. On the other hand, his face isn't rosy or sloshed the way it gets when he's swimming, his shoulders aren't sloped, his lips aren't mashing. So then what's this about? What problem? Could this be a genuine attempt at reconciliation?

“Hey Van!” I yell out. “Come here! We’re going to talk about our problems.” I can’t imagine the extent to which Oscar is prepared to deal with the desert, but here he is, at the threshold of reckoning, calling to us, beckoning reluctantly, but he’s here in the flesh, right now, so how can we not come forth and enter into conversation with him, however extensive or limited it might be. This is an opportunity, an obligation, a calling to account that we must face together.

I fall instantly into an effusive preamble. “I can’t believe it. Do you really mean to say that you’re willing to talk? Okay fine, so now we’re talking. And I want to say, first of all, that I consider Sinjin to be at the heart of the matter. You want to talk about problems? Then we need to talk about Sinjin. We need to interrogate *that* figure...as a man...as a symbol.”

Oscar’s face becomes bewildered and sullen. But, no way, I’m not letting this opportunity go. I’m determined to put Sinjin on trial, and bring testimony to bear for the record, and examine witnesses to his conduct in the desert. *WHO IS SINJIN?* If there is indeed a calling to account that we must face together, it’s got to be this. And while we’re on the record, I want to talk about the incident, the episode...you know the one I mean...he knows the one I mean. But he never wants to get into it. I call it *the hole*, although it wasn’t exactly that. Still, we were in it, and it was deep, and it was dark. I’d like to submit that for examination.

Now I know, of course, that Oscar will have his own version of the story. And that’s okay. Because I believe it’s the weaving together that counts, the weaving together of his account and mine...*the weaving together*...that’s what’s going to open the way to

new understandings and new possibilities. He'll have his say and I'll have mine, but we'll never really know what happened until we weave our stories together.

All right, so now that we're talking, let me tell you this. If we want to understand Sinjin, if we want to really talk about who that man was, about what he did, about what he represented, we need to get back to *the hole* and talk about that place as well. And if we do, if we can, I say we're going to come back out with a better understanding of both. I say Sinjin and *the hole* are the same damned thing. I say we talk about them together, as one, or we'll never have one damned clue about either. That's what I say.

In reference to The Hole:

What I remember most was the darkness. It was so far beyond not seeing the hand in front of my face, I could punch through my skull and still not find my fist. The luminous dial of my watch was my only source of light. Those were the hands I could see and I stared down the seconds with relentless curiosity. Seventeen hours, four minutes, and fifty-three seconds... fifty-four... fifty-five... fifty-six. Not even a day gone by and I was already swimming in seconds.

“Oscar! This is some Gothic shit you got us into! Buried alive.”

A wispy “Shhh” sailed through the dark then a whisper. “They might hear us.”

“Who?”

No answer.

I eased my head back onto my inverted helmet and went back to staring down the seconds, three or four, then I thought twice, and my head jerked up. “Well isn't that what we want? For someone to hear us!”

But Oscar stayed cool. “Depends on who that someone is.”

“Well I don’t give a damn who it is. Just so long as they get us the hell out of here.”

“Do you know what they’ll do if they find us? What they’ll do *to us*.”

“Who?”

I asked, but I really didn’t care. The crumbled brick and concrete were digging into my legs and knees so I had to constantly shift and roll my hips side to side. My back was okay, thanks to the flak vest. And I slid out the SAPI plates and set them under my elbows.

“You all right?” Oscar asked.

“I don’t know. I think I busted my ankle, or rolled it anyway, something.” He didn’t answer. “Oscar, why the fuck did you pull that pin?”

“Protocol.” Not whispering, not embarrassed or unsure, as though a different outcome than this, even if he could know or decide in advance, wouldn’t be enough for him to break their precious rules.

“Why did we ever leave the truck?”

I know it was my choice as much as his. Maybe it was more mine. Who knows? But it was definitely his idea to drop that incendiary grenade in the cab before we ran. The moment he pulled that pin, I knew...he fucking knew, too...there was no turning back.

We sprinted across the road, ducked through alleys and groves, and bolted for the biggest building on the block. Don’t ask me why. The place was a ghost town anyway. Had been for weeks. There was a haunting air in every house, like the people disappeared

all at once in the middle of dinner, or chai, or prayer, or whatever else they did there. You'd see food still in the pot, a book tossed down beside a chair, basins filled with water, clothes half-packed in trunks, like everybody suddenly dropped their shit and ran. But to where, I don't know, or from what. I never saw them go. They just up and vanished.

So there we were, Oscar and I, streaking through town, the last two ghosts, aside from whoever ambushed us. We never saw them coming. One moment, another dusty road, the next moment, flames filled our windshield, followed by black smoke and the loudest thunder that ever rolled. The vehicles ahead disappeared behind the smoke and fire. We heard a familiar rat-a-tat in the distance and gave a rat-a-tat back.

And then there was a grotesque silence in the air. No shots. No thunder. Just the crackling fires around us and the bright light of the day. And suddenly, in that instant, I felt the miles between home and me, in my legs, and my arms, and pulling down on my guts. Never before had I given thought to how far we'd come. And now this. Were we left behind? Were we the sole survivors? Squinting through the haze and the dust, there was really no way to know. Oscar pointed out the big building to where we ran, a mansion more or less, made of stone and brick and concrete.

"Bet they'll have chow in there," Oscar said, sure of himself as always. And he charged ahead. And I followed him because there was nowhere else to go, and because that's what I'd been doing my whole life—following fucking Oscar. I followed him into boots and utilities, followed him to the desert, and here I was following him again. But why'd he have to pick this particular house? You'd have to figure it'd be the only one visible from five thousand feet. Why couldn't he have found something else a little less

obtrusive?

We got inside the house and ran straight to the living room. Oscar flopped down on a velvety yellow couch. I slumped in big wooden chair with an ottoman. We didn't say a word to each other, just breathed and stared off into our own private spaces. For ten minutes or so, I'd say we had real peace, the first genuine taste of it in nearly a year. I gazed at a dozen prayer mats scattered around the stone floor, and they suddenly struck me in a most peculiar way.

But then Oscar shot up from the couch and turned his head to the window. "Listen." The dull whisper of approaching aircraft filled the air. "The sound of freedom." A slow smile spread across Oscar's face. I pulled my legs off the ottoman and sat up straight to listen, too. The jets screamed overhead and Oscar's whole body swayed with them with like an eager sapling. "Whippin'!" he cheered. Then he looked up and added thoughtfully, "...F-18s."

"Fuck you." Oscar's always trying to convince people he can identify aircraft by the sound of them, like in the old Nam movies. In minutes the scream of freedom was upon us again and even louder than before.

"Yup," he nodded. "Definitely F-18s."

That was it. That was the last time I saw Oscar.

In reference to Sinjin:

Sinjin laid out feral dogs with a shotgun, and he scarfed Viagra before patrols (he said to keep his edge), and he planned upcoming missions indefatigably until it turned out he was, in fact, fatiguable. He never laughed except in conversations about sitcoms with pathetic male leads (and when he was laying out feral dogs), and he despised command almost as much as we did, but for different reasons, and he was a compulsive eater and was getting fat in the desert, and was always displeased by decisions that were made in his absence. He was fascinated by technology and its possibilities in the desert, and was prolific with instant messages that spit from his gun truck computer as if belt-fed, and when in conversation he laced every comment with faintly discernible threats, through his tone or his cadence. It's hard to say how, but he did it, and we felt it, and we were afraid, of his wrath and his desire, even afraid of his instant messages.

Sinjin demonstrated *his edge* by slapping flies out of the air with bare hands. And he'd let out a gurgling laugh with his small black eyes gleaming while he adjusted his junk and said, "Man, I'm hard." And then he'd quote another sitcom and laugh again and we'd all laugh along because, with Sinjin, you had to laugh along. Sinjin was the master of one-sided banter and he communicated his intent through sarcastic abuses, between mouthfuls of gedunk, and he scorned anything sympathetic, but every now and again he'd confide his frustrations to us, about command or some galling condition of the desert, and we'd feel obliged to respond with sympathy, which he clearly wanted, and his small black eyes would search our faces for sincerity, so we were always desperately earnest.

The Hole:

Sitting in the darkness, I tried to remember just what it felt like to be bombed. But I couldn't. There was the first part of a noise that from a distance you might think of as a blast, or an explosion, but from beneath, those words weren't enough. It was *utter*—that's what I'd call it now, *utter*—too big, too damned intense to be described, as though it went beyond sound itself into the realm of the supernatural and it shook our very souls. But the sound quit in my head before it really ended, as if someone snapped off the tube in the midst of the scene and everything went suddenly black except for that small prick of light in the center of the screen. The last light.

When my eyes reopened, I found my body twisted inside that black hole. The first moments comprised mostly panic and frantic blinking. I couldn't see. I thought I was blind, flailing in the darkness, before I caught a glimpse of the green glow beneath my sleeve and found my watch. What a relief, to have sight. I sang out—right there in the hole—I sang. *I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind, but now I see!*

But wait. I wasn't found. I couldn't see.

I wondered how long I'd been unconscious, but the hands of my watch struck me as in awkward positions, bent backward in some awful way. Had they gone around once already? Twice? There was no way to know. The face was tritium so its green pallor would never fade, which I thought was fitting. I imagined my flesh, in the months to come, or maybe years, decaying against the faint chemical glow of the watch hands, eventually stopped, with a battery depleted and a body long dead. I tried to get a feel for this place, reaching out and around, running my fingers and palms blindly from edge to edge but I couldn't keep track. The jagged rubble seemed infinite in the darkness like rows of teeth in a great white shark.

But then I heard a voice...calling.

“Trace? Trace?”

It was Oscar, but where? My head spun around.

“Oscar?.....Oscar? Where are you?”

“Trace?”

His voice was muffled, like in another room. I groped at the rubble, slapping bricks aside, scraping, scratching, pulling, pushing, yelling out, “Oscar! Oscar!”

“I’m here,” he called.

No better words could have been spoken.

I trembled and tears filled my eyes. I almost busted out another hymn...almost... except there was a wall between us, just a pile of debris, but it was too much to move, too heavy. For hours I poked and prodded and shifted rocks to and fro, desperate, dazed, digging toward his voice, and Oscar did the same on his side, searching for a way through, back together again. But we were divided in the darkness and I began to worry I might never see him again. The digging went on for hours. It was engrossing work, certainly, and it postponed reality for a while. But then my ankle started wailing and my back ached from the weight and the bending. And finally I gave up the struggle, crumbled down to the ground like the building I lay beneath, and curled up, silent and still.

Sinjin:

He was a frightening figure precisely because he was not overtly barbarous, or zealous, or awesome. He was unquestionably cruel and yet his cruelty did not seem to arise from a place of passion, but from some sort of bureaucratic dispassion that soaked into his skin and produced an utterly detached and yet deadly persona. One wonders what strategies such a bureaucratized body must employ daily to maneuver through the minefield of emotions that humans traverse as a natural course of their daily existence, especially when that daily existence includes the very real threat of dying and the equally likely possibility of killing.

I imagine such a person must become unconsciously deft at organizing their responses to life according to some set of regulations or principles. And maybe there are some people more genetically suited to this kind of work than others, I don't know, but no matter how strong their apathetic propensity, one can always detect rough edges on a smooth veneer. If you watch a face closely enough, long enough, you'll see the emotional undercurrents reverberating subcutaneously.

Sinjin was not a smoker. He called it a nasty habit and he'd launch into ludicrous tirades about *health hazards*. Health hazards? It was a strange argument, I thought, given our circumstances, for one thing, and his general attitude towards life, for another. But the argument (or the effort he put into it) seemed suddenly less strange when he passed us one day. We were gathered outside in a circle, smoking, and he looked over at us and, almost under his breath but not quite, he commented about missing out on something. That's just how he said it. "Looks like I'm missing out on something." Missing out? Missing what?

The Hole:

I wasn't hungry at first, but I knew I would be eventually. It turned out I had some food left over from my last MRE. A Pop-Tart, a mini-bottle of Tabasco, and a package of Charms.

"Don't eat the Charms," Oscar told me. "Bad luck."

"Yeah right...because luck's really been in our corner so far."

Oscar had a main meal. Hot dogs—*the four fingers of death*—but he was fasting, he said. "I'll eat when you eat."

"Okay, I'm eating," I lied.

"Yeah, me too."

I had some water left in a plastic bladder and kept the tube stuck in my mouth like an I.V. but I was horrified by the possibility that every sip might be my last. Oscar and I talked as much as he was willing. He was still trying to be tactical.

"You think they'll find us?" I asked him. "You think they're even looking?" My eyes were fixed on the watch. It was beyond staring by this time. I think those green glowing seconds will be burned in my retinas forever.

"Of course they're looking. Never leave our own behind, right?"

"Ha!" I laughed bitterly and my face fell grave. "We did. Or have you forgotten Frank already?"

A heavy silence descended and I could hear Oscar shifting around. Then... "That was different. He was already dead. And anyway, he wasn't one of us."

"You know something, Oscar. They might just say the same thing about us now."

Oscar didn't answer, which was the inevitability of all our conversations.

Two hours passed before I heard his voice again.

“Hey Trace. Got any smokes?”

I whipped my hand up to my shoulder pocket, patted it down, and smiled.

“Fuckin’ A, I do.”

“Yeah? You got a light?”

My fingers scrambled into the pocket like a runaway spider. I couldn’t believe I’d forgotten my lighter. I snatched it out and flicked it once or twice. My heart was racing with hope. I flicked it a dozen more times, but nothing, goddammit, nothing! The wheel scraped the flint but no spark, no hiss, no fucking flame.

“FUCK!” I flung the lighter into the darkness and listened to it bounce off the rocks and fall away into silence.

“I’ll take that as a no.”

“Busted. Yours?”

“Mine’s cool, but no smokes. Looks like we’re not gonna die from cancer after all.”

“Fuckin’ A.” I stuck a cigarette on my lip and dragged a smokeless breath.

“I wonder what happened to that couch I was sitting on,” Oscar said wistfully. “It was right next to me, then *bam*, gone—just like that.”

“Yeah...*bam*,” I breathed, still bewildered by the sound of it. *Bam!*

Sometimes, while lying still and listening, I could hear Oscar flicking his lighter, over and over, *flick, flick, flick*. I stayed huddled into the face of my watch, shrinking into the glass.

I shivered. “Hey Oscar, you cold?”

I heard him shift a bit and flick his lighter. “Fucking freezing.”

“Yeah, me too. Must be night.”

Sinjin:

He was alone. Of course, one can say that of any figure of authority. Although, the bureaucratic mode in which he operated precluded even a patronizing connection with his subordinates. But the human is a social being. If there’s any essence to us at all, it must be that. And you can’t contain essences, just like you can’t lock a lid on a boiling pot. Sooner or later it’ll blow. But what would this *blow* look like in the mind of a man like Sinjin? Of course, we’ll never know because his body was blown to bits first. So we can only surmise that the blow was coming. And the only indicators of this impending blow lay in subtle moments of longing, in minor encounters, tiny cracks in his face, in which the heat of solitude had long been slipping, expanding, and forcing its way toward the surface.

The Hole:

It got to be a comfort, that *flick, flick, flick* of Oscar’s lighter, like an old grandfather clock ticking in a darkened hall. It let me know he was there, even if he wasn’t talking. I wouldn’t tell him this, of course. He would have taken it as another call of duty and gone on flicking that damn lighter till his thumb was bleeding. The poor bastard’s dying deed would have been to flick that flint wheel with a trembling thumb, just...one...more...time.

Ha! Good old Oscar.

When I couldn't bear the stillness anymore, I'd lurch to the wall between us and try to break through. I'd have clawed at the stones and the bricks till my fingernails popped off. If I could just dig out the smallest passage to reach my arm through and grab hold of Oscar's hand. That's all I needed. The feel of his hand...or even a finger...our fingertips touching would have been good enough, just to feel another human being...just to know...just to know, I was not alone.

Sleep became my refuge.

Sinjin:

So that was the chink in Sinjin's armor—solitude—it must have been that. As if he was suited in a neuromuscularly constructed story of himself and suddenly we spotted a torn out page, just a glimpse, as he passed our smoking circle, and all at once his callous existence was revealed as an act, a cover up, a sham in the sense that it's function was to conceal, not convey, and when I think of it that way, I'm almost impressed that he carried it on for so long. He was in character all the time and that character comprised a logic, a way of being in the world that could never be disrupted at any cost...and yet it was disrupted.

What did we see in that glimpse of loneliness? What did we notice in Sinjin's demeanor as he passed our smoking circle? Was there an irregular shift in his little black eyes? Did the corner of his mouth quiver? Did his laugh lose its gurgle? Did his mood flicker in some manner that our senses detected but our minds had no language for? There was a wince in his presence, I know that for sure, and it made me imagine all the voices inside him screaming without a medium. Sinjin *the persona* silenced and censored

every thought that challenged the logic of itself.

I imagine this kind of work must be accomplished through some complex process of physical and psychological self-discipline. Sinjin exerted brute force on himself as much as he did anyone else. But every once in a while, the silenced multitudes inside us find a channel through which to communicate and tear out a neuromuscular page in the story of self. I believe our smoking circle must have sat at the intersection of conditions that made Sinjin falter, to lapse for a moment into loneliness, and to look at us with longing eyes.

The Hole:

I woke up frantic, eyes darting, searching for the glowing face. I'd been dreaming of home. I started thinking of home. Did they miss me at all? I'd hardly heard from them since I got to the desert. Hell, I hardly heard from them before I left. I wondered what they'd be told when I didn't come home. KIA? MIA? AWOL? Or would I be accused of something worse?

"Hey Oscar?" No answer. I could hear scratching sounds in the darkness but no flicking. "Oscar? You there?"

Frank came to mind again—our man in the truck. We called him *Frank* because we couldn't be bothered to pronounce his real or even learn what it was. I thought we should have taken him with us or at least dragged his body from the cab. But Oscar said no point, he was dead anyway. Then he pulled out the pin, dropped the grenade, and that was that. The truck burst into flames within seconds. But now I'm not so sure.

"Hey Oscar!"

There was a sound, a move, or a groan. “Yeah?”

“How do you know that Frank was really dead? I didn’t see any blood.”

“You ever see body folded back on itself like that? What did you think he was doing back there, yoga? Anyway, he’s sure as shit dead now.”

“Yeah.....sure as shit.” I bit my lip.

My stomach was twisting and aching but I wouldn’t eat.

My new discipline. “Hunger is good.”

I was sneaking the Charms, though. I tried not to let Oscar hear the crinkling wrappers but they’re always melted into the candy and shred to pieces when you try to peel them apart. I ate most of them half-wrapped. They even tasted like bad luck.

“Hey man, you eating?” Oscar whispered. The man’s got ears like a Greater Wax Moth.

“Yeah.”

“Charms?”

“Hey goddammit, you got your four fingers of death over there.”

“Nah, I ate ‘em. First day. The four fingers are gone, my friend. Nothing left for me now, but death.”

I gagged on the candy in my throat and coughed it out into the darkness.

“Shit. I thought you were fasting.”

“I thought you were eating.”

“Well maybe...maybe I can dig through, pass you what I’ve got left.”

“What? Your Charms?”

“You’d rather starve?” He didn’t answer and I think it’s because he genuinely

didn't know.

And then he said, "Hunger is good, right?"

Ears like a fucking moth.

"I've still got my Pop-Tart."

"You need to eat that thing."

"I will," I promised him.

Oscar didn't sound so good.

Flick, flick, flick.

I started heaving rocks again, picking and clawing away. Still nothing.

"I don't know man," I panted. "I just can't figure how to get through."

"You can't get through. Nothing left but to settle in. Welcome home, brother."

Flick...flick...flick.

We stayed quiet for one hour, seventeen minutes, and forty-nine seconds. It's funny, with my eye always pressed up against the watch, my brain began to absorb time in such a way that I didn't even have to keep track anymore. I'd know the minutes by instinct so my thoughts could drift elsewhere.

"Oscar? Were we right to run?"

"Damn right," he said. But what Oscar didn't know—or maybe he did—is that I wanted to run before the ambush. Long before. I wanted to run riki tik from the moment our boots hit the sand.

"Were we right to come here, Oscar? To the desert?"

"Damn right."

Conviction was always Oscar's strong suit but there in the hole, I wondered. How

could it be? If we were right to come to the desert in the first place then shouldn't we have stayed in the truck and pressed on into the fire?

Flick.....flick.

"I'm out of fluid," Oscar whispered. Then, not a word.

Sinjin:

There was an expeditionary FOB hastily established in an old municipal building at the southern end of *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero*, and in it a command center that was a nest bed of boredom or pandemonium, depending on the hour. Baking heads hung woozily until the radio crackled with alarm and voices and eyes would burst open.

Sinjin would survey the map, study satellite images, absorb the positions of all our assets in the AO, his black eyes glimmering with measurements and calculations, geometry of fires, angles of trajectory, analyses of ratios and priorities, risk assessments, etc. It was all in his face, the algebraic expressions of life in the desert. And when he arrived at some satisfying result, he turned and burst suddenly with a barrage of commands that made the room swell and stagger.

Rotary wing on station, IP2, rockets and guns in a water tower, data to the battery, mark, yellow smoke, HE and Willie Pete, tanks to the top of Jackson, reaction force up the canal, south side of bridge one, east of the nine four gridline, dismount at Mobile, hold their position for fixed wing at four six, sweep west, block by block, clear the houses—every last one.

This was the crooning of the desert that Oscar adored. He relished the sound of authority, orders and commands articulated in smooth rich timbres, muscular sentiments,

assertions of will, steely gazes out into the field of battle, stoical excess and madhouse glory. He loved remembering the mobilization of firepower, the creative application of violence, and the individual force and the imposing presence of Sinjin.

He loved the technical jargon and the expertise of sophisticated weaponry, and the wild audacity to use it without compunction or consideration of whatever lives might be in jeopardy. He loved all of it so much, so much that he'd never mention that, in truth, he never witnessed any of it. He wasn't there. He couldn't have been, of course, because we were ten clicks north at the time in the house that Sinjin bombed.

"Yeah maybe, but it doesn't matter," Oscar would say. "I know what it was like."

And I suppose that's true as well. We certainly saw Sinjin in action often enough, playing the same part, in the same theater, day after day, always the same, with only the slightest variations, in the assets deployed, or the ordnance delivered, or the ground that was covered, or the grids that delineated the ground, or the bodies and blood that filled up the grids. Those were the only things that ever changed in Sinjin's occupational performances. The rest was repetition. Old hat. Year after year. Century after century. And so, in that sense, Oscar did know what Sinjin was doing and saying in the command center ten clicks away, only moments before we were bombed.

The Hole:

I slept partially, fitfully, shaking and turning, and then came back around in the cold mouth of the aftermath. My eyelids lifted lethargically and exposed my brain to another assault of darkness while the green glowing hands swept unshakably by. I'd forced my arm into an uncomfortable angle near my head so that my watch would remain

wedged in front of my pupils, and I'd always wake up to its light. My body grew numb. I couldn't feel the pain in my ankle anymore, which was good, I suppose, but it only made room in my head for Frank. I had half-a-mind to wrench my ankle again just to get him back out.

A few months ago, Frank gave me his prayer beads and he kissed me on both cheeks, as was his custom. I never had any use for prayer beads, from any faith or denomination, but I wore Frank's beads around my neck. And in return, we bestowed him with an incendiary grenade.

"We burned him alive, Oscar!" I shouted.

But Oscar didn't answer.

I wondered if Frank was really alive, or if it mattered either way. Would we be off the hook if he was already dead?

No sound from Oscar, not a flick or a cough. Nothing.

"Oscar?.....Oscar?"

I had an uneasy suspicion, a recurring premonition that my Pop-Tart would suddenly vanish from my cargo pocket and I'd be deprived of my last supper. So every now and again, a surge of panic would rush through my body and my hand would snap down instinctively like a trap against my leg to be sure it was still there. On one of these occasions, my palm glanced off an unfamiliar surface, an object of some kind, affixed to my leg. What was this thing latched upon me? I scoured through long strings of images and ideas, fitting together sensations and stories, trying to reassemble an obliterated world, so I might figure out what this thing was attached to my leg. And at last I remembered. *Oh! My pistol of course!* It was my pistol.

All of this occurred in five seconds, or less, but the loss of that memory, that one bit of data, one point in a vast web of meaning mutated itself into a void in my head, consuming more points and more points, breaking circuits, enlarging and knocking down the dominoes of meaning, unsettling my understanding of all things including my own body, to which this thing was attached, until my whole universe seemed suddenly meaningless. And then, just as quickly as it had burst apart, once I remembered this object as *pistol*, in a long legacy of pistols, the universe was restored and I knew myself once more. Relief.

With glee: “Oscar!”

Oscar didn’t answer. While I waited for some sign of his presence on the other side of the rubble barrier, I felt my spirits sinking again. I unholstered the pistol, brandished it, squeezed the grip until my arm quivered, and I felt myself wince. *Yes...yes, I do know what this is, this thing attached to my leg, I do know what it means.*

Without glee: “Oscar!”

Oscar didn’t answer.

Sinjin:

There’s a story I’ve heard about Sinjin, but I didn’t witness it myself. Others told me the story. Sinjin told it, too. The events relayed were said to have occurred in the desert, but the story itself...well...that’s another matter. The story takes place wherever and whenever it’s told. The story is always *now*, an event unto itself, with every subsequent re-telling, and hearing, another new event.

It's natural to assume some sort of ineradicable connection between a story and the material circumstances that brought it into being. But every once in a while, one's relationship to a story changes so drastically, so severely, that it suddenly becomes impossible to accept it as anything but utterly separate from the events that it purports to describe. An encounter of this kind throws a person, face to face, with him or herself as a stranger.

This story of Sinjin in the desert that I once experienced with admiration, or at least tolerance, I later experienced with dismay, or something worse, and found myself suddenly estranged from that earlier version of me in a most uncomfortable way, as though I were occupying a different body altogether. And no...for the record...I do *not* believe it's fair to say that I've merely changed my mind, while the earth continues to be as firm and unchanged as it ever was, and the story and the experience remain one and the same, just so long as the facts are straight and conveyed with enough precision.

The story is this: Sinjin and his troops were traveling north through the desert and took fire from a remote cluster of houses. Sinjin led his unit to cover and the antagonists held each other at bay until dark. The unit took two casualties, both of whom were stabilized and evacuated in short order, but Sinjin was furious at the affront. At daybreak, when the fighting was over, he took his troops into the village, rounded up the villagers and, through an interpreter, demanded to know who'd fired upon them and where they'd gone. The villagers told Sinjin, through an interpreter, they didn't know.

Sinjin lined the villagers up against a stone wall. He lined up his troops across the courtyard facing them in firing squad fashion. And he asked the villagers again, through an interpreter, who'd fired upon them and where they'd gone. When the villagers still

wouldn't answer, he commanded the impromptu firing squad, *Aim!* And the firing squad lifted their muzzles up in the direction of the villagers. This required no interpretation.

Now in every telling of this story, it has always been made clear that Sinjin's threat of execution was never intended as anything other than a bluff. He wanted crucial information and thought he might scare it out of these villagers. Of course, that doesn't mitigate his actions, legally or ethically. And yet, mysteriously, this story has been embraced among many a listener, and recollected and recounted with nostalgia. I was, at one time, among these nostalgic listeners, but then later on found myself estranged by the very same story.

Oscar is as nostalgic now as he's ever been before. In the desert, he was nostalgic about everything no matter how recent or mundane—a foot patrol last Tuesday, the B-rats at breakfast, the swarming rats in the chicken factory—whatever it was, Oscar could produce a wistful word on its account. And when Oscar tells this story of the villagers lined up against the stone wall facing a firing squad, even though it's not his story, not his experience, he nonetheless raises a glass, like a salute to the memory of Sinjin, and I wonder every time...*Do I raise a glass, too?*

I notice the scrutiny that comes with every toast he proposes. I see his burning gaze over the tops of glasses and bagged bottles, and I feel his searching eyes scanning my face for the signs of reluctance that he already knows are there. What does he want from me? He wants the old loyalty. Not just loyalty to Sinjin, or to the desert, or to our many acts of occupation, but a loyalty to our past selves and the claims we once made on the world. He wants to hold them all, now, in hopes that that particular *now* might remain forever the same.

To break ties with our old allegiances, or break faith with our brothers in arms, to break trust, or our word, or the promises we made, is for Oscar to break our own bodies apart, hurl our limbs overboard, and watch them flail in the waves as in limbo. He wasn't there in the courtyard. He didn't witness the firing squad. He didn't feel their trembling trigger fingers, or hear the orders to make ready and aim. He didn't look down the barrel at those trembling villagers in front of a stone wall, preparing to die in this village in the desert.

And yet he clings to this story like a bit of flotsam, like the limb he threw overboard, or a barrel rolling amidst the breakers, the last vestige of an obliterated vessel that has carried him for the better part of his life. Of course, I'm slung over the same barrel as he, clinging for life in the endless arms of the ocean, adrift beneath a swelling nimbus and a forlorn wind. But where Oscar feels abandonment, I feel horizons. So many horizons.

The Hole:

"OSCAR!!" His name reverberates in the darkness, shakes the gravel loose, and there's a feeling, a howl, barely perceptible, yet undeniable, a whisper. *Brother, he's gone.* Is he dead? Oh he was fading, but somehow I know he's still out there...somewhere. No, he's not dead. No, no, no. He left me.

"Oscar?.....Oscar?" Scratching sounds again. "You've gone, haven't you, Oscar? You left me, just like you left Frank. Have you got a grenade for me, too?" Shivering now. Not just a little, like before, but constantly. A deeper cold is creeping in.

What do you want to remember? I mean, in the final hour, in the last analysis...*in the end*...what do you want to remember?

Nothing! God damn it! Nobody! I'm tired of remembering. That's all we ever do. It's what we do best. *Remember*. We're always remembering somebody, in some solemn ceremony, with lined up boots, and flags flapping, and bugles blowing. Remembering and remembering, our highest form of praise, as if it were better than loving. First, it was crazy Ogden and poor baby Sword. Then Sinjin, fucking Sinjin and his junk. And now they're remembering us. Shit. I'd rather be loved.

What do I know about love? I've been an emotional refugee since I was a boy, afraid of human touch, a hand on the shoulder, or even a hug, but longing for it, all the while, like bread, and knowing damned well, it would someday be my salvation. It shouldn't be so hard, with so many souls traipsing around the earth, adrift themselves, desperate for touch, too. It shouldn't be so hard. But I followed another dream, like a clown in an armored car, and we all piled out into the desert with pop guns, and noise-makers, and thousand-pound bombs. Don't tell me about love. This is no game.

Why'd you pull that pin, Oscar?! Why'd you leave Frank?!

Nobody answers. Nobody is left to answer or to hear my accusations. Nobody but me.

Sinjin:

Enter Sinjin with a satellite image in hand. A digital photograph depicting a piece of ground, somewhere in the desert. But it didn't look like any land I'd ever seen. No discernible features, no impressions or protrusions, just a mild flowing mosaic of pixels,

black, white, and various shades of gray. We gathered around the image, cocked our heads sideways, and said, “What is it?”

Sinjin pointed to a red dot in the center of the sheet. “Triple-A.”

“It doesn’t look like Triple-A. It looks like a dot.”

We huddled close to the map and stared at the dot like a mesmerizing eye.

“Where is it?”

Sinjin read off a coordinate.

Van picked up the map, scanning it, and I peered over his shoulder on tiptoes, searching for the unfamiliar grid. We studied the landscape, bewildered, before we realized our eyes were trained on the wrong end of the map. Van had to unfold the map and spread it out across a bench so we could take in the bigger picture. It had been folded one way for so long that the exposed topography had become soiled, the colors faded, and the paper rubbed soft, and now this other section, having been concealed in dark folds, looked by comparison utterly pristine, smooth and crisp, untouched and unknown.

Van scanned the map, zeroed in on our destination, and laughed. “Shit.” We looked up at Sinjin. The Sugar Bowl. Not at the border. No. Right in the heart of it. Hell and gone. Two hundred clicks past the bridge. No support. No resupply. Utterly alone. We go out there, we’re not coming back. Oscar shrugged and said he wasn’t planning on coming back anyway. Well, at least we’ll have the satellite phone, if things go badly. We can call up command and let them know how it all ended. But of course, they already know how it ends, don’t they?

“The thing is...” I said. Oscar rolled his eyes. “But no, seriously. Wouldn’t you just love to get a peak under that red dot before we go all the way out to the center of the Sugar Bowl? I mean...just to see...just to know what’s really under there.”

“Sinjin just told us. Triple-A.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, but I’m saying...I look at this picture and I don’t see Triple-A. All I see is a red dot, and a hell of a lot of sand. Don’t you kind of wonder what’s *under* the dot?”

“No, not really.”

No, not really? No, not really? Well, damn it, *I* wondered what was under the red dot. *I* wanted to know. But the truth (unmentionable in the moment) was that it wasn’t for the reasons I’d been giving. No. The red dot didn’t mark Triple-A. It didn’t mark an objective, or human cost, or strategic advantage. The red dot on the map marked *The Unknown*, just as all maps do, and always have. It marked our desire to see. I yearned to drive into the heart of the Sugar Bowl as the bloody stake of curiosity. *The Unknown* wasn’t out there, beyond the bridge, somewhere in the open desert. *The Unknown* was inside me.

I longed for this mission, maybe as much as Sinjin. If there was a difference between us, it may have been that I was embarrassed by the longing, embarrassed to have been overpowered by it. So I masked it with tactical disputes and moral claims. *At any cost, dear god, don’t let them discover what’s really under that red dot.* Whatever else may be said about Sinjin, it must also be said that he lives on indefinitely, blown to bits or intact, as a reminder of that longing, and how overpowering it was. That’s the one thing I can’t bury in the Crazy Mountains of Montana.

The Hole:

Oscar's gone. He's found his own way out. Left me behind to die in the dark. Abandoned underground, to suffer my end in solitude. Pistol pressed against my head, ready to speak my last piece, to end the story on my own terms. Do I dare? My finger's against the trigger, the hammer's cocked, but the gesture is disingenuous at its core. I've made it this far in life through sheer contempt for everything and everyone who would encourage silent suffering. And I've sworn by blood and lucid lyric never to help them to bury the light, and I won't. I'll never help. Not one finger.

I turn the pistol out into the blackness and fire one shot. *Bam!*

A one-gun salute in loving memory of the fight that I carried to the end.

I'm suddenly torn from my funereal reflections by a tickle, or a scratch on my leg, and a rustling. *OW!!* A sharp pain in my thigh, one last cut before I die, with a knife or a razor...or...*claws?* A rat! Or a thousand rats. Maybe I'm lying in a den of them, crouching on ledges, licking their chops, staring at my withering flesh, waiting for the feast to begin. I fly into shrieking and lurching, slapping and brushing at the claws shooting down my leg, blazing off shots in every direction, blinding flashes, deafening blasts, and dodging ricochets long since passed.

Then everything falls silent again. Gun smoke drifts up to my nostrils. My hand creeps down to my cargo pocket, each finger whispering its own reluctant prayer, but to no avail. Too late. Heartbreak. The bastards got my Pop-Tart. There's nothing left to eat but a miniature bottle of Tabasco. And there's nothing left to do but stare in the face of my green glowing watch. The sacred levee of restraint, eroding for years, finally lets go,

and I weep. But don't misunderstand. I'm not weeping because Oscar is gone. Or because I'm trapped under the rubble of a building where I'll soon die. I'm weeping because I'm finally free. Free enough to weep. Free enough to know that I can. For the first time, in a hole, in the dark, in the desert, I'm free enough to weep.

The plan is as follows: I'll recover a spent casing from the rubble, a tiny brass chalice, and fill it with Tabasco. I'll raise the chalice to Frank and drink it down as if it's the last drop of his burning blood. I shout venomously at the rats, *When you bite into my flesh, my blood will bite back!* It's a wicked plan and it makes me laugh. I dig through my pockets in search of the hot sauce, through the lint and the frag orders falling apart, amidst the trinkets and junk one accumulates after months in the desert, and then, incredibly, miraculously, I make another discovery as precious as any buried treasure could be. My lips fall apart in amazement. How could it be? After all this time, how could I have not known? I pull from my pocket, a book of matches.

Day after blessed dark day, and now, a book of MRE matches—the most useless matches ever made, just about guaranteed not to light. You've got to strike the whole book, hard, all at once, to even have a prayer for fire. Well, that's about all I've got, anyway. I'm on my own, now. No Frank. No Oscar. No band of brothers. No mother or father. No Holy Ghost, no Good Samaritan, no saving grace. I've only got myself, to blame, to save, to touch, to speak to, to live with or die for. I've got only myself. I clutch the book for dear life. Don't drop this book, your one chance for fire, don't drop it, or—

I freeze before the strike. Suddenly I see more clearly, in this dark hole, than I ever did before in the brightest desert light. Now I know. I know exactly what to do. Off with the flak! Off with the blouse, and the boots, and the belt! Off with the trousers! Off

with the socks! Off with the skivvies and the glowing watch! Into a pile before me. Stark naked and shivering cold, rubble digging into my bare bristling skin, ankle flaring up. But I'm collected with a flimsy book of matches.

MRE matches always manage to feel soggy, even bone-dry, and I concentrate and hold the book so tightly the matches might combust by pressure alone. There's just enough phosphorus on the heads for one strike—one shot—best make it a good one. I rip out the cardboard bunch, fold them inside the book, slow inhale, hold, and *snap!* Quick to the cloth and the flames catch nicely.

I laugh out loud. "*Let there be fucking light!*"

Staring into the fire, as one does, watching it consume my boots and fatigues and glowing watch, the smoke wafts around with no place to go, and in moments it's burning my eyes and lungs. I duck down low, wince, gasp, and press my head to the ground, but still facing the rising bonfire. I can't help feeling giddy. Of course I know...yes, I know all too well...when the fire burns out...oh yes, I know. Fuck it, let it burn. I see my body for the first time in days, ankle swollen, ribs jutting, skin casting peculiar shadows, and I pour my shot of Tabasco and raise the shell ceremoniously before the flame.

"To Frank! And to you, too, Oscar, wherever you are." Down the hatch, burning my mouth and throat, but hell, not as bad as a shot of lead would have burned. In throwing back that shot, I notice something else in the firelight. The dimensions of my space! It's not quite the neat casket shape I'd imagined. Ominous perhaps, with all its jagged edges, but I can see. The smoke is no longer wafting, but drifting away, down a path that I hadn't been able to find before, a crooked little crawl, a painful trek no doubt, but a path all the same. A way out.

All that digging toward Oscar and the way out was always right there, lying in the opposite direction. So, with nothing on my body but Frank's prayer beads, I creep on hands and knees past the fire and down the path that grows smokier and darker the farther I go. My palms and knees bleed, my head and back scrape against the concrete stalactites, my ankle throbs, my body fatigues, my throat and lungs burn, and yet I barely feel any of it because at least I'm not curled up, silent and still.

The first natural light emerges ahead like a distant star showing me the way, just a pin, like the prick at the center of the black tube when this whole thing began. Every inch forward is a barter, a plea, or a gritty rebuke. My eyes remain fixed on the light, as they were fixed on those green glowing hands. The light spreads like a brilliant tear in black fabric. And added to the tear is a voice. The smoke has drawn someone to me. There's digging outside and the sliver of light becomes a gash, then a gaping hole, through which streaks of light and dust flood down.

I look up, and there waiting for me, is the silhouette of a hand, reaching down, a hand that's cut up and bleeding from tearing at the rubble, digging...scouring... searching for me...*for me!* The hand is covered in blood and dust, and infused with sunlight so I can't make out whose hand it is. It's just a human hand. I stretch for the hand and at last our bloody fingers touch and tangle together. Outside in the distance, beyond the rubble and debris, there are more voices, chattering and excited, a mystified throng, and though I can't tell who's talking, I can hear them shouting back and forth, *How many down there??*

How many?

Fucking thousands.

G. The Gray Man

Oscar: “What in God’s holy name are you talking about?”

Me: “Why always in *God’s* name? Who appointed you God’s examiner? Who told you, you could speak in that name? Yes, you get to have your say, but your say isn’t more holy than anyone else’s.”

“What?”

“We’re talking about our problems, right? Isn’t that what you said? Well go on then. Talk. What’s your say?”

“We just got off the phone with Dover.” I glance at the boy. “Yeah,” Oscar nods. “Her.”

“The mother?”

“No, not the mother. The neighbor.”

“Oh...not the mother?”

“No. Not the mother. So—*our problem*—since you wanted to know. She said a man came to the house...looking for us.”

“A man? What man?”

“That’s the problem. She didn’t know, said he was driving a gray sedan, wearing some kind of suit, figured he was police.”

“Police? Why would police be looking for us?”

“I don’t know. So we called Van’s people. Same guy, same gray sedan, showed up there, too. Whoever he is, he’s on our trail.”

On the map of existence, we suddenly find ourselves back in the harrowing district of *culpability*, as if we’d never set out on a journey at all. Who is to blame for this gray

man on our trail? Who can we call to account? Van offers himself to the scaffold. *It's the boy, he says. He's coming for the boy.*

Each of us follow, in turn, with alternative theories and confessions of our own. From Oscar, it's the gun, waved out the window, one too many times. From me, it's the white SUV. Well...the thing is...I stopped making payments about a year ago. I guess, technically, that'd make it stolen. It was just a matter of time before they sent someone to take it back. W. Devising offers his own perspective on the gray man. "It goes back to the mountains, you see." And we know right away we're in store for another chilling installment.

"How about we give the mountains a little rest, eh?"

"No, no, you need to hear the rest of the story, how W. Devising became a ghost. Then you'll understand why this gray man's on our trail."

The probability of a correlation between the gray man and W. Devising is clearly remote, *clearly*, but he refuses to hear reason or appeal. He won't be dissuaded. So we're left with no choice but to bear the man's testimony, however improbable or perjurious. And that's how we find ourselves back in the dead man's mountains.

"When the cold cut its way into the cottage, when it seeped into our bones, when the wild markhors appeared on the ridges around us, we knew the time had come to decide. Either press ourselves out into the elements in search of the base, or lie down in the cottage, on warped planks, and pray for a miracle or a reasonably quick death. The team was divided because our boots and guns were still unaccounted for and without them we would not be received warmly at home.

“Two of us resolved to risk court martial rather than accept certain demise in a lost mountain cottage. So the first thing to do was to tend to our feet, make them ready for the journey ahead. We cut wide strips of fleece and wrapped them around our feet. We found rolls of medical tape and bandages in our first aid kits and wrapped those around the fleece. When our feet were prepared, we rose to depart. We looked down on the huddled bodies of those who’d decided to stay. They looked up at us. We offered them nothing but their names, spoken softly, one by one.

“Out into the mountains we walked, me and a grim Irish medic named Dullahan. He was tall and had strong legs. He took much longer strides than I ever could in the snow. I called after him repeatedly but he wouldn’t wait or slow down as if he had no more business with me, no forbearance, no charity. As if he was suddenly alleviated of all his medical duties and bore no further responsibility for another human life.

“He trudged forward with his head hung low, low enough so that from behind, you couldn’t see it at all, and he’d move farther away, and faster, until he was just a shadow in the distance. And yet, he never fell out of sight completely. He was always there. From time to time, when the wind blew up a white haze between us, and I couldn’t tell which direction he’d gone, I’d follow his darkened tracks in the snow. And when the wind settled, he’d appear again, still trudging ahead in the distance, head still hung low.

“Our makeshift boots didn’t prove very effective nor our sense of direction. I assumed death would be waiting for us at one icy juncture or another, but I never anticipated the agony of frostbite in my feet, which beat on my metatarsals like a cross peen hammer. I wanted to surrender the quest, to collapse in the snow, to cry, and if need be to die. Anything not to walk another mile. Then I’d peer into the distance and see

Dullahan striding callously away and I'd grit my teeth, invigorated by the insult of abandonment, and pick myself up and press on.

"Doubt became a brutal assailant, as relentless as the frostbite. *What a mistake!* *What a mistake!* Death in a cottage has got to be better than death in the open wind, on a drift, lost in the mountains, lost for a thousand seasons, a preserved cadaver like a petrified mammoth or old Hatchet Jack. Oh the agony! Oh the suffering! Oh the—*Wait!*

"I heard sounds, not indigenous to the mountains, something familiar, in the distance, somewhere...*gunshots!*...but it was impossible to say from where. The chattering reports ricocheted all over the rocks and cliff faces. I didn't know which direction to run or turn. This was the first time I'd completely lost track of Dullahan. I shouted to him but the acoustic campaign between the gale and the guns rendered my voice insignificant.

"And then, as suddenly as the shooting began, it ceased. The prevailing wind bellowed its victory cry. And I waited. I scanned the surrounding ridges, but still not a soul appeared. Who'd been fighting? Why did they stop? Where did they go? Should I hide or run for my life? Shout out for help? And where the hell was Dullahan? I staggered toward the closest ridge (because it was the closest), and on the far side I found the body of a soldier, one of our own, stretched awkwardly in a swell of red glistening snow, lying still and alone.

"I made my way toward the prostrate form, expecting...yes expecting. I was surprised, I'll confess, Death had not yet found him. Not yet. But it was hastily approaching. There was no doubt about that. This man was most definitely among the expected. I rolled his soaking body over, spoke at him loudly, clapped his pale cheeks.

Nothing. I looked for more bodies, living or dead. There were none, nor trails, nor prints, nor any sign of his people. He must have had people. But where did they go? I scanned again...no one...no one...and then...*Dullahan!* I could barely see him waving from a distant peak. *Dullahan!* I shouted. And I waved back in a craze, trying to signal him to come help. He'd certainly know better than I would how to treat the wounded.

“But Dullahan didn't move toward me and the expected man. He remained on his peak, waving his arms just as wildly as I was, and shouting in return...something, something...but the words didn't carry. What the hell's wrong with him? *Come on!* I shouted. *Come on Dullahan!* But he didn't come. He kept waving and shouting idiotically and I stretched my neck toward him to hear. But the words wouldn't carry. *What? What did you say?*

And then I heard him...just a word...one word...slipping through the gale, echoing in my head, faintly and more faintly still...*Devising! Devising Devising!* What did it mean? I looked down on the expected man's face and discovered that Death had quietly come and gone while I wasn't looking. I clapped his cheeks again to be sure. Then I was sure. When I looked back up to the distant peak, Dullahan was gone. I never did see him again. And no gun men arrived. And no people. Just me and the soaking body, supine in the snow.

“Survival is a boisterous companion and convincing under the most ambiguous circumstances. What can I tell you? The soaking body had boots. My frostbitten feet had none. And so, on the advice of survival, I took them. But I was too weak to walk any further. Even the jeering of survival couldn't spur me to move, or prevent my inevitable conclusion. It was now me, the expected man, waiting for the call and the kiss. I laid my

body down in the snow, huddled up close to my barefooted benefactor, and whispered in his ear, *Devising*. And together we sunk into the longest dream.

“But somehow, I was awoken from the dream, pulled back up to the land of the unexpected. I peered around, disoriented by fluorescent light and bare white walls. Where were the glaring ridges? And the bounding markhors? Where was the soaking man? All of them gone. I was lying in a hospital room. A doctor came to my bed. Well, maybe he was a doctor. He wore scrubs and carried a clipboard. He smiled and held out a glistening silver identification tag in front of me. I squinted at the tag, confused. He moved it closer to my face, so I could see it more clearly. *From your boot*, he said. *My boot?* I didn’t understand what he was saying, but he lost interest, checked his watch, rested the tag on the tray by my bed, and left the room. When he was gone, I picked up the tag and examined it. The name on the tag? *W. Devising*.”

W. Devising stares at us intently, waiting in silence, but waiting for what? What does he want for his theatrics and prevarications? Applause? Tears? Pity? Delight?

Me: “What in God’s holy name does this have to do with the gray man?”

Oscar: “He stole the boots, stole the name, he’s not W. Devising.”

“Yeah, I got that. But do you really expect us to—”

“No. I didn’t steal. Maybe I’m not W. Devising, but I’m not *not* W. Devising either. I serve now as his ghost. What else could I do? It was my only passage home. I had no choice but to accept the misidentification. Of course the mistake would never endure. They’d figure it out sooner or later. So I had to run. The irony is I could never go home as the ghost of W. Devising. And I couldn’t go home as the man I was before either, the

man who disappeared in the mountains. That man had been declared dead already. There was nobody left for me to be. So I've been drifting ever since. But I did not steal."

"I stole. I stole a child from his mother, and a page from the log. I stole."

"I stole a gun."

"I stole a white SUV."

Shamil stands up and moves toward us, which is visually stunning since we've become so accustomed to her moving away. The conversation halts and we wait as she studies the northern horizon. "He's not coming for you," she says. "They don't send gray men across borders for stolen cars, or contraband firearms, or even deserters."

I wonder. "Do they send gray men for a stolen child?"

Shamil does not wonder. "I don't know. But I do know how far the gray men will go for a terrorist."

A terrorist? What an incomprehensible category of existence!

"Okay but...you aren't a terrorist, are you?" I regret the question before it's done asking, though it may be beside the point. Shamil's eyes turn in my direction but clearly she's not looking at me, not me alone, as if the lenses in her brain are zooming back, outward, faster and farther, drawing in the widest angles around the planet until the world is depicted as nothing but a rough surface, pixelated shadows vaguely stretching across a topographical map, and our bodies are nothing but dots.

Dots? What an incomprehensible category of existence!

"It seems to me there's only one thing to do. Let's paint the SUV another color. That'll throw this gray man off our trail."

"I guess that'd make you the first person to think of painting a stolen car."

“What color?”

That’s a good question. What color? Imagine all the shades, the hues, the possibilities. Purple? Orange? Mauve? I don’t know...just not white. Anything but white. I’m sick to death of white.

“Not to death...not yet.”

So that’s the color I choose—*not-white*.

“You can paint it every color in the rainbow. It’s still going to be a white SUV. There’s no getting around that.”

“I really don’t see how it can be white and not-white simultaneously.”

“Exactly. It’s white! No matter how many coats you apply. It’s always going to *be* white. Read the registration. It says, *White SUV*. No paint job is going to change that.”

“Well I say *we* decide if it’s white or not-white.”

“We decide which is right, and which is an illusion.”

On the other hand...I do like this idea...*Every color in the rainbow*. Yes. You never really know what anything means till you put it in practice, till you see it in motion. That’s the problem with deciding on a single color. I don’t want to slap another static veneer onto the SUV, run it through one vacuous identity after another—white to black to blue to mauve—as if it had no history, as if there was no history of colors. I want to see the motion, the mutations, the evolution, the making and unmaking, and all the mistakes and moments of brilliance, all of it marked on the body of our stolen SUV. I want its skin to remind me that the color was applied by human hands. That the whiteness is not innate.

A hunt, therefore, ensues for all the colors in the rainbow. We dash through a town, for which we have no name, through stores, excited by a language we don't speak, through streets, where we are the fatuous aliens, chattering and pointing at cans of paint and angle sash brushes. Negotiations and exchanges transpire, the meanings of which, I can't imagine, but I have an armload of supplies now and a vision that illuminates me. I stride eagerly back to the white SUV, many eyes watching, many faces contorted sympathetically, many heads shaking sadly, among them is Oscar's.

He peers over the materials. "Well? What now Vincent?"

I'm radiating with enthusiasm, immune to his acrimony. "Ah! Not Vincent, my friend. No. Jackson!" And I see in his eyes, the name *Jackson* stirs him to the core. Yes, *Jackson*. I have him now. He understands. So I arrange their bodies—Van, W. Devising, the boy, even Oscar, even Shamil—around all sides of the masked SUV, each with cans of paint of all different colors, each with a brush of different widths and lengths, and I issue these orders: When I say *go*, everyone splatter as much paint as you can, all over the SUV, move around freely, up, down, all around, till every square centimeter is *not-white*.

Oscar: "Why do you get to say *go*?"

"All right Oscar...*you* say *go*. And on *your* command, we will *go*."

I'm conscious of the possibility that he may take this opportunity to never speak the word *go*, to grab back his initiative, to undermine my plan, and leave us suspended in silence. But *Jackson* is stirring, and the momentum is building, as a tidal waves does, growing and rushing forth, impossible to hold back, and he knows, as we all know, he has

no choice but to step up to the surf, face the endless ocean, and command the wave to come.

Go!

First. Nothing. Motionless. Reluctance. Caution. Trepidation. Then... a single arc of paint floats up through the air from the boy's brush, sinks downward and smacks the white body, becoming oblong spots, red and glistening, like bullet holes in the skin of the SUV that drip down in crooked crimson lines, stunning to the eyes, ghastly, horrifying...marking the un-markable...the mortality of whiteness...the ruin of essence...the end of an epic. Other drops suddenly slap the SUV, other colors, slowly, building speed and intensity, more marks, more streaks, then the rain falls, full on, excitedly, frantically, wildly, arc after arc, splatter upon splatter, color with color with color.

Hysterical streaks of paint fly from every brush, through the air, colliding against the white enamel, smashing, bouncing, running, trickling, blending into other veins and splatters of fury and laughter, fear and remorse...green, red, black...green, red, black...and all the other colors of the rainbow, spewing from our arms like severed wrists, opened arteries, accompanied by screams, and cheers, and seething allegations. Leaping. Dancing. Arms flailing. A hurricane of irreconcilable motion and emotion.

When the cans are drained and scraped clean, we stand, heaving with hanging arms and uncontainable grins, bearing witness to the chaotic accomplishment before us, watching the last of the animated drops quiver, creep, and settle into some faint notch or lump of coagulating gray matter. Our bodies, clothes, and faces are as covered with vengeful streaks and arcs as the *white* SUV that is now, simultaneously, *not-white*.

Swimming in adrenaline and euphoria, we shout and embrace, and throw empty cans and stiffening brushes off into the sand. We hurl ourselves inside the splattered SUV, our bodies as weightless as sparkling light, agreeing unanimously, effortlessly, that the highway wind will certainly solidify our new schematic better than any setting sun. *Just try find us now gray man! Just try!* Even Oscar must admit...even Shamil...we've achieved something today, though it's doubtful there will ever be consensus on what that something is, or was, or will be.

H. Cradle of a Mushroom Kiss

Deeper into the desert we go, day after day, one lonely camp site becomes another, and another. The moment of euphoria from painting the SUV *not-white* was short-lived and is now long passed, dissipated in our blood like endorphins fleeting or glucose dipping, making our muscles leaden and cramped, and our thoughts grueling. And the splattered paint feels increasingly like another fabricated miscalculation. After all, the interior is still the same as it ever was. So what's next on the map? What plot? What point? What destiny? Another site. Another fire. Bed rolls stretched like body bags beside the flames, each one of us crawling inside, preparing our cadavers for cremation and the salutary kiss of Betsy Ross.

Under the tarpaulin night, I stagger or swim or squirm, depending on the terrain in my head and the available transportation, and the modes of delivery from one memory to the next. A chilly breath blows inside my sleeping bag, slips beneath my shirt, over my skin and follicle bumps, and draws a shiver. I squeeze my eyes tightly to prevent whatever warmth I have left from escaping. Eyelids glow orange from the inside, pupils enlarge and follow a constellation of particles drifting across the conjunctiva. And I meander back to my own memorial, like Oscar's black bay. But mine is in the desert, vanished now in life, and so can only be approached in the imagination. No concrete rim to lean against here.

It's that same row of riddled cars, lined up in the gravel lot under the same implacable sun, unmoved after all these years, one car after another, idle in a boneyard, in the aftermath, intractable, indignant, silent bloody bodies, haunting me more than all the torn flesh I've ever seen, and all the more terrifying for the many thousand of unanswered

riddles spread over their steel skins. *Who has been here? Who is still here?* I sit in the mythical realm between dreams and reflections, waiting and listening for some reply from these riddles cars, a reply that's yet to come, never to come. I sit and observe this wasting exhibit that defies verdicts and empiricism and announces itself as evidence of nothing.

Another chilly breath blows in, wraps me up, and makes muscles contract. I squeeze my eyes even tighter now, but there's something present, something near me, something spurring my curiosity, urging my eyes open. I'm slow to respond, reluctant, as one tends to be in the face of impending cold, shooing off the curiosity, but the curiosity persists, and the presence, whatever it is, swallows me bone and mare, and whispers in my ear, *You are not alone.*

Resting so much faith in sight, as has always been my custom, I throw my eyelids open to verify the reality or unreality of these impressions. And there, inside the sleeping bag, inches from my face, is another face. *What face is this?* I concentrate on the face, move closer to it, wince through the sallow light of a calavera moon that paints macabre streaks across the skin. *What skin is this?* It isn't human skin—it can't be. The face trembles. Or is the trembling mine? It whispers again and I whisper back. *What did you say?* The face comes closer and the eyes glisten. My god—it's Shamil! *My dear Shamil!*

She moves like a leopard. Her hand lunges around the back of my neck, her tattoos come alive, and creep, and spread over her body and face, and her lips are upon mine, and I feel mine press back against hers. My hand moves cautiously, wondrously, breathlessly, over a jellied scalp, down past black eyes and translucent burn scars, down and down, beyond the arm that comes to a precipice, down to the empty space where an

arm used to be, touching, embracing, another, and another, and another hand moves toward her body.

Shamil! I call as long and as loud as I can, until my lungs give out, reaching and longing to close the distance between us, and just as the tips of my fingers touch the rough material of her shirt, her hand lets go of my neck, snatches hold of my wrist, and clamps down like a vice. She kisses me with open eyes, pins of moonlight shimmer on teetering black tears. *Wait! Are you crying? Are you shaking?* Her cheek crashes against mine, her grip tightens around my wrist with excruciating force, our arms vibrate, pushing and pulling, back and forth as though in a struggle, but it's not clear what the struggle means, or who struggles for what cause.

The riddle of beginnings and ends, Shamil whispers in my ear, but over the anguish, I can't make it out. *What did you say?* She whispers again, and again I implore her, *Wait...wait...what did you say?* Her grip tightens more as though she might just tear my arm out and leave me with a precipice of my own. The throbbing in my wrist falls in sync with the indistinguishable pulses and respirations of two bodies intertwined.

Shamil raises her melted face, levels our glistening eyes, ascends once more, and presses her lips against my forehead. Then, with all the force and suddenness with which these impressions arrived, Shamil lets me go. She pushes my hand from her inky black face, rolls her body back, and slips away like a leopard. She's gone. I'm left grasping at fluttering images, and a tingling, and a moment that stubbornly announces itself as consummation of nothing. *Wait! What did you say?*

For some duration, I sink down, fathom after fathom, below REM, or memory, or awareness of any kind, perhaps near enough to the border of death's vestibule that I

might catch a glimpse of that place we once longed to know all about. And yet, even if this is so, such knowledge will not come back with me in any form that I can articulate or make recognizable to others. I'm ill-equipped to communicate outside a concrete domain. So this period of time can only be classified for now as *non-REM*.

There are no hours in the day more precious to me than the earliest, when the bloom of my soul spreads and expands to soak in the radiance of humanity. But then, in the darker hours, my soul closes up again, forgets the world outside itself, and greedily licks up the last nectar of light, as if unaware of the source of its sweetness, and unconcerned by its own need for replenishment. One wishes the soul could remember. But the soul can only feel, and feeling is only experienced in the moment.

Floating gently back to the surface of myself, I find my body still in a bag, still shivering, still alone. My eyes dart in every direction in search of some proof of what has occurred, some justification for the emotions that buck and tear from one end of my body to the other. I speak to myself firmly. *All right steady now...steady!* Let me think this through, meticulously, logically, or else how am I to know? Start here, with the following question: How might we describe the geometric properties of, say, love, or grief, or joy? These must have dimensions, I would think, and take up room in, for instance, the nervous system.

What value or weight might be applied to love? What electrical charge? Does love cluster and create mass? Does it become dense like a celestial body and stretch the fabric of space and reconstitute the angles and trajectories of other bodies? I ask because, well, I need to know, I need to know how this particular morning, this particular moment, could

be what it is. How is it possible—physiologically, biologically, mathematically possible—that this morning could be both sublime and catastrophic? How can that be?

Perhaps...perhaps this is the wrong approach. But something did happen. I know that much. It's still reverberating inside me. So the happening is not in question. It's the meaning of the happening that I need to interrogate. Let's begin with a bit of context. I peer outside my sleeping bag and find the world sideways. To the left, a brilliant magenta sky and the day's first rays of sun shooting across the planet's surface. To the right, a diamond landscape, no crags, or drifts, or dunes, no blemishes or flaws, only smooth lines stretching to the farthest reaches of earth. And binding these together is the indefatigable wind. Context: Sunlight, sand, and wind.

I detect a smile on my face and confide to myself, *We've been here before, old friend. It means nothing.* On the other hand, we have not been here with Shamil...*my dear Shamil!* Did she really come to me...*to me?* There's a flash of desire, to roll over, to find her, to look at her face, into her eyes—but I don't dare. Not because I don't want to see her, no, of course not that. I'm afraid of disrupting this trickle of warmth that runs like fingers over my head, through my hair, and slides down my neck and shoulders and onto my back. No, I cannot, with a free hand, turn that spigot off.

With an emotional state such as this, so fragile and so precious, one hesitates to even breathe too deeply, for fear the slightest quiver will result in dissipation, or alienation, or freezing cold. There is the obvious possibility that the encounter with Shamil was a dream. I'm not a fool—I know this. But I'm postponing the question, just a bit longer, while I linger in the magical feelings of a mushroom kiss that cradles me in

my bag. And I've relegated this dream hypothesis to the far corner of my mind, where I'm content to keep it for now, sitting on a stool with a dunce cap on.

Of course it wasn't a dream, you idiot! I felt her. My wrist still hurts. I feel the aching. My heart's still pounding. I can still see the dots of moonlight on her shimmering tears. Eventually though, through the interminable labors of a steadfast liver, my tranquility fades enough to see reason, and I call my dunce back to negotiate our differing views. (I'm no less displeased, and I bark like a school master.) *Well then? Let's have it.* The little dunce turns directly to a predictable recitation on material evidence and I instantly cut him short. Yep...right...obviously. Look, little dunce, I get it, okay? Maybe it was a dream. Fine.

But here's what you need to understand. Now pay attention, because this is as true as any truth could ever be. Right now, at this very moment, in my muscles, in my stomach, in my brain, and my fingers, and my eyes...*I am physically feeling love.* And nothing you can say about dreams versus reality can diminish these feelings or alter their value to *untrue*. Whatever the basis of my loving happens to be, whatever materials have made it possible—dreams, drugs, carnal encounter—I regard them all as equally immaterial next to the loving itself, which I do feel, right now, at this very moment.

With that, I command the little dunce back to his corner, but before he goes, he points out that the question of dreams is not yet resolved. It will bear itself again, he promises (actually the tone is more warning than promising), when I come face to face with Shamil. What will you do? The little dunce become snarky now. Pull her in close and whisper your husky longings? That'll be interesting, especially if it turns out to have

been a dream all along. Maybe she really will tear your arm out. Have you considered that? No, I hadn't considered it. But I will.

I have it. The answer is simple. I'll say nothing at all. That's what I'll do. I predict, if Shamil wants a discussion, then she'll start one. If she doesn't bring it up, neither will I. And if it was a dream all along, I'll have preserved my feelings in the best possible way. The little dunce laughs to hear such a sport and reminds me that if the encounter was, on the other hand, real and I remain silent, then I'll have succeeded in transforming reality into a childlike dream instead of the other way around. *That will be the price of your precious silence. Are you prepared to pay?* I send the unruly dunce back to his stool and he goes, but he won't keep still, or keep quiet, and he won't stop laughing and singing, *The cow jumps over the moon. The dish runs away with the spoon!* Shut up you little dunce! Shut up!

I. La Ruptura

"What!...what do you want?!" I roll over to see Oscar standing above my bag with his hands on his hips. "What's going on?" I ask blearily, glancing in the direction where Shamil was lying last night, but she's nowhere in sight, nor is W. Devising. Oscar is glaring at me. "What?" I demand again. He points at the ground and I scoot myself up to see. "What? Sand?"

"Yeah...*sand*. Notice any special marks in the sand?"

I study the sand more carefully. "Hey, where the hell's the SUV?"

"Well inspector..." Oscar points to the sand again. "It was right about here. Now, all we've got is tracks, leading suspiciously away!"

“What...but who—” I look for Shamil again, panicked for a moment, but then spot her in the distance standing by the side of the highway.

Oscar’s got his Beretta out now, locking a round in the chamber. “Who the hell do you think? *W. Devising*. And the boy was sleeping in the back.”

“Shit. You think he knows?” I climb out of my bag, still eyeing the pistol. “What are you going to do with that thing, Oscar, shoot him?”

“Probably...but for the moment, we need a ride.”

“And you’re going to...”

“Get us a ride.”

“With a gun?”

“The boy is in the truck! I’m going to find him. And I’m going to stop the first car I see, and yes, with a gun if need be.”

In that moment, I feel the weight of every grain of sand of all the deserts in history pouring down on top of my body and it makes me howl inside. “Oscar...I want to find him, too. I do. But not like this. Not by force. I’m not using a gun to get a ride, or get anything else. No matter what happens, I’m not using a gun. I’m not going back to that way of thinking.”

Oscar’s face begins to resemble the magenta sky. He looks as though he might just point his pistol at me and settle our differences once and for all. Instead he speaks. “How many photo albums are filled with pictures of you carrying a rifle and grinning ear to ear? So think about this: If that idiot leaves the kid in the truck with the windows up in this heat...maybe the kid gets out, maybe he doesn’t. You want to take that chance? You

want to find him in the cargo area of your white SUV with his brain fried? All because you've had second thoughts about firearms?"

I glance in Shamil's direction again and see she's begun walking away, southward down the highway. "Hey! Where's she going?"

Oscar shakes his head in disgust. "Jesus." He runs out to the highway and positions himself to intercept the first car he sees, then turns around and calls back to me. "You need to think real hard about who you're going to stand with in this life."

In a matter of minutes, a pickup truck approaches. Oscar waves it down, it stops, he jumps in, and they tear off to the north. And to the south, Shamil is barely a silhouette in the distance, slowly vanishing behind the rippling waves of heat. I yell out as long and as loud as I can, *Shamil!* until my lungs give out. But the silhouette only gets smaller and fainter until it's nothing but a dot. In a matter of minutes, Shamil is gone.

Gone? Gone? But how? After all this? After last night? How can she abandon us? Abandon me? Abandon the boy? I want to shout, *Don't you care?* It doesn't even matter now whether or not I dare. She's gone. Everyone's gone. The only one remaining now is Big Van, who's slumped forward and staring into the smoldering logs, impervious to our calamities. I look to the south again. The faintest sliver of dust drifts up over the highway. It's another vehicle, maybe a hundred miles off, or a thousand for all I know, but definitely coming our way.

"Van! Come on!" I dash back to the campsite, to the sleeping bags tangled lazily by the vestiges of our fire, to our strewn duffels gaping at the sky, baring teeth and fodder, as dumb and indifferent as Big Van, and to the indistinct tracks in the sand that lead both north and south. In short, to ground zero, to the point of our obliteration. "Van!"

Van remains motionless, mesmerized by the wisps of smoke that trickle up from the ashes. He says nothing. He does nothing. The dust on the highway grows into a dot, the dot becomes a tiny silhouette of a car, which in turn becomes an actual car with color and light reflecting from its windows. “Van!” Nothing. Not a word. Not a stir. Not a glimmer. “What’s the matter with you?” The car is coming to life now and driving fast. Time has run out.

I sprint back to the highway, with my duffel cradled in my arms like an infant, and my eyes concentrate on the nearing car as if attempting to shout telepathically. *Help!* I free one arm from my bundle and wave madly, all the while trying to ignore the little dunce on his stool in the corner of my mind, laughing, jeering. *Stop? For you? What are the odds?* The odds, I’m afraid, are not good.

I quickly catalogue as many good deeds as I can recall from my life and push them to the front of my thoughts, just in case there’s something to this telepathy business. Let’s see...I once gave a homeless man five dollars. That’s got to be worth a ride out of the desert. Right? On the other hand...there was the time before that, when I was a kid, when that old custodian gave me ten dollars because I’d lost mine and I was crying. I’m not sure where that puts the score, but I seem to be ahead by five dollars. Things are not feeling favorable at the moment. Quick! What else, what else? You must have done something truly selfless, for somebody...didn’t you? Anything??

Hope begins to feel like a set of indistinct tracks in the sand heading north and south, simultaneously, slipping out of sight as a dot in the distance. And yet...and yet...what’s this? The car is upon me and rolls to a stop without the least sign of hesitation or caution. I’m sure this only sets my scorecard of deeds further back, but I’ll

take the ride all the same. The man behind the wheel greets me and I circle around the back and jump into the passenger seat.

The driver points at Van, who is no longer *Big Van*, who will never be *Big Van* again, and asks me (I assume) if he'll be joining us. I indicate with hands and head movements and bitter eyes, *No...the immovable lump won't be joining us*. And off we go. No coercion. No threats. Just a simple episode of care, one human being for another. You see Oscar? You don't always need a gun in this world. To this, the little dunce adds, *And apparently you don't need to be a saint either*. Keep quiet little dunce!

Sailing northward, I see a highway sign announcing the next town whose name I'm unable to read before it whizzes past, and the driver points his thumb out the back window, speaks succinctly, and nods. I don't understand what he's saying, but I'm guessing it has something to do with the sign, so I nod in return. There's no way to know where W. Devising has taken the SUV and the boy, or where Oscar has ended up, so there's really no use in being overly specific about where I want to go. All I can do is tally my good deeds and hope for the best.

Traveling farther and farther from Caye Alma has thrown me into despair. Where in the world is Oscar? Where is the boy? Where the hell is that parasite W. Devising and my SUV? A surge of retributions pass through my mind, some of which might require temporary application of Oscar's Beretta—but only temporary. I'm not going back to that way of thinking.

W. Devising...the so-called ghost...he left us for dead in the desert. What pity does he deserve? And Shamil? What about her? She abandoned us, too. What pity does she deserve? And Van sitting feebly, and Oscar carjacking heedlessly. What pity do they

deserve? And what about me? What pity do I deserve? I can only say that whoever's in charge of doling out pity in this world has certainly got themselves a confounding task.

We arrive to the town, which is small but established, and the driver parks his car on a main street with various stores and markets. We glance at each other and exchange uninvested smiles and nods and waves. He drifts off into the mix of pedestrians and I remain still, cradling my duffel, scanning the town's center, and wondering how I'll ever figure out whether W. Devising or Oscar have been here or not. But I don't have to wonder long. I see a crowd forming in the street, not two blocks away, and I move instinctively toward it. No SUV. No Oscar or W. Devising in sight. But there's something strange happening.

The people appear oddly attentive to a mark on the pavement. There's pointing, discussing, and more people gathering. What is it? One would think with all this excitement there'd be a body sprawled out, but there's nothing, nothing but this indistinct mark on the pavement. I draw close and hear voices, and words become more distinct, although I don't understand their meaning. What is it? I come to the edge of the throng, hugging my duffel close to my chest and looking among the faces for someone who might be willing to help me.

Someone taps me on the shoulder. "Those were your friends?"

"My friends? Who?"

"Your friends with the truck, the white truck, painted like a circus."

"A circus? A circus? Oh right, yes, yes! That's them. But where are they now?"

Where'd they go? Where's the truck?"

“They were fighting...grabbing each other, rolling on the street...right there. Then there was a shot. *Bam!* One jumped up, got in the truck, and drove off. The other...”

“The other?”

“Dead...maybe. Or maybe not. An ambulance took his body. The police went after the truck. Don’t worry. They might not catch him. But with that coat, it’ll be hard to hide.”

Dead? Can it be? I lean forward, peer through the canopy of dungarees and dresses, and see this crooked mark on the pavement. It’s a crimson pool. Blood. But whose? Who died? Who fled? I ask this stranger. “The man who was shot...what’d he look like? Did he look like...like a mosquito with boots and a canvas coat?”

“A mosquito?”

“Yeah, a mosquito. With boots and a canvas coat.

“No. Not a mosquito. He looked like you.”

Like me? Like me? What does that mean? “Which one looked like me?”

The stranger shrugs. “Both of them.” And seeing my face droop asks me, “These were your friends?”

I have no idea how to answer this. How can they *both* look like me? They look nothing like me—neither of them do—and they don’t look like each other either. One is fat. The other’s an insect. It’s absurd. And now my SUV looks like a circus? But at the same time it’s white, even though it’s not-white? How can this be? And how could this stranger even know that it had been white? It makes no sense. It makes no sense at all.

I’ll have to go to the police, of course, and find out who’s body they have. But wait...the police...they might ask me questions. And if it’s Oscar on the run, I’ll be

forced to tell them who he is. Not only that, but it's my SUV, and it's stolen. And where's the boy? Still in the truck with Oscar or W. Devising? Maybe they'll call it kidnapping. Maybe they'll call me an accomplice. Maybe they'll throw me in prison, no trial, no contact with the world, maybe for the rest of my life. No, I can't go to the police.

And now, as if things aren't bad enough, I've noticed a car creeping conspicuously toward me, a mark on the street as incongruous as any pool of blood. It's a gray sedan with U.S. plates. *The gray man! He's here!* I can't let him see me. I've got to hide. If that crowd gets a hold of me—that crowd of all crowds—if they think I've been harboring a terrorist, or associating with a terrorist, or kissing a terrorist in a sleeping bag, or at any rate dreaming of it...well, there will definitely be no trial and no contact with the world. I'll be stuffed in a jumpsuit and whisked off in a jet to a site in the desert that they call *black*, never to be seen or heard from again. That damned W. Devising. This will turn out to be the end of us all. I only wish I knew if it was his blood on the pavement, or Oscar's.

I slide down an alley, then out to another street, cut through a garden, onto a path, fork upon fork, turn after turn, weaving through town indiscriminately to shake the gray man, whoever he is, whatever he wants. No sign of him yet. But that's an empty promise. He could turn up at any corner, appear at any moment, ready to take me into custody. My pace quickens, panic mounts, glances dart spastically, and my arms hug a duffel, the only thing I have left to hug.

I'm on the verge of hysteria, prepared to sprint wildly, to duck for cover in a cafe or a dicey saloon, to dive in a dumpster, to press my body into the shadow of some nook, or a tree, or a concrete pier. Then someone yells out, "Eh buddy!" I spin around. Nobody's

there. But the voice calls again. “Eh buddy!” Now I see. There’s a man in a pickup truck waving me over. So I go to him. He says, “You need a lift back to your campsite?”

I’m stunned. *My campsite?* How does he know—

“I was just about to drive your boy back, when I saw you. I remember you from the highway.”

What the hell is he talking about? Oh! This must be the guy that Oscar carjacked.

“You’re the one who...I mean...”

“Yep, that was me. Your buddy said he was looking for a little boy. Then I saw this kid sitting on the curb with a plastic arm in his lap—figured he must be the one. I told him I’d give him a ride back to his people.” The driver directs my attention back to the bed and I lurch over the side to see. Sure enough, there’s Sinjin’s boy, curled up with Shamil’s prosthesis in his arms like an old stuffed bear.

I gasp with relief that bursts from my eyes like prizes in a piñata. “Hey.” The boy looks up at me and silently waves.

The driver says, “So? The campsite? Don’t know where your buddy went, though.”

I look down the street in the way that one looks into a mirror or a self-portrait to find whatever’s missing, whatever’s hidden in a face that has always been so familiar and yet so alien. “He’s not coming.”

“Okay man, well hop in. I’ll take you two back.”

Where are you Oscar? Are you slipping away in a hospital bed or getting cold on a shelf in a morgue? Can I really leave without knowing? Can I leave you at all? *Never leave our own behind.* The words echo and carry. Will any treasure I find in the dunes of Caye Alma be meaningful now without Oscar? Will any conclusion make sense?

Survival clears its throat and answers me decidedly. *Look there.*

So I look. The gray sedan appears and creeps forward.

There are no choices left. I slap the side of the pickup truck and leap into the bed with the boy, duck my head low, and shout to the driver, “Let’s go!”

“Sure man!”

This driver has certainly been accommodating, hasn’t he? Especially after Oscar pulled a gun on him. They must be really used to guns around here. Still, I’m ashamed and embarrassed, and I think I ought to offer some sort of apology. I’m not sure how to go about it, but I’ll give it a try. As we steer through town and get back on the highway, I work through several drafts of this apology in my head, refining the phrases, tightening the sentences, rearranging the words, till it sounds just about right. When I’m satisfied with the composition, with its clarity, and its emotional force, I finally lean my head in the back window. The driver looks content in his thoughts and I hate to disturb him, but I don’t want to lose track of my speech.

“Uh...”

The driver looks at me. “Hey man.”

“Listen...I’m sorry about the gun.”

The driver becomes alarmed and glances back at my hands in the window. “What gun?”

“No, I mean...the other guy, um, Oscar. I’m sorry he pulled a gun...on you...like...I’m just saying...well anyway, I’m sorry about that.”

“He had a gun? I didn’t know he had a gun. He just asked me for a ride. Why would he need a gun for that?”

I work through my bewilderment for a long windy moment, studying the driver, looking back at the boy with his prosthetic bear, turning forward again to catch a glimpse of myself in the rear view mirror, and at last I let go a titter of astonishment. *Yes indeed...why would he need a gun for that?* Ha! Good old Oscar. I guess the speech wasn't necessary after all.

I notice as the miles wear on, the boy slides closer to me, but he still hugs the plastic arm, just as I hug my duffel. It's no longer clear where we're going, or what we're doing, or why. I don't know about Caye Alma anymore. I've still got the map, of course, but no means to get there, and very little desire to try. On the other hand, there's this gray man on the prowl, in pursuit, tracking us down, and I still don't know why.

I don't know if I'm running or chasing, or if I should return north or carry on south, or search for Oscar, or search for Shamil. I don't know whether to cast Van off, or offer forgiveness, or ask him to forgive me. I don't know what to know. Sensibilities rupture as splenic capsules do, blood rushes out and fills the belly, pain and confusion set in, and suddenly one is confronted with the difficulty and the vital necessity of holding so many thousands of individual cells and experiences together, for dear life.

For the first time since I came home from the desert, for the first time since I discovered this map, since we set out on this journey, since I set my mind on a small island off the coast of Belize, for the first time, I feel as one feels simultaneous torment and adoration, without any clear basis or material circumstances to explain it. For the first time, I feel physically lost.

J. Caye Alma

The Island

There was a moment, albeit short-lived, when I imagined a fantastic sense of satisfaction, roaring up to the coast of Belize in my variegated SUV, into the sand and surf, audaciously, victoriously! Alas...it was not meant to be. Instead, we've arrived by bus. Yes, *we*, the remainder of our crew—Big Van, the boy, Shamil, and I—together again, and now on the beach, scanning the ocean, over the breakers and through the haze, in search of an unmarked island.

Of course I couldn't leave them behind, or let them leave me. Sinjin's boy was like our compass, and our gears, and our aperture, combined, the embodiment of our systems and machinery, as if, together, we all made up a single organism. So, I found Big Van, who was still Big Van, still slumped over the ashes at our campsite in the desert, and I dragged him along with us. And I found Shamil, still walking at her merciless pace on the side of the highway. And through some blend of pleading and moral postulating, I coaxed her on board, too. And when we got as far as we could go on the good will of our pickup truck driver, we found a bus station and bought ourselves tickets to Belize.

The issue, at present, is that we can't figure out which one of these islands is Caye Alma. It turns out, the coast of Belize is peppered with hundreds of reefs and keys, some of them named, some of them not, and I'm beginning to believe we may never know for sure which is the one indicated on our map. I remember reading that Caye Alma was difficult, if not impossible, to observe from the mainland. *It was a hideout for pirates*, I inform Van and Shamil, who haven't yet heard the story. *So from the mainland, it can't be seen.*

My suggestion is to rent a boat of some kind and trawl around these reefs and keys and see if we can't spot Caye Alma from the water. The problem, however, is that we've come a bit short on funds. The bus tickets nearly broke us. I charged this journey as far as I could without paying the bill, but eventually the bank cancelled my card. Therefore, all decisions, from this point forward, will be made within the bounds of cash on hand. A motorboat is outside the realm of possibility. So, we go looking for a decent craft that can be powered by the strength of our bodies.

Finding a boat is not a problem in this area. Finding Caye Alma, however, will be another story. We ask around about the island, talk to some locals, show the map to a few salty souls whose eyes look so weary that they might just have witnessed the arrival of the first conquistadors. But nobody seems to have heard anything about this mysterious place called Caye Alma. These pirates certainly kept their secret well. *There is no Caye Alma*, one fisherman tells us. *Don't waste your time*. This advice is repeated by several other coastal experts, including an oceanographer we've met, who says she's worked in the area for nearly three decades.

Van and Shamil are starting to express doubts, too, with their own weary eyes. I try to reassure them. *Well, what the hell do these people know? I mean, that's the whole point of a secret island—that nobody knows about it, right? ...right?* The truth is, I don't put a great deal of effort into persuading them because I've got a hunch that no matter how dubious Van and Shamil become, they'll be with me all the way to the end, though I suspect not to find whatever's buried in the dunes of Caye Alma.

The oceanographer asks to see my map. I pass it over and she studies it for all of five seconds before declaring it out of date and useless. She pulls out a different map

from her sack, every bit as old as mine, and hands it to me with an adamant nod. I place the maps side by side for comparison, my eyes bouncing back and forth between them, scanning the coastlines for some indication of difference. I can't find the least discrepancy and conclude the two maps are exactly the same, equally up to, or out of date. But the oceanographer insists, tapping the map that she's just given me, *Use this one. It's much more accurate than yours.*

I'm tempted, momentarily, to argue, but her sharp eyes, sun-beaten skin, and gnarled hair, combined with her accent (whatever it is) give her a presence of aplomb and sophistication that I find enchanting and influential. Suddenly I'm convinced. I abandon all arguments and doubts, along with my old map, which I toss aside as though it's been dead weight from the start, and take hers in its place with confidence and renewed hope that Caye Alma will soon be found and its secret uncovered. I hold the new map up for Van and Shamil to witness, to restore their faith, as mine's been restored, but again I'm struck by the impression that neither of them are depending very much on faith or secret islands. They're coming with me, one way or the other, but for their own ends.

A row boat is hired at a reasonable rate, supplies are assembled, and we launch ourselves out to sea. As Van and I are the viable rowers on board, we take turns at the oars. Shamil assumes a position at the bow with the boy curled up on the deck by her feet. The plan, more or less, is to row around the coast and look for an island that might be shrouded from the mainland and fits the general description of Caye Alma. Given the distance between these bodies, and the pace we can maintain in a row boat, I estimate our search will take days, even weeks, maybe months. We'll have to rest each night at the closest piece of land we can find.

Several hours into our first day of the voyage, I stop rowing, close to exhaustion, and let the boat drift and toss pathetically in the waves, while we scan a variety of nearby land masses. We're not far from the mainland. Rowing out into the ocean has proven far more challenging than I anticipated, and a hell of a lot less romantic. Van is sleeping at the stern. Shamil is dangling her tattooed arm in the water and peering off the starboard at a vague key. I'm not sure how far away it is. It's frustratingly difficult to estimate distances on the water. It's frustratingly difficult to do pretty much anything on the water.

"Shamil!!" I shout. She turns slowly as if I've crooned or whispered, as if she's never heard an urgent call in her life. "Your arm!" I shout even louder. And I point out into the water at three approaching dorsal fins. She lifts her arm leisurely from of the water and watches the fins draw near. The dorsal fins circle briefly and vanish from view. Shamil seems disappointed. And now I'm flustered, and worn out, and I throw the oars down with all the theatricality I can muster, slump forward, and stare at the map.

"I don't know where this damned island is."

I steal periodic glimpses at Shamil, hoping I suppose for some small gesture or remark of pity. I have to laugh inwardly though, like I'd just wished for immortality. My little dunce slaps his knee and gibes, *Yes, I'm sure it's forthcoming, just another moment now!* Yes, just a moment, a moment of recognition from Shamil, just a flash, would be as nourishing as any ambrosia. Shamil holds an inscrutable gaze on the same vague key off the starboard.

But I notice something else, as well—a surreptitious glance at the oars. The oars...the oars. Something about the oars. Well, it's never really possible to discern meaning from the contortions in Shamil's face, and yet, I begin to suspect she's feeling

trapped on this boat, vulnerable, and the oars are an uncomfortable reminder of all that she's lost and everything she's unable to do. I want to offer some small gesture of pity. Then again, I don't suppose Shamil would appreciate pity, nor would she recognize the legitimacy of the phrase, *Unable to do*.

The boat drifts and rolls. I sink into the map, deeper and deeper, into the empty blue space, into the paper, into my thoughts, far from Belize, far from our vessel, out to the desert, to the Sugar Bowl, to *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero*, to the hole and the play and the missing antenna, to the bloody sand, to three throats cut and Sword's missing body, deeper and deeper I submerge into myself, until—

“There.”

What? What was that? I groggily emerge from my thoughts. Or was I dreaming? Did I fall asleep? I squint up into the sunlight, shade my eyes, and see Shamil at the bow pointing to the same vague key she's been watching all along.

“What? You think that's Caye Alma?”

“That's where I'll be.”

I study the island, study the map, analyze our position, compare them again, paper against sea, look up and—“Wait...what?” Shamil is unlacing her deeply creased suede boots. “*Where you'll be?*” She doesn't answer but I gather the plan. “You want to go to that island?” Still no reply. “Okay, fine, no problem, we'll go there. We're going!” I pick up the oars, dip them into the waves, and take the boat about. “Shamil!” She stands up at the bow like a figurehead of defiance with her t-shirt flapping wildly as its pennant. “Shamil!” She doesn't look at me. “The sharks!” But she doesn't hear my voice, however loud I shout.

Shamil steps to the thwart and pans the water slowly and looks back at me as if to inform me the danger has passed. I look, too, and it's true there are no fins in sight. "Well yeah. They've gone underwater, obviously." But again my voice is intercepted by the wind and goes unheard by Shamil. Either that or she's ignoring me. She steps up on the gunwale, balances uneasily for a moment. The boy watches her, uneasy too.

She arranges the balls of her feet on the wooden precipice. "Shamil!" She bends her knees slightly. "Shamil!" She leaps gently up in the air, away from the boat, a moment suspended in the wind, outside of sound or time, and then time is alive again, and she crashes gracelessly into the black water. "Shamil!" Her body vanishes under the surface. The boy and I leap forward, panicked at first, not seeing her, but then we spot her head reemerge, bobbing slowly, her one arm thrashing fiercely, and her body progressing toward the vague key. How far away is it? It's frustratingly difficult to tell. "Shamil!!"

I jump back to the center thwart, snatch up the oars and row wildly after her. I'm unable to overtake her, but she seems equally unable to outpace us. We remain at a uniform distance from each other as we close in on the key that is less vague with every stroke. Van, who can sleep through any calamity, however raucous or horrific, finally wakes up with glazed indifference and looks over the situation. I refuse to fill him in on matters that clearly don't concern him. He does eventually notice Shamil missing from the boat and spots her ahead in the water.

"She's swimming? Why?"

I maintain my silent rowing with all the indignant stoicism I can radiate. *Why*, Van asks. *Why*. As if any answer I could offer would be enough to yank him from his self-indulgent gloom. As if he would consider the danger to her life, at this very moment, as

cause for alarm, her struggle to swim in the ocean with only one arm, and the prowling sharks with endless rows of white teeth, as if he'd consider risking his own life to save hers. Would you throw yourself to the sharks, *Big Van*? Would you satisfy their appetites and their blood lust with your own flesh? Would you place your body into their jaws to prevent Shamil's from being devoured?

Van peers at the approaching island with his customary insouciance. He yawns. "That's Caye Alma?"

"Yep—Caye Alma."

Of course, my infuriation with Van doesn't last. It never does, or has, and probably never will. The truth is, I love Big Van. We reach the edge of the island at the same time as Shamil. Van hops out into the surf and drags the boat up onto the beach. Shamil wades alongside us, her body sagging forward, wobbling faintly, and finally she collapses down onto the sand. I yearn to sit next to her, to talk with her, ask her how she's doing, maybe drape a dry blanket over her shoulders, maybe an arm. But I don't. The boy, however, arranges himself next to her heaving body and begins scraping designs in the sand with the hook from her prosthesis.

I turn around to take in the wondrous panorama of swaying palm groves and sea grass bunched in the dunes—it's just as I'd imagined it would be. *Caye Alma*. It seems impossible, like a dream, but here we are. We made it. Van and I embark on a hasty survey of the island, making jocular predictions about penguins, and cannibals, and marooned buccaneers. There's some brief discussion regarding the treasure I've been alluding to from the beginning.

“How do you know where to look?” Van asks. He squints out over the open water toward the coast of Belize, which can be faintly discerned through the haze. “Hey, I thought you said the mainland couldn’t be seen from Caye Alma.”

“No, I didn’t say that at all. I said Caye Alma couldn’t be seen from the mainland. That’s completely different. Did we see this island from the mainland?”

Van shrugs. “So what do we do now?”

I’m just about to declare the island deserted, which would correspond nicely with the theory of its secret whereabouts, when we spot someone in the shade of a palm grove, waving us over. We veer toward the crouching shadow, who turns out to be a sort of discombobulated personage with a substantial beard and long snarled hair.

“I guess it’s not deserted,” I admit.

Van shrugs. “Maybe this dude’s in on the secret.” I glare at him, not in the mood for heckling, but he puts up his hands and says, “Hey, he might tell you where the treasure’s hidden, save you all that digging.”

Now that I think about it, I wonder if it’s not true. Maybe we’ve stumbled on the guardian of Caye Alma. Furthermore, the prospect of digging random holes all over the island in this blazing heat isn’t as appealing now as it was in the comfort of my imagination. We reach the palm grove and the crouching guardian. His hair and beard is a blend of black and gray. His skin is rough. His lips are cracked. His eyes are sterling. He’s certainly got the look of a castaway, and aside from his tie-dye tank top, I could easily imagine him sitting under this same palm grove for centuries, reciting Old English verse and weaving mysterious allegories from strands of ancient wisdom and forgotten lore.

“Hey man!” The castaway swigs a dark glass bottle. *Two hundred year old rum?* He offers me the bottle.

“What is it?”

“Water man.”

Well he does speak English, anyway, which is convenient I suppose. Although it doesn't sound especially old or lyrical. Van and I sit down beside this castaway with sterling eyes. The conversation starts out slowly and does not proceed in a direction I would have hoped for. No folklore of freebooting and buried treasure. He does, however, have a lot of information about the *People's United Party* and their struggle for freedom against the British Empire. This turns out to be a difficult topic to veer him away from.

“I knew George Price,” he tells us. “A long time ago, though. This was when he was first elected to the Assembly and Mayor of Belize City, too, back when it was still British Honduras. You know, they tried to charge him with sedition for threatening speeches against the Queen. Oh, what an error that was! Those charges were but the first drops of ink on a resolution for independence, signed by the Queen herself, not twenty years later. Ha! Savory days!”

“Say...uh...any idea if this is Caye Alma? This is Caye Alma, right?”

“*Caye Alma?* What do you mean?” Another swig from the dark glass bottle. Another fond smile. “You remember '68?” He studies our faces. “No, I suppose you're too young. But it was the same here as everywhere else—man, the students were serious! Resistance. Strikes. Revolution. Everything. The land was alive. Each person's blood pumped by a thousand hearts, every heart bore a thousand souls. Ah...but there were problems and disappointments, too...same here as everywhere else.”

“So, this island...it’s called Caye Alma, isn’t it?” I show him our map.

The castaway peers down at my map. “There,” he says tapping the map. “You can’t see it, but that’s where we are.”

I look closer at where he’s pointing but I’ve thrown away my old map, so I can’t compare the two anymore, and I don’t remember where the other one was marked. It could be where he’s pointing. It might be. I pull out a pen from my pocket and use it to point more precisely than I can with my finger. “Here?”

“Let me see that.” The castaway snatches the map and pen away from me, presses it up against his thigh, and draws a small crooked circle near the coast. “There. That’s us.” And he hands the map and pen back to me.

“Caye Alma?”

The castaway swigs from his dark glass bottle and laughs, “Baby, you can call it whatever you like!”

Dreams

It’s difficult to know how to think, or what to do, when one’s destination is finally reached. How does one process *achievement*? After all this time and all these miles, I’m standing on the mythical dunes of Caye Alma and I can hardly comprehend the sand that works itself between my toes at this very instant. What does it mean to *be* in the place, compared to the meaning of *searching* for the place? This is a question I’m perfectly willing to set free into the atmosphere like a helium balloon and never ask after it again. I’m not driving for those kinds of answers anymore. And yet, the problem of *being here*

now confounds my body in the same ways that earlier questions have confounded my mind.

I begin to gather the inextricability of *being*, and *doing* and *thinking*—that these are indivisible, practically and theoretically, essentially faulty categories. And yet, at this point, the *gathering* still occurs more in my thoughts than in my muscles. I don't know just how to realize the doing of life. How will I deliver my thoughts into undiscovered territories and, at the same time, prevent old interpretations from guiding my body toward exactly the kind of responses that put me on this search in the first place? The only thing that seems very clear to me now is that I will not be able to work out this problem on the page of a notebook.

Van, Shamil, the boy, and I have circled Caye Alma for two days now. Sometimes we're seeking (anyway, I am), sometimes just wandering. Sometimes we sit with the sterling-eyed castaway. Swig after swig from his dark glass bottle that never seems to run dry any more than his reminiscences of old struggles, and old comrades, and old times.

"Sure, the British were finally gone, but then there were the Guatemalans to deal with... talks, disputes, riots in the streets...all these years and they still haven't figured it out." Another swig. The castaway looks me over. "What's your name?"

"My name? Trace. He's Vannareth."

The castaway glances at Van but turns his sterling eyes back onto me and runs them over my body and face, this time more carefully, up and down, up and down. "No...your family name. You look familiar. Where are your people from? I mean before America."

"The family name is Tiburon. I don't know anything about my people."

“Tiburón...Tiburón,” the man nods. “Yes. Tiburón. Makes sense.” He points out to the ocean. “Your people descend from there.” Then he glances back at Van. “And your people?”

“Outside of Tyler.”

“Have a drink.” He hands me the dark glass bottle. I take the bottle, smell the top reluctantly, and ask him again what it is, because who knows what sort of duplicitous concoction this might be—perhaps a blend of hemlock and ambrosia that delivers one’s soul into eternal grasping for annihilation, pleading for an end, while simultaneously digging one’s fingers in an everlasting precipice of existence, and fearing that peace will not be found on either side of this threshold. “Yeah,” the castaway nods. “That’s what I said. Just water.”

I pour a cautious sip into my mouth, let it seep over my tongue, and wait for death to seize me by the throat. But no, it’s exactly as the castaway has said, only water, though horribly stale. I ask him, “What are doing out here, anyway? How long have you been on this island?”

The castaway takes the bottle back, shrugs, and waves dismissively. “Ah, I had some trouble with the authorities...years ago. It’s nothing.” And he leaves it at that.

The next morning is violet and chilly and the palm trees hush under a steady breeze. I wake up and make out Van in the distance pushing the rowboat toward the surf. I pop up, clear my eyes, and realize he’s preparing to launch himself out to sea. I leap out of my sleeping bag and run toward him. “Van! What are you doing?”

“Come on,” he says.

“We can’t leave Shamil and the boy.”

Van shakes his head. “We’re not leaving...just going for ride. I need to get off this island for a while. It’s starting to feel claustrophobic.”

Claustrophobic? That’s an odd complaint. I look back toward our campsite, where Shamil and the boy are still sleeping. “But we’ve got to tell them—”

“Trust me. You don’t need to tell Shamil anything. Get in.” His voice and eyes drive like iron nails, the first and perhaps only expression of will I’ve ever witnessed in Big Van. So what can I do? I get in the boat. Van takes the oars and rows us eastward into the rising sun, away from the island, away from the mainland, during which time neither of us speaks. The wind and waves render words superfluous, even detrimental, to the experience of being among them.

But as the light spreads over the sky, I begin to recall the fringes of a dream I was having earlier in the morning, before the dawn broke, wisps of sounds and imagery leaking back into my consciousness, and filling my head. I feel suddenly desperate to open my mouth and drain the dream out of me before it becomes so heavy it pulls me down to the bottom of the sea.

“I had a dream,” I tell Van. Van keeps rowing. “I was here...on the island...with a rifle in my shoulder, set up in the prone. And I was aiming at a big black bird with a white crescent moon behind each eye.” Van rows on silently. “In the dream, I can only see through the rifle’s rear sight aperture, that’s the scope of the dream, the limit of my perspective, and the front sight post is resting on this black bird.”

Silent Rowing. Waves dashing against the hull. More of the dream leaks in as fast as I can bail it out.

“And the only voice I hear is my own—I’m talking myself through the shot, like we used to do. *Slow steady squeeze, straight to the rear...slow steady squeeze, straight to the rear.* You remember?”

Van nods. “I remember.”

“The front sight is sharp, the black bird is blurry, as all targets must be, to make the shot. I talk myself right through to the end. Wait for the natural pause between breaths, I say. Hold it. Slow steady squeeze, straight to the rear. All I see is the clear tip of front sight post and the blurry black bird. And all I feel is the faintest beating of my heart. But even the beating must be settled. One must quiet the heart to make the kill.”

Van stops rowing and pulls the oars into the boat.

“I’m squeezing the trigger, gently, slowly, waiting for the hammer to fall. Be surprised by the falling hammer. Be surprised. I tell myself again and again. Be surprised. And I am surprised. But not by the hammer. It’s a voice. Not mine this time, someone else’s. It’s Oscar’s voice. I can’t see him. I can only hear him. And he’s calling to me, as if from a distance. He’s shouting through the wind, and I’m struggling to make out the words. *What? What did you say?* Slow steady squeeze, straight to the—*Wait! Don’t!* Oscar shouts. I finally hear him. But it’s too late. The hammer has already fallen, the primer is punched, the powder ignited, the projectile thrown down range, out into the world. The stock pushes my shoulder. The sight picture is lost.”

Van watches me with unfamiliar curiosity. “So? Did you hit the bird?”

“By the time the smoke clears and I realign my sights, the bird is gone. I don’t know—dead or alive. Just gone. I don’t know if Oscar has saved me or not.”

“Saved you? What about the bird?” Van digs into his pocket and produces Oscar’s knife with the glistening silver blade.

“Hey...where’d you get that?”

“I’ve had a dream, too,” Van says, studying the knife. “The same dream, over and over. But I’m not always asleep when I’m dreaming.”

“A dream? What dream? What’s it about?”

Van runs his fingertip along the blade, pressing harder and harder until it cuts into his skin. A tiny drop of blood pops from his finger, a scarlet blossom unfolding beneath the rising sun. He looks back up at me and his face is hanging and his eyes are twisting and his teeth are flashing. I don’t know what this expression is meant to convey. He gazes briefly toward Caye Alma. “I dream about killing.” He points the blade at the beach. “About killing that little boy.” Then he turns his attention back to the blood on his finger.

“What? But why?”

“Why? Why do I dream about killing a boy? Night after night? Murder after murder? Why? You have to ask? You don’t already know? Am I responsible for my dreams?” The blood on Van’s finger has trickled down crookedly toward his hand, and Van makes another crooked cut into his arm, from which more blood sparkles.

“Van! What the hell—”

“Listen to me,” he says. “I get a check every month, for as long as I’m alive. I want you to send that money to my people.”

“In Tyler?”

“Outside of Tyler.” Van clenches his fist and loosens it, several times in succession, urging more blood from the skin, more scarlet blossoms that spread over his arm and drop into the bilge sloshing around in the bottom of the boat. “Don’t tell anyone I’m gone. Just send them the money.”

“Van, I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

“Which part?”

“The part about you being gone!”

He whispers at me with that same mocking tone that I get from the little dunce in the corner of my mind. “Do you want to know what *my* dreams look like? Do you? Do you want to know what they sound like? Do you want to hear how I murder that child every night? Do you want to hear the screaming? Do you really want the same exquisite detail about my dream that you’ve given me about yours? Or would you prefer not to hear?”

“But Van—”

He smiles almost cruelly and says, “You don’t understand? No. You don’t *want* to understand.”

Van rises and steps up to the thwart facing west toward Caye Alma. I follow his searching eyes and begin to see what he’s looking for. Dorsal fins. I lurch toward his body, to grab him, maybe wrestle him down, but Van holds the point of Oscar’s glistening silver blade in my face. I reach out to him and whisper as tenderly and urgently as I’m able. *Van! Please.*

Van looks down on me now. “What if the dream comes true? What if the dream becomes an idea, and the idea becomes intention, and the intention leaks down into my

arms and hands and fingertips, until finally one day, one night, I reach for that child?
What then? Who will be responsible? You?”

I fall back to my thwart and stare helplessly up at him.

He repeats his instructions. “You will serve as my ghost now, so the checks will keep coming, and my people will be taken care of. No matter what, no one can ever know that I’m gone. My body must disappear completely, without a trace. But my name...I bestow to you” He watches the dorsal fins gathering, drawing near, the judges of the earth arriving to deliver their verdicts. “From now on, *you* are Big Van.”

He throws the knife down onto the thwart and the glistening silver blade sticks into the wood with an odious thunk. Then he flings his body up in the air and splashes into the sea. It looks like a vacation photo. And for the briefest moment, he floats gently with his face down and his arms out. But an instant later he’s ripped beneath the surface by a force unseen. There’s a flurry of bubbling salt, and foam, and blood that quickly dissipates into the heaving darkness. In seconds, just seconds from seeing him standing beside me in the boat, seconds from the snapshot of him leaping into the air, his body is gone, consumed by that vicious silence without a trace.

The Ghastly Striptease

I suppose it shouldn’t surprise me that Shamil hasn’t expressed the slightest curiosity about Big Van, despite his unexplained absence and my conspicuous tears. I steal a glance at her from afar, sitting in the sand, staring out at the sea, and I want to ask, *Don’t you care? Don’t you even wonder?* This time I do want an answer. I want to demand it. And meanwhile, the boy is digging a hole in the beach, clawing aimlessly into

the sand, through the fine dusty top layer, to the moistness below, deeper and darker, he relentlessly digs. What on earth is he doing? What's he after? Oh, who the hell cares? I don't care. Nobody cares.

Suddenly, my heart skips. My mind whirls. Wait! I study the boy, digging and digging, and begin to feel the pressure of an impending revelation. Of course! The boy's been our compass, our prognosticator, all the way to Caye Alma, and now, perhaps, he's our diving rod, as well. I remember the woman in Dover. She said, *Whatever it is you've got to say...the boy already knows*. Of course...of course...we don't need to find the treasure. The boy already knows. He's already digging it up. I spring up, dash for the shovel, and I'm back almost instantly digging wildly beside him, plunging the spade in, expanding the hole, hurling sand aside.

"Watch your hands!" I shout frantically. I'm digging so furiously, I don't even notice the boy has stopped to watch me. He's hugging his legs close to his body, following each scoop of sand as it sails up in the air and plops down around edge of the hole forming a sort of parapet. Fatigue is upon me but I tell myself I won't give up, I won't yield, in Big Van's name, I'll never stop. Two hours pass before my back and shoulders and arms fail and I can't hurl another scoop. I've made it five or six feet down. My feet are submerged in a salty pool of mud. Nothing else. Tiny prickles of doubt run down my neck. *But this must be the place*, I mumble helplessly in Big Van's name, *it must be the place*.

I peer out from the hole, over the top of the parapet, panting and soaking with sweat, only to find Shamil and the boy, side by side, both viewing my desperate performance with...*what is this?...amusement?! What the hell is so damned funny? Yeah,*

go ahead and laugh. They can laugh, yes, they can laugh, because they don't know what I know. They don't know that Big Van is dead. And I won't tell them either, since they feel no concern, no worries, no need to ask.

So fine, I'll say nothing about it. Instead, I fling the spade out of the hole and climb bitterly after it. I'm tired enough to collapse right there next to my gaping accomplishment, but I'm so indignant in the moment that I storm off to the palm grove and fall down silently next to the castaway with the sterling eyes, who's still swigging from his bottomless glass bottle, still combing over the old days.

"We had chicle, and coconut, and trash fish. They all brought in money. But, you know...times got hard."

"So you're from here?" I ask him. "You grew up..."

The castaway nods. "Of course. Right here. Always, right here."

"I thought...but you speak English." He pats me on the shoulder sympathetically, though it's not clear why. Then something on the beach catches my eye. "Hey!" I tug on his tie-dye tank top and point. "What's that? There...what is that?"

The castaway squints into the glistening surf and shades his sterling eyes. "Where? What—"

"Right there, that bird, the black one with the crescent moons behind its eyes. What kind of bird is that?"

"Ah right," he nods. "That's a sooty. A common bird. Not very interesting. You know the ones you should see? The *Sula Sulas*...now those are strange birds." Yes fine, I say, but I want to know more about these sooties. The castaway ignores me. "The *Sula Sulas* have been on these keys since the oldest times, even before the Mayans. It's been

told that they walked across a sea of blood before they learned to fly. Even now, the Sula Sula struggles to take flight, so much blood has soaked into its feet and legs. You can see for yourself. But the sooty? Ah!” He snarls. “That’s a common bird. More or less a gull.”

From my pocket I pull out Oscar’s knife, stare at the glistening silver blade, and wonder. *A common bird...a common bird. But does that make the dream okay? What have you done? What have you done? And who is responsible?*

I tell the castaway, “It’s time for us to go.”

“Yes,” the castaway agrees. “Time for you to go. But first...” He leans over behind a palm tree and pulls out an old leather bota bag. “Take this.” He unscrews the top and pours out the contents of the dark glass bottle. I’m amazed to see it empty out—I wouldn’t have thought it possible. He holds the inverted bottle over the bota bag patiently as if he’s pouring out diamonds, waiting for every last gem to fall. Then he tosses the bottle aside, tightens the cap on the bota bag, and hands it to me. “There, take that with you. You’ll need it. It’s a long walk home.”

I feel somewhat indifferent toward this gift, and yet, there’s something precious about it. Well, if nothing else, it’ll be my one souvenir from Caye Alma. I thank the castaway, exchange goodbyes with him, and return to the shore with the bota bag slung over my shoulder. Shamil isn’t there. The boy is still sitting beside the great vacant pit. I scan the beach, up and down, and ask him, “Where’d she go?” He points to the surf. Shamil is standing out in the water with waves breaking against her body, pushing and pulling her, rocking her side to side, and her tattooed arm is dipped in the water, her empty sleeve flaps, and her eyes are fixed on the mainland.

I step to her cautiously, watching, waiting, considering my words carefully. *Should I call to the Imam?* And if he doesn't answer? What then? Before I can speak, she takes hold of her t-shirt, pulls it up over her head and flings it away into the waves. Her back bears long strips of burn scars falling down from shoulders to waist. And I see. The tattoo sleeve on her arm spreads over her whole body but lies beneath the surface of her melted skin. So I see. The ink came before the desert. Whatever designs or images or pictures that were discernible at one time have become blurred and distorted under the rough surface of those translucent scars. I see. I see.

And I watch. I watch and I wait for her to move, wondering what she'll do, or what I'll say. Her hand takes hold of the waist band of her jeans. She unfastens them and lets them fall down around her legs. I now see. They are as covered with scars as her back. The jeans waft in the water, and one foot at a time, Shamil steps out of them. I'm unable to speak, barely able to breathe. *Will she turn around?*

I regret the question before it's done asking. I regret the seeing. I try to beat back my desire, my curiosity, my horror. I shove mundane thoughts and common birds into view, and sand in my eyes, so I won't see, so I can't see anymore. Shamil looks over her shoulder at me, and for the first time since we met at the edge of the VA parking lot, when I held out her prosthesis and she said, *That's not my arm, I left my arm in the desert*, for the first time on this journey to Caye Alma, she smiles. And she says, "Tell me a story."

I stammer back, "A story?" But I can't think of any story.

Shamil waits for me to speak. But I don't. I can't. She turns her whole body around. She faces me. And I try to face her, with clenched fists I try, but my body is pushed and

pulled and rocked side to side. I can't quiet my heart. Finally, I let my eyes fall, just as they've wanted to fall all along, up and down, up and down, to see, to bear witness, to finally know the truth. But the truth, I find, like all the tattoos on her body, is covered with burn scars, distorted and blurred, an indelible defiance of clarity. I'm left now with nothing to say or to do but to face the embarrassment of my horror, my desire, and my curiosity. Shamil's smile is gone.

"Tell me a story," she says. "And I'll believe you."

A story? A story? What fucking story? I tremble, lost and enraged. I want to tell her that Van is dead. That Oscar is dead. Frank is dead. Sinjin is dead. The sooty is dead. And the captain and all his crew—they're dead. And I'm dead, too. Don't you see? All of our bodies are lifeless and soaking. There is no more story to tell.

I stand silently in the surf, gaping haplessly at her marred flesh, unable to imagine even one single story. Shamil doesn't wait any longer. She doesn't ask anymore. She turns back around, to the breaking waves, to the wind and the whipping spray, and she walks, as she's always walked, forward, deeper and deeper, till the ocean lifts her up by the neck. Her one arm flies up, she plunges her inky burned body into the water, and she disappears into blackness.

Unable to see, I shout out as long and as loud as I'm able.

Until my lungs give out.

CHAPTER 6
THE ABSCONDERS

A. Fleeting Monuments

It is now the boy and I. Our last act, before returning to the mainland, was to bury Shamil's prosthesis. The plastic arm marked with a copy of a copy of Jackson Pollock's unnamed lithograph. We tossed it in the pit that I dug in the dunes of Caye Alma. It splashed down at the bottom and sunk out of sight, with only its metal hook protruding through the murk. The boy squatted by the edge of the hole and stared down at the hook. I said to him, *Looks like you'll need a new canvas*. But he didn't appear to get my joke.

I picked up the shovel and set to work unmaking my fruitless excavation. Spade after spade, I scooped sand from the parapet and flung it into that six foot hole, spade after spade, till it was five, and then three, and then one, and the puddle was covered, and the hook disappeared, and the hole and the parapet were gone. As we rowed away from the shore, the castaway with sterling eyes strolled down to the beach, and the boy waved, while I heaved the oars, glancing periodically over my shoulder to keep us on course. The castaway's body slowly shrunk into a shadow, and the shadow became to a dot, and at last the dot was gone. By the time we reached land, Caye Alma was out of sight.

We've crossed the border from Belize back to Mexico and we're traveling along back country roads and paths to avoid an encounter with the gray man, or anyone else for that matter. We don't need anymore encounters. The hills in this region roll out to the horizon, the sun seems forsaken at its zenith, and the land is tightfisted with water and shade. I feel the terrain breaking me down, fiber and soul, picking my bones to a smooth

ivory finish, and yet the boy sprints ahead, peak after peak, mile after mile, racing across contours like miniature continents, while I plod behind, a withering mass, with a duffel hanging over one shoulder and an old leather bota bag slung over the other.

The boy skips up one baking slope, then vanishes into the defilade of another. I risk an occasional sip from the bota bag, but I'm panicked by the possibility that every sip may be my last. The boy's vitality only exacerbates my languor and I'm sorry to say that a bitterness begins incubating in my stomach, festering, urging acid up my esophagus into my mouth, leaving me with no taste for tenderness. *Damn that child! Where the hell is he leading us?*

On other occasions, I feel too weary to lift another leg up another grade and I fall into the dust, prop myself up against the duffel, and watch the boy surmount the hills ahead, embodying a future I can't possibly face. He notices my temporary collapse and squats on a distant peak, watching me, waiting for me to climb back to my feet, and though he's scarcely a dot in the distance, I can feel the contempt spreading over his face and into his terrible blue eyes. This is indeed the progeny of Sinjin.

My stomach aches, my head spins, my hands shake with hunger, yes, *hunger*. *Hunger is good*, I whisper desperately. Hunger is...*what?* No. *Hunger* is the sign of the desert that hangs at the threshold like a plastic limb with burned skin. *Hunger* gazes down on the earth as the satellites do, inscribing all the pixelated towns and the pixelated people. *Hunger* rattles buildings to their foundations and shreds bodies beneath televised barrages. *Hunger* is the map, and the notebook, and the empty red circle. *Hunger*. I think that's how it goes.

By dusk, the boy has fallen out of sight, which fills me with a troubling blend of panic and relief, but as I reach another declivity, where ground and gravity will take the burden from my body for some short duration, I see the boy again, hunched beneath a hideous tree that stands vigilantly in the valley between us. Its trunk is twisted and its bare boughs stretch furiously outward as if in pursuit of absconders.

When I reach the bottom of the hill, I find there is no shade beneath this tree. The boy is waiting, squatting, his back leaned up against the trunk in a way that evokes a shivering memory of his father and makes me suddenly reluctant to touch its bark, as if it might bear a venomous sap. I crumple to the ground, panting, and take another sparing sip from the bota bag. I offer the bag to the boy but he says he's not thirsty. *Well, how the hell that can that be?*

"Are you tired?" I ask him. "You want me to slow down a bit?" He shrugs and finds a stick to drag through the sand between his feet. I slip another swig from the bota bag while he's not looking. *Of course he's not tired. Of course he's not thirsty.* With the growing realization that I won't be able to keep up much longer, I begin to wish the boy ill. Something slight, mind you, just enough to slow him down. I suppose, as long as I'm wishing, I could wish for some strength of my own rather than cursing the child, but then again, I've never really known how to attend to my own health. Wishing ill for others seems so much easier.

I notice the boy sketching again. His new canvas—the sand. What's he drawing? I don't even want to know anymore. In the beginning, we lifted him up to the role of messenger, even messiah. Well, if he is a messiah, I'm going to have a lot of explaining to do. And then, as if reading my mind, as we've always claimed he could do, he looks up

and asks me, *What have you done?* The words eddy faintly in my head and then whip away as if they'd never been said, as if I didn't know that sooner or later someone would come asking, and I'd have to account for myself before the judges of the world—whoever they are—they upon their thrones and benches, and me under the pains and the penalties of perjury.

What pain? Van would have asked. *What penalties?* Oscar would have demanded. *What perjury?* Shamil might have wondered before she slipped out of sight in the sea. The oath itself is a fabrication, and perjury is as much an illusion as truth. But Oscar, utterly committed to the firmness of the earth, would have answered, *Perjury may be illusion, but the penalties are damn sure real, and so is the pain.* That was Oscar, always involving himself with the penalties and the pains of mankind. Shamil, on the other hand, detached herself from *man-kind* altogether and changed into something else entirely, and in doing so perhaps changed *man-kind* into something else as well.

But now, the boy is asking me what I've done, to account for myself, to give testimony for all my thoughts and deeds. What can I say? Can I pretend not to hear him? Can I ignore the question? Can I say nothing at all? Under the circumstances, that doesn't seem possible or fair. So I ask myself, *Well then, what have you done?* Of course, it's hard to say—hard to know. *Do you mean everything?* I ask cunningly. Because of course that would be a difficult task. Just the sheer volume of events to recount...all the stories...and the stories have back-stories, and side-stories, and then there are all the points of view to consider, and who can really say how it all began, or where, or why? It might be dangerous to even try to account for everything. *What have I done?* No, it's an impossible question. It can't be answered. Sorry kid. You just can't know everything.

The boy doesn't speak, which is his customary response to just about everything, so I'm not alarmed, but his face reveals confusion. So I say, "Maybe you'd like to hear a particular story. For instance, do you know about the map? The map of Caye Alma? Do you want to hear about that? Or what about Shamil? You want to know where she got all her scars or how she lost her arm? I can tell you the story of the desert. I can tell it like it's never been told before. Well, you did ask me what I've done, right? You said, *What have you done?* Isn't that what you said? Just a minute ago? What have you done? What the fuck have you done with your life?" I let out a sigh, run my fingers through my hair, and let them trail off down the back of my neck. "It's just that...I'm not sure I can account for *everything*."

The boy looks up from the sand and *un*-customarily speaks. "I said, why don't you eat?"

I stare at him for a long moment, glance off to the setting sun, turn back to him, and say, "Oh...so...you didn't ask me what I've done?" The boy's gone back to sketching in the sand but turns his eyes up to mine and shakes his head. This only thickens my bewilderment. "Wait...what did you ask me?"

"Why don't you eat?"

"Oh...no thanks. I'm not hungry."

"You're never hungry. You never eat."

"I do eat. I ate earlier."

"You look like you don't eat." I glance down at the end of my belt dangling from my waist, pock-marked with makeshift holes, my jeans bunched around the front. I try to smooth out the folds while the boy continues scratching the sand.

“I’ve got it!” I rip a rugged blade of brown grass from the ground and stick it between my teeth. “Let me tell you a story about a captain and his crew who all die of thirst.” The boy doesn’t appear enticed. I guess I don’t have the hooks or the knack for teasing like old W. Devising. “Trust me. It’s a sea story. You’ll like it.” The boy remains silent, which I take as a sign of consent and signal to begin. So I begin. “Every sailor aboard that ship was sprawled out on the decks, bone dry and dead. But then, something unexpected occurred. The sky darkened! The fire of Erasmus struck the main mast! And rain burst from the clouds, poured down, and soaked through all their bodies!”

I take a sip from the bota bag. While I’m talking the boy removes a can of black beans from my duffel. What the hell is this? I didn’t realize I’d been hauling canned beans through the mountains. Well, no wonder I’ve been struggling! The boy peels back the lid and takes a pinch of beans, sticks them in his mouth, and offers them to me. It’s a gruesome scene, I can tell you. The bodies of a thousand beetles with legs ripped off, mashed down in a tin casket, only to be exhumed and devoured by us. I can see the boy out of the corner of my eye watching me while he chews up their flesh and guts.

“Eat,” he says.

“I’m really more thirsty than hungry.”

“Eat.”

I raise a single beetle to my lips. My mouth opens slowly, reluctantly...*then suddenly*...something catches my eye in the sky. Movement. A bird I think, a black bird, or maybe the silhouette of a bird. I’m not sure, but I leap to my feet, point upward and shout, “Did you see that?” I toss the beetle away and scour the clouds for a bird. Any bird will do. “Did you see it?”

“What?”

“Something flew by...I think it was a bird.”

But the performance is not yet complete. I turn my head back toward the boy so he can see me chewing. He’s watching me intently. He appears to be thinking. “Are there other things that fly? Besides birds?”

“What?”

“What else, besides a bird, could have flown by?”

I panic for a moment. “A squirrel! It could have been a flying squirrel.” I rub the back of my neck. “But no...I think it was a bird.”

“Squirrels fly?”

“Well yeah, sure kid. You didn’t know that? That’s why they’re called *flying squirrels*. You could look it up. Well I mean, no...they don’t actually fly. They leap. Their bodies stretch out like gliders. So that’s what they do—they glide from tree to tree. But they’re *called* flying squirrels.” The boy nods, pinching beetles, chewing them up, quietly scanning the barren landscape. I can’t help scanning too. Fucking trees—none to be seen. Except the effigy of Sinjin here. “Yeah...you’re probably right. I think it was a bird.”

“More?” The boy holds out his beetle sarcophagus.

“Nah,” I pat my belly and puff out my cheeks. “Stuffed.”

We settle in for the night beneath the lifeless boughs of Sinjin.

The next day, the struggle continues, traversing an infinite range of mountains and ravines, summits and crevices, eternal ups and downs, on and on, and the boy skips along, increasing the distance between us, skipping and skipping, with an alacrity that

denies every ascent. And the descents are no better, almost more heartbreaking than the incessant clambering up. Will it ever end? I lean forward and let gravity pull me into an unsteady trot down a rocky path and call out to the boy. “Wait! Wait!!” But he’s already skipping over the next peak and out of sight. I reach up instinctively to wipe my face with the back of my wrist but instead of sweat there’s only prickly salt and dust.

Panic...exhaustion...surrender. I drop to the ground and take a sip from the bota bag. One last sip. It has always been the last sip. It will always be the last sip. How many miles to go? It could be a thousand, or more, for all I know. I have no map, no flying crows to count, no glistening silver blade. Nothing left but the boy. And now I’ve lost sight of him, too. It’s suddenly occurring to me that these hills are not rolling as uniformly as I’d once thought.

The ridges arch and twist, divide and multiply, creating forks upon forks in the paths that we follow, so we could be anywhere now, heading in any direction, with the sun still forsaken at its zenith, and the dust swirling, and my throat tightening. And the boy and I are divided. He’s abandoned me, or I’ve abandoned him, depending on how one wants to see it. I gather up my bones, half buried in sand, toss them in my duffel like scrap iron, heave the duffel over my shoulder, and set out in pursuit. *I must find the boy.* My new mantra. My new prayer. The promise that propels every molten step. *I must find the boy.*

There were, in fact, no more steps. That was a lie. Or call it a dream, if you like. At any rate, it didn’t happen. The boy was gone. I was curled up in the sand beside the road, my eyes closed, my skin burning, my body slipping down to the vestibule beneath. And then, I heard...just a sound. Whatever sound it was I’m not sure, but *I heard.* You

must understand. You must imagine. It took *strength* to hear, more strength than I imagined was left in my body, just to hear a sound springing forth in the silence.

To hear the sound of another person, to hear a body approach, to hear footsteps, to hear a voice, it took strength. To feel a hand touching my face and squeezing my hand, and to be felt by that hand, by that person, it took strength. It took strength to open my eyes and see a gray silhouette in the merciless light, to recognize another human face and to be recognized in return. It took strength, to know that I'd been found. It took strength.

B. Roughly Speaking

“You’re alive.”

I look around and discover my body stretched out across the back seat of a car, the gray sedan, I presume, and the driver is the gray man. But he doesn’t appear quite as gray as I’d imagined. “Where are we?”

“In the arms of Sierra Madre.”

Hot wind rushes in the windows and swirls around me. The bota bag rests on my chest and feels heavy. A sparing swig tastes sweet, but I suppose everything does after a glimpse of the vestibule, or the desert, or whatever raucous calamity one has faced. But Sierra Madre? What does it mean? “Am I under arrest?”

“Under arrest?”

“Well...” I’m not sure how to interpret this response. “You’ve been on our trail for like, however long...I assume you’re here to arrest somebody.”

“I’m not a policeman,” the gray man says. “I’m an ethnographer.”

“An ethnographer? I don’t understand. You tracked us over half the continent for a research project?”

“What makes you think I’ve been tracking you?”

“What makes me think? You mean to say all this has been a coincidence? Just a fluke, you turning up every last place we passed through? Just happenstance that we found ourselves on the same roads, the same towns, the same destinations? You stumbled upon me in the middle of the mountains, or the desert, or whatever the hell this place is, you found me by pure chance, a stroke of luck? An instance of serendipity? Do you really expect me to believe that?”

“I don’t remember mentioning luck.”

“Well, what then? What do you want with me?”

“Actually, I wanted to hear your story.”

“My story?”

“Sure. Why not? I was speaking with a group of people who said they’d met you. They said you didn’t believe in the story, didn’t believe it had any power or possibilities.”

“Oh...*those* people.”

“You didn’t like them?”

“We had a minor dispute. And anyway, I never said the story had no possibilities. It was just the way they were telling their stories. That’s what I had a problem with.”

“That’s why I wanted to talk to you. I have concerns, too.”

“About stories?”

“Absolutely.”

“And you came all this way to hear mine?”

“Not exactly. I have my own reasons for being here. But you’re right. Our meeting isn’t innocent. Just as our stories are never innocent. And that’s exactly the problem, isn’t it? Once you realize the culpability of *all* stories, it suddenly becomes very hard to tell your own.”

“Yeah...it sure does. But I still don’t understand your interest. What do you care how people tell their stories?”

“My interest in stories...yes...that is indeed another problem. Stories certainly enjoy an illustrious position in society, don’t they? Romantic. Entertaining. Evocative. The means by which we create significance for our lives, understand our struggles, and share them with each other. But stories play a more sinister role, too. I believe you’ve seen it, haven’t you?”

“Everyone’s seen it.”

“That’s true. They must. Or the stories wouldn’t work. But not everyone recognizes *how* they work. Every regime of power, every system of oppression, every government, every ruler, they all rely on some combination of *violence* and *stories*. The indispensable braces of control, the wraiths of subjugation—*violence* and *stories*. You can see the violence. You can feel it. But the stories lead a more clandestine existence, operating in the darkness more often than light, concealing more than giving account. So understanding how stories works seems kind of important. Wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes I suppose. But, I’m not sure this explains your particular interest. I’m still wondering. Why do *you* care?”

“I agree. That is absolutely the first and final question: *Why do we care?* And in between, we have our stories. How will you tell yours? What will you share? What will you shy away from? How will you make *your story our story?*”

“Do you know what fascinates me? *Quarks*. Subatomic particles, electrically charged, clustering or dispersing, clinging or repelling, throughout all time, creating matter, and light, and eventually life. All of this history formed by sheer chance through arbitrary currents of energy, all leading to a conscious embodied being, curious and innovative enough to discover...what? *The quark*. The unconscious quark has created the conditions for its own discovery. Now that’s what I’d call a phenomenon.”

“That’s your story? The quark?”

“What, you don’t believe it qualifies as a story? What worries me are all the in-betweens. In between the formation of a body and the discovery of itself. Stories are always suspiciously smooth. All the rough edges are filed down and polished, smoother and smoother, until there’s nothing left but art and artifice, metaphors and magic, but never bodies. The beauty of bodies is in their roughness. I don’t believe such smoothed out stories will ever lead to the discovery of ourselves.”

“Yes, I’d agree with that. But it seems to me the real work is figuring out the approach. How do we go about telling our stories, especially when we’re not invited to be storytellers or when our stories include interpretations and conclusions that run against the grain of common sense? How do we tell stories that might make a difference in the world instead of buttressing old regimes? How will we represent ourselves?”

“How will we understand ourselves?”

“How will we speak?”

“How will we listen?”

“How will we know?”

“Yes—how will we know? I can only tell you that I don’t trust my stories anymore. Every time I tell a story about the desert, the first thing I want to do is attack it, destroy it, debunk it, tear it apart, mock it, and ridicule myself for having told it in the first place. I don’t trust my stories.”

“Yes...I see and I agree...the position of the storyteller is indeed a precarious one.”

“Tell me something. You seem very agreeable. Is this some kind of ethnographer thing? Do you have to go along with everything I say? Or are you just saving your critique for some other place and time, another set of conditions when I won’t be available for comment? Is that the strategy? I can tell my story, but I can’t participate in the conversation—something like that?”

“It sounds as if you don’t trust me either.”

“Well, maybe not. Why should I? Let me ask you this. After you’ve recorded my story, transcribed it, analyzed it, transformed it into a narrative specimen, drawn whatever conclusions you’re going to, and written your book, then what? You’ll publish it, won’t you?”

“Yes, I suppose. If I’m lucky.”

“Lucky? But you just got through telling me that *publication* and *occupation* are basically silent partners in the same lethal business—making claims, marking territory, placing names—isn’t that what you said, just a moment ago? So my question is this: When it’s your turn to make a claim, your turn to publish, whose name will you use?”

“I’m not really sure. You haven’t told me yours yet. If you’re talking about compensation or credit—”

“No, I know. I’m not getting any royalties or degrees for a heap of half-baked unremarkable anecdotes. I’m talking about names. When people pick up this book, when they read this story, when they think about these events in the desert, whose name will they see? Whose name will they hear? Who decides whose name will appear on the head of a story in which, *roughly speaking*, a half a million human beings were killed?”

The ethnographer becomes gray.

“Somebody does have to tell a story, sooner or later, somebody does have to give an account. You can’t really believe that silence is the preferable solution.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“So maybe it’s a good thing to have a few reluctant storytellers in the mix?”

“Mmm...maybe. Okay. All right. I’ve got a story for you.”

“About the desert?”

“Yes. About the desert. Except this story takes place at sea. It goes something like this. There’s a ship that’s lost in the doldrums and the crew is all dead.”

“This is your story?”

“It’s the way I’ve chosen to express my experience. So yes, it’s my story.”

“About the desert?”

“About my body.”

“In the desert?”

“In the universe, which would include the desert, yes, and the sea, and everything else that one is touched by. Now this ship—”

“Okay but wait, I still don’t know your name. When I relay this account, because that’s kind of the point of all this—to share the story—when I write this story down, what name should I use?”

“Well...I don’t know...how about for now you just call me *captain*.”

C. Epilogue

Having assembled a great many materials, and having reflected on these materials considerably, and now preparing them for public view, I am obligated to confront the issue of authorship. Over the course of our interview, the subject of this inquiry expressed to me his own reservations on this issue, and I believe I should express mine, as well, alongside any presentation of a narrative that might, on its own, imply a work of singular creation and ownership.

I intend to weave these concerns into the narrative itself, rather than consolidating them into a prefatory statement, or worse, tucking them away in an endnote or epilogue. The reasons are, first, to make these considerations more visible to the reader, and second, to subvert (or at least resist) the reproduction of the same problems by unnaturally segregating narration from contemplation. I’m disconcerted by the common sense that a story springs naturally, almost magically, from a single body, a body that is immersed in a social world and yet somehow remains impervious to its influence when it comes to accounting for experiences of that very same world.

Virginia Woolf remarked that literary accomplishments are not “single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice.” The

accomplishments of personal narratives and identities are no different. Woolf has frequently been described as ahead of her time, which I'd certainly agree with, but I suspect she may be ahead of *our* time as well, because the myth of individuality remains so inviolable, so toxic, that it seems as frightening and inconceivable now as it ever was that one would be so desperately dependent upon the universe of stories through which one moves to create a story of one's own.

At the request of the subject, I will refer to him, hereafter, as *the captain*. What I found curious about this case was that the captain's narrative was almost unrecognizable as a narrative, bearing little if any coherence, consistency, or logic. His story contained multiple sequences that were highly implausible, which he openly conceded. He then built further events (perhaps factual, perhaps not), upon these implausible sequences, binding them causally, correlating fact and fiction, so as to render the two inseparable, thereby undermining any potential truth value of the entire narrative.

This was not, as far as I could tell, a matter of lucidity, or a lack of it. The captain was not without his faculties. And I don't believe it was strictly a matter of cleverness or mischief, although I'm sure those came into play as well. There seemed to be some authentic disability or inability in his process of narration. As I've mentioned, he wasn't unaware of the problem (if it can or even should be labeled *a problem*); in fact, he chose to mark the problem specifically through the issue of names. This certainly played a role in his rationale for not providing his own name. At any rate, that's how the topic of authorship arose.

"Whose name will you use?" the captain asked me. I supposed it would have to be mine. The publishing industry would certainly perish without the use of authors' names.

After all, even *The Unnamable* has an author. The captain pointed out that, historically, stories have not always assumed an author, and that at one time their shared construction was taken for granted broadly. He asked me if we might invent a name, or a pseudonym, or a pen name. I told him it was improbable. Nowadays, there's sort of an obsession in the public with credibility, which is generally affixed to one's name. The captain drew an alternative conclusion from this fact. "Well, in that case," he said, "we should definitely invent a name."

Why did this individual choose to refer to himself as *captain*? Or, more precisely, why did he ask me to refer to him as such? He didn't offer an explanation; however, there was a story, not of the desert, more of a fable from the sea that he continually referred back to throughout our conversation, and this story's protagonist was a ship's captain. The story begins with this captain and his crew already dead.

I asked him the obvious question. How did the story ever survive if the bodies themselves did not? This seemed to be exactly what he was driving at. The captain went on from there in a highly discursive fashion, interweaving the stories of the desert, the sea, his childhood, and of other places and times in his life, as if they were all indistinguishable narratives, requiring no corollaries or chronological ordering.

"I have reason to believe," the captain told me. "that the mother of my mother was also a perpetrator of horrors. And that the father of my father was also missing."

"What reason?"

"Actually, no reason, in particular. Instinct. Eyes. Various clues left lying around in old family tales, like fingerprints and bloody trails. If only mother had given an account of that history, however awful, if she'd only set herself apart from those trespasses

against her, then maybe she wouldn't have joined in the legacy of trespasses. Silence was party to that. *Silence* is the most vicious perpetrator of all."

"And the captain?"

"Ah the captain...an incredible turn of events. The skies darkened, the fire of Erasmus struck the main mast, and clouds burst with rain that poured down and soaked through every lifeless body on board. By nightfall, the clouds cleared, the calavera moon glistened in a sterling sky, and that's when the miracle occurred. You see, the captain never knew that he'd died. He thought he was the sole survivor. The bodies of his crew became animated, took their posts around the ship, and the captain assumed them to be ghosts, while he assumed himself to be alive. But who can say which version of this story is true? The question is always *Who*. Who is made of moonlight and who is made of blood? Who has lived and who has died?"

"Um, sorry...actually, I was asking about you. *Captain?*"

"That's just what I mean," the captain replied. "Our stories are one and the same."

"The desert, too?"

"The desert has no story. The sand holds more blood than a sea does salt, but it doesn't speak. So it has no story. Only the excitable bodies passing through the desert's crags and drifts can account for their own traversing." With that, the captain leapt off abruptly to another new topic, and yet another story.

"Are you aware of the legend of the truck?"

"The truck?"

"That's the ball that sits on top of every flagpole on every American military post in the world. According to legend, the truck contains three items—a match, a blade, and a

bullet. These are provided as a last resort in the event of an attack and impending fall of the reservation. The sole survivor is instructed by this legend to use the blade to cut the stars from the flag, to use the match to burn the flag (to prevent it from falling into enemy hands), and to use the last bullet to take the last life (to prevent that too from falling into enemy hands).

“The legend advises suicide?”

“The legend is ludicrous. Inconceivable, on at least a dozen grounds. Not to mention unsupported by a single historical document. It’s just a legend. And yet... *it is a legend*. Doesn’t that make you curious? The story of the sole survivor ends with the erasure of itself. Symbol and body, ashes and dust. And the last expression of human will: Self-destruction. So why does the legend survive? How does it persist without the support of the slightest proof? What is it about this version of our end that holds the imagination? Or maybe the question is, why is the alternative so frightening?”

“What is the alternative?”

“I don’t know. Self-discovery? Oh but, at all costs...not that! Better a bullet in the brain than a glimpse in the mirror.”

I asked the captain if he’d ever tried writing his stories down. That seems like something similar to looking in the mirror. “You attended a meeting once, didn’t you? People were sharing their stories?”

“Oh yeah...that didn’t go so well.”

“I understand there was an altercation.”

“It was a minor dispute.”

“But they offered you advice, yes? Did you take it?”

“They suggested I try journaling. So I did.”

“And? Did it accomplish anything?”

“I don’t know. I suppose that depends on what counts as an accomplishment. If marks on a page are accomplishments, then yes it did. As for the meanings of those marks, well, I can’t say if anything was accomplished or not.”

I asked the captain if I could include his journal in my project and possibly publish some of the contents. He agreed. But the question of names returned and with it the issue of authorship. Despite his earlier campaign for anonymity, he seemed suddenly disconcerted by the idea of my name appearing above his stories. I pointed out to him, in return, that his story, in fact several of his stories, had conspicuous residues of other people’s writings.

“For instance,” I said, “There’s this little vignette about the sea captain that has a familiar ring to it.” I thought it better to nudge than to shove the evidence right in his face. But the captain was indignant.

“Wrong!” he blurted at me. “Do you want to know what really happened on that ship?”

“Okay but—”

“They *all* died, none of them survived, not even the captain. And they were *all* brought back to life, flesh and blood, not just the captain. It was the water. The rain that fell from the sky and landed on their skins and soaked their bodies. It was the rain that gave them life.”

“That’s what really happened?”

“Oh that’s just the beginning. Not the end. You see, when the rain fell over their bodies, it also fell onto the decks, into buckets, dips in the sails, and anything else that might have served as a receptacle. Wherever the water was caught, a pool of life was formed. But do you think the captain figured that out? Or his crew? Did any of them make the obvious connection between this salubrious liquid and their sudden vitality? No, not a one of them. The captain went roaming around the planet spouting some miserable gibberish about creatures great and small, when he came upon a tiny uncharted island on the Caribbean coast. He went ashore and immediately launched into his usual song and dance with a hermit who’d lived on the island for years. It was the hermit who figured out the secret behind the resurrection.

“The captain mistook this hermit for a holy man and begged him to perform a séance, or some sort of healing ritual or whatever, and the hermit, instantly realized he was dealing with an idiot. He spotted an opportunity and so said to the captain, *I take it this rain water is still gathered around your ship.* And the captain answered, *Sure, it’s everywhere, fetid pools in every nook and board, from bulkhead to bulkhead.* So the hermit offered an exchange—a few bottles of rain water for a soul-cleansing ceremony.

“The captain was thrilled, of course, and came back later that day with a life boat filled with dark glass bottles, each one topped off with rain water. The bottles were unloaded onto the beach, a ceremony was performed by the hermit (who tried to maintain a straight face throughout), and the captain sailed off in his ship, feeling purified and, moreover, quite satisfied with himself for the bargain he’d made—he figured the hermit must have been a bit daft to trade magic for bottles of rain. But it wasn’t long before the captain had second thoughts. His misery returned and he started to suspect the hermit’s

ceremony wasn't worth one bit more than the fetid water. Eventually the captain went back to his traipsing and trawling around the planet delaying unsuspecting passersby with his tedious parable of creatures great and small."

"I see. So...*this* is what really happened?"

"Sure. Of course."

"And you know this because..."

"I met the hermit. He told me the whole story. The Caribbean island, where the captain brought his bottled water, it's off the coast of Belize. It's called *Caye Alma*. The hermit's still there, still sitting under a palm grove in a tie-dye tank top. He gave me a bota bag filled with the last of the rain water. And that's how I survived coming home."

"You don't think all this sounds a little...*improbable*?"

"No. Why would I think that?"

As an aside to the reader, I'd like to note here that, from an ethnographic standpoint, I believe I handled this conversation poorly. I am aware, of course, that falsifications, distortions, exaggerations, and so forth, are natural occurrences in all stories that are collected during these kinds of inquiries. Furthermore, I don't believe them to be necessarily detrimental to human research. One can often learn as much from fabrications as any earnest testimony. It's all about how people choose to represent themselves. The question of fact or fiction becomes almost secondary.

In this case, however, I'll admit I was thrown. First were the captain's wild excursions from one fantasy world to the next, and then, his flagrant appropriations of other people's stories, well known stories by the way, stories that were themselves fictional. I was thrown by a lifetime of conditioning to believe in a particular brand of

truth, and then thrown again by a baldfaced challenge to that truth. So I forgot myself and my ideals, and in that moment became all that I claimed to oppose. How did the captain choose to represent his experience? I never really got the chance to find out because I intervened with critique when I should have just listened. I didn't merely curtail his story. I played a role in shaping it. Instead of allowing it to become whatever it wanted to be, I quietly established the rules and the bounds for his testimony.

My questions expressed aggression, not so much in tone, but in design, not in my words alone, but through my body, through a system of knowledge production, in which my body moved. I didn't make up the margins of truth, but I traced them and enforced them. The prohibition of particular sensibilities leads to the prohibition of particular stories, which is the same as a prohibition of the bodies who tell them, and that is a prohibition of truth itself. I made myself a party to that prohibition. I suppose once it became clear that his story could not achieve truth in a conventional sense, there was no further incentive to abide any truth at all. I make these remarks in retrospect. I'm sorry to report that the conversation did not unfold with these ideas already in mind.

"So," I said to the captain, "You realize, don't you, that you've hinged the believability of your story on the believability of the hermit's story, whose story in turn depends on the believability of the sea captain's story, the very character who both you and the hermit have independently dismissed as an unreliable witness."

"Um...yes."

"And yet, both of you go merrily on drinking rain water and calling it *healing*." The captain muttered inaudibly. And I spoke sharply. "What's that?"

"*I said*...this is starting to feel more like an interrogation than a conversation."

I was stunned by this comment. It was severely jarring. Suddenly, I felt regret, shame, even nausea. I'd never thought of myself in this light—as an interrogator. I wanted him to take for granted my good intentions. I wanted to reconstitute myself in his imagination as a decent human being; unfortunately, as many people know from experience, it's not always easy to gracefully un-paint oneself from the proverbial corner. So I made a defensive remark about interrogating *narratives* not *people*, as a means for revealing truth. It was neither a productive response, nor a tenable argument. I knew it right away.

I apologized in earnest. I never wanted to project hostility or create an uncomfortable environment. Just the opposite actually. I liked the captain. I liked his stories, to be honest, and the way he told them. I wanted him to know that I liked him. I wanted him to feel it. I'd say my behavior was the unintended consequence of a strategy I've adopted over the years, not just in scholarship, but in life. I've come to rely on my instinct for critique as a means to navigate the stories of the world, in which we're all immersed, and as a means to make ethical choices and take responsible actions. I do believe this is a genuinely worthwhile faculty.

On the other hand, I realize (now, after the fact) that there must be a flaw embedded in this approach. I include this point because I really can't present any ethnographic findings without including that which I've found in myself along the way. What I have found is *knowledge* and *ownership* bound together in a most unsettling way. And the knot that holds these fast is called *authorship*.

The moment a story is marked “by” and attached to a name it signals its own participation in the ultimate prohibition of truth. This has left me, *the author*, in quite a

precarious position. But this precariousness should not be allowed to function as an excuse not to mention it. Precariousness does not necessitate silence; rather, the opposite. The problem of authorship may be inescapable—*maybe*—but it’s certainly not unassailable.

In the end, the captain said he wasn’t concerned with the fate of his testimony after all, and didn’t care what name I chose to publish it under. He said that was never the point of his stories, anyway. He said he wanted the stories to fly out into the atmosphere and collide with other people, and other bodies, and other stories, and burst like fireworks into new light that no individual could ever claim as his or her own property.

At the end of our interview, he offered a last observation that not only prompted the reflexive passages above, but made me reconsider my role as *author* and wonder what name should or should not appear at the head of this statement. The captain stood up and moved to the threshold, a place where he was visibly nervous, and when he looked back at me, I could swear his eyes turned black.

“Do you know *why*—when we tell our stories of the desert—*why* the number of dead can only be spoken of roughly? Because nobody wanted to know precisely. So nobody ever counted. And by nobody, I mean *us*. With a satellite camera orbiting earth, we could zero in on an ancient howitzer abandoned in the center of the Sugar Bowl, or capture the digits of a license plate on a blue Opel or a white SUV. We could pick up the heat signature of a high value target, a solitary man, with an unmanned drone circling ten thousand feet above, and remotely drop a bomb on his village.

“And yet, somehow we lacked the technology and the will to know for sure how many humans we killed in the desert. So when the conversation turns to these unknown

bodies and their torn apart flesh, our memories will always become vague. And when the stories of the dead are expurgated from the conversation, all of the living are made to abide that vicious silence. Consequently, our heads are filled with black holes and voids and, from that moment forth, our stories can only be roughly spoken.”

APPENDIX A

DISCUSSION OF DISSERTATION-PERFORMANCE

A. Dissertation-Performance

The following discussions relate to the performance-writing piece above, which I'll refer to as a *dissertation-performance*. These remarks are intended to provide some framework for the performance; although, the categories presented should be regarded as artificially distinct, established only provisionally as an orientation. Generally speaking, performance-writing does not necessitate orientation; in fact, orienting an audience too much may disrupt or disturb the experience of the performance or its subsequent critique.

However, in the context of a dissertation, I believe it's both productive and appropriate to communicate my intentions and the theoretical foundations of my performance. The fact that these discussions are preceded by the performance itself and are conveyed as appendices is, in my opinion, ideal. Part of my intention for this dissertation-performance is, as Pelias notes, to reject the positivist assumption that knowledge is necessarily progressive, "always moving toward a goal of obtaining the complete truth" (xiv).

B. Methodological Innovation

The emphasis of this dissertation-performance is primarily methodological. The method is autoethnography, which is itself bundled with a wide array of theoretical and methodological implications; however, my focus is on innovations to the latter. A great deal of theoretical work has been accomplished over the centuries (and more recently

within performance studies) that has provided many useful ways to think about life struggles that all people face as individuals, as family and community members, as scholars, teachers, and citizens. However, I feel that these theories tend to get suspended in an ongoing ritual of theory-production and seldom get put into practice in concerted ways within research and pedagogy, as well as everyday life. This is where I see the greatest room for innovation.

As Pollock puts it, “The question might become...now that we are unknown and deprived of knowingness, unlearned and learning, *what are we going to do about it?*” (emphasis added) (2006, 328). In this particular situation (this dissertation), I have chosen performance writing as the means by which to express one possibility for the kind of innovation I have in mind—one possible innovation among many. And because there’s no clear distinction between theory and method in performance scholarship, I’ve integrated the two in the forthcoming sections.

C. Epistemology, Narrative, and Aesthetics

The major rationale for this dissertation-performance is epistemological. I view epistemology as underlying all politics, and while pure positivism may no longer be widely embraced within academia, I suspect it is still the operative epistemology for the general public and mainstream political thinking and social practices. I believe social justice depends on epistemological commitments that promote inclusivity, multivocality, and embodied situated knowledge. The scientific style of academic literature continues to reproduce attitudes of positivism throughout society. This is a critique that is frequently

discussed in the performance community; however, I feel the critique is not transformed into practice often enough to compel real institutional change.

Building from my epistemological commitments, I employ the personal narrative in order to highlight the situatedness of my knowledge. This is also an ethical consideration since embodiment implies an inherent incompleteness to my perspective, making *knowledge* a social activity and, therefore, urging more participatory forms of politics. The personal narrative may be understood as a fundamental form of exchange even when one is not necessarily delivering a story.

Autoethnography overlaps with personal narrative a great deal and the two might even be thought of as synonymous. I've placed a discussion of narrative outside of autoethnography in order to convey my own theoretical emphases for each. For me, autoethnography draws my attention to a social critique performed through personal experience. Personal narrative may do the same work, but I focus my attention here more on narrative theories and strategies of representation. Again, I see no special requirement for autoethnography and personal narrative to be separated, but I've drawn from different bodies of literature in the development of my performance-dissertation, and so I'd like to discuss those materials accordingly.

Aesthetics plays a fundamental role in my dissertation-performance as an extension of my epistemological commitments and as a component of my narrative strategy. Aesthetics is a term that I use for embodied knowledge *in motion*, the perpetual inter-action of sensory data, discourse, and emotion. Aesthetics in this sense does not emphasize a convention of beauty; rather, it is a way to understand all knowledge as visceral not just that which triggers a strong emotional response.

This dissertation-performance uses a heightened aesthetic style (as it might be understood in Western culture); however, this isn't meant to convey my thoughts beautifully, per se, but to draw attention to the role of the body in the experience and interpretation of any scholarship, not just a personal narrative. In other words, in this particular performance, as dissertation, the aesthetic dimension is exaggerated specifically to deliver this point.

Within the dissertation-performance, there is a division of labor, so to speak, with different themes being approached through different means. I view epistemology and aesthetics as fundamental to social justice work especially in the struggle for more diverse forms of inquiry within academia. My emphasis on an unconventional method of performance is intended to express my political and scholarly commitments.

However, beyond what this dissertation-performance may convey indirectly through its style and form, the autoethnographic side of it deals more explicitly with issues related to my life and the competing identities within my body. "It is vital to explore the exigencies that influence which facets of one's identity emerge and are (re)presented within particular and social contexts" (Young, 159). A central theme of this performance is *occupation*, which is meant to refer both to my participation in the occupation of Iraq, and to the social/political subject positions that my body occupies in the world.

I'd like to emphasize that, while this work has unquestionable value for me personally, I consider my core motivation to make a contribution to the struggle for social justice and perhaps to offer some alternative perspectives to others who may be

wrangling with similar issues. As Stern notes in her discussion of autoethnography, by voicing our experiences, our stories can heal not just ourselves but others (86).

And in the *Handbook for Performance Studies*, Madison and Hamera also emphasize the binding of the personal and the political in autoethnographic work. “The autoethnographer inscribes the experiences of a historical moment, universalizing these experiences in their singular effects on a particular life” (333). This should be considered the essence of autoethnography, so the undercurrent of all my themes, whether expressed indirectly through my method or directly in discussion, are intended to bear a critical tone—that is, they are meant to address structures of power and my relationships to them.

APPENDIX B
METHODS AND THEORY

A. Embodiment

The foundation of any research project is its epistemological orientation. How the researcher understands the nature of knowledge itself informs both the theoretical framework of the research and the method of inquiry. For performance scholarship, that epistemological orientation must include an understanding of embodiment. No performance theory or method can succeed otherwise. This dissertation-performance relies on an acceptance of knowledge as fundamentally embodied, so it seems appropriate to precede my discussions of method and theory with a brief explanation of my understanding of embodiment and some of the ways that it has been articulated and employed historically.

Embodiment is an expanded epistemology that rejects mind-body dualism and traditional Western logocentrism. This doesn't mean that all scholarship that deals with embodiment necessarily endorses critical postmodern perspectives; however, the increased interest in *the body* within academia has given rise to a wide range of social theories that would not have been possible, otherwise, if not accompanied by the recognition of the body as a site of knowledge production. Performance and embodiment may be theorized separately or given different degrees of emphasis; however, the former is a field of study because we've come to terms with the latter—not the other way around.

Embodiment is not simply the idea that material conditions influence human thought and discourse, nor is it meant to suggest that the body is simply a receptacle of consciousness, or a sensory filter through which humans gain understanding of their world, which is ultimately discursive. Embodied knowledge is meant to describe the body *in total* (including the mind), first, as the site of knowledge itself, and second, as the producer, receiver, and transmitter of that knowledge. This is what Herbert Blau refers to as *blooded thought*. Elizabeth Bell describes a performance epistemology that is “a much different, and often maligned, way of knowing the world” (22), maligned precisely for the ways it undermines the epistemological foundations upon which Western society has been built.

For Ronald Pelias, “performance as knowing is something we learn from our daily practice. We know it *somatically*; we know it in our bodies...performance is an embodied procedure that provides insights” (21). Leland Roloff says, “*somatic thinking* is a way of knowing the world through all our senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell). Somatic thinking, however, is immensely difficult to translate into words” (1973). An embodied epistemology is really the cornerstone of performance scholarship, to include autoethnography, but its importance reaches across disciplines and history in important ways that both reinforce the commitments of performance researchers and suggest innovative directions for future scholarship in and out of performance studies.

Both Nietzsche and Foucault understood “the body as the basis of our being, a basis that has been covered up by the intellectual philosophical tradition” (Hoy, 4). And Dewey, another early champion of experiential knowledge, challenges the primacy of reason, noting that “an experience of thinking has its own aesthetic quality...Not only is

this quality a significant motive in undertaking intellectual inquiry and in keeping it honest, but that no intellectual activity is an integral event (is an experience), unless it is rounded out with this quality. Without it, thinking is inconclusive.” (599).

Experience as performance—cultural performance, social performance, and social drama—according to Victor Turner’s model explains social interactions that incorporate, in fact necessitate, consideration of the body. Social performances are adopted for their discursive value but it’s a false value or a value not *fully* articulated or meaningful and so the physical performance produces material results that may not be anticipated or understandable. The meaning of the performance slips away into a myriad of sensations, thoughts, feelings, etc. that may not fit into any narrative template.

Embodiment as a way of knowing has progressed steadily across the academy in a number of ways. It has given flesh, so to speak, to the earlier *subject positions* of poststructuralist epistemologies that acknowledged the differences between bodies and their associated social and political power, but didn’t thoroughly consider the ways that those bodies, especially non-normative bodies, interacted with official or authorized knowledge production. As a result of this embodied epistemological orientation, researchers have been able to identify and reject particular methodological practices that reinforce/reproduce structures of normativity.

For example, in anthropology Dwight Conquergood innovated performance ethnography to expand the mode of participant-observation from strictly a method of data collection, to a form of data representation—that is, the data would be learned in the body and then, rather than translated into text, the researcher’s data analysis would be presented literally through the body. Conquergood performed his ethnographic findings

on stage with his body, arguing that the translation of embodied rituals/practices into (Western) text is not only a distortion of the knowledge itself, but a form of violence against the people being studied.

There has been significant input by more biologically oriented scholars to demonstrate how knowledge and language intersect with processes and structures of the physical body. For example, Kenneth Burke dove emphatically into a study of endocrinology nearly a century ago, insisting that this was a crucial piece in understanding human behavior. Such systems, he argued, influenced human practices and habits, which then formed collective experiences and with them various systems of beliefs and morals (Hawhee, 2009). This isn't meant to be a deterministic argument; however, the relationship of biological systems with social practices shouldn't be hastily dismissed.

More recently, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999) have made similar claims through the cognitive sciences that focus on the ways that biological processes and structures influence language and knowledge construction. What's important to acknowledge about these hard science approaches is that, like Burke, they're not making deterministic arguments. This, I believe, distinguishes them from the positivistic atmosphere of both traditional empiricism and the academy in general. Note the subtitle of their book: *The embodied mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*. Theirs is a critical realist approach, in which they acknowledge that language will always serve as an ideological medium through which meaning is socially constructed around material bodies and environments; however, they demonstrate quite convincingly the many ways in which the material world penetrates back into consciousness.

Humans cannot choose to eliminate the biological necessities of life (i.e. food, water, air, etc.) from language. The fact that our interpretations and representations of these necessities are socially constructed is not reason to overlook the conditions of their emergence. Lakoff and Johnson argue further that the physical structure of the body creates constraints to knowledge, for instance in the structure of the eye or ear, both of which can only receive a range of wavelengths. Further still, they claim that the physical structure of the brain itself imposes particular tendencies in the ways that humans organize knowledge. All of these arguments suggest that materiality imposes itself on the consciousness and so must be dealt with epistemologically one way or another.

The importance of these perspectives for performance scholarship is in their correlation between the body, as a biological system, and the social world. Trinh Minh-ha asks, “Where does the social stop in the biological?” (41), and Haraway asks the same question but in the opposite direction, “Why should our bodies end at the skin?” (36). And Kristin Langellier comments on personal narrative (a performance methodology) in a way that further ties the social and the body together:

Personal narrative is a site where the social is articulated, structured, and struggled over...Identity and experience are symbiosis of performed story and the social relations in which they are materially embedded...This is why personal narrative performance is especially crucial to those communities left out of the privileges of dominant culture, those bodies without voice in the political sense (1999, 129).

For a performance product, such as my dissertation-performance, to be understood and accepted as scholarship despite its *poetic* style requires an epistemological commitment to these notions of embodiment. This is what brings emotions, personal experiences and narratives, back into the realm of official knowledge

production. In fact, these elements were always there, but the official story of knowledge production in the West has historically segregated them in such a manner, and to such a degree, that they could not be acknowledged and, therefore, could not be effectively employed.

I believe that epistemology is the crucial struggle of society and within the academy. So while I will always characterize all research, whether analytical, clinical, empirical, or otherwise, as performative, I want to participate in this epistemological struggle by demonstrating how knowledge may also be conveyed through more poetic forms, and that such modes of knowledge production are not only legitimate but desperately important to the cause of social justice. This dissertation is largely intended as a performance of my part in that struggle. I'll return to a discussion of the connections between scholarship, social justice, and the body in subsequent sections.

B. Autoethnography

The method for this dissertation-performance can be characterized as *autoethnography*, which has been defined by Ellis and Bochner as “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (2000, 739), and to this Tillmann adds, “striving to show life’s complexity and fragility in depth and detail, autoethnographers utilize varied forms (i.e., short stories, poems, plays) and multiple narrative techniques, such as scene setting, dialogue, and metaphor” (95).

Denzin and Lincoln describe autoethnography as a balancing act. “Autoethnography works to hold self and culture together, albeit not in equilibrium or

stasis. Autoethnography writes a world in a state of flux and movement—between story and context, writer and reader, crisis and denouement. It creates charged moments of clarity, connection, and change” (764). And Spry refers to autoethnography as “a self narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with other social contexts” (2001, 710). The essence of autoethnography can be, therefore, thought of as an act of personal reflexivity with the explicit intention of disrupting hegemonic practices and creating ruptures in imperialistic research routines (Spry, 2006).

For me, an important characteristic of autoethnography is the space it makes for creative expression whose purpose is to convey and stir up emotions that complement discourses. That is to say, emotions represent an integral part of knowledge—the individual embodied experience of the social and political world. As Denzin and Lincoln explain, “autoethnographic texts seek to invoke the corporeal, sensuous, and political nature of experience rather than collapse text into embodiment or politics into language play” (767).

An integrated sense of embodiment, epistemology and aesthetics enables a more willing reception of Denzin’s description of autoethnography as a “method of the heart, a form that listens to the heart, knowing that stories are truths that won’t stand still” (2006, 334). It’s important to acknowledge, though, that emotion cannot stand alone as knowledge in itself. As Spry puts it, “evocation of emotion is not itself aesthetic or epistemic; artful knowledge is constructed.” She adds to this, “As we develop ‘post’ methodologies we may be in danger of expecting the personal or emotional to stand in for literary acumen. Performative autoethnography resides in the intersections of knowledge construction and art” (2011, 22).

This is a crucial point in the production and justification of performance scholarship, although, for me a more fitting metaphor than *intersection* might be balance or tension. One cannot expect to arrive at an intersection, like a point on the map, between knowledge and art—they are not truly discrete—indeed epistemology and aesthetics are constituted by and constitutive of each other, but perhaps they pull at the heart in different ways or in different directions.

The relationship between performance theory and method bears a parallel tension, perhaps the very same tension as that between epistemology and aesthetics, between attitudes and practices, and this is what makes an understanding of embodiment so vital to the struggle over knowledge production in an academic institution that continues to enforce the mind-body split and privilege reason over feeling. A living separation of method and theory is arguably impossible in any field; however, in the performance community, such a division is more explicitly regarded as not only unworkable but unproductive in the sense that even in one's imagination, theory is a practice in itself and so is performative. Autoethnography as a *method* of analysis/production is inextricably bound with an embodied epistemology, which is in turn bound up with autoethnography as a product, or a form of representation.

The processes of introspection, critique, and representation are all performative. What the autoethnographer offers the audience foremost are these performances. Of course, as a performance-oriented researcher, I'll always argue that all scholarship is performative; however, performance based work tends to emphasize its own performativity, which is itself a comment on one's epistemological orientation. Since my ideas are always embodied and situated, then how I choose to present my ideas is as

much a part of the product as the ideas themselves. To borrow Dwight Conquergood's words, I want to "pull the pin on the binary opposition between theory and practice" (2002, 145).

The background and disposition of autoethnographic research as a mode of inquiry within the academy are important to me personally and to my dissertation-performance. I join those who believe that all research can be understood, to one extent or another, as autoethnographic. The difference is one of degree between the various forms of scholarship and the level of acknowledgment of the researcher's situated self that he or she is willing to allow onto the page. So one might say that the essence of autoethnography is the practice of personal reflexivity with the explicit intention of disrupting hegemonic practices and creating ruptures in imperialistic research routines (Spry, 2006).

Looking historically, public access to the act of interpretation came into the West as a by-product of the Enlightenment era and the romanticization of individuality. Interpretation of social life once belonged exclusively to officials of the Church and then later to scientists and philosophers, those with official credentials, but it was really only a matter of time before lay people started to notice their own claims on truth and their right to have their perspectives included into larger social narratives. The logic of individuality ignited an inevitable chain reaction leading directly to issues of embodiment and interpretive modes of inquiry whose purpose was not only to discover in new ways but also to resist the authority of those who claimed exclusive rights to interpretation in the first place.

Within academia, interpretive modes of inquiry have come to function as the antithesis of positivism, and these modes arrive with the creeping acknowledgment among scholars that there can be no research free of ideology, no objective reality outside of personal experience—no unmediated ontology, and no metanarrative that can explain all aspects of the human condition. However, throughout these developments, positivism and logocentrism have maintained their grip on the academy and comprise the central machinery of knowledge production and state power. Performance Studies is part of a movement that struggles for social justice and opposes these ontological and epistemological orientations through its emphasis on embodied experience (Denzin and Lincoln, Madison, Spry).

Autoethnography (or performance autoethnography) functions as one method of research within a range of many, but in this struggle over knowledge production, autoethnography represents a shrill cry of dissent within an academy that still privileges objective positivistic-styled scholarship, reminiscent of earlier power structures including colonialism, over subjective interpretive scholarship. Hall says of *Performance Writing* (an inherent method for producing textual autoethnography), “Performance Writing has drawn on and attracted those who find themselves on the margins of disciplines and practices, often defining their own practice as in contrast to or in flight from the current conventions of their discipline” (361). So when one takes up autoethnography as a mode of inquiry, that researcher must be fully cognizant of the political as well as philosophical commitments that he or she is making.

The autoethnography is, by its very form, a critique. It is a critique of Western philosophy, of academic conventions, and of dominant representations and practices that

leave so many voices unheard. The autoethnography, through its form, declares embodied experience as the essence of knowledge, and this to me implies that knowledge must be a communal activity. In the Western academy, that is also a critique, a political statement that rejects credentials as the basis of authority to know and to speak. Autoethnography inherently rejects singular notions of truth. It rejects a system that gives access and privilege to those who accept those credentials and singular truths. And it does so through its form before the first words have been written.

The autoethnographer acknowledges, before the work begins, the ideological nature of all interpretations and all representations. This is a fundamental attribute to social life and to the autoethnographic form. The autoethnographer says “I feel” and “I want” and that is a critique in itself. The autoethnography must, therefore, bear ontological and epistemological orientations that enable such a critique, orientations that must be in themselves critical (that is, critical in the context of dominant positivism). To employ autoethnography without a critical aim would be discordant with the form and produce something indistinguishable from memoir.

For me, autoethnography should bear the following theoretical underpinnings: It is *interpretive* in the sense that it rejects positive truth claims; it is *feminist* in the sense that it emphasizes inclusivity of bodies and voices as both a manner of expression and interpretation that come through a concerted emphasis on empathy and respect; it is *queer* in the sense that it emphasizes the demystification of normative values, terms, systems, etc.; and it is *embodied* in the sense that both the questions posed and the conclusions offered are derived in an embodied experience; however logical the analysis might be, it must be recognized as situated knowledge.

Lastly, autoethnography is fundamentally *performative* in the sense that one's embodied experience is interpreted, communicated, and received through a multitude of identity categories that are formed through rituals, practices, and performances of daily life, performances that collectively make up both the larger social context in which the autoethnography is produced and received, and the more immediate circumstances of the autoethnographer and the audience. These are the elements that comprise the critical orientation of autoethnography, the essential task of identifying and resisting power imbalances.

I have chosen autoethnography because it reflects the concerns I have about my body occupying several dominant social categories and about having participated in the violent occupation of Iraq. Both of these occupations demand an account of myself and, moreover, preclude a mode of inquiry that might perpetuate and reproduce *the gaze* that comprises an imperial attitude, with which I want to clearly pronounce my disenchantment. Autoethnography strikes me as an appropriate form of research, in particular, because it combines rigorous introspection with a critical orientation.

My decision to do an autoethnographic project has three explicit aims: First, I want to produce a statement that overtly challenges academic norms, while simultaneously (and ironically) receiving authorization or recognition by the academy through its own conventions. I view this as an opportunity to broaden the breach in the academic institution for future scholarship that is politically radical and social justice oriented. Every incident of anti-positivistic/anti-logocentric research that is published increases the opportunities for subsequent scholars, and aids in the disruption of the power structures that maintain the academy in its current state.

Second, building from the first, is the broader struggle against state power, hegemonic discourses, and systems of normativity. Autoethnographic scholarship is not an end state; it is a method of inquiry that comments critically on social conditions as experienced by an individual (Spry 2006, 2011). The implicit suggestion made in any autoethnography is that action must be taken in response to critical observations of power structures (i.e. social movements, demonstrations, revolution, etc.).

Finally third, building from the first two, is my own effort to reconfigure my identity, personal narratives, and ways of being and interacting in the world. The inward orientation of autoethnography encourages perpetual self-reflection. Given my embodied affiliation with so many dominant social categories, I feel autoethnography is my best (if not only) option, one that encourages me to cultivate an ongoing process of rigorous critical introspection.

C. Analysis and Production

In the production of an autoethnography, one must ask why, necessarily, this work need be *auto*? What are the advantages and values to using a personal narrative as a research strategy? What are the limitations? What are the ethical obligations? And how will this research be used both in and out the academy? To begin with, we should understand autoethnography as existing within a range of research strategies, none of which is inherently invalid—every approach simply has different strengths, uses, and limitations. Empirical research, for instance, should not be automatically disqualified just because it emphasizes observation. And other forms of deductive or analytical research

delivered in the more objective academic style can certainly have value, too. Kristin Langellier offers this valuable reminder:

Whether these studies of personal narrative performance are empirical, interpretive, or critical, I argue that they take text/context relations as the unit of analysis. Situating personal narrative in context—performance and performativity—reminds us, for example, that not all bodies have voice: not all subject positions are open to all subjects, and not all subject positions are equal in cultural power (1998, 211).

The problem isn't the methodology in itself; the problem is a master narrative that's built around methodology that says this or that method is the one and only way to produce truth. All scholarship, whether aesthetically coded as scientific or poetic, should include deliberate processes for understanding the researcher's personal relationships to their inquiries, and the relationship of their research products to structures of power. Whatever style a researcher chooses to employ will always suppress other perspectives and ways of knowing.

There are many valuable strategies for knowledge production; however, autoethnography strikes me as having two distinct advantages. The first, which is especially important for me, is that it turns the researcher's gaze inward and, more importantly, away from the so-called *exotic* people in faraway lands. This is an opportunity to challenge the objectification of Others through colonizing/imperial research projects. The occupation of Iraq, for example, relied heavily on American anthropologists, who supplied the U.S. military with local cultural knowledge that was then used against the Iraqi people. I do not want to take up research that resembles that kind of work.

The second obvious advantage is that the researcher has direct and total access to the experiences and corresponding thoughts and emotions that will ultimately be used as data in the autoethnography. Traditional ethnography requires interviews, in which subjects may or may not reveal themselves fully or honestly. They may be hostile, or scared, or embarrassed, or overly enthusiastic. They may interpret their own stories and tell them in accordance with different social narratives and identities that the ethnographer is either not aware of, does not fully comprehend, or is ideologically opposed to. From a research perspective these performative tendencies may be useful or illuminating but they are not the focus of this particular performance.

Subjects of ethnographies may have interests, one way or another, in seeing the ethnographer's research developed in a particular way. And, conversely, ethnographers may also have interests that could interfere with their interpretations of subjects or events. The ways in which stories can be told, interpreted (or misinterpreted), and retold is limitless. Mary Jo Maynes et al have written an excellent book that deals with exactly these kinds of challenges: *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences* (2008), so I won't attempt to rearticulate that entire discussion here.

The question is, does *auto*-ethnography escape these types of challenges? I would immediately submit, no, it does not. Occupying the roles of both researcher and subject may eliminate some of the boundaries that divide the two; however, there are still powerful narratives (social and personal), interacting categories of identity, and ideological orientations that all function in the consciousness as organizers of knowledge in potentially blinding ways so that discovering truth even from one's own experience may be extremely challenging, perhaps even more so if one's experience is traumatic, or

painful, or shameful. On the other hand, if that experience is a great source of pride, strength, or power it may be equally difficult to dismantle.

In other words, autoethnography is not the instant solution to all our scholarly problems. But it is most definitely a valuable research method and so the difficulties that come with scrutinizing one's own experience should not be taken lightly.

Autoethnography is not easy social science; it's not a shortcut and it's not self-indulgent. The data isn't anecdotal or it wouldn't be suitable for autoethnographic inquiry—the aim is not to generalize but to give voice to a personal experience in such a manner that it is meaningful to others and reflects larger social or cultural conditions (Baías, 28).

The possibility of biased reporting here is significant, the most effective counter to which being a process of intensive self-interviewing. If the fundamental advantage to auto-ethnography is access, then bold introspection is essential to realizing that advantage. The greatest difficulty of autoethnography may lie in the resistance to one's own biases and emotional attachments to personal narratives. These are narratives that may have been constructed unconsciously or perhaps through larger social (hegemonic) narratives. One's narrative construction could very well be the primary site of interrogation because a personal narrative, just like an ethnographer's research subject, can, in a manner of speaking, lie.

The rigor of autoethnography is located in one's willingness to endure deep self-interrogation, to respond openly, and to analyze the data as dispassionately as possible. I use the word *dispassion* here with the understanding that any process of analysis will always be situated and embodied and, therefore, always be influenced by one's passions. I'm not suggesting that one could actually produce a purely objective autoethnography—

those terms are clearly contradictory—but the application of our logical faculties can be useful at various stages of analysis. The hope is to hold those passions in tension with logic, not to eliminate them altogether.

Different bodies with different affiliations to power structures may respond to this call for self-interrogation with varying levels of resistance; however, I believe no matter how powerful or oppressed one's body might be, the process of identity construction occurs in the same way, through the interactions of one's personal conditions/experiences with the social and material conditions of one's existence. From a social justice perspective, there's no advantage in turning away from these ongoing embodied interactions, but there is certainly much to lose. Self-interrogation should not strictly imply an examination of one's own power, but also a way of noticing and understanding one's behaviors, emotions, cultural practices, etc. as they are produced through various structures of power, no matter what one's relationship is to those structures.

In short, *self-interrogation* is a term I use here as a hyper-deliberate process of self-awareness through a critical lens, irrespective of one's social capital. In cases of extreme oppression, such introspection may be physically and psychologically impossible (or at least very difficult); however, I believe an ongoing process of critical reflection is not only possible and highly productive for a substantial portion of the American population, I also believe that such self-interrogation performed at a large scale throughout society is precisely the path to noticing and eliminating the conditions of extreme oppression for those who cannot.

The process of self-interrogation can be developed and represented creatively through collaboration or multi-layered self-critiques (for examples, see Diversi and

Moreira, 2009). Or one might produce an inner dialogue, in which questions and responses are exchanged with oneself, without locking either voice into the designation of *interviewer* or *interviewee* since both are in the same body, and both may direct equal skepticism toward the other. Questioning the questioner can be an effective way of uncovering concealed affiliations to power. (Why have I asked these questions in particular?) Self-interrogation may also benefit from a more methodical approach, that is, some structured set of questions intended to excavate the experience at multiple levels of thought, including sensory, emotional, physical, historical, social, cultural, legal and political factors (among others) that reveal different, previously unnoticed, perspectives.

Dennis suggests a process of analysis she calls *devising* in which the creator “literally and metaphorically lays all sorts of things out in front of them and begins to mix and match, and play and question how the things might interact and come together. It is a process of deconstruction and (re)construction, and then (re)organization for performance to an audience. The way things are organized emerges from a blend of intuition, conceptual or thematic structure, aesthetic and contextual knowledge and artistic purpose. The creative process is made transparent” (232). The transparency of analysis is a vital component to all performance scholarship, including autoethnography, which is precisely what marks its own performativity and situatedness.

The point of such an exhaustive style of inquiry is to overwhelm the human tendency to explain or describe experiences according to familiar discourses in which particular vantage points are excluded. The sheer volume of data can fill out the narrative with contexts that may be surprisingly illuminating. Of course no approach to self-interrogation is going to transcend the ideological character of all interpretation and

representation. This process has to be understood somewhat hermeneutically, allowing that presuppositions will always exist in one's analysis. That which is presupposed can only be acknowledged and bracketed out. Otherwise, one may become lost indefinitely in even the briefest narrative analysis.

D. Representation and Critique

One's method for self-interrogation and analysis may or may not be presented in the final autoethnographic product. The representation may be poetic or analytical, a digital or embodied performance, or some other visual or aural medium, an aesthetic strategy that most effectively achieves the researcher's aims. Aesthetic choices are always ensnared with ideology and power; there is no escaping this. An autoethnographer may produce a performance that resists aesthetic conventions; however, as explicitly non-conventional performances, they still function against a backdrop of conventions, and so do their own work to reproduce norms. For example, this dissertation-performance is meant to disrupt the norms of narrative construction, but in order for it to be appreciated as such, one still must understand conventional narratives as normative.

The point is not to throw up one's hands, but to remember that power is always present and wants to be static and sedimented. The goal will always be to keep representations dynamic, to continue roiling that which becomes sedimented, and to challenge all conventions, even if today's conventions were yesterday's critiques (Goltz, 36). In a political sense, contrasting categories or dichotomies may be formed or employed to reveal systemic oppression (race, gender, etc.) but ultimately the hope is for those categories to dissolve in the popular consciousness altogether, physically present

but not politically meaningful. There may be occasions where it is pedagogically or politically useful to employ popular aesthetic styles in slightly innovative or ironic manners just to capture the attention of a generally uncritical audience. Ultimately, awareness and acknowledgement of such choices distinguish an effective and responsible performance from that which is built around indifference and willful naiveté.

Whatever mode of representation is used, the autoethnographer (as opposed to, say, a poet or visual or performance artist) should feel obliged to answer for those choices in an academic setting. “If autoethnography is epistemic, then the evidence of how we know what we know must reside in the aesthetic crafting of critical reflexion upon the body as evidence” (Spry 2011, 19). It is this concern over evidence that creates an obligation. For performance scholarship to function as a contribution to a larger academic conversation, researchers must be prepared to account for the techniques and strategies they’ve employed.

This, to me, is the central difference between autoethnography and art for art’s sake—the researcher *must* take part in audience reception and critique and assume responsibility for the material presented, while the artist does not necessarily have to. This is not to say that one must decode an artistic representation and drain it of its visceral meaning, but be willing to engage the academic community and discuss the ideological/theoretic work that the product is attempting to do. So one might ask, for instance, if a given work succeeds in some way in connecting with an audience, then what are the conditions that made that connection possible? What larger social constructs does this work depend on in order to achieve its ends and to be meaningful?

There are many choices to be made at the stage of representation that are tied to the function of the work and to its audience. What does the autoethnographer want this product to do? Develop theory? Perform pedagogically? Raise consciousness in an activist setting? Perhaps one wants to examine a personal (potentially traumatic) experience as a process of growth, recovery, or healing. These are vastly different goals that usually have different audiences who will likely engage the autoethnographic material in very different ways.

So the strategies of representation are crucial and wide-ranging, from the purely visceral to the purely positive, and yet there is no truly absolute purity in this continuum, just the notion of purity, like the concept of infinity. For example, I decided that this dissertation-performance would be best delivered as a visceral experience through poetic-styled prose, but as I set out to create this performance, I would have to acknowledge that whatever poetic or artistic strategies I employed to produce such a visceral experience, would never be free of ideology or reason, so I could never claim a purely alternative way of knowing.

And where the visceral experience fails to be visceral through some failure in my ability to captivate an audience through art or emotion, then the work forfeits its claim to visceral knowledge production and is left standing as a straightforward, logocentric (and perhaps poorly constructed) argument. Finally, where the visceral experience is achieved, that is, where people are indeed moved to feel the events rather than, say, comprehend them through more rational terms, I must utterly yield authority, or ownership, or authorship over any truth claims or knowledge production that might occur in response to

my performance. To do otherwise would be to strip it of its visceral capacity and undermine the very possibilities it presents.

This is the challenge of political art. One longs to declare a situation or a system unjust and see reforms arise as a result; and yet, one knows that such declarations too often fall on apathetic ears and so one creates art laden with emotion and tragedy to move the audience to new viewpoints and action. Meanwhile, the ideological/subjective character of such performances are often represented as undeniable human truths by virtue of their sheer horror. There is often a positivistic undercurrent that comes along with performances of heightened pain, which can have precarious effects on the performance's ability to generate open conversation. Performances of pain, embodied or textual, can be created to expose certain truths; however, they can also shield others truths from consciousness or conversation. Here again, the performance scholar faces the obligation to participate in critique.

Personally sensitive materials can function as both the point of a performance and the very thing that stifles critique—both internally and externally. So the autoethnographer must see it as an ethical obligation not to deflect criticism based on the personal nature of the performance. When personal experience is presented as data, it is done so with the intention of illuminating larger social phenomena and promoting social justice, and with an acceptance that the relationships of those data to social phenomena will be evaluated by others. It's not a matter of determining a correct interpretation; rather, it's a process that allows, even encourages, multiple interpretations to float up and mingle together in one space in such a way that new understandings are made possible

that never were before (Goltz, 37). In this sense, it's the possibilities and the multiple interpretations that we strive for that create an obligation to participate in critique.

One of the main justifications for art as knowledge is that it conveys that which cannot be expressed through language. So when a social justice claim is made explicitly in a performance, its artistic form seems suddenly beside the point, or worse, ideologically manipulative. The pathos of performance/rhetoric has been criticized since Plato for precisely this reason. The difficulty is shifting the focal point of one's work from product to process and the locus of knowledge production from the voice of one to the interactions of many, and this is no less a challenge within the performance community. Pelias remarks, "Whether knowingly or not, performance scholars have not escaped the considerable institutional authority of positivist logics" (x).

Performances with political aims (especially those delivered within the social justice community) have an unfortunate tendency to be artistically lifeless or unimaginative, resting on their political laurels, so to speak—that is, carrying expectations for positive reception based entirely on the performance's message of social justice. Pelias comments further, "These accounts often seem flat, even boring. They serve to document that a particular performance has occurred, but in the reporting they strip the performance of its life, of its soul" (ix). Performances like these are, nevertheless, often received with positive feedback, on the basis of their social justice claims from audiences who serve more as support groups than sites of political movement.

The epistemological and aesthetic shifts that are called for in performance studies challenge scholars to genuinely let go of their truth claims, to yield publication credits,

and authorship, and citations to a process of unpredictable, undeterminable, unstructured, multiple interpretations. They further challenge the academy to let go of a system of power that inherently and absolutely demands explicit truth claims, authorship, and citations in order to perpetuate its own existence. Performance work promotes an express intention of *listening* and creating space for further *listening*, rather than informing or persuading. For me, that is the bottom line of autoethnography.

E. Ethics of Representation

Tami Spry describes the moral imperative of autoethnography as “situated in its aesthetic craft as in its epistemological potential. The depth of knowledge generated (epistemology) by performative autoethnography is directly related to its aesthetic acumen; and just as autoethnography is a critical moral discourse, the aesthetic crafting of autoethnography is a sociocultural and political action...Here performance autoethnography operates as a movement of epistemologically embodied art crafted within and between representations of power and powerlessness” (2011, 106).

With Spry’s moral imperative in mind, I want to offer my own formulation of an ethical position, which I’ve drawn foremost from Levinas and his works *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and *Otherwise Than Being* (1981). While I will attempt to convey my understanding of Levinas’ theories to some extent, I don’t believe it will be productive for me to attempt a comprehensive explanation of his work here, especially because his writing seems specifically intended to perform the uncertainty and dynamism of his ethical domain, as much as explain it.

One of Levinas' priorities is to point out the failing attributes of reason as a framework for ethics and one can immediately recognize his appeal for performance scholars who are making similar arguments through other means (i.e. Conquergood, 147). Levinas proposes a pre-ontological ethical domain that curtly refutes Western metaphysics and philosophy. For Levinas, *being* is not the starting point of an ethical domain ("to be or not to be is *not* the question," he famously remarks), and therefore, reason cannot be employed to establish and/or understand it.

An ethical system established through reason (i.e. virtue, utility or duty) is one that must appeal to a logic other than that of ethics—ethics cannot be logical or it would not be ethical. A rational framework leads to conclusions and imperatives; it creates obligations and implies guarantees. What makes the ethical *ethical* is its utter lack of obligation and guarantee. Epistemologically, performance scholarship is generally oriented toward postmodernism, which is fundamentally organized around a lack of guarantees in the production of knowledge and an emphasis on continuing possibilities (Pollock, Denzin, Hamera and Madison, etc.).

Clearly, Levinas has not invented or discovered postmodern ethics. I view his contribution as an extremely powerful and valuable articulation of an ethical attitude that has always existed—that is, the ethical possibility has always been present throughout human history. It would have to have been if ethics is, in fact, pre-ontological. Furthermore, humankind has consistently demonstrated an ethical instinct in a great number of instances, in a great many bodies, some famous, some not at all. The more crucial question then, I believe, is how to encourage or develop real world (non-theoretical) conditions in which these instincts emerge more readily than not.

Levinasian ethics begins with the affective (phenomenological) encounter with another being—the face-to-face moment, in which “I” experience or feel the presence of another. This occurs in a moment before I gain the language to understand such an encounter. The face is bare and expressive; it is utterly vulnerable and yet it commands me, it commands my responsibility for its welfare. The face of the other is the face of authority over me, but it has no voice, and the command doesn’t carry without my authorization. I give authority and voice to the other to command my responsibility. This is a responsibility that carries no expectation for reciprocity. Responsibility is not conditional. And the authority I offer is limitless and my responsibility is limitless and, therefore, I remain in a permanent state of *striving* for the fulfillment of my responsibility, until death. If ethics could ever be achieved finally, there would be a collapse of the entire ethical domain. It must, therefore, be infinite.

Levinas’ crucial challenge to western metaphysics is its general orientation toward *the other*. Traditional ethics positions “I” as the primary and central point/moment/emergence of existence—all others are unknowable beings outside of consciousness, or otherwise put, *objects* to be understood only insofar as “I” experience them, and these others are to be (desperately) resisted, just as they will, in turn, be objectifying me. Mutual objectification creates an interminable relationship of distance, antagonism, domination, and resistance. The Levinasian call for unlimited responsibility or *being for* the other reverses this relationship in a most fundamental way that draws the two beings (neighbors) together, rather than pushing them apart.

Metaphysics is a totalizing logic in which others may be defined—not known in essence perhaps, but calculated based on their part in the sum. For Levinas, too, the other

is not known, but the vital distinction here is that the other can never be assimilated in any form into one's 'own' knowledge. Alterity is the absolute unfathomability and irreplaceability of the other—an element in the infinite universe that cannot be added up because there is no sum. And one's responsibility or *being for* the other precludes (or at least discourages) the desire to own them.

The third party is the complicating factor. "I" still remain responsible for each and every "other" that I encounter, but I find that they, too, are all encountering each other, entirely outside of my purview, and I have no way of understanding their relationship to each other; I can only observe them from afar. This distance introduces a difficult situation in which differences may be discerned, comparisons made, standards set, and so on and so forth, and therein lies the possibility, even the incentive, for *objectivity*. Both objectivity and alterity can only always be understood as *options*—"I" *may* locate myself (and others) in a totalized universe, or I *may* locate us in an infinite one.

This is the choice that humanity struggles with indefinitely, in every moment of becoming, day in and out, a choice that's never made free from ideology, discourse, or narrative, a choice that's never made once and for all, but a choice all the same. It is the choice itself and the concomitant risk of harm or death that one assumes in giving that choice to others that comprises the ethical domain. If the only encounter I were to ever face was with *one other* being, then perhaps I might understand this choice as simply right or wrong without much sense of choice or risk; however, with the infinite encounters in the infinite universe before me, and with others encountering each other, perhaps at my expense, what am I to do? How am I to decide? What is the ethical choice? How much risk must I assume? Here I stand in the political domain.

The Western privileging of objectivity over alterity can and has led to violent and oppressive attitudes and regimes, and human horrors; however, it would be a mistake to imagine that objectivity could be somehow eliminated from consciousness, thereby eliminating the horrors. The third party guarantees objectivity as an ineluctable condition of the social world. Reason is the faculty we've been afforded to deal with it. The problem is not so much with the presence of objectivity (or reason) as much as it is in the exclusion of alterity and with it the sense of responsibility and care, and affection, and empathy and love and all the things that bring humanity closer together rather than driving them farther apart.

This orientation toward others marks the crucial distinction between postmodernism (which for me includes embodiment) and logocentrism. It is the *being for* others that undermines the western logics of ownership, objectivity, domination, oppression, and all the violence that these produce. I view postmodern ethics and performance epistemology as not only compatible, but also mutually reinforcing and, in some respects, rearticulations of the same struggle for social justice.

With the dismantling of essences and the postmodern emphasis on process, the focal point must become representation and here we arrive at the notorious crisis (Denzin and Lincoln, Spry) because we find we cannot make any claims about the world that are not tied in to our personal histories and simultaneously to the social/cultural/political histories within which we are all situated. How can one convey knowledge that is embodied in a way that another embodied consciousness can perceive in common? I understand this as a problem of aesthetics with the term *aesthetics* representing a stylized doing rather than a standard of beauty. This is what performance is all about, as Hamera

points out: “performance is a loose knot binding aesthetics and social life” (Madison and Hamera, 7).

The performance scholar sets out to create an experience for the audience, to produce some kind of connection through performativity, artistic strategies, and available discourses, etc., and this performance may feel or appear analytical or poetic, it may sound intellectual or workaday or vulgar (all these terms relative), or it may achieve a blend of styles that in itself performs a certain kind of knowledge. But without the ethical foundation, one may produce a work that unconsciously excludes members of the audience. Performance scholars needn't presume comprehensive knowledge about the audience, but must try with all possible vigor to avoid constructing narratives whose logic inadvertently denies the humanity of others.

F. Performance Writing and the Performative I

Performance Writing can be understood as the natural methodological upshot of Performance and Auto- Ethnography where the relationships between body and text, researcher and researched, and subject and object, are increasingly interrogated. Performance, as Pollock notes, “has moved writing in the ‘writing of culture’ into a performance of frame such that (a) performance ethnography manifests given power relations in the poesis of their undoing, and (b) it not only allows for but requires various sensuous retellings and ongoing re-creations, in word and body” (2006, 325).

Alexander describes Performance Ethnography as “literally the staged re-enactment of ethnographically derived notes” (111). Spry obtains similar notes but from her own personal experience, so here the ethnography is auto yet still, like Alexander,

puts her findings onto the stage as a performance. “For the performative auto-ethnographer, performance is discovering the transformative force of experiencing the language of her body, experiencing the language she chose to ethically represent her body’s communions and collisions with others in culture” (2011, 157). The staged performance enables a tangible experience of the embodied language and also promotes an alternative mode of knowledge production and conveyance.

Performance Writing doesn’t eliminate the stage but redefines what a stage can be and locates the performance in the act of writing itself. The author composes within a set of material conditions, not unlike a stage, and through text performs aspects of identity and slivers of experience. The audience-readers then receive that performance under their own material conditions, to include the materiality of their own bodies. The physicality of text imposes certain constraints on the way knowledge may be organized, expressed and contained.

Dennis writes, “The capacity of the body, my body, my everyday body and my technically trained body is a central text in the piece. Despite what ideas I might have had the text was limited to what my body could write, be, represent, show and feel. Meanwhile, the slipperiness of memory simultaneously opened new spaces between in which to write” (242). Transformations in form from embodied knowledge to textual, and vice versa, can produce useful insights into the relationship between the two, insights that are often overlooked in a largely logocentric society.

All writing may be understood as performative in this sense, but performance writing, like performance scholarship in general, seeks to draw particular attention to the issues of embodiment that go into the production of a work, whether staged or textual.

The epistemological and ethical foundations are not different between a staged and written performance, only the strategies for production and representation; in short, the differences between performance media are primarily methodological, with varying emphases in the struggle to disrupt hegemonic discourses and practices both in and out of the academy.

Hall comments on the tenuousness of the term *performance writing*: “I think we always knew that there must never be such a thing as Performance Writing. It is not and was not a nameable practice or even a fixed set of practices. It was instead from the start intended as a name for a set of dispositions towards textual practice and enquiry, motivated by questions requiring both practical and speculative answers through writing and performance, their various interconnections, and their embeddedness in political economy, technology and practices of everyday life” (356). In other words, the most important function of this term is not to define the content of the writing but to announce an epistemological orientation that bears ethical implications.

There is a circular logic in the connectedness of performance and writing and ethnography, each of these terms being explained to some degree through the others. I view this as an unavoidable attribute of a closed and referential linguistic system, which attempts to name things discretely on the page, things that cannot be broken apart in body or practice. It’s the unavoidable byproduct of representation, in text and on the stage, in scholarship and everyday life as we negotiate our various competing identities in the cultural contexts through which we move. And this give’s rise to the Performative-I disposition.

Building from speech-acts (Austin and Derrida) to a sense of performativity where identity features are constructed over time through citational performances (Butler) or restored behavior (Schechner), in which, as Diamond explains, the *re-* in restored implies a preexisting discursive field within which the performative self can materialize something that exceeds knowledge (Madison and Hamera, 419). Diamond refers to performativity as *a thing done* and then Patraha redesignates it *a thing gone* meaning that the materialization achieved through performance always stands against a backdrop of loss or disappearance (Madison and Hamera, 8).

But the notion of performativity must be taken in the postmodern sense, that is as fractured and without essence, in order to avoid the assumptions bound up with a modernist 'I' in which identity is imagined as something that emerges mainly from within the individual (Pollock, 2007). This is not meant to abandon our commitment to embodiment as a site of knowledge, but to emphasize the point that biological processes and individual propensities, attitudes, talents, disabilities, physical features, and so on, are only made meaningful (only made real) through social (usually dominant) discourses and narratives. And, conversely, social narratives are constituted through the practices and utterances of all the bodies they comprise.

Lee Roloff writes, "In the performance of personal narrative, I am the text that is performed. When it is the 'I' that performs, what performance becomes, then, is the transformation of my outer and inner lives, a transformation of the vastness of interiority" (1997, 241). How I understand myself, how I arrange my life experiences, thoughts, feelings, etc., into a personal narrative can only be achieved through some partial correspondence of my own story with the story of the social world in which I live. The

problem here is in the singular form of the word *story* that quietly implies that my story bears a singular source—my body. And likewise the *story* of society is understood in the common sense as also having a singular origin, from which history unfolds in a naturally linear, albeit complex, trajectory. But theories of performativity shatter this singular sense of self and society, both literally and figuratively.

Since my *story* is created and conveyed through multiple and competing orders of discourse and through embodied interactions, then my story, my entire identity, must be a microcosm of those competing discourses intermingling with all the features of my body. Under the heading *Fragments* Spry writes, “The researcher positionality of a performative-I approaches the auto/ethnographic process/text as wreckage or rupture of linear concepts of meaning-making allowing fragments of experiences to be articulated and arranged in a collage or bricolage form” (2006). There can be no *single* story, no truly singular interpretive frame through which to understand the world or the self in any unified sense or produce representations that are held together with a singular logic. And yet there remains a powerful common sense that stories are just that—singular.

This is the effect of sedimented discourses, dominant narratives, normative values, etc., that urge one particular way of understanding the world, a particular story that privileges certain bodies over others. This is precisely the tendency that performance scholars seek to unsettle and why the notion of a ‘performative-I’ emerges in the first place. The single story is the story of power, a story in which some bodies can find themselves, while other bodies cannot. The single story conceals far more than it reveals and produces disenfranchisement rather than community.

Quoting Madison, Spry writes, “Representation happens at different points along power’s spectrum—we are all ‘vehicles and targets’ of power’s contagion and omnipresence” and adds, “The performative-I disposition encourages the researcher to locate self in relation to others in the both/and of ‘power’s contagion’ seeking to understand how we—as both vehicles and targets—can effectively negotiate and transform power’s contagion, and to continually inoculate ourselves against the danger of a single story” (2011, 62).

An embodied epistemology implies that knowledge is both communally constructed and inherently interpretive. What the performative-I disposition draws attention to are the ways in which discourses compete through our bodies, through our performances of daily life, and through our practices and utterances. Each story, each utterance, each action represents a choice, a choice that is ideologically weighted. I can no longer think about *my story* as a matter of fact or truth and I can no longer convey that story as a unified or coherent record of events existing apart from the representational choices I’ve made.

In my dissertation-performance, I want to perform this very dynamic, a narrative that highlights the performative-I. A performance writing piece may be undertaken and produced with an understanding of its fractured nature and the multiple discourses drawn upon to create it; and yet, the narrator voice can still perpetuate an illusion of coherence and singularity through its own consistency. My vision for a performance narrative is to enable the reader to witness the voices shift and compete in such a way that the process of its becoming is further illuminated and the illusion of coherence is disrupted to some degree.

My intention is to personify various voices, as characters, through which an interior dialogue can be delivered; however, these voices are not meant to represent particular or discrete orders of discourse. Each voice respectively represents still further bundles of competing discourses. The layers of identity are infinite and the deconstruction of voice can, therefore, go on indefinitely without ever coming to any resolution. My intention, further, is to point to that very characteristic of the narrative voice in any narrative moment, not to suggest a final destination. The process of deconstruction cannot function productively on its own; it enables innovative reconstructions of one's narrative in ways that can have material effects on one's life that then prompt further deconstructions and reconstructions, and so on and so forth.

Narrative implies a sense of motion to me and the interaction of theory and practice is what makes that movement possible. And while this interaction is understood perhaps broadly enough at the philosophical level, I feel there are many unexplored opportunities for innovation in the ways that individuals employ that relationship with the explicit intention of resituating themselves in the social world. If one's agency is understood in degrees relative to how actively one resists normative practices or dominant discourses, then a perpetual process of deconstruction and reconstruction of one's narrative can function as a source of empowerment if that process actually prompts new attitudes and behaviors and disrupts the tendency of all discursive formations, personal and political, to become sedimented, normative, and hegemonic.

Suddenly the multiplicity of voices and contexts becomes pivotal to an innovative existence. One can define context—that which frames the narrative—in many different ways. A different theoretical framework, for example, can redefine the terms of the

narrative as well as a different country, a different style of conveyance, or even a different medium of communication. Moreover, the terms themselves—the contents of the narrative—are interchangeable as well. In the spirit of *nomadic thought* one can swap out details, reorient one's lens, broaden or reduce the scope, etc., all in the frenzied and endless effort to “break constraints and open new vistas” (Massumi, 1992).

“The subjectivity that comes into being in the interplay of power and resistance consists of a changeable collection of fragments among which the struggle between powers and resistances take place. A panorama of possible experiences, modes of conducts and reactions open up. The ‘I’ is not a unity but a wide range of experiences, intentions, desires, powers, movements, souls and the like. A multitude that can not be designated in any other way in Western language usage than by the word ‘I.’”

I draw from Foucault's *technologies of self* and *aesthetics of existence* and this remark of his in particular has become my mantra: “Make life a work of art.” That is to say, that the stylization of self is an ethical project. I do not reinvent myself for vanity or diversion. I reconstitute myself discursively, subversively, and imaginatively, through whatever means available, with the specific intention of disrupting my own relationship with structures of power. This cannot amount to merely word play. Like theory, it only becomes meaningful when it is injected into the bloodstream, and lived through the body.

Making life a work of art is what I think of as creative subjectivity, a project that inherently requires perpetual scrutiny of relationships. I cannot reconstitute myself in a vacuum. Who am I to you? And vice versa? And what can we do, you and I, to reconfigure our relationship, even if only slightly, to produce new possibilities for speaking, and knowing, and being, and doing? And tomorrow, when the discursive

formation has been scattered somewhat and the new possibilities of yesterday become the sedimented discourses of today, we will, you and I, look for new ways to reconfigure ourselves again. So then, making life a work of art, as an ethical mode, implies that the work will never be completed, that the making will never end, and that the art can never be finally judged.

One of the central thematic emphases of my dissertation-performance is methodological, and that method is intended to apply to both the production of scholarship and the ongoing negotiations of life. So the narrative presented in my performance will be focused primarily on the interactions of character-voices situated within a particular sociopolitical context and how those interactions make visible ‘constraints and new vistas’ and expose new pathways.

One might say that such a narrative simply describes life as it is already occurring, that this is not representing anything innovative at all, and to some extent I’d agree; however, I believe that the common sense in the social world does not encourage a deliberate noticing or acting upon such discursive interactions. My hope is to, first, illuminate the interacting voices of identity as a theoretical proposition and, second, to suggest, through a story device, the potential for agency through heightened awareness of competing discourses and concerted actions that can figuratively and literally shift the very ground one walks on.

The phrase *performance of knowledge* might be thought of as redundant, especially if one assumes an embodied epistemology; however, in the context of a logocentric academy and a society in which knowledge is so widely understood as strictly discursive, explicit performances of the *performance of knowledge* are important in the

struggle to illuminate the great gap produced in a conception of knowledge that overemphasizes reason or attempts to segregate rational thought from practice, emotional and sensory data, and biological processes.

The inextricability of these elements may not be difficult to conceive theoretically; and yet, the organizing principles of society and the standards for knowledge production within the academy remain to a great extent logocentric, refusing or resisting the legitimacy of more creative (rather than analytical) expressions of knowledge. So when one talks about *performance writing* being or doing something more than other forms of writing, the point that I believe is being made is that the performance writing piece emphasizes the doing nature of knowledge.

The ways in which writing can convey this doing nature are infinite, limited perhaps only by one's imagination but I'll make note of a few examples here. One simple manner in which text can perform beyond linguistic means is through a manipulation of its formatting. Fonts, spacing, page orientation, etc., play a role in how the words are received. Formatting conventions for dissertations in the academy not only enforce a positivist attitude toward knowledge production but also deny a range of cognitive responses to such simple visual variations. When one's eye and brain must leap around the page or navigate different formatting innovations, one is immediately prompted to consider the process of creating or doing that formatting conventions tend to mask.

Keeping my body in mind, so to speak, I think it's valuable to note that my performance of the act of writing always involves multiple readings aloud as a mode of revision. I cannot write in silence, in my head, through thought alone. I need to speak the words, feel them in my mouth, rolling off my tongue and lips, and hear them in the air

around me, before I am satisfied that these are the words that best deliver my intent. Therefore, it makes sense to me that my writing is best conveyed through me personally reading aloud to an audience. I may not always have that opportunity with every audience but I write as though I will.

And I believe, further, that when another person reads my work, even in silence, that the words will have a percussive aural texture that the reader will feel because I've performed my writing through this embodied mode. One might argue that a similar phenomenon occurs in every instance of writing, and that may be so; however, I consider it important to explicitly call attention to this performative/physical aspect of writing as a part of my epistemological commitment to embodiment.

Text is always, at best, an approximation of a moment of consciousness. An embodied epistemology makes this obvious enough; however, the logocentric tradition encourages an understanding of text as a sort of mirror image of thought, albeit symbolic. So rather than conceiving text as a translation of thoughts, we can understand it as a performative product that is meant to be experienced viscerally in another body in ways that correspond (relatively) to the author's own visceral experience. This is different than a process of encoding and decoding, which I think places faulty emphasis on the text as the object of meaning rather than on the experience of it.

This orientation toward writing broadens the possibilities for text as a medium of exchange and, therefore, how that text is structured, styled, and formatted. The context within which the text is produced and received are integral to the experiences of it because both are somatic events, with different bodies living under vastly different conditions, and because language is neither static nor self-encapsulated. This means that

writing cannot be understood as anything other than performative despite the long tradition of scholarship that claims otherwise. So here again we might regard the term *performance writing* as redundant; and yet, given the broad deference to objective/empirical research in the academy, from an activist standpoint, this redundancy remains for the moment quite valuable.

Employing an array of styles and voices, integrating poetry and theory for example, or incorporating images, are other means by which one might signal the performative nature of writing (Pelias 1999, Denzin 2003). These aren't superior modes of representation; but they're modes that intentionally signal the subjectivity and situatedness of all texts, and I view that as another important task in the context of contemporary positivism. My dissertation-performance will be an attempt to demonstrate knowledge production as a doing while simultaneously creating another experience of doing for readers in the ways they interact with the text.

I understand narrative construction as occurring within a postmodern social context that enables infinite interpretations and reinterpretations, which is what makes the narrative a performative accomplishment rather than the product of inevitability or historical determination. Nevertheless, the narrative remains a method for organizing data in one's head and corresponding one's experience to larger social discourses and narratives, so despite the limitless layers of context and possibilities in this postmodern condition within which the narrative is constructed, the construction itself has the potential to reproduce a sense of unity or objective coherence of facts and events.

I'll return to a broader discussion of narrative and postmodernism in the sections to follow, but I've inserted this point here as a part of my logic for performance writing.

My intention for this dissertation-performance is to convey an experience in which there is an accumulated sense of stability or linearity through a non-linear process of development that highlights the contingent foundation of any narrative structure. In other words, I want to perform a narrative that produces a structural feel but that is not rigidly structured, a feel that is generated through a sequence of internally referential experiences and ruminations that become increasingly meaningful as those references accumulate and amass.

I feel this closely reflects the formations of personal and social narratives in everyday life, narratives that are so heavily layered with whole histories of interpretations and representations that they cumulatively produce concrete impressions of the world but that, in fact, have no discernible origin and, therefore, no definite external basis for which to build any structure at all. Our narrativized lives bear a constant tension between materiality and meaning, or between discursive formations that produce real structure in social life and the illusion of a structure that is ontologically prior to consciousness and interpretive mechanisms.

The aim of my dissertation-performance is to give myself an opportunity to write with a heightened sense of my own performativity, my own doing of identity, and then to subsequently make the experience of reading the narrative as a performative act as well, on the part of the readers, a conscious doing of meaning making as they engage the text. This is where my emphasis will lie in producing a work that I can characterize as *performance writing*. With this in mind, I want to shift my focus now to the function and character of narrative as a mode of making meaning and shaping identity.

G. The Performative Road to Radical Politics

I'd like to open this section with a few words by Della Pollack, whose perspectives on performance, postmodernism and social justice resonate in particular for me. This passage comes from her article titled *The Performative "I"* (2007) and directs our attention to the role of performance in the ongoing search for a way forward. I find her articulations on these matters especially powerful and I think they set the tone well for my discussion to follow. Here, Pollock is commenting on Judith Butler's observations about identity formation and the inevitable failure of individual performances to meet or match gender ideals.

Pollock writes, "Butler finds hope in failure. If the illusion of selfhood depends on repeated acts in time, then (quoting Butler 1990, 141) 'the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relations between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction'" (242). Here Pollock responds, "Failure is not enough."

It is not enough to reveal the phantasmatic nature of identity or to see, as Diamond does, the tension between the thing done and the doing of it as primarily an opportunity for (as yet idealist) critique. For Butler and Diamond, performance remains performativity's weak sister—a kind of incidental tremor in a system that depends on live repetition for its upkeep. I want to claim more power for performance: to think about the tension between the thing done and doing as a collision of past and present producing the excess of what's as yet undone, what's yet to be done. I want to think about how performance propels us forward into a future world, a world full of dangerous and fantastic possibilities" (243).

These 'dangerous and fantastic possibilities' seem to me to be the only reason to think about performativity at all. Generally speaking, I work under the assumption that all

social life and the ever-evolving and morphing web of interactions that comprise it are performative in nature, but that there's not a high degree of awareness in society about performativity or how it operates through bodies. So here I'll provisionally use the term *critical performance* simply to refer to acts, utterances, interactions and other types of expressions that are performed with a specific intention to demonstrate both performativity and its implications for power dynamics in the world.

This isn't meant to suggest that people who understand theories of performativity are inherently more conscious of its presence in their daily lives interacting with others or within their own bodies; however, I would like to focus this part of the discussion on those performances that *do* have a critical intention in order to offer some viewpoints on the relationship between critical performances and social justice, and to talk about where I think my dissertation-performance fits in.

We might think of a critical performance (literary, theatrical, scholarly, etc.) as a *moment* or a *part* or a *segment* within a larger conversation, a conversation that never ends and is occurring at multiple social levels simultaneously, from the immediate space of the performance all the way to the happenings around planet and beyond. Thinking of a performance as but a *segment* is crucial to its value as a critique of power and as an experience that embodies one's vision of social justice. That is to say, the performance itself should correspond practically with the political vision of that performance. Pascale makes a parallel observation in *Cartographies of Knowledge* (2011) about the inconsistencies in the social sciences between researchers' epistemological/ontological commitments and their methodologies:

To the extent that social researchers assume, rather than account for, the ontological and epistemological commitments of social research, social scientific knowledge is bound to an unacknowledged, ideologically determined, and culturally biased production of knowledge. Both the practices and representations of the social sciences are constitutive of epistemic realities. As researchers, we know that “knowledge” and “truth” are polemical, strategic relations of power—our efforts to create just social research paradigms will always be imperfect, but we can do better” (164).

Both Pascale and Pollock seek strategies for putting their visions of social justice into *practice*, to disrupt current power structures and reveal new possibilities. This is the idea I’ve got in mind as I proceed through this discussion of performance and radical politics. I view the postmodern sense of knowledge as a ‘conversation without end’ as implicitly *inclusive*—the reason it cannot end is because of endlessly emerging perspectives—and so is an important piece in any model for participatory politics. This conversation is comprised of people who are all *Performative I’s*, all performers and audience members in turn and simultaneously, and significantly, all bodies, flesh and blood, nerves and emotions, thoughts and experiences.

Where knowledge is understood as co-constructed and shared, where identities are inherently ideological and narrative, where interactions are embodied not strictly discursive, where power is present in every relation in every moment indefinitely, I believe the only logical way to form a socially just society is to make this ‘conversation without end’ the process itself by which we organize ourselves. Social justice lies in the ongoing struggle for inclusivity and the concomitant resistance to hegemony. In the broadest terms, I suggest that social justice is pursued at three fundamental (but not hierarchical) levels, all mutually constitutive and all informed by a postmodern,

performance, and embodied epistemology. I'll refer to these levels here in shorthand as political, educational, and individual.

At the political, community and organizational level, we may consider the allocation of material and cultural resources, and the processes by which these are managed. This is usually the focal point of social justice movements of all kinds, probably because they involve the most apparent conditions and perhaps the most immediate concerns of our embodied existence. And yet, as has been observed extensively over the centuries, these movements often comprise performances (speeches, scholarship, creative productions, etc.) that are built upon foundations of, and reproduce, the very systems that they are intended to disrupt.

Clearly this is a problem far easier to describe than to fix. But as Laclau and Mouffe point out in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) in order for significant social change to occur, the discursive groundwork must first be sufficiently laid and widely embraced throughout society (155). This creates the necessary shift in the “social imaginary” for political activism to succeed and this explains their focus on issues of hegemony. There has been significant thinking and literature produced on participatory politics, to include that of Laclau and Mouffe; however, these ideals have not yet been accepted on a wide enough scale to overcome the deeply ingrained hegemony that exists in the United States.

For example, in *The Occupy Movement Explained* (2014) Nicholas Smaligo offers a detailed account of the efforts made to work collectively and create a functioning participatory process for decision-making and planning. His book doesn't specifically address 'embodiment' but many of the strategies and concepts employed in their

processes reflect an understanding of the importance of *the body* to radical democracy. Their model didn't privilege information or a particular critique over their methods of exchange. 'What you have to say, as an individual, is important, but how we share together is more important.' Nevertheless, while participants of the movement found these processes exciting and effective, there were even moments of invigorating self-discovery, there was not enough popular resonance with their methods to bring large-scale support to bear.

Mainstream/corporate media certainly played its role in diminishing the messages of Occupy, but I suspect they didn't need to do a great deal of labor convincing Americans not to support the movement and their rather odd looking practices. I further suspect that the political hegemony in the U.S. is largely bolstered by its deep-rooted positivism. Even among the most disenfranchised there seems to be fairly significant deference to cultural symbols of expertise (titles, credentials, race, gender, etc.) that are all grounded epistemologically in a particular kind of knowledge production and a particular kind of *truth* that authorizes some few voices/bodies to speak and be heard while de-authorizing most others.

At the level of knowledge production and education, there is the less apparent problem of epistemology that forms the interpretive framework for all social life. The relationship between epistemology and power is crucial to social justice efforts. Society's systems of education/pedagogy/scholarship are fundamentally connected with its social organization and political practices. Here, once again, I'm referring to ideas that have been substantially thought through and discussed. I don't want to attempt to recreate that conversation, but I do want to acknowledge it and mention its importance to my thinking.

For me, Paulo Friere represents the spirit of critical pedagogy (not the end state) and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) has significantly influenced my understanding of the correlation between education and politics. The processes by which we learn the world become the ways in which we understand ourselves in the world and the modes by which we act. Knowledge production is then subject production and plays a key role in conditioning people to not only obey hegemonic systems of oppression, but believe in those systems (hence hegemony), and this conditioning, as Friere notes, occurs at every level of citizenship (or non-citizenship) among both privileged and oppressed.

Friere writes, “Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything—that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive—that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness” (63). He remarks of students (in this instance adult learners), “Almost never do they realize that they too, ‘know things’ they have learned in their relations with the world and with other women and men. Given the circumstances which have produced their duality, it is only natural that they distrust themselves” (63).

Building a widespread acceptance that all people know things and that their experiences are indispensably part of both the knowledge that already exists in the world and the production of new knowledge is, in my view, the heart of the epistemological struggle. If this idea ever reaches the level of common sense then movements such as Occupy will surely meet more enthusiastic and active public reception. Positivism and the ‘banking’ concept of education that Friere explains are considerable barriers to such common sense ever being achieved. Like Laclau and Mouffe, and Smaligo, and many

others, Friere doesn't specifically address embodiment but his attitudes seem to me quite compatible with a somatic epistemology.

Implicit in the banking concept is the assumption of a dichotomy between human beings and the world or with others: a person is merely *in* the world, not *with* the world or with others; the individual is a spectator, not re-creator. In this view, the person is not a conscious being (*carpo consciente*); he or she is rather the possessor of a consciousness: an empty "mind" passively open to the reception of deposits of reality from the world outside...The teacher's task is to organize a process which already occurs spontaneously, to "fill" the students by making deposits of information which he or she considers to constitute true knowledge (75-76).

The 'empty mind to be filled' is an attitude that grows out of positivism, the idea that a total truth is, at least in theory, achievable and this prompts individuals to make claims on that objective totality just as one stakes a claim on objects, or in the ground. These kinds of claims negate human interaction as innately meaningful or as the source of meaning itself. And this is the crucial connection between epistemology and power, between education and politics; the positivist paradigm enables bodies to be negated through objective truth claims. This is the connection Friere wants people to notice:

Only through communication can human life hold meaning. The teacher's thinking is authenticated only by the authenticity of the students' thinking. The teacher cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thoughts on them. Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about *reality*, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication. If it is true that thought has meaning only when generated by action upon the world, the subordination of students to teachers becomes impossible (77).

Friere finds the locus of knowledge within the actions and endless exchanges between embodied beings. And for me what is so significant in this passage is the last line (above) where he finds political implications in this revised epistemology, where if it

is internalized at a large scale, the same scale, say, as positivism now lies, then subordination becomes impossible. This is the call for political reformation through knowledge production and this is also where Laclau and Mouffe pick up the conversation: “Our central problem is to identify the discursive conditions for the emergence of a collective action, directed towards struggling against inequalities and challenging relations of subordination” (1985,153).

While Laclau and Mouffe devote a great deal of attention to the challenges of radical democracy and to finding ways to resist hegemony through the conversation without end, they do so strictly within the realm of discourse. In their view, there is no accessible ontology; all knowledge is discursive, relational within a linguistic structure, and therefore ideological. For them, there is no objective reality that can ground one position or another in truth and so “meaning can never be ultimately fixed and this opens the way for constant social struggles about definitions of society and identity, with resulting social effect” (Jorgensen and Phillips 2002, 24).

As poststructuralists, Laclau and Mouffe don't have a totalizing attitude toward discourse; the contingency of language keeps meaning in permanent flux, which I agree with. And yet, I feel they lose some important value in their critique by neglecting the role of the body in social struggles. Whatever the discursive conditions of a given conversation in a given moment, the utterances of one body will invariably be interpreted differently and have different effects than the same utterance from a different body. One body may have access to the conversation, while others may not. Moreover, the privileging of discourse over somatic knowledge seems to inadvertently perpetuate a deference to reason, which in itself can marginalize those who experience and interpret

social life and express themselves through other means. All the problems of expertise and the skilled use of language are reproduced rather than eliminated.

At the political level, the theoretical distinctions between embodiment and discourse may seem to some merely semantic—so long as hegemonic discourses are resisted and inclusivity is the goal, we may all feel satisfied. But the project of radical democracy, participatory politics in general, and collective actions, cannot be built in theory or through text alone. Ultimately, we come to a moment where human interactions must take place, and these interactions occur through bodies, each of which holds a unique history of experiences and positions of power that have informed their interpretive tendencies.

Discourses do not compete outside of bodies and they do not compete at random. The narratives that different people adopt and transform into identities come as a result of their material existence in the world, the sensory input they've taken in, the emotions, the physical and biological conditions of their bodies in a political realm, and so on, and this to me is what enables an ethical attitude, one that pure language manipulations cannot account for. Power is power because bodies feel (in all sorts of ways) and while feelings may be approximated by language they can never be fully captured in words. As obvious as this may be, I think it's an important point to emphasize because it shifts the object of language from a representation of the real world to a representation of bodies, especially as they interact with each other.

From the political and educational moves toward social justice that are built upon embodiment and human interaction and taken up collectively, individual action necessitates concerted focus on performance and performativity. As I mentioned above, I

want to specifically address deliberate/marked critical performances rather than the (equally important) social performances of daily life, and this is to provide some rationale for the dissertation-performance that I intend to submit. Many considerations for the production, reception and critique of marked performances will certainly apply to unmarked social performances, and *both* categories of performance are absolutely vital to the educational and political work toward social justice.

If this were not the case, there wouldn't be any point in doing the marked performances in the first place. The marked critical performance should attempt to provide pedagogical value for some part or element of the other performative processes, whether at the political, educational, or individual level. I see critical performances involving minimally two stages of analysis, both centered on performativity and yet drawing one's attention in two opposite directions—inward and outward, an examination of *self* and *others*. I don't mean that *self* and *other* are truly separable categories; the two exist in relation to each other and within some shared global context, but I do think that it's important to devote heightened attention to each in turn, perhaps cyclically with the medium and context kept in view, until the two begin to merge somewhat organically through one's process of critique.

Regardless of the particular type of performance (medium, genre, style, etc.) or its message, one the most immediate tasks of the performer is to effectively connect one's *self* with the *audience*. But what is at stake here is the nature of connection, or, put more ironically, the *logic of connection*. What is the goal of the performance? It's not uncommon to hear performers talk of *moving* audiences and while this may connote a range of ideas, I believe that what's implied most universally is a movement *toward* the

performer. In other words, performances of almost every kind have an intrinsically persuasive logic. This may not be entirely negative or entirely true, but I do think it deserves some inquiry.

Rhetoricians have been studying and teaching methods of persuasion for thousands of years, especially in the West. And though one might think of persuasion as a form of coming together, the togetherness is, by definition, always on the terms of the persuader. Persuasion, then, is just another way of staking one's claim on an objective or total truth. Even in "dialogue" (a word I feel more often than not masks power dynamics), the logic of persuasion hinges on somebody winning and somebody losing; somebody's right and somebody's wrong. This logic fits neatly into the traditional Western metaphysical explanation of consciousness as in competition with the consciousnesses of all others, all striving to objectify and dominate one another. The following passage by Cooks (2000) reflects a similar concern about dialogue in the context of global conflict resolution:

Scholars discussing the use and abuse of "dialogue" as a means to conflict resolution among racial, ethnic, and cultural differences note that dialogue has only happened under conditions of white supremacy and/or conformity to the conditions and structure (for dialogue) of the dominant group. Moreover, conflict resolution "talk" toward racial and cultural understanding in the United States is often structured within relations of difference and based on hegemonic constructions of argument/debate and dialogue. Where argument and dialogue are positioned as oppositional terms, analysis of the Western tradition of debate and polarization of issues reveals the fundamental belief that the presentation and defense of position leads to dialogue and conversation. Such beliefs are rooted in beliefs about equality in presentation and representation of self (as non-gendered, non-raced, non-classed, etc.). Here, if one presents oneself effectively, advocating for representation and position, one is engaging in dialogue (273-274).

This is why Levinas rejected Western metaphysics and why he formed his ethical domain around the notion of *being for* one another rather than being against, or as Friere put it, “being *with* the world”. So where it comes to critical performances the logic of connection must be something other than persuasion. If one adopts an epistemology that is derived in human *inter-action*, then first, one cannot stake any claim because the ground is never settled enough to hold any stake—dynamism and inclusivity lie at the core of knowledge production, and second, one cannot really call a performance “meaningful” if it doesn’t bear the specific intention of co-construction with an audience and also regard itself as but a segment or a part in the larger never ending conversation, a conversation that strives above all to reform and align its own process with the ever-changing social and material conditions of the world.

In my view, there is a (literally) *logical* correspondence between competing consciousnesses, competing discourses, narratives, rhetoric, ideas and so on, competing bodies, competing corporations, and armies, and nations, all competing performances built on objectification, even those performances that are meant to advocate a good cause. Where the logic of connection and the goal of performances are centered on human interaction and creating space for the co-construction of new knowledge, the conclusion of a performance, marked or unmarked, can never be regarded as an end state or a final moment of resolution.

Admittedly, this is a highly idealistic vision of knowledge production and human communication; the world is nowhere near situated to adopt such a collective mentality. However, I do think that the road to radical politics and social justice will require significant epistemological and performative adjustments on a global scale. In the

meantime, marked critical performances can play a valuable role in expanding public awareness of performativity and its implications for social justice. And this brings me back to the production of a critical performance in which analyses of one's *self* and *others* in relation to each other and within a specific social/political context must occur.

While in theory such inward and outward critical analyses are not terrible difficult to grasp, I believe that the introspective operation tends to be far more difficult and more easily overlooked by even the most thoughtful and social justice minded individuals. As widely known as that old platitude is, "know thyself," I believe the biggest and most prevalent blind spot in the human consciousness is one's *self*. This is the area that I've come to pay the closest attention to and has a great deal to do with my attraction to autoethnography and personal narrative.

My entry point into conversations about the occupation of Iraq has always been storytelling, and the more storytelling I've done, the more I've directed my critique inward, not only toward my actions in Iraq, but toward my subsequent representations of those actions. As much as I might like to persuade audiences, if not outright demand of them, to universally agree that occupations and wars are a bad thing in the most absolute sense, I have slowly developed my storytelling strategy away from persuasion into deeper and deeper self-reflection with hopes of encouraging similar introspection and further sharing among audience members.

The scholarship I've encountered in Performance Studies has helped me to recognize that even when I do not try to stake any claim, even when I explicitly try *not* to, I nevertheless embody many claims of the world, that I may not even be fully aware of. So even the attitude of *sharing* or *being for* others can be undermined by my sheer

presence especially if I'm not acknowledging the claims and power structures that my body is affiliated with. This is where the need for rigorous introspection enters. For me, in the academic setting, autoethnography represents that crucial element in my logic of connection.

My dissertation-performance is not meant to capture or represent the full range of operations involved in creating social justice or performing some version of radical politics. I am focusing on the process of introspection and a range of possible expressions of those observations I've made as I look back at myself in moments past. One of the things that make sharing a critique of oneself in a public space so daunting is that it naturally heightens one's sense of vulnerability. I say this from a position of privilege and also as the participant of military actions that I view now as unethical, so being immersed in those issues I don't want to over-generalize for other people whose experiences have been quite different than mine; on the other hand, I do still believe that introspection and disclosure are universally challenging tasks.

I'd like to further point out that this dissertation-performance is written in a poetic style, which I'll discuss further in the following sections, but that isn't meant to suggest that radical politics inherently involves a lot of people sitting around sharing poetry with each other. However, concerted introspection is truly an important component of social justice actions at the individual, educational, and political levels and so I think it's still worth advocating this kind of work. Moreover, as logic, and reason, and rationality have all been so vigorously associated with positivism, patriarchy, and power in general, I think there is some value to occasionally expressing one's analysis in more emotional and

artistic terms, and there is value, too, in getting the world to acknowledge it as valuable. I'll close here with the famous quotation by John Dewey that seems quite relevant here:

As long as art is the beauty parlor of civilization, neither art nor civilization is secure (1934, 357).

F. Autoethnography and Personal Narrative

I want to acknowledge and address the distinct scholarly traditions from which autoethnography and personal narrative have emerged. I recognize that these two modes of inquiry have different genealogies and, therefore, to some extent different bodies of work to reference and draw upon. However, in my view, these terms do not imply or demand different political or epistemological orientations; in fact, I find the two traditions to be highly compatible with each other and overlapping significantly. Given the possibility that not everyone agrees on this point, I want to include here a brief discussion about how I've reached this conclusion.

Personal narrative as a scholarly mode has roots in autobiography and interpretation whose focus was primarily literary for the greater part of the twentieth century (Henderson, 2006). As social and political concerns became increasingly present, these departments grew or changed into Performance Studies, but the literary emphasis remains for many scholars doing personal narrative work. Autoethnography comes out of critical ethnography, which has its roots in anthropology and a more social science orientation; however, critiques of the political blind spots in such research led many scholars to question the value of observation without embodiment.

Embodiment and performativity have brought both literary and ethnographic research to the testimony of individuals. Whether these testimonies are constructed

analytically or poetically, whether they're characterized as personal narratives or autoethnographies, they have come to share some fundamental principles that are reflected in the literature of both. The remainder of this section will be dedicated primarily to the works and comments of scholars identifying their work as *personal narrative* in order to furnish a comparison of such work with my discussion above on autoethnography and, further, to explain my interchangeable use of these terms.

At the core of *personal narrative* in performance studies is an epistemology that recognizes the significant role of the body. Kristin Langellier, who was commenting on the disembodied voice of modernist literature, observed that the voice needs a body and the body a voice. She went on to say, "These movements to reclaim voice *and* body ground personal narrative performance: to narrative, the personal gives body; to lived experience, narrative gives voice" (1998, 207). In Madison and Hamera's *Handbook of Performance Studies* they write, "Somebody performs personal narrative. Some body performs a story; somebody voices experience through a body. Embodiment makes all performance possible, but even more explicitly so for personal narrative when voice and body coincide in performance" (157).

As with autoethnography, once the body is introduced into one's epistemology, the nature of knowledge production changes radically. Knowledge is constructed collectively through infinite interactions, and utterances, and social and cultural performances, all of which are situated in a body, geographically, historically, politically, and so on, and more importantly performed in relation to other bodies (Perez and Goltz, 2010). This puts a heavy ethical burden on researchers who want to use personal stories

as scholarship to ensure that they remain highly reflexive about the structures of power within which such scholarship is produced.

Scholars doing personal narrative within performance studies are acutely aware of the political implications of their work. Embodiment and performativity drive the conversation of personal narrative into the dynamics of power in society. Peterson and Langellier write, “we take as our beginning point the position that all personal narratives have a political function and that we must confront performance issues within structures of power” (1997, 136). And at a time when personal narrative was beginning to capture a great deal of attention in performance studies, Langellier warned, “Without performativity, personal narrative is a performance practice without a theory of power to interrogate the constitution of subjectivities and ordering of text/context relations” (1998, 209).

This is the core of the work and this requires of the writer/researcher a concerted effort not to allow one’s narrative to become utterly solipsistic or self-indulgent. In talking about narratives of healing, Theresa Carilli warns about this very real and common tendency: “The personal narrative has the potential to transcend all quantitative and qualitative research methods, and stand alone, giving epistemological information and insight into the communication process. Yet when authors of personal narratives construct in-process narratives with the intention of obtaining ego gratification, the narratives might appear ‘verbally promiscuous’...and can seem unnecessarily self-disclosive” (1997, 232).

The critical intention is imperative. A personal narrative, like an autoethnography, is a site for challenging the discourses and social narratives that shape or influence or

constrain the identities and stories of individuals. For example, Corey writes, “The personal narrative is one way of disturbing the master narrative, and through the performative dimensions of the personal narrative, the individual is able to disrupt—and, I dare I say *rewrite*—the master narrative” (1998, 250). More recently Perez and Goltz, building from Langellier, Madison, and Munoz, emphasize the political potential within personal narratives:

Personal narrative performers negotiate the tensions within a performative struggle for agency, resistively rendering the margins of invisibility and silence hyper-visible. Madison’s ‘performance of possibilities’ theorizes how performers present and represent Subjects as made and makers of meaning, symbols, and history. Performance theories mark what personal narrative performance *does*, potentially producing alternate subjectivities among performers and audiences and imagining alternate public formations (2010, 248).

So we see in both autoethnography and personal narrative that strong critical intention, not only for one’s scholarship but for one’s life. In the title of one essay, Julie-Ann Scott succinctly describes her reason for studying with Kristin Langellier: *Because I Needed a Way to Better See and Be in this World* (2013). That sentiment very closely aligns with my own motivation for coming to performance studies and taking up autoethnography/personal narrative—to examine the life I’ve led, to the power structures I’ve been invested in, and to find ways to alter that course in the future.

Generally, when one reviews the reference lists of articles written about autoethnography or personal narrative, one finds a tremendous amount of overlap between the two, and having noticed this, I recognize that the distinction between the two may not be so strongly felt in the Performance Studies community. Nevertheless, the two terms do remain distinct and one finds scholars selecting one or the other for themselves.

This category selection may have an influence on how scholars perform their work or talk about it, or how they subsequently situate themselves in the academy.

For instance, in Denzin and Lincoln's *Handbook for Qualitative Research*, '*personal narrative*' appears within a section on autoethnography: "Literary *autoethnographies* feature writers/researchers describing and interpreting their culture. *Personal narratives* as critical autobiographical stories of lived experience offer (public) audiences access to personal experience with the intent of politicizing aspects of human and social sense-making" (423). (This quotation comes from the third edition; the fourth edition has no listing at all of *personal narrative* in its index.) While I don't concur with the subsumption of personal narrative into autoethnography, I certainly support their collocation in a text for qualitative research.

In my dissertation-performance, I don't mark any sharp distinction between personal narrative and autoethnography; however, I imagine a stronger emphasis on autoethnography (as a mode of critical inquiry) in the stage of analysis of my story, while I imagine leaning more heavily toward the literary tradition of personal narrative at the stage of representation. This isn't a necessary division of methods—it's just how I identify with them personally. I understand my process very similarly as Carolyn Ellis describes hers in *The Ethnographic I* (2004):

I think and gather information like an ethnographer, but I try to write like a novelist or storyteller. Autoethnographic writing goes hand in hand with fictional techniques such as dialogue, scene setting, and plot development. These strategies allow me to show rather than tell, present a feeling for how life flows, and display the autoethnographic process as I teach it (335).

I've labeled my dissertation-performance an autoethnography precisely because of its literary form. I want to immediately signal the reader that this is not a narrative written simply for art's sake or as an opportunity for self-indulgent storytelling. It is a critical examination of a particular identity, my identity, which will be conveyed in a poetic style to illustrate points about epistemology, aesthetics, methodology, and representation. I want to close this section with one final, but important, quotation from Kristin Langellier, who was an extremely moving voice to me when I was first introduced to the personal narrative conversation:

As we perform and study personal narrative, we are aware that personal narrative exists in, through, and across the body. There is no way as narrator, researcher, or performer to 'step out of,' 'hide behind,' or evacuate the body in personal narrative performance. If in postmodern times, the voice needs the body and the body needs the voice, the future of personal narrative performance will be shaped by continuing to *critically* question the production of personal narrative (1998, 211).

APPENDIX C

NARRATIVE

A. Narrative Cognition

I don't perceive any special requirement for an autoethnographic work to be fit into a conventional narrative form. On one hand, an autoethnographer may challenge the conventions of narrative through artistic and technological reconfigurations within a performance. One may create an experience that works viscerally, emotionally, abstractly, and so on, with the precise intention of disrupting assumptions about knowledge production and truth. Or, on the other hand, one might produce a work of scholarship that closely adheres to normative academic conventions, both aesthetically and epistemologically, but then label it an autoethnography, which would be a performative move in itself.

The characterization of a traditional scholarly work as autoethnographic would, alone, evoke questions of authorship and perspective that might otherwise go un-discussed. The point is that there are many methods of performance and many possibilities for production. The expression of possibilities isn't merely a peripheral benefit to the production—it is the main point. I believe the value of autoethnography lies in its foundations, not its form. I want to move this discussion from autoethnography and personal narrative to narrativity because this dissertation-performance is written in the form of a story; therefore, I think it will be helpful for me to address a broader body of literature around narrative that is not restricted to performance scholarship.

I want to address the narrative of this performance piece as both a mode of representation that is embodied and situated, produced through the interrelationship of the personal and the sociopolitical, and, as a biological mechanism for cognition. My intention for this dissertation-performance has been to demonstrate an alternative form of scholarship and simultaneously perform a story as a moment of meaning making. The narrative is, I believe, most commonly understood as a stylized (re)formulation of *the facts* that occurs only after those facts are obtained through some other kind of objective analysis, a mode of inquiry that is generally assumed to correspond with the natural thinking process.

But the universality of the narrative through human history suggests to me that narrative operates at a more primary level of cognition. I believe that positivist scholarship is, in fact, produced through narrative understanding; it is a denaturalized mode of representation, more stylized and incongruous with human cognition than the narrative itself, and so it seems worth devoting attention to the ways narrative has been talked about as a basic cognitive, and therefore, universal human function. The universality of the narrative is perhaps best articulated in this lengthy passage by Barthes:

The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances—as though any material were fit to receive man’s stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting...stained-glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation (*continued on next page*).

Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself (Barthes, Sontag, 251).

The narrative is indeed there like life itself, so fundamental to human existence, that to cite experts on the matter, to refer to anyone at all, seems almost superfluous, like arguing that the heart must beat or the body must breathe. And yet I want to begin at that basic life level exactly because of the narrative's crucial role in human vitality. To jeopardize a person's narrative capacity or to edge a body out of the narrative universe is a throttling no less deadly than depriving it of air or blood.

This kind of urgent connection between life and narrative begins with the understanding that narrative is a fundamental cognitive mechanism. Narrative cognition spans from the construction and presentation of self (Sermijn, 2008), to the formation of memories, to a general processing of the world, as Mark Turner observes: "Narrative imagining—story—is the fundamental instrument of thought. Rational capacities depend on it. It is our chief means of looking into the future, of predicting, of planning, and of explaining" (1996, 4).

"Narrative capability shows up in infants...[coinciding] roughly, with the first memories that are retained by adults of their infancy, a conjunction that has led some to propose that memory itself is dependent on the capacity for narrative" (Abbott, 3). According to Jerome Bruner, "people use narratives as a means to understand the causes and consequences of life events" (cited in Herman et al 2005, 473). Peter Brooks

comments, “our definition as human beings is very much bound up with the stories we tell about our own lives and the world in which we live. We cannot in our dreams, our daydreams, our ambitious fantasies, avoid the imaginative imposition of form on life” (Abbott 2008, 3). The narrative is employed in psychoanalytic dialogues as well:

We are forever telling stories about others. These other, too, may be viewed as figures or other selves constituted by narrative actions. Other people are constructed in the telling about them; more exactly, we narrate others just as we narrate selves. The other person, like the self, is not something one has or encounters as such but an existence one tells. Consequently, telling “others” about “ourselves” is doubly narrative.

Manfred Jahn notes that the cognitive sciences themselves have begun to recognize the storied nature of perception, sense making, memory, and identity formation. David Herman describes the reversal of emphasis between cognition and narratives in this way: “Instead of focusing on how people make sense of stories, research on narrative as a cognitive instrument highlights how stories support or enhance intelligence itself...Furthermore, narrative affords a basis for ascribing roles to agents within such conceptually modeled story worlds—agents whose activities as characters can thus be situated within networks of beliefs, desires, and intentions. Or as Langellier puts it, “People make sense of their experiences, claim identities, interact with each other, and participate in cultural conversations through storytelling. Narrative is performed everywhere” (2004, 1).

The list of fields that have begun to investigate and employ narrative as a foundational framework increases all the time. We find narrative everywhere from psychoanalysis and its use of narration as psychoanalytic dialogues to computer science where the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology has been expanded to

include a new branch of research called Narrative Intelligence (NI). What I hope to convey here is that *narrative* as a cognitive function is deeply embedded in the epistemology of embodiment, and therefore, carries tremendous implications for scholarship and knowledge production of every variety.

The word *cognitive* here may seem to imply something strictly internal, operating inside the apparatus of an individual consciousness and, therefore, potentially or theoretically divisible from the social universe. Of course, this cannot be, and I suppose no rigorous argument is necessary to prove that point. On the other hand, the recent zeitgeist in popular culture around storytelling and the concomitant fascination with, or emphasis on, personal perspective has, I think, infused a common sense around the narrative that carries an unconscious (and perhaps romantic) deference to subjectivity that might even beckon the return of essentialist notions of identity. However, there is an inextricable link between personal and social narratives, a link which may be obvious to some, but I'd like to mark that interaction at this point with this brief passage based on the work of Bruner:

Occurrences must be interpreted in light of larger configurations of events (i.e. plots), whereas building up an understanding of the larger configurations in turn requires making sense of individual events. Analogously, humans construe particular behaviors of social actors by situating them in a wider context of assumptions about identity, while also using the specific behaviors to monitor the validity of those same interpretive frames (Herman et al, 350).

In other words, *knowledge*, which can be characterized as both socially constructed and embodied may also be understood as meaningful only insofar as it is narrativized. This leads to a curious category of psychological disorder referred to as Narrative Disorder, in which individuals have lost their ability to narrate the world. This

is studied as a failure in brain function or with particular cognitive processes with dire consequences. “Individuals with brain injuries in other sectors may lose their linguistic, mathematical, syllogistic, visuospatial, memory, or kinesthetic competencies and still be recognizably the same persons. Humans who have lost the ability to construct narrative, however, *have lost their selves*” (emphasis added) (Young and Saver 2001, 75).

The correlation between narrative and identity is crucial to my understanding of self and to this dissertation-performance, in which I intend to perform a dramatized version of the ongoing process of identity renegotiation and the struggle that is experienced when the ability to narrate oneself is jeopardized. Narrative failure and the collapsing of one’s identity occur simultaneously when one is unable to create a personal narrative that corresponds with larger social configurations; however, one can think of this correlation in more productive terms as well. Through an understanding of a narrative identity, one can enhance one’s agency in a discursively structured environment.

B. Narrative Time and Identity

I believe we may reasonably accept the above assertion by Bruner (and others) that personal and social narratives are bound together without much further questioning; however, I think Paul Ricoeur offers a way to understand how they are bound through time that is useful from a performance perspective because it rests fundamentally upon an assumption of embodied knowledge that enables precisely the connection I seek between the body and the material and social conditions of its existence. Ricoeur’s movement away from earlier models of phenomenology was brought about in part by his own firm

belief in embodiment as an epistemology; he consistently refused mind-body dualism throughout his studies.

Moreover, he rejected the ego as the originating point or moment in which the self comes into existence; rather, he stood in accord with those who have suggested that the self is realized as a response to the calling (or hailing) from others already present at the moment one is thrown into the material conditions of life. So for Ricoeur, self-consciousness is a result rather than a starting point of philosophy and it is his commitment to embodiment that draws him to the vital correlation between *time* and *narrative*.

Ricoeur develops Heidegger's *being toward death* into his own conception of *being in time* in order to provide a philosophy that would explain the human capacity to produce and comprehend narrative structure. The concept itself *being in time* is an expression of Ricoeur's embodied epistemology in that he understands existence as the experience of a body over time. The time component here is essential because it puts the body in motion and gives rise to his subsequent theories of narrativity. And conversely, what enables the comprehension or even awareness of time is the embodied experience of the present. In short, without the body, we have no access to time and, therefore, no narrative to speak of; without narrative, we have no ability to interpret or express understanding of our embodied experiences.

With the body in motion, Ricoeur, in *Time and Narrative Volume 1*, looks to motives for action as they relate to meaning and then, more importantly (and inseparably), to values or belief systems (1984, 63). So for Ricoeur this implies an ever-present ethical dimension to all human action, a dimension that I think corresponds in

many ways to Levinas' vision of an ethical domain. For one, Ricoeur suggests that time must be a pre-ontological condition of existence; time cannot be constituted by the consciousness without already itself constituting the embodied experience of consciousness. I think this gives us an opportunity to think of Levinasian responsibility (being for) the other as an embodied motive for action with time drawing the two together—both Ricoeur and Levinas arrive at the notion of “care” as a fundamental action within their ethical constructs.

However, when considering time as experienced in the body, it occurs to Ricoeur that there is a problem universalizing time as it was by Aristotle and, moreover, as it is popularly imagined now. This is a positivistic kind of time that moves in a steady and linear fashion (a series of nows) in strict accordance with the movements of celestial bodies irrespective of human experience. On the other hand, there is an internal time, what Saint Augustine (of Hippo) referred to as *time of the soul*. For Ricoeur, this can be understood as that highly subjective experience of time, dragging out or moving fast, depending on one's circumstances. And while both of these strike Ricoeur as true forms of time, neither one seems viable as a means to communicate experience with one another.

Narrative Time is Ricoeur's innovation to describe the human ability to bridge universal and internal time, and construct knowledge in a way that references the two that is universally comprehensible and yet not universal. So for Ricoeur, knowledge is the experience of a body over time, an experience that is, therefore, understood in narrative terms. Knowledge of self can only be understood through or against one's embodied experience in the world and conversely knowledge of the world can only be understood

through one's experience in it—that is, through one's knowledge of self. The two are reflections of each other.

In a discussion of identity, Stuart Hall writes, “The term ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual” (1988, 257). Communication of that knowledge (interpretation and representation) is meaningful only insofar as it is narrative and this is what Ricoeur contributes as an argument against structuralism or poststructuralism, in which sequences of events are not given significance as embodied experiences.

Words can only be partially meaningful as elements in a linguistic structure; they require multiple levels of context to make them fully meaningful; the organizing mechanism of those contexts is narrative—a subjective sense of time and causality. Personal and social narratives are interdependent and inextricable; the ideological construction of one enables, and to some degree mirrors, the construction of the other. Social, political, historical, and cultural narratives are achievable to the extent that they resonate with the individuals whose lived experiences are reflected and explained within those narratives. In other words, narratives correspond language with embodied experience in a highly subjective and ideological way.

Furthermore, the default narrativization of experience presumes an embedded mechanism for the expurgation of data (moments of experience over time) that are not germane to the narrative template or genre at hand. This is perhaps an instinctive function of economy since it would be impractical, and probably impossible, to recall and narrate all data that entered the brain. It can be assumed then that the vast majority of human

experience is not narrativized and, therefore, stored perhaps in the unconscious mind or lost outright. For Ricoeur, this means that all knowledge is operating through narrative time. Human existence, personal and social, cannot be conceived otherwise.

So when narrative is defined as a linguistic expression of embodied experience then I believe it's a fair to think of *narrative* and *identity* as equal terms, or maybe two sides of the same coin. I do not regard my self and my story as two discrete mutually constitutive elements, but as one and the same. Singular identity categories, like race or gender, tend to mask the stories that made them categories in the first place. If one already understands the social construction of these identity categories, then their emergence through social narratives is probably obvious; however, in a context where such categories are still widely regarded as distinct, static, essential, and deterministic, not strictly meaningful within an evolving social range of identities, the narrativization of self is an important point to emphasize. Hantzis comments on the overlap between self and narrative:

If the self, rather than producing personal stories, is (at least partially) produced by them, then that which is taken as 'personal' belongs also to the space of the cultural—marked not by/as individual experience, but as a socio-political production. The instrumental relationship between the personal narrative and the self parallels Judith Butler's articulation of the gendered self (1997, 204).

The urgency with which I fuse narrative and identity comes from all the narrative theory available that enables an understanding of how narratives can be manipulated and reconfigured to produce new perspectives and meanings. This means, for me, that those theories of narrative become theories of identity and can be used to navigate social discourses in more conscious ways and to perhaps more effectively maneuver oppressive and/or traumatic experiences.

A performance of the interaction between social and personal narratives would be, I think, something circular or redundant like performance writing itself; no expression of experience could be anything else. Moreover, the ways in which the social world permeates personal identities and vice versa is not a recent discovery; and yet, I see no sweeping awareness of the implications of such a relationship in the common sense or the academy. And this observation is compounded further by the discouraging fact that I, too, have had to scour obsessively for years to make this same discovery for myself while coming to terms with my participation in the occupation of Iraq.

This dissertation-performance is, at best, an attempt to deliver a narrative that illuminates its own process of becoming through and within the constraints and limitations of language, a representation of the struggle to resist the tyrannical rule of the past, over the present, and into the future. And this is what draws me, in particular, to the design and construction of historical narratives as a means to understand personal narratives, especially in the ways that both are fabrications, for better or worse. *Narrative Time*, the essential and ongoing merging of universal and subjective time, suggests to me that the narrative is not just an interpretive mode for what has already happened but what is happening right now.

C. The Facts and Fiction of Personal and Historical Narratives

The study and application of the narrative is certainly limitless; I've taken particular interest here in the connection between personal and historical narratives because I believe Ricoeur's narrative time, as it operates in the consciousness, encourages a default understanding of stories of the past and of oneself as having extremely similar if not identical processes for objective discovery and construction. I feel this is a faulty epistemological orientation that places all personal narratives within a theoretically universal historical narrative in such a way that all narratives might be seen as leading to a common conclusion. However, the infinitely subjective element within narrative time renders any such common conclusion a logical impossibility.

Ricoeur's *Oneself As Another* (1992) deals principally with issues of a selfhood. What emerges from his proposal of a narrative time is a form of testimony or giving an account of oneself; this is an expression of knowledge that aligns with narrative time. It is neither an attempt to objectively describe the world nor a total denial of, or turning away from, the world into one's interior. It is an acknowledgment of a universe outside oneself and a concomitant acknowledgment that a person can only know the universe so far as it is experienced through the body. So I might say that my testimony is an account of my body in motion over time, the actions I've taken, the observations I've made, the sensory input I've absorbed, and the belief systems that I've adopted that can make sense of all this data.

I don't see an important operative difference between my testimony of the world and that of my self, which I also refer to as my identity. As noted above, I understand identity as an ongoing process of narrative construction that is subject to all the problems,

pitfalls and nuances of language and performance. From his work *Freud and Philosophy* (1970) Ricoeur develops a concept he calls a *hermeneutics of suspicion* to refer to the limits of consciousness and the inescapable (and healthy) skepticism one contends with in philosophy, and the necessity to temporarily bracket out these moments of skepticism in order to maintain a semi-stable sense of certainty about one's testimony.

Ricoeur notes the powerful presence of universal time in the imagination that seems to produce the rather intransigent illusion of a linearity of the past. With respect to historical events, this has given rise to a mentality of stories-found rather than stories-constructed (Mink, 1987). It may be that this deference to universal time is particular to Western culture, in which objectivity and reason are the most salient or celebrated attributes of knowledge. At any rate, from this emerges the notion of a theoretically achievable universal history or a single plot that corresponds with a positivist epistemology. However, an embodied epistemology disrupts the possibility of such universality and so draws attention to the process of narrative construction.

The emplotment of both history and one's life tends to give the narrative a sense of wholeness that comes from the linking of events through causality. The events are conveyed as having no other possible outcomes. This sense of definite causality is an illusion, of course, and yet it is a necessary component of the narrative for it to be a narrative at all with some explanatory or meaning-making function. Even with some awareness of this problem and an attempt to unsettle the linearity of one's own narrative, there will always remain the inevitably retrospective understanding of a whole narrative as one constructs it, regardless of how postmodern or anti-Aristotelian its style. The best

one can do, I believe, is to draw attention to this illusion and make room in the narrative for its own deconstruction.

From here, emerges an increasingly common critique of historical narratives as largely fictional. What is perhaps the most universal attribute of the narrative is its bi-directionality—that is, even when written in the present tense and purportedly looking forward, a narrative, by virtue of its own arrival to some conclusion that makes any sense at all, always implies a looking back (Phelan, 1994). The backwards construction of a story from a designated beginning to an already known end enables a retrospective selectivity where it comes to events, characters, and descriptions that will form one's plot.

Hayden White (1987) is known for his critique of historiography as *fictional* on these very grounds. Ironically, Ricoeur disputes White's fiction-thesis on the basis that historical narratives must reference actual events in time while imaginary narratives have no such obligation. Several narratologists such as Cohn, Phelan, and Bal share Ricoeur's view despite the experimental narrative work of many authors including Joan Didion, Hunter Thompson, and Tom Wolfe who have tested the permeability of fact and fiction (Phelan 1994, 29). Ricoeur points out that any imaginary detail that appears within a narrative immediately renders imaginary its entire narrative universe because of the interconnectedness of all narratives in the material and social world.

To conjure an element of any kind (i.e. a character) in a narrative is something like creating new matter out of thin air. So no matter how realistic the story, no matter how historically accurate the context, any imaginary element in that story must remain unreferenced and logically disconnected from a universe that appears deceptively similar

to our own. This imaginary element then becomes a sort of black hole that sits ominously inside the narrative indefinitely threatening to consume the rest of the narrative if we get too close to it or make any serious attempts to connect it to our own world. On these grounds, imaginary narratives do seem to fail the test of truth, but the test itself rests on a particular epistemological orientation that distinguishes fact from fiction in a particular way.

The word *fiction* here does not necessarily imply imaginary or fantasy; it is meant to direct our attention to the purely creative and ideological process through which all narratives must be constructed. No matter how hard the facts may be, they always appear at the expense of other facts, equally hard, that do not appear. The question becomes then, which are the truths that the narrator wants to make most salient? In a positivist culture, the kinds of truths that are most frequently credited as fact are those that can be apprehended empirically or logically. In the common sense, the kinds of experiences or understandings that come in a visceral or emotional form are not generally given a status of factuality.

Here again, an embodied epistemology makes visceral and emotional experiences fundamental components of all knowledge production and, therefore, utterly inseparable from material facts. Vietnam War veteran and author Tim O'Brien is known for challenging the truth-value of factual war stories. He writes, "Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth" (79). *The Things They Carried* (1990) is categorized as fiction and O'Brien acknowledges his manipulation of the events in the narrative; yet still, he conveys a clear interest in producing a truthful experience of war for the reader. He wants

the reader to feel the war, not know the war as merely a sequence of materially grounded events.

This brings the narrative, once again, down to choices and emphases with all varieties of truths shaping and influencing the others. One may read *The Things They Carried* as a visceral experience of Vietnam or simply as a visceral experience of Tim O'Brien in 1990 as he reflected back on his own visceral experience of Vietnam. On the other hand, one could pick up Stanley Karnow's well-known history of Vietnam (1983) and make a similar observation despite its far more objective genre. Karnow, who was a journalist in Vietnam, writes in his preface, "As a reporter, I witnessed the suffering of the soldiers and civilians, whatever their allegiance, and I have sought to convey their ordeal in these pages" (xii).

If that's so, then I think we can assume that Karnow believes a certain kind of testimony about Vietnam will produce a sympathetic response among his readers. Ultimately, whatever genre, style, or rhetorical strategy is used, a narrative may be best received as a textual approximation of one author's embodied experience, even if that embodied experience is research or observations of other people's embodied experiences. As Benjamin notes, "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" (1969, 87). In the attempt to convey that approximation to an audience, one may find that revealing events in a particular way in a particular light, or distorting those events, or including imaginary events are all viable techniques, especially when one wants to convey a viscerally truthful experience of ordeals and suffering.

Artists and writers have been producing this kind of visceral experience throughout human history; it's not a new idea. However, in the context of the academy and dominant positivism, I think it's still necessary to reinforce the truth-value of experiences felt, not strictly contemplated. I include this discussion of narrative fact and fiction here because I've blended imaginary and real events and characters together in this dissertation-performance. I have not explicitly stated so in the narrative and believe it best if I don't. This is not meant to be deceptive. On the other hand, I do think the obsession with factuality in Western culture creates a tendency to organize one's responses to the text in different ways. I'd like to challenge that tendency.

One can sense the weight of this cultural deference to hard facts even among those who value other kinds of truth. Tim O'Brien blends fact and fiction as I do, but he makes sure to acknowledge it in the text. I suspect there is a fear that without such an admission one's entire narrative will be dismissed as false or an outright fabrication that is ethically compromised. Autoethnographer Carolyn Ellis makes similar claims about the interpretive quality of facts in her methodological novel about teaching autoethnography (2004), but she is careful to explain in the preface her use of fictional elements in the narrative.

In this work, I intentionally combine fictional and ethnographic scenes. I never actually taught the class I describe, two of the characters are made up, and many of the scenes did not take place. What *has* taken place is that I've watched (and felt) myself learn, write, and teach autoethnography for the past eighteen years...This book is based on these ethnographic details, making it possible to construct the ethnographic scenes that happened and the fictional scenes that didn't—but could have. Combining literary and ethnographic techniques allows me to create a story to engage readers in methodological concerns in the same way a novel engages readers in its plot (xx).

I agree with everything in this sentiment except the presence of the sentiment itself. Actually, that's putting it too harshly. I don't think it's inappropriate or wrong to include such prefatory acknowledgments about the deliberate inclusion of imaginary elements in one's narrative. But since I've performed a semi-fictional narrative with the specific intention of rejecting that very deference to objective facts, it seems to me that a disclaimer about the use of fiction weakens any claim for its truth-value. However, I also see how such a disclaimer could be useful to audiences who do not already share this view or know about it.

There is an ethical dimension involved here, given the dominant views of factuality, but I don't see factuality as necessarily aligned with ethical, especially since factuality itself is a contested term. It seems to me, the assumptions that audiences bring to the text are the problem and in Western culture those assumptions most often include an expectation that authors and storytellers will make known whether their accounts are fictional or not. It's this assumption that brings the ethical problem into play. This presents a dilemma, in my view: To ignore such a commonplace expectation or feign naiveté, the storyteller risks alienating the audience through what may be perceived as willful deception; on the other hand, to continually announce a story as fiction or non-fiction is to perpetuate these troubling categories and positivistic attitudes towards truth claims.

I realize that I risk such alienation by not specifying which elements in my dissertation-performance might be more popularly recognized as physically or historically true and which ones as emotionally or philosophically true, and that I will inevitably be faced with exactly this question by future audiences. I believe, given my

epistemological disposition, that the ethical reply must be somewhat ambiguous while openly acknowledging the ambiguity. That is to say, I believe I should express my intention to blur those lines and explain why I feel it's important to do so and, therefore, remain unwilling to fully reveal which parts are derived in imagination and which are derived in physically experienced events. I suspect the audience's scrutiny of my narrative with this question of factuality in mind will have some pedagogical value in itself.

What is of particular interest to me about both historical and personal narratives is the ways in which the construction of the past, in the present, produces constraints on possible interpretations for future actions. In Foucauldian terms, these are *discursive formations* or *regimes of truth* that encourage if not enforce particular interpretations of experiences and their subsequent responses. This occurs at the social and personal levels simultaneously. The logic of a persona that is constructed within some social context will function as an interpretive framework for all subsequent experiences unless one can undermine that persona. This is where an emphasis on the performativity of narrative construction and the fictional nature of *all* narratives can prove quite useful. If one can only understand history, of oneself and the world, as fixed and objective, it will be extremely difficult to realize any agency in the course of one's life and find new paths.

Narrative theory holds significant implications for social justice work at many different levels. For example, we may ask whose bodies are left out of the dominant social/political narratives of a given society and then ask how do marginalized people construct personal narratives where their bodies do not appear within dominant narratives? The same set of questions can be applied within one's own body. Which

categories of one's identity get narrated and which get suppressed? Further, who narrates the stories of a country, of a community, and of individuals? Whose viewpoint is reflected? It is impossible to suggest that one has the power to fully narrate oneself.

One functions as one's own historian without always being aware of the inner historian's ideological agenda. Who, within ourselves, is the excavator of moments and which of our identities has the authority to apply narrative causality between one moment and another? My intention for this dissertation-performance is to blend historical and imaginary moments together with philosophical observations so that there is no definitive sense of fact or fiction. I anticipate whatever truths may emerge from this narrative to be of a variety—emotional, visceral, intellectual, ethical, and so on. And these subjective truths cannot be delivered through exclusively rational terms. Different rhetorical, narrative, and literary strategies will be required to capture or convey the widest range of such truths.

I will, for instance, invent characters and dialogues along the way, which may represent competing discourses within myself, agonistic identities, and most literally the conversations that I have with myself that tend to unfold very much within the conventions and structures of interpersonal dialogue. But the force or authority of any given voice over another within one body is not always easy to figure. Which position is privileged, which is subordinated or silenced, and who is the arbiter in the end? Is there an ethical domain within myself? The emphasis remains on exploring a wide array of interpretive modes.

My intention has been, in part, to explore various identities, not as neatly separated categories (i.e. male, white, American, middle class, etc.), but as vaguely

overlapping impressions of identities that I personify in unspecific ways. This is meant to both convey my epistemological sense of identity as unspecific and provide characters for the employment of certain experiences. As embodied beings, we communicate different truths in different ways, so that creative or poetic performances can provide enhanced understandings of experience that work in concert with, not against, our logical or analytical faculties. This is my rationale for employing a personal narrative in a dissertation-performance and for interweaving fact with fiction, imaginary and historical episodes.

Despite Ricoeur's view on historical narratives, where it comes to the formation of a narrative identity, he seems much more willing to accept the element of fiction. But again, the possibility itself that consciousness operates through narrative time and that narratives can be endlessly reinterpreted only reinforces the suggestion of a fictional element in all narratives, historical or otherwise. Where it comes to identity, I believe the locus of authenticity lies in a radical openness to alternative readings of one's experience. So the practice of perpetual self-reinterpretation can produce a wealth of previously unnoticed perspectives that can, in turn, produce new possibilities, new vantage points, and new motives for action. In other words, if ethical action is connected to the ongoing effort to disrupt silencing hegemonic narratives, then one (already located as citizen) must initiate one's citizenship through a process of constant self-disruption.

It seems likely to me that there are some narrative strands within one's identity that more urgently require disruption than others. If I were to establish some kind of prioritization of work, so to speak, I would try to locate those narratives/identity categories that were most closely affiliated with systems of oppression. For me, as a body

that is connected to many structures of power, the difficulty is not so much in locating narratives to interrogate, but what to do with them and how to reposition myself in the world. I don't believe I'm being melodramatic in suggesting that only death will truly sever me from structures that in life I cannot escape. But I do believe I can participate in many levels of resistance rather than accepting the power naively, or enthusiastically participating in its enforcement.

Recalling, Ricoeur's *hermeneutics of suspicion* it's easy to understand the need to provisionally bracket out segments of the unknown in the name of stability because I think a truly constant process self-disruption, if practiced in the extreme, might produce an emotionally untenable condition. On the other hand, there is a distinct possibility of becoming overly reliant on this sense of stability, especially in cases where there are favorable conditions to live within, one might easily lose track of what one has bracketed out. Eventually, the suspicion will dissipate within the very feelings of comfort that the provisional stability enabled in the first place and without realizing it, one's epistemological foundations begins to shift.

So it seems to me that the tension between stability and contingency is a better focal point than on the contingency by itself. Both are theoretically and practically useful in combination, and simultaneously problematic in each other's absence. However, because narrative stability, and coherence, and linearity, etc., are the dominant models in Western culture and in the academy, I have emphasized a postmodern epistemology and the contingent nature of narratives in this dissertation-performance. I have not eliminated all evidence of structure in the narrative, only organized the narration of events in such a

way that the reader may more easily discern the narrative choices being made. I'll continue this discussion in the following section.

D. Postmodern Narrative Structure

One way that an author might call attention to the performativity of his or her narrative is to denaturalize the narrative structure in such a way that disrupts a common default sense of flow between designated points of origin and conclusion, and that corresponds with the postmodern condition. Postmodern narratives aren't new but I believe they are under-utilized as a means to raise consciousness about the political implications of the more traditionally styled Aristotelian narrative structure. I also view the use of the postmodern narrative as an opportunity to resist dominant positivism within the academy. However, given the fractured/contingent essence of postmodernism, there is no specific way to perform a postmodern narrative.

As a rationale for a postmodern narrative, I take as my starting point the multiplicity of identity, as discussed in the previous sections, and the inescapably ideological nature of all narrative construction. I'm not interested in simply pointing out this nature—I believe that's been done sufficiently by many scholars and artists—but exploring ways to put it to use both politically and personally, which I do not think has been done sufficiently, at least not enough to promote systemic change. No single narrative (mine included) can affect such a change, but increasing the presence of experimental scholarship/art can help.

From my education and interest in literature, and from my own background as a writer, I'm drawn to literary scholars who have devoted attention to postmodern fiction.

They are concerned with the problems of representation just as scholars are in the social sciences. And, as far as I can tell, both have arrived at the same general conclusions about postmodernity as an epistemological framework. Where I think literary scholars can contribute to the performance community is in their focus on artistic modes of representation—that is, the visceral experience that literature provides the audience. (I'll be focusing on literature in this discussion, but I imagine these issues extending over many artistic/creative modes.)

Of course, this discussion does not teach anyone how to do art; however, it may offer some useful perspectives to activist-scholars who are trying to create visceral scholarship that is both emotionally impactful and bears challenge to positive truth claims. Performance scholars may gain insights from professional artists within the genre that they've chosen to perform and, moreover, to scholars who have commented on that genre. This body of work should be given as much importance as the social theories that frame their inquiries—not because artists are authority figures, but because their expertise lies in capturing the imaginations of audiences. This is an expertise that performance scholars could certainly benefit from.

A major tension in the discussion of postmodern fiction lies between narratives that are realistic and those that are highly expressionistic or hyper-solipsistic. Postmodern art is, at its core, an epistemological rebellion. So writers in this genre have been anxious to disrupt traditional forms, narrative structures, and character representations that lock them inside dominant discourses. There is the further goal to disconnect from coherent or realistic narratives specifically to increase the visceral response to the art and, in doing so, defer more interpretive authority to the audience.

One of the primary justifications for postmodern expression is to enable the audience to experience in art what they are actually experiencing in daily life; in other words, the postmodern claim is that a fragmented narrative, filled with contingency and uncertainty, is a more realistic experience than an orderly realist narrative could ever be. The counter-claim, however, is that a narrative that is too disconnected from the real/material world serves no purpose other than to provide the audience a disconnected experience. Worse yet, such solipsistic literature fails almost entirely at the social/political level, offering no tangible comment on real life conditions. Employing experimental techniques to articulate collectivist politics is always a dubious strategy.

Postmodern artists may object to this latter critique, arguing that realism is rife with ideology, and any ideology that creeps into the text will sully the purity of their work. But I think it's well enough understood by now that artistic purity (a.k.a. beauty) is a discursive illusion that bears residues of the very epistemological regimes that these artists are rebelling against. At any rate, the tension persists between realistic and subjective narratives. I bring up this particular point because it relates closely to the problems facing performance scholars at the stage of representation.

Among postmodernists, mimesis and poesis are not thought of as distinct forms of representation or ways of knowing, and so in the headlong resistance to logocentrism one might reject the realistic narrative out of hand. I believe this is a mistake that corresponds to the wholesale rejection of research analysis that is logically or empirically oriented. The postmodern form cannot be any more pure or ideologically free than realism; both forms, and every blend of the two, require some method of reflexivity to

announce its own ideological disposition or emphasis (to the extent that it's possible), in order to achieve perhaps its greatest aim—to prevent the silencing of other forms.

What's more is that, from an activist perspective, pure postmodern form is not necessarily more effective at moving audiences or raising consciousness. Barbara Foley offers an interesting example of this very point as she contrasts two works of early twentieth century Marxist fiction. She finds that innovative uses of the traditional 'bourgeois' form "proved usable—perhaps to a surprising degree—by the 1930s proletarian novelist" (61). She remarks further:

While the implication of the postmodernist critique of realism would seem to be that narrative transparency is in and of itself politically 'bad,' and narrative subversion politically 'good'...the relationship between politics and form in the novel is more complicated, more nuanced.

To compound this, Jerry Varsava points out that writers who are known as avant-garde are oftentimes only intriguing to elitist aesthetes, and not popularly recognized for their political value until after their innovations have been duplicated broadly enough to be internalized at a large scale (16). So while there's most certainly a need for perpetual innovation, activist-minded artist-scholars needn't dismiss popular forms and styles as vehicles for their political messages. The answer, I believe, to this question of representation lies in the continual tension between innovation and custom and the willingness to let one's art/scholarship slip a bit back and forth, from pole to pole, from time to time, while keeping the line ever-taught.

This is an *ideal* and so does not explicitly account for the tendency of all popular innovations to become customary; the innovations of today will be the customs of tomorrow. Temporality and dynamism define the struggle of ontology and epistemology. And as artist/activist/scholars make their representational choices, whether between

objective and subjective, between realistic and expressionistic, or between logical and emotional, they will also have to keep in mind the moment of audience reception and critique. The question remains how to create a performance/text that reaches its audience viscerally and that somehow conveys a social justice message while also undermining its own authority so as not to reproduce the very power dynamics its meant to challenge. This is, and has always been, a delicate balance. One possible solution (or approach) to this problem may be to relinquish control over, or to relocate, knowledge production.

If one focuses on the task of conveying a visceral experience rather than on delivering a particular message, then performers may emphasize aesthetic strategies for moving the audience, and the performance itself will have successfully achieved a demonstration of an alternative epistemology. Of course, as noted above, this kind of work delivers a much wider range of interpretations among audience members (perhaps even within the performers themselves), and, therefore, shifts the locus of knowledge production from the stages of analysis and representation to the moment of reception/critique.

This corresponds, I think, with another observation by Varsava, in the literature community, who notes his concern that literary critics applying a honed methodological opinion of postmodern fiction, more than anything, “interfere with the dialectical link between reader and text that allows the literary communication to take place” (15). Where the aim of postmodern art is to increase the interpretive authority of the audience, it may help critics and performance scholars alike to remember to let go their hold on knowledge production and interpretation (especially of their own work).

This generates powerful possibilities for critical exchange and multivocality very much in the spirit of a postmodern politics, and this might be viewed as a social justice move in itself. The artist/activist/scholar still exercises some measure of authority through authorship in the sense that he or she decides the mode and style of representation; however, the classic rhetorical aim of *winning* the debate through persuasion—an explicitly Western logocentric positivistic mentality—is abandoned for an alternative objective. In this case, the objective is to create a collective visceral experience in which people are inspired to engage both the product itself and each other, and this would be the moment of discovery for everyone involved, including the performer; ultimately, there is no winner and no final answer.

I regard this argument as an extension of the above discussion on participatory politics and radical democracy and a product of all the literature that has influenced my thinking in this area. I do not think, by and large, that the theoretical foundations upon which I've built this dissertation-performance are new. In fact, that's very much the problem at hand. And this performance does not develop these theories as much as it is intended to exercise them.

That so many decades have passed with such a vast amount of theoretical knowledge available about dialogue, participation, narrative, embodiment, performativity, etc., without substantial practical change to the academic and societal landscapes is evidence, in my eyes, of the deep-rooted hegemony in operation (especially in the United States) and, therefore, the deep need for scholarship and art that continues the struggle to make these theories more widely recognized and embraced as a positive basis for the practice of social life.

Community and social activism take many forms, of course, but a postmodern understanding of knowledge seems universally important in order to establish movements that enable the widest recognition of infinite identities and embodied experiences as vital to the political process. An important goal of the performance model then is not to diminish difference but to constantly resist the sedimentation of hegemonic and totalizing discourses. Postmodernism, as an epistemological commitment and a mode of expression, can certainly be understood as sharing these goals. The curious paradox of postmodernism is that it seems to simultaneously bring us closest to and furthest away from a functioning model of scholarship and participatory politics.

This is a moment/space where narratives become the last source of identity and the ways in which we share those identities and narratives turn out to be the very point of collectivity. Barbara Marshall says, “Within the postmodern moment...each of us within language has no choice but to be a storyteller.” So how we tell our stories is of great importance and the process we seek is one that enables all stories to be heard. I see performance autoethnography (and personal narrative) as an expression of the urgency of this vision and so there is a concomitant concern about the ways in which we present ourselves on the page as narrators.

As I expressed above, I feel there is a common sense of unity emerging from the pronoun “I” as though the narrative equitably reflects all of our different identities or subject positions. Naturally, this cannot be and for this reason, I will perform a great deal of play in this dissertation-performance where it comes to the narrator’s voice and perspective from one narrative segment to the next. The rhetorical construct known as *the narrator* may be voiced through the author or a character, neither having any solid basis

in reality. The author is “implied” (to borrow Wayne Booth’s term), which is a concise way of saying that the individual who produces a text forms a persona with a voice, through which to narrate events, a persona that can never be fully reconciled with a body. And a character narrator must, as a fabrication of the author, be inherently unreliable—that is, it’s interpretive range is enclosed within that of the author’s.

Pelias articulates the problem of narration this way: “To engage in autobiographic ethnography is to enact the old aestheticism. It is to create a rhetorical dandy, who, as Geertz tells us, must more than anything else present an engaging persona, one who seduces readers into believing that they are in the company they wish to keep” (3). To compound the impositions and shrouded fragmentation of the narrator function is the way in which the narrative is received by audiences. The audience is very obviously multiple, many bodies receiving a given performance in many ways, and not unified at all.

And yet, this utterly apparent material diversity seems to conceal the narrator’s unapparent power to notionally compel all audience members into a single *position*. In the realm of writing, Walter Ong argues, “The writer’s audience is always a fiction” (2003, 55) and makes a case for the *implied reader*. This is Ong’s shorthand for a consolidation of bodies that a writer cannot fathom in reality and so conjures a position upon which readers are ushered in order to relate to the author’s point of view.

For Ong, this is a double fictionalization, both writer and reader assuming pretended positions. His concern is primarily indirection—the inability to communicate directly through text, which for him gives the medium nuance in a positive way, but my concern is with the authority that a writer exerts over a reader’s perspective within that textual interaction. Perspective is a major interest in visual arts involving a style of

imagery that geometrically locates the viewer in relation to the image—at any rate, it seems to. The point on which viewers are converged is imaginary, of course, in much the same way that the writer imagines a point for all readers; this point is very often physically impossible to occupy and inherently ideological.

I recognize that merely shifting the narrator level and position does not fully emancipate my audience or free me from the problems of representation; however, I still believe there is value in drawing attention to the perspective that I impose through each position I assume and, further, drawing attention to the position that I direct audiences to assume, and finally to the shifting responses that occur within each of us as the ground shifts beneath our feet and our perspectives change. This relationship between performer/writer and audience/reader is by no means new. It's widely understood by scholars and easily grasped by anyone else, scholar or not, when laid out plainly.

The problem, in my view, is more practical. The narrator construct continues to be employed in ways that tend to mask the author's ideological commitments and perpetuates the illusion of a unified "I" and an equally unified sense of the implied reader or audience. Social discourses compete inside the body as much as outside in the world, and are projected through narratives in ways that are not always made apparent. This dissertation-performance serves two functions: First to mark my own narrative *authority* for all to see, and second, as a scholarly work, to advocate precisely this kind of marking within all scholarship, which I feel is still generally suppressed and avoided in the academy.

Narrative play isn't a dramatically innovative move in fictional literature, especially in the postmodern genre; however, I think it's worthwhile as a performance in the academic setting, where despite significant theoretical challenge to the contrary, the notion of individual authorship remains the dominant understanding of knowledge production. I believe this anachronistic view of *the author* as a singular figure can be closely linked with positivism and undermines a great deal of work that is meant to promote radical democracy and social justice. In short, my hope is to draw attention to the unreliability (meaning not objectively true) and instability of the narrator in any text, in any form or style, no matter how objective (or poetic) its voice may sound. It is with all this in mind that I directly challenge my own authorship of this dissertation-performance from its opening line.

I tend to favor semi-natural narrative structures—that is, structures that feel vaguely linear as lived experience—but the linearity and the sense of stability that such narratives tend to produce are illusions. And this also is like life itself. Narrative time, the mode in which humans process and retain experience, makes all memory (and all stories generated from memory) a blend of material and imaginary elements. One aim of this performance is to create an experience that brings attention to the imaginary role in all narrative construction while maintaining a (questionable) sense of realism.

Most important of these imaginary elements are the artificial beginnings that are applied to narratives, the foundations upon which all subsequent events are developed. It's easy enough to understand the theoretical impossibility of apprehending any real point of origin for any narrative, or human existence for that matter, and also easy to see that when this problem is applied to a narrative, any narrative at all, that the factuality of

the entire story quickly unravels and becomes nothing but a bit of free-floating interpretive work. While this isn't an intensely complex idea, it's a problem that is habitually bracketed out.

This isn't a practice that needs to be fixed—it's simply a necessity of consciousness, to make some relative sense of the world in which we live and our experiences in it. On the other hand, it's not a flaw in our narrative existence that should be hidden away either. There needn't be embarrassment about a narrative's contingent basis or constructed nature. But I suspect there is quite a lot of embarrassment all the same because such an admission immediately destabilizes one's sense of identity and, with it, the firmness of one's worldview. To me, this is a primary issue to be addressed as a component of all personal and political conversations, and all scholarship, and all art. How we tell, hear, and understand stories is how we live and interact in the world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abate, F. R., & Jewell, E. (2001). *The new oxford american dictionary*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Abbott, H. P. (2002). *The cambridge introduction to narrative*. Cambridge, UK; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press.
- Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The new mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute.
- Artaud, A. (1958). *The theater and its double*. New York: Grove Press.
- Aṭṭār, Farīd al-Dīn, Davis, D., & Darbandi, A. (1984). *The conference of the birds*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Bal, M. (1985). *Narratology : Introduction to the theory of narrative*. Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press.
- Banks, S.P., & Banks, Anna,. (2000). Reading 'The critical life': Autoethnography as pedagogy. *Communication Education*, 49(3)
- Barthes, R., & Sontag, S. (1982). *A barthes reader*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Bauman, Z. (1993). *Postmodern ethics*. Oxford; Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Beatles. (1987). *Magical mystery tour*. London: Parlophone.
- Beckett, S. (1965). *Three novels*. New York: Grove Press.
- Bell, E. (2008). *Theories of performance*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Benjamin, W., Arendt, H., Zohn, H. (1969). *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Berlatsky, E.L. (2011). *The real, the true, and the told: Postmodern historical narrative and the ethics of representation*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

- Berry, W. (2012). *New collected poems*. Berkeley: Counterpoint.
- The bible : King james version*.(2008). Glasgow: Collins.
- Bitzer, L.F. (1992). The rhetorical situation. *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 25, 1-14.
- Bochner A.P. (2012). On first-person narrative scholarship: Autoethnography as acts of meaning. *Narrative Inquiry*, 22(1), 155-164.
- Borges, J.L. (1998). *Collected fictions*. (Hurley, A., Trans.) New York: Viking.
- Boudreau, T. (2011). The morally injured. *Massachusetts Review*, 52(3/4)
- Boudreau, T. E. (2008). *Packing inferno : The unmaking of a marine*. Port Townsend, WA: Feral House.
- Bowman, M. & Pollock, D. (1989). "This spectacular visible body". *Text and Performance Quarterly Text and Performance Quarterly*, 9(2), 113-118.
- Brown, C.B. (1887). *Wieland*. Philadelphia: McKay.
- Brown, L. A. (1975). 'For the characters are myself': Adrienne Kennedy's funnyhouse of a negro. *Negro American Literature Forum Negro American Literature Forum*, 9(3), 86-88.
- Bulgakov, M. (1967). *The master and margarita*. (Glenny, M.,Mayer, M. Trans.) New York: Harper & Row.
- Butler, J. (2005). *Giving an account of oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Caldecott, R. & Goldsmith, O. (1935). *R. Caldecott's picture book (no. 1): The babes in the wood*. London; New York: F. Warne.
- Cash, J. (1963). *Ring of fire : The best of johnny cash*. New York: Columbia.
- Chen, G. & Starosta, W.J. (2000). *Communication and global society*.

- Coleridge, S. (New York, N.Y.) Young, E., Adlerman, D. Fodero, & Patrice, A. (Eds.) (1992). *The rime of the ancient mariner*. New York: Collier Macmillan.
- Conquergood, D. (2002). Performance studies: Interventions and radical research. *TDR (Cambridge, Mass.)*, 46(2)
- Crane, S. (1960). *The red badge of courage and other stories*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Defoe, D. (1983). *Robinson crusoe*. New York: Scribner.
- Dennis, R. (2009). Sensing the story: Structure and improvisation in writing for performance. *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, 2(2), 231-249.
- De Assis, M. (1952). *Epitaph of a small winner*. (Kislak, J.I., Trans.) New York: Noonday Press.
- Denzin, N.K. (2006). Pedagogy, performance, and autoethnography. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 26(4), 333-338.
- Dewey, J. (1959). *Art as experience*. New York: Capricorn Books.
- Diamond, E. (1993). Rethinking identification: Kennedy, freud, brecht. *KR the Kenyon Review*, 15(2), 86-99.
- Dickens, C. (1997). *A tale of two cities*. New York: Signet Classic.
- _____. (1843). *A christmas carol*. New York: Bantam/Signet.
- Diversi, M., & Moreira, C. (2009). *Between talk decolonizing knowledge production, pedagogy, and praxis*.
- Donne, J. (1999). *No man is an island*. London: Souvenir.
- Dostoyevsky, F. (2004). *Notes from underground*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

- Dowling, W. C. (2011). *Ricoeur on time and narrative : An introduction to temps et récit*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Dylan, B. (2003). *The freewheelin' bob dylan*. New York, NY: Columbia.
- Elbow, P. (1973). *Writing without teachers*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press.
- Ellis, C., Bochner, A.P. (1996). *Composing ethnography : Alternative forms of qualitative writing*. Walnut Creek, Calif.: Alta Mira Press.
- Emerson, R.W. (1968). *Essays*. New York: AMS Press
- Fairclough, N. (2010). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Harlow: Pearson.
- Forester, C.S. (1959). *Death to the french*. London: Bodley Head.
- Foucault, M. (1998). *Aesthetics, method, and epistemology*. Faubion, J.D. (Ed.) New York: New Press.
- Márquez, G.G. (1970). *One hundred years of solitude* (Rabassa, G., Trans.)
- Genette, G. (1988). *Narrative discourse revisited*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Gibbons, R. (1979). *The poet's work : 29 masters of 20th century poetry on the origins and practice of their art*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Goltz, D.B. (2013). The critical-norm: The performativity of critique and the potentials of performance. *TPQ Text and Performance Quarterly*, 33(1), 22-41.
- Gramsci, A. (2001). *International encyclopedia of the social & behavioral sciences* (pp. 6357-6360). Smelser, N. & Baltes, P. (Eds.). Oxford: Pergamon.

- Haddawy, H. (Trans.) (1992). *The arabian nights*. London: Everyman's library.
- Hall, S. (1988). *The hard road to renewal: Thatcherism and the crisis of the left*. London; New York: Verso.
- Hall, J. (2013). Performance writing: Twenty-years and still counting. *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, 6(3), 355-363.
- Hall, S., Morley, D., & Chen, K. (1996). *Stuart hall : Critical dialogues in cultural studies*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Haraway, D.J. (2003). *The haraway reader*. New York: Routledge.
- Harvey, P. J., Parish, J., & Gore, J. (1995). *To bring you my love*. New York, NY: Island.
- Hawhee, D. (2009). *Moving bodies : Kenneth burke at the edges of language*. Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press.
- Heidegger, M. (2000). *Introduction to metaphysics*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Heller, J. (1995). *Catch-22*. New York: Knopf.
- Hemingway, E. *For whom the bell tolls*. New York: Scribner.
- Hofstadter, A., & Kuhns, R. (1964). *Philosophies of art and beauty; selected readings in aesthetics from plato to heidegger*. New York: Modern Library.
- Huijer, M. (1999). The aesthetics of existence in the work of michel foucault. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 25(2), 61-85.
- Huxley, A. (1932). *Brave new world*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Jones, J. (1951). *From here to eternity*. New York: Scribner.

- Jørgensen, M., & Phillips, L. (2002). *Discourse analysis as theory and method*. London; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Kahn, V. (Trans.) (2010). *The quran*. New Delhi: Goodword Books.
- Karnow, S. (1983). *Vietnam, a history*. New York: Viking Press.
- Kearney, R., Rasmussen, D. (2001). *Continental aesthetics : Romanticism to postmodernism : An anthology*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers.
- Kennedy, A. (1969). *Funnyhouse of a negro: A play in one act*. New York: Samuel French.
- Kielhofner, G. (1985). *A model of human occupation : Theory and application*. Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins.
- Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (1985). *Hegemony and socialist strategy : Towards a radical democratic politics*. London: Verso.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1999). *Philosophy in the flesh : The embodied mind and its challenge to western thought*. New York: Basic Books.
- Langellier, K.M. (1999). Personal narrative, performance, performativity: Two or three things I know for sure. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 19(2), 125-144.
- Larsen, N. (2001). *The complete fiction of nella larsen*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Lévinas, Emmanuel.,(1985). *Ethics and infinity*. (Nemo, P., Trans.) Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- _____. (1979). *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority*. The Hague; Boston; Hingham, MA: M. Nijhoff Publishers; Distribution for the U.S. and Canada, Kluwer Boston.
- _____. (1981). *Otherwise than being: Or, beyond essence*. Hague; Boston; Hingham, MA: M. Nijhoff ; Distributors for the U.S. and Canada, Kluwer Boston.

- London, J. (1994). *The portable jack london*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Madison, D.S., & Hamera, J. (2006). *The sage handbook of performance studies*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Madison, D. S. (2005). *Critical ethnography: Method, ethics, and performance*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Mailer, N. (1948). *The naked and the dead*. New York: Rinehart.
- Mandelbrot, B. (1982). *The fractal geometry of nature*. San Francisco: W.H. Freeman.
- Marshall, B.K. (1992). *Teaching the postmodern: Fiction and theory*. New York: Routledge.
- Massumi, B. (1992). *A user's guide to capitalism and schizophrenia: Deviations from deleuze and guattari*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Maynes, M.J., Pierce, J.L., & Laslett, B. (2008). *Telling stories: The use of personal narratives in the social sciences and history*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Mink, L. O., Fay, B., Golob, E. O., & Vann, R. T. (1987). *Historical understanding*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Mitchell, W. (1981). *On narrative*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Moody Blues. (2011). *Nights in White Satin*. New York: Polydor/Universal.
- Morris, W. (1979). *The well at the world's end. vol. 1 vol. 1*. London: Prior.
- Nizāmī G., & Gelpke, R. (Trans.) (1966). *The story of layla and majnun*. Oxford: Cassirer.
- O'Brien, T. (1998). *The things they carried*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Oliver, M. (1986). *Dream work*. Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press.

- Otis J. (1998). The future of performance studies: Visions and revisions. Dailey, S.J. (Ed.)
- Pelias, R. J. (1999). *Writing performance: Poeticizing the researcher's body*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press.
- Pérez, K., & Goltz, D.B. (2010). Treading across lines in the sand: Performing bodies in coalitional subjectivity. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 30(3), 247-268.
- Peterson, E., & Langellier, K.M. (1997). The politics of personal narrative methodology. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 17(2), 135-152.
- Phelan, J. (2007). *Experiencing fiction: Judgments, progressions, and the rhetorical theory of narrative*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Phelan, J., & Rabinowitz, P.J. (1994). *Understanding narrative*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Pink Floyd. (2011). *The wall*. London: Parlophone Records Ltd.
- Piñero, M. (2010). *Outlaw: The collected works of miguel piñero*. Houston: Arte Público Press.
- Poe, E. A. (1966). *Complete stories and poems of edgar allan poe*. New York: Doubleday.
- Pollock, D. (2006). Marking new directions in performance ethnography. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 26(4), 325-329.
- Pollock, D. (2006). Marking new directions in performance ethnography. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 26(4), 325-329.
- Remarque, E. (1982). *All quiet on the western front*. (Wheen, A.W., Trans.)
- Ricœur, P. (1984). *Time and narrative*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- _____. (1992). *Oneself as another*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Rolling Stones. (2011). *The very best of the rolling stones, 1964-1971*. New York: ABKCO Music & Records.
- Roloff, L.H. (1973). *The perception and evocation of literature*. Glenview: Scott, Foresman.
- Sandars, N.K. (1977). *The epic of gilgamesh*. Harmondsworth; New York: Penguin.
- Scarry, E. (1988). *The body in pain*. New York, London: Oxford University Press.
- Scott-Heron, G. (2000). *Now and then: The poems of gil scott-heron*. Edinburgh: Payback Press: Brouhaha Books.
- Scott, J. (2013). Performance studies: Because I needed a way to better see and be in this world. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 33(4), 425-430.
- Sedgwick, E. & Kosofsky, F. (2003). *Touching feeling : Affect, pedagogy, performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Semprún, J. (1997). *Literature or life*. New York: Viking.
- Sendak, M. (1983). *Where the wild things are*. New York: Scholastic Book Services.
- Sermijn, J., Devlieger, P., & Loots, G. (2008). The narrative construction of the self. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 14(4), 632-650.
- Shakespeare, W. (1993). *Romeo and juliet*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Shay, J. (1994). *Achilles in vietnam : Combat trauma and the undoing of character*. New York: Macmillan International.
- Simone, N. (2004). *Greatest hits*. [United Kingdom]: BMG UK & Ireland.
- Smaligo, N. (2014). *The occupy movement explained from corporate control to democracy*.

- Smedley, A. (1998). "Race" and the construction of human identity. *American Anthropologist*, 100(3), 690-702.
- Spry, T. (2006). A "performative-I" copresence: Embodying the ethnographic turn in performance and the performative turn in ethnography. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 26(4), 339-346.
- _____. (2011). *Body, paper, stage writing and performing autoethnography*.
- Stern, D.M. (2015). Engaging autoethnography: Feminist voice and narrative intervention. *Women and Language : WL.*, 38(1), 83-102.
- Stevenson, R.L. (1925). *Treasure island*. London, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stirk, P. (2009). *The politics of military occupation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Tennyson, A. (1979). *Ulysses*. Placerville: Blackwood Press.
- Tillmann, L.M. (2009). Speaking into silences: Autoethnography, communication, and applied research. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 37(1), 94-97.
- Timerman, J. (1981). *Prisoner without a name, cell without a number*. New York: Knopf.
- Tolstoy, L. (2007). *War and peace*. (Pevear, R., & Volokhonsky, L., Trans.) New York: Knopf.
- Torring, J. (1999). *New theories of discourse: Laclau, mouffe, and zizek*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Trinh, T.M. (1989). *Woman, native, other : Writing postcoloniality and feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Trumbo, D. (1970). *Johnny got his gun*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Turner, T. (2008). *Tina!*. New York: Capitol Records.

- Unamuno, M. (2000). *Mist: A tragicomic novel*. (Fite, W., Trans.) Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Varsava, J.A. (1990). *Contingent meanings: Postmodern fiction, mimesis, and the reader*. Tallahassee: Florida State University Press.
- Villanueva, V. (2003). *Cross-talk in comp theory: A reader*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Vonnegut, K. (1971). *Slaughterhouse-five*. New York: Dell.
- Wells, H. G. (2013). *A selection of writings from HG wells: The time machine, the invisible man, the island of dr moreau*. St. Petersburg: Black and Red.
- Welty, E. (1984). *One writer's beginnings*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- White, H. (1987). *The content of the form : Narrative discourse and historical representation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Wolfe, T. (1957). *Look homeward, angel*. New York: C. Scribner.
- Woolf, V. (2005). *A room of one's own*. Orlando: Harcourt.
- Young, K., Saver, J.L., (2001). The neurology of narrative. *SubStance*, 30(1), 72-84.