

CHRISTMAS IN THE EQUINOX

CHRISTMAS IN THE EQUINOX

by

Joseph A. Dane

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Part One: ADVENT CALENDAR 1

Part Two: BILDUNGSROMANE 77

Parallel Rule: From Compass Rose to Compass Rose
On Vacation with my Darling Eloise: The Seed Book
Writing Assignment

Part Three: OUTTAKES 149

Tenancies
Masked Ball
Your Call is Important to Us

PART ONE:

ADVENT CALENDAR

With some dismay, in the welter of files and note cards in fans and toppling stacks, Father Jude understood that to tell the story as a story was to pull a single thread, only, from the pattern of this woman's life, leaving the rest—the beautiful and brutal tapestry of contradictions—to persist in the form of a lie.

—Louise Erdrich, *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, 337.

Eloise, I'll call her;
though knowing not one
name of one of them.
Eloise, her blood on the windowpanes.
She the first I saw there,
posed framed within the window frame.

She stayed with him erratically, and I could hear her car, her
“truck” she called it, roll out of the carport at 5AM on many of
the nights she spent with him.

Perhaps it was the end of things.
Perhaps it was nothing.
On her way to work or a dance class.
Perhaps like all of us she hated traffic.

Perhaps she hated the morning routine—the smell of coffee,
the love-making when you can barely remember whether it
took place in the real world or in the dream world.

They sometimes made a great scene of it, as if rehearsed,
with door-slamming and other dramatics, threats of vengeance,
the strained peace of truce and truth. Like the time he
chased after her, blocking her truck right in the alleyway between
our two buildings, and waved his phone at her. “Seth!” he
cried out as if angrily, though clearly repressing his laughter.
“It’s my best friend Seth! Talk to him!” Poor thing! Certain
the call had come from another woman, her rival, a mistress
or girlfriend. And now the innocent facts laid bare before an
audience.

She was a dancer, *the* dancer. It showed in the way she walked. Like when you buy a ticket to the ballet and everyone in the balcony stalks majestically to their seat—recalling the days when they still had hopes of performing. Toes turned out. Hell on the ankles. The days before the grim reality of the dance world revealed itself to them.

Sad really.

For all of them.

She had a mat of some kind; for a makeshift barre, she often used what seemed no more than a chairback, just below the crepe paper curtain taped to the window frame, the chair thus out of sight. Nothing hid the sadness I saw in her eyes when she rose in an arabesque—a term I remember of course from when I too was a child, maybe in the same class as she was, but that you don't forget. All I could see of her was her face and shoulders, but all once-dancers know that position well—the arms extended and the wrists bent in exquisite grace.

The last time I saw her she showed up at his door carrying what looked like an overnight. Dropped off by taxi, she must have been. An Uber had we had them then. No way she would ride the Metro, the stop three blocks away. An hour later you could see them walking together—arm in arm, nearly in lock-step. Like two kids finally, seeing nothing but themselves. You had to love them watching them.

At 4AM, they woke me with cries of anger and anguish. They walked out to his car in the dawn light. Tandem, he first and she following, neither speaking. A week after Thanksgiving I think it was. I never saw her again.

And I hear him again compose his elegies:

“And the benighted scholar fell in love with her ...”

I.

A picture gallery it might be. That's how our building might seem to be. Like at the Louvre, where the riches are so great they just tack the paintings up in parallel rows or anywhere there's space. No sense of continuity or influence. Just monuments. Giotto. Piero della Francesca. A Uccello nailed so high you can barely sense the genius of the manneristic perspective.

Or a domestic variant. You open a closet so disused it smells, not of fall or spring, but of seasonless must; inside, a stack of photos you took years ago in the days when you had to wait a week to get them back from the developer. You arrange them on the floor. Treating them with respect, remembering the effort it took to produce them. You had to think about it. You had to bracket each shot, it was called, adjusting the F-stop or the shutter speed in discreet steps. Nothing was free in those days. And video was for those with expensive cameras or old Super-8s.

You laid them out in two rows,
Eight in the top row.
Eight in the row beneath it.
Easily divisible.

That's what our building must have looked like when seen from across the alleyway. Dramas, discrete in both senses and spellings, played out behind each separate window. Or so one might imagine.

Or is the better simile a game of solitaire, played according to unknown rules and conventions? maybe a poker hand in a dream state? The nuances known only to your opposing

Joseph A Dane

table-mate. Some kind of sequence, repetitions, perhaps, even though it is not obvious at first glance except, say, to a card shark or to a self-lauded critic of the old school.

The array of choices in Netflix.

A gallery. Choose one.

Mark each square that contains a bridge ...

No history, no way of moving through or between them. Paintings or photos taken before the advent of digital cameras stare back at you as if from a past now inaccessible.

The cards maintain their positions. What does it matter how they got there? why study the intricate process of shuffling? Is that a self or an inanimate object in your field of view? No inkling of how they got to where they are today. The present just another fiction, a fiction of time itself, no different in its being, as Heidegger might have it ...

I am not a robot.

All so particular.

Particle-like as well.

Position or speed.

But never both.

We learned that in the Academy.

II.

One day the vertical louvres in the window facing his were drawn. He saw nothing and of course assumed the worst. It was the first of the month, the time when tenants and tenancies were often abandoned. A few nights earlier his

downstairs neighbor had kept him up nearly to midnight dragging his heavy furniture out to the U-Haul. Laughing with his friend as they clumsily rigged a tarp instead of the requisite dolly and slid a bureau noisily down the driveway.

Good neighbors.

Never made a sound except the day they left.

They could be serial killers.

CEOs of major corporations.

Drug dealers and producers at film companies.

Callers at collection agencies.

It made no difference if they made no sound.

The next day, a white lacquered bedframe hid as inconspicuously as possible (not possible) between the carport and the industrial dumpster, filled such that the plastic cover angled upward. The sparkling white bedframe must have been bought from IKEA only a few months earlier—a move-in purchase for the neighbor's brief stay. Like the crisp white blouse of the girl-friend and her sterile and stenciled smile above it. "Oh I'd love to live in Maine," she said, the one time he spoke to her, with all the sincerity of a 20-year-old, with all the sincerity of speeches at Bar Mitzvahs. Her abandoned belongings tossed into the dumpster; among them, covered with empty cans of cat food, a shiny white bidet—the kind even an amateur could hook up to the toilet. Its surface gleaming even covered in trash bags. Like the white smile of the girl-friend or roommate, he thought, thinking only "what a thing to think of her."

Joseph A Dane

What if his alley-mate turned out to be no more than one more of them? A transient like his neighbors and other neighbors? Interchangeable, they were, those with no histories.

In two days the light returned,
a light that back-lit the blinds across the alleyway.
The louvres themselves displaced from the vertical.
Probably off for Thanksgiving.
Nothing more than that.

He could once again see between the vinyl slats
the closet door and the jacket hanging
from the hanger hooked on the closet door.

He thought of the day he thought he had first seen her.
She lay there as in the famous painting by Matisse.
Unsensed on the day-bed.

III.

There. To the right, second floor. The trapezoid set into the supporting surface. The viewing screen, I suppose you would say, and its angular if predictable distortion. Like the film-screen in *Amarcord*, key-stoned as seen by the boys in the front row.

He stands framed, as one with no one watching, distorted in the wavy glass from the 30s. One arm to his side, the other holding what he must have imagined as a model airplane, a glider or a bird perhaps, and he cut or traced an erratic flight, a-rhythmic, patternless through the unseen air surrounding him.

You learn a lot, I guess, alone as a kid doing things like that. Using your brain to sort through the words and images and the scenes you create of them. The tactics in an aerial dogfight; the elaborate mating rituals of waterfowl. Not sure he is learning anything today, or just revisiting the times when he did.

A kid playing.

Remembering a kid playing.

Adrift, you would say, his mind—
the kid's mind now—on something else.

How humiliating to know he had been seen,
that he had acted as we all act when unseen
or believe as much. Not knowing he was
no more than just another one.

I watch the sweep of the arm, his turning away, dropping from view, reappearing, empty, the real plane or imagined one, the bird in flight in its real and imagined flight. And I tell of this incident, beginning with and in his boredom, the grasping of the toy as if a metaphor, dropping from sight with a cry of anguish; returning to himself finding nothing changed, rising, the sweep of his arm ...

And please don't tell me I am intruding on his privacy; that I oppress him with my gaze, or "regard" in the lexicon of the self-styled literati. He is unaffected or he is part of it. Like me, re-embodying poses I learned as an eight-year-old in ballet class.

IV.

Oh I've tried everything. You need to live. Even if it means working in an office, like secretaries of the old days or still in the movies. Where everyone treats you like crap, wasting half their work-time trying to cop a feel or look down your shirt. Then some boss calls you into his office and for a couple of minutes he is stern and profession—officious, they call it—mentioning your tardiness, but casually, as if only a sidenote, and the importance of time-management and team-playing then you realize he is checking you out, his eyes not on your eyes, as if afraid to look at you, and the whole reprimand ends with him asking you out on a dinner date.

Screw that, I thought. If I want to be objectified (as my scholar-friends say), I can get that simply by walking the streets, where I don't need to wait on a nod from a superior just for permission to slink back to my cubby.

So I quit that and for a while I got into investing in Crypto (I wasn't rich enough to lose much), then into MLVs and various pyramid schemes, and blessedly never had the determination or bare resources to invest more than the minimum, nor was I resourceful enough and enough lacking in moral character to enlist my friends to profit off them like all these companies want you to do. I ended up with a box or two of what they called "product" (always in the singular!) and I left it on the door stoop after my last move. Cold cream sold for 10 times the retail price. Skin lotions. All the same but with different perfumes added and dyes of the latest fashion dictated by the color industry.

For a while, I danced in a strip club. A different form of office-work, here with drug-addled office-mates. Cigarette smoke stale in the worst sense. The butts extinguished in

shallow Manhattans. Oh it wasn't dancing, not like what I'd studied as a kid. No need for warm-up, stretches to avoid injury, nor what they now call a yoga mat or a roll-up for Pilates. Prostitution in a barely metaphoric sense, the closest I came to being a hooker for real, although I never saw myself as that.

It's not like a normal job. It costs you fifty bucks for any night you work, so you have to hustle. You don't get paid to sit around wasted looking hot and you won't get paid if that's all you do. The basic idea was you would mark some guy as a regular, enamored of you and your pole-dancing routine, enamored of you and your surfaces; then another, and you schedule them, the way that witness in the old Perry Mason show testified on the stand, distinguishing one of her boy-friends as her "Wednesday steady"; the supernumeraries in the courtroom smirk, playing the role of a laugh-track. So Thursday's were, say, for Han, and Tuesdays for some guy named Charlie although that couldn't be his given name, and the weekends got crazy as shit for me. Even then, the job was pretty much lap-dances for old Asian guys who rarely got off on it despite our efforts and despite what they hoped. Funny. And sad too. Dangerous as well, or so we were warned. Because you know the paunchy old geezers aren't about to blame themselves if things go awry or don't work at all. That's why the bosses took their cut. That's why they also patted down all their "clients" or ran them through a metal detector before letting them in to where the dancers were. They didn't do much else. Besides keeping track of money, of course. I have no idea what they charged for drinks or for a cover; I have no idea what their cut was for an hour in the back room. But they likely kept us dancers alive, for what that's worth, if that's worth anything. In the end, I came away most nights

Joseph A Dane

with more drugs than money and occasionally a bed-mate to go with it. And you know the old adage: “the worst sex you ever had is better than the best night alone” or maybe it’s “the best day at work” or something like that.

Whatever.

The point is, it’s just not true.

V.

Sid, I’ll call her, sent him a Christmas tree once, knowing he hates the holiday and would never have a tree of any sort. Not a real one, of course, not one cut from its roots from a tree lot, say, like the one out behind J. and T.’s house, leased now to strangers. It was one of those plastic ones from China or the dollar store, the size of an aerosol can of ant poison, lit by LED lights flashing red, white, and blue in a set sequence that you can never remember as you’re falling asleep or high and thus think even the simplest of repetitions is a long extended and open-ended history.

Maybe with a built-in variant.

An irrational. Just think.

Had Nietzsche only known:

the wheel turned at π -intervals never returns to the starting point.

The light flashes all night.

Some paradox there:

neglected thus in use.

Across the alley-way, he will see the vertical blinds carelessly set. A triangular strip lets light into and out from what I'll describe as a living room, and in there a blue light like all those lights—vampires they call them now—telling you your computer is on or your modem or maybe just the charging block for your cell phone or water-pic.

And then the blue light turns to red, then to white, the same pattern as in the cheap plastic night-light from China Sid, I'll call her, sent him more than four years ago.

It was a coincidence, he'll try to think. Anyone can have friends who give them cheap gifts at the holidays; anyone can toss crap into their basket at the dollar store.

It's nothing.

It's like what the *au pair* thought, "Nothing" as she heard the teenagers snickering on the landing, minutes before being knocked unconscious by her rapist employers.

VI.

A better job I had in those days was as a phone sex operator. A guy I knew, J., it was, once told me just hearing my voice was such a turn-on for him (if we can still express it that way) he could hardly contain himself and became little more than a flattering and fawning fool, undone by desire. That's how he might put it; what he meant was he wanted to jump me. I just laughed, thinking it was all play-acting and flattery, but I realized finally it wasn't only J. who felt that way.

And that skill, or, better put, mere natural attribute—no different from my ass, I guess—got me out of the hooker business or meth-addled lap-*danseuse* business, if you'd rather, and into the industrial or legitimate sex world, at least a low tier of it where you don't have to worry about benefits and

retirement plans. It's easy work, all you have to do is keep your voice functional, and it doesn't matter if your boobs don't hold up and your ass goes all to hell. I wasn't going to make a real living or establish a career; I mean who wants to wake up calculating social security benefits with coffee, then clearing one's throat to help some old guy trying to get off hundreds of miles in the distance. For me, it was just what they now call a corporate "side hustle" and meanwhile I could always go down on a guy for a button or a bag of shake if it came to that.

Working at home was simple and I guess safer too, and I could work pretty much whenever I wanted whether I was high or stone cold sober. No more driving half-crazed on meth to the strip club, or having to get some John, or "client" as we called them there, to drive me home. And I guess most of my company's workers—the girls they hire, and men too for all I know—are like that. Some version of that. Or maybe some have an office in a high-rise with servants and cleaning staff. What's the difference? Maybe they are aliens, for all I know.

I was given a new phone, or what looked like one, and a phone line or two, one of them with the option of a screen. That was still pretty new in those days, hardly like it is now, when anyone can have video phone sex pretty much any time of day. Back then, if the guy insisted and paid extra, I guess, I'd just screen up some overweight chick masturbating with her head thrown back or her face buried in a pillow and no one knew the difference. I tell you if it hadn't been such a hassle to get set up at night, and smoke a j or so or maybe knock down a G and T, I'd probably still be doing it today.

I loved handling multiple calls simultaneously. It wasn't the money. Rather the challenge. Like having an out-of-body experience while you are with company or in a class or a meeting or something like that and seeing how long it takes anyone to notice, say, that your soul—who you are for real, your self, that is you yourself—is now resting atop the security camera fixed to the ceiling near the door, while your body, mouthing all these attempted platitudes, isn't making any sense. So on I'd go with my schizoid porn calls, finally one of the horny guys would get an answer that was not only surreal, but more to the point, unerotic, generated as it happened by an entirely different conversation, with some guy, say, with a foot fetish and I lost control so many times like that, eventually some ... excuse me, "one of our customers," would threaten to call the company to complain, can you imagine doing that? I mean, what do you say. "I was And then she ... And so I" Just eat the money, I say. How many bad f*cks have you had in life, and you didn't beat your partner to a pulp afterwards or demand a refund, did you? Or hell, maybe you did. I've had it happen, but as for me, I never really got into that. Rough stuff is for the movies.

"Hi, John. What do they call you when they get wet?" You know; things like that. "Are you with me? Look at me, Johnny, oh my God I'm ...". You know it doesn't take much imagination, any more than it takes imagination to write one of those series novels which they used to call Harlequins and God knows what the New Age term for the version of that is today. Or fan fiction or just something on the New York Times best-seller list.. The fact is, these repressed guys, if they can get off at all, pretty much get off on everything. And if you screw up,

it's not like they're going to be at your door the next day demanding satisfaction.

So one time my dorky boyfriend was over, the wannabe hipster guy I told you about, or will, our relationship was shot anyway, and wanted to be part of all that, so what the hell, I signed in and got all set up and we sat there waiting for a few minutes. And finally the call came, and you could tell the guy was nervous. Maybe even his first time (the caller I mean, not the dorky boyfriend, though it was his first as well). And you know what it's like with guys and "first times"; they all pretend to be sophisticated and experienced (as if calling some porn site at 10PM weren't the most pathetic thing imaginable) and their voices always drop in imitation of whatever it was they saw most recently on tv or in the movies. As if you're going to fall in love with them right there on the spot or get so horny you'll catch the next plane and become their sex slave or loved one forever—you could tell that's what some were fantasizing—or maybe just teleport your selves through the phone line and be done with it.

So my hipster boyfriend starts pawing at his crotch and I have to look away because it's almost too much trying to keep from laughing at him getting off, or trying to, at another loser-guy's attempts to do the same thing.

I'm telling you, you can disparage 9 to 5 jobs all you want but sometimes you think you'd just like to come home from work and not feel you have to take a shower to disinfect yourself. Maybe the bourgeois life is not so bad after all.

"You alone, John? Are you sure? John I think there's someone watching. Oh John I can feel him watching us. Oh god I'm going to ... I have to ... Oh my God John he's watching us do you see him watching us ... I can't help it ... I ..."

I was high way too often and finally the company could no longer ignore the complaints, so I got called in, and not in the way the lecherous bosses did it at the offices I used to work for. You can't blame them—the company I mean—because it's a pretty big investment, you know, or maybe “big enough” (which is all that matters—in investment, sex, and life itself!, a joke J. always used to make with me), first all the technological stuff, then bribes and crap like that, and keeping all your accounts in order so at least some of those who work for you get paid and the clients keep calling in rather than trying to establish material lives on their own.

So I just denied all these accusations you can't take what these losers say seriously or I said maybe my meds were off or that extra glass of wine or there was some confusion, no problem, it won't happen again. But I remember one night “You know what I like, John. You know? You know? Elephants, John. I once saw a nature show on PBS where they were taking semen samples ... Are you there, John? Oh John! ... So they shot up the elephant with some drug—damn I wish I knew how to get some for myself—and one guy stuck a vibrator up the elephant's butt to get at the prostate ... John, oh John! ... and the other guy slapped on a condom the size of a freaking garbage bag Oh John! YES! ... and the one chick biologist gets to hold the slowly erecting elephant penis and encourage it, and you can just see all three of them losing it in front of the camera and this fuddy-duddy English accented voice-over tries to keep it all together in the background as the elephant begins to spasm ... John? Oh John! ...”

VII.

The wall surface was dark. No one home. Maybe a light in the apartment downstairs and to the right.

I looked up to the upper story windows, some with the shades drawn, others little more than the old test patterns you used to see late at night on tv in the fifties. He stepped into the window frame thus framed within it, or perhaps he just became visible as my eyes adjusted to the darkness and the light. No more than an outline, then fading into the colors slowly evolving behind it.

It was him. Of course it was him.

As I watched, I saw him raise his hand with what was likely a cigarette. He slowly dropped his hand slowly dropped. I could see the mist when he exhaled the mist. I could smell the smell of smoke conventionally described as stale, although what the word *stale* might mean suddenly and absurdly bothered me. It didn't mean, say, 'contaminated with the complexities of reality', that is, diluted by countless other smells, but rather it came from the breath of the living. That's what stale is. A paradox, I guess. I breathed it deep within me. He made the slightest toss of his head to the right—his right, my left, had I been sitting upright. Obviously a gesture, not just a tic, I thought, but I could not decipher it in detail or express precisely what it meant today. He turned away and flicked off the light. I didn't see him reach for it I couldn't see how he reached for it. He did not wait for a reply, acting as if unseen or knowing himself unseen.

For a moment or it may have been as long as a minute I lay there thinking of myself as "unmoving" or "as if paralyzed," but of course there is no such stasis in life or reality. Then I sat up and got to my feet. I moved as if slowly; any

witness would agree, I thought. But it was too like an image in a movie—the speeds linking the discrete fames conventional and thus arbitrary and unstable. I had a sense of racing faster than I have ever moved, leaving the apartment, putting my shoes on, lock the door, what color to choose, stairwell and across the alleyway, grab a jacket. Like that. No longer than it takes to describe it. Nothing in proper order. But who knows what it was in life, since who knows what life is in the first place, as my dorky boyfriend would always say. By the time I reached his door, my breath was short; I could not tell whether that was from my actual speed or the anxiety that seemed to make me stumble. Each step like one I've never made before.

The door was ajar when I reached for it.

There was no screen.

The stairs precipitous and narrow.

I walked up, counting, odd or even, you never know, slowly enough so that I would not lose my breath and have to pass off my panting with some labored joke: “Oh I need to work-out more it's not that I'm nervous I'm way too cool for that having experienced everything there is to know in life I just slipped on the way over or forgot something or didn't want to be late why don't you just replace this staircase with a climbing wall, it would be easier ...” Something to both hide and suggest something sexual “panting like a damn race-horse” I think was the way he put it once.

When I turned into what passed for a hallway or entry-way, I saw a dim light in the far room, toward the street. I walked straight toward it, hardly glancing at the space I

passed through, hardly locating the spot that may well have been where he stood when I first saw him from across the alley. I kept my attention fixed, my head steady, as I crossed the interior doorway with only the hinges indicating where a door had once been.

A makeshift living room, I think, likely a bedroom decades ago when the whole building was no more than a duplex.

I took the chair that was facing what seemed to be a couch or futon. I sat down without hesitation, without seconds wasted seeking permission or selecting the best available seat like making reservations with an airline. Stereo system—now old-fashioned—to my left. Even older than those that fell out of favor with cell phones. Vacuum tubes, I think they're called. The kind of thing you know only from pictures of your parents' house or from ads from the fifties. A tv screen, modern, behind me. Wooden floor; those pre-cut boards you just clip or hammer together. Encased in impenetrable laminate or veneer, like all of us, I guess, or so my boyfriend says. No one, especially a landlord, bothers with oak floors anymore and the craftsmen needed to install them properly.

The walls were plaster. Old building. Cracks from the earthquakes like all buildings in this area. Northridge or Whittier. Must have been one of them. Maybe some sheetrock on the dividing walls framed in when the house was converted to a rooming house and then to apartments.

The ceiling light fixture broken or perhaps just a protective globe removed. No reason to check the wiring: most of it what they used to call "knob and tube"; if you live in an old house or apartment, you've doubtless seen it in the attic.

That's where most fires start in buildings like that and it's easy to see why.

There were art works, many of them original; one of a cellist, beautifully framed, an etching I think, others abstract, dark reds streaked by black or spattered like we always associate with Pollack or more recently Percival Everett. Framed photos of people no visitor could know. All covering nearly all available wall space. Two rows, in inadvertent symmetry, placed there only because of the empty space left by the windows.

Arranged with attention, but unplanned.

Then too, amid all that, the *décor*, or in this case establishing what they call the *setting*, I would guess, he sat before me.

He gestured to a small glass of water next to me. I drank it. Maybe there was a cigarette there too, and maybe he shared that too with me.

We were silent. You know how that is. There was music playing but it was difficult to place. Something classical. I'm not very good at that—identifying pieces and periods. Feldman, maybe. Something minimalist. Something that instructs its listeners in its conventions as it proceeds, such that, as far as listening and appreciation goes, there is little difference between a person with no musical training and some kid right out of conservatory. A man on the street can understand and enjoy, say a work of German expressionism, Shostakovich even, as well as a professional painter or musician. The democracy of music, you see. Glass the quintessence. The ideal books for the ideal readers.

But that music distracted me with repetitions, its teasing harmonies; and I was struck that one could use the same language of a piece written 200 years ago, in reference to

precisely the opposite technique. And I was thinking about what it is to like music; is it beauty, whatever that is? Or just those minimal chord variations, always leaving something familiar as the leading note advances, leaving the listener to ruminate over whether the pleasure one might get from, say, a mischievously complicated piece by Bach, or a modern one, say, meaning those composed a century ago, atonal, whether that pleasure is in fact what one feels, or only what one wants to feel. Aspirational, they call it now. Or maybe pleasure is no more than the thinking that, at least in this case. What did they say once jazz was?—the musical creation of tolerable levels of pain and discomfort. Miles, Coltrane, and who's the other one? My friend Andrew quoted that to me.

That's what I thought as I sat there.

VIII.

She had a friend who was pretty straight-laced—do we still say that? Like a corseted Victorian. But liberated too; so sophisticated that she spent most of her college days barefoot, even on the slopes of that college in central Maine. And she hooked up with some guy despite thinking, as she herself confessed, Oh my God, what am I doing this guy might have AIDS I just saw him fondling his old girlfriend at a party; and after months or years together right out of the blue he asks have you ever used a vibrator? and she's like No whadda you think I am ... then when he hit her with it she shrieked in shock and he says whoa calm down! and tries again and she ejaculated right on the spot much to the surprise and admission of both of them, leaving the bedsheets not in ruins but desperate for a wash and it was so different from their

norm—their mean, what kept them together— that the fools never tried it again.

Her ex as a sex object
herself as sex object.
She hadn't thought of that though
those are things a guy might think.
Those are the things anyone might think.
It was that, he said, that gave him life.

IX.

The music played over the background silence, and finally we broke that silence, and he turned down what there was or had been of music.

“Do you ...”

“Oh yes. Of course.”

“I was thinking ...”

“I know. I know exactly what you were thinking. Just now. You were thinking of Beckett.”

“Beckett?”

“Yes. And Estragon says, ... No. That's wrong; it must be Vladimir ... Vladimir says: 'That's what we'll do! We'll have a conversation!' Something to that effect, artificial and futile. An exchange in *Godot*.”

“Or parodied in *The Graduate*. Mrs. Robinson. 'Let's talk about art.' This in a theatrical baritone. She says that in resignation, in despair; but Benjamin, the idiot, takes her literally. Or tries to. Of course there are worse things to talk about. Less consequential. Or do I have that backwards?”

“I remember my friend John Ph. from college. He visited me the summer I was building the cabin in the woods. We played chess, but not conventionally. Or perhaps we had, but that’s not the game I’m thinking of. We sat in chairs facing each other—I can still see him sitting cross-legged in the overstuffed chair that I moved out to and eventually out of the hand-built cabin in the woods for which we had laid the joists only a week earlier. I just tossed that chair into the woods. There’s not a trace of it left today. Stolen, I suppose, or just rotted, springs and horsehair alike. We imagined playing a chess game, the same game?, even gesturing as if punching the chess clock—‘your move’—though neither of us had ever actually used a chess clock, and I still don’t know how I learned how it operated. It’s just obvious, I think. And later we speculated on what our game was or had been, or was it not a game, but rather the searching for the rules of a game that we might play, but no, not that, we decided—(I know I know, but we were just out of college!)—we decided that the purpose was communicating as we did about the rules or rather finally conversing about communicating the rules. ... That’s what it was like to be young, I guess. Back in those days, at any rate.”

“That’s what it was like for us to be young? Us? You mean for you to be young. Or how you imagine being young.”

“I remembering coming back to the dorm or eating-hall a year or so earlier, two hours after swallowing the hallucinogens. We sat at the table, two opponents opposite. ‘Let’s play mind football,’ Rubin said, challenging us, thinking himself stronger of spirit, I guess. ‘You have no idea,’ I answered, ‘you have no chance.’ And then we laughed, or what passed for

that, each of us amused by our idiosyncratic, unshared view of things. ...”

“That was the game?”

“Well, no. It wasn’t. That was my point. What you experience under drugs is less real or profound than you think it is. The chess game, with John, now running a legal firm in San Francisco, that was better.”

“And?”

“And?”

“I mean what did he do in that firm? Was he defending thieves and billionaires? Or using legal defense contributions to get murderers and hardened criminals off on technicalities?”

“I think the latter.”

“Not surprising. Young, as you said, both of you. Imagining what the future would be as imagined being young. Were those the best chess games you ever had?”

“You don’t mean the most competitive: those might be against my deadbeat cousin in the Fisher/Spasky days, or against my seat-mate on the plane to Boston, who traveled with his portable board and nearly lost to me, more skilled in the end-game where learnedness and technical ability matter most, and I quickly lost interest.”

“The best you played, then; your most glorious victory or most glorious defeat.”

“That’s easy. Against Joe P., once chess champion of New Orleans. He played the entire tournament stoned, he said. I’ll never forget the look on his face when he looked at the board and realized he had a losing position.”

“Anything else?”

“That’s all I remember about the game. The rest of chess is a series of stills, like the chess-squares themselves: cloudy images of games I had, with Fat James, the one with my dead-beat cousin, rooks controlling the center files, and then so many with Eloise, that often ended in anger, sweeping pieces from the board like in the *Seventh Seal*.”

“With the same result.”

“Well, the only certain thing we have... or maybe it’s no longer certain! ... is the end, no?”

“How about the best in other matters? What was the best girlfriend, the best lover you ever had?”

“Don’t you mean ‘who?’”

“No. Love is one thing; lovers another. I’m not referring here to what you will have with her whom you will one day call your darling Eloise. The ‘best’ in the sense I mean? They’re not people you love. They’re people that ...”

“Oh that. Then you mean, I guess, not emotion but something like technique. Like the skill of the endgame, although I don’t mean that literally here. That I can easily answer. Some ...”

“Was she beautiful?”

“Beautiful? What a question. You know you can’t judge beauty when you or the beautiful itself is overwhelmed by lust! French girl from Brittany. She might have passed for lovely, but I have no way of knowing what others thought of her. When she hugged me, I could rest my chin on the top of her head. Overshot jaw, like the French often have. She chased me for a year and I was oblivious to the whole thing, in love then with a different lovely girl who soon outgrew her need for me. When the lusty Bretonne finally caught me I still believed in proprieties of love and fidelity and thus, given my

appalling naiveté, I was in no position to appreciate her skills, then quite unimagined!”

Those were days before porn and the internet.

Those were the days you had to learn all by experience.

But yes, she was the best. There is really no question when it comes to that, even though no two people are likely to agree. I’m sure you’ve experienced the same thing. There was another French girl. Very much like her. She was the worst. And in order to understand the French-girl-best-there-ever-was, you need to know French-girl-worst-in-history as well. Literary scholar, or styled herself that. The letters of Mme de Sévigné, if I have the dates right. Both women very sexy. And both socially combative, although never enough to embroil them in quarrels or to make serious enemies. Just enough to make their lovers, say, understand that this was never about love at all, none of this. The first, Marie, I call her, invoked in me what I’ll call a defensive passivity but what was really astonishment and self-preservation, and I’m sure this both annoyed and repulsed her. ...”

“Bad way of putting it!”

“The second, Fl* (another girl with a Saint’s name) invoked instead an almost absence of self, such that I neither remembered or cared what she or sex itself was. That’s the best way to describe the embarrassing details ...”

“Even worse. You don’t mean ‘describe’; you mean ‘avoid’! Just bullshit abstractions. I’m sure going through all that was very cathartic for you and of course it was amusing for me, even though I understood barely half of it. No matter. ‘The best’ for me was nothing like ‘the best’ for you. It came

with neither revelation nor regret. No self-reflection, wondering why did I ever care about nonsense such as love and what its consequences can be. I went to a high school reunion, my late 20s I must have been, and 'hooked up' (in the old and in the modern sense) with a guy I'd never so much as talked to as a teenager. He ended up majoring in statistics or ancient history in a college I'd never heard of. We were sitting at one of the reunion tables strewn with discarded name-tags, having coffee. He mentioned tantric sex. I had asked about interests; that's what he was interested in, he said. Tantric sex. Not hitting on me, you understand. Not propositioning me. Just answering my question. I, by contrast, was interested in the old tugboat my mom had just bought on the Coast of Florida that needed engine work: was it worthwhile to overhaul the diesel, since the boat would never be moved from the dock except to shift sides, port side to starboard, to even out the sun damage. That's what we talked about.

"That's what you talked about?"

"That's what we started to talk about. You can imagine as well as I can describe the exchanges that followed."

"The most fitting punishment for tantric sex is ..."

"I know I know: 'tantric sex'. Surely you don't think you're the first to make this joke? Or first ever to think of it? Do you imagine it has the same force as when you first came up with it?"

"I'd rather make the joke than embody it ..."

"Another one. As rehearsed as the first! Now to begin with, you're not a woman. Or I think that's the case. What do I know? Second of all, if you had any experience in this matter, you wouldn't be saying that, whatever your sex or what they

now call sexual ‘orientation’—which is about as fixed as the planets.”

“ ‘I’m retrograde. Hand me the strap-on.’ ”

“He had rented a small suite in the local hotel and I think he told whoever was with him to leave for the weekend or paid him off, or maybe he never had a room-mate in the first place. He gave me a massage. That was a prelude of sorts. And then ... well, let’s just say: we had sex and leave it at that. And then we had sex and let’s just leave it at that. And then we had sex and let’s l- ...”

“OK OK. You were young. That explains most everything.”

“Again, that guy thing. Typical response. It’s not the same for women. A 75-year-old woman is as ready to go as I am today.”

“But ...”

“Oh yes. Always that.”

That’s how I remember it.

Nothing more.

And a transcript at that. It proceeded in life more slowly. Haltingly. Missing even the obvious transitions.

There was a glass of something next to me that he had offered, “offered” in the sense of merely a nod and the fact that the clean glass was there in the first place. Our hands met briefly as both of us reached for it and I took it from him. I could say it was nothing, just a moment of awkwardness. But no one fails to know when they make bodily contact with another. I remember a guy at the opera once, our elbows then our shoulders met; he was crazy about me as he had been since he first laid eyes on me. He pretended neither of us was aware of the contact. I pretended I was oblivious. An old

Joseph A Dane

boyfriend claims he first touched my breast while steadying the dinghy as I leaned over the rail of the tugboat Mom bought. I told him I had no recollection, no more than of the opera-lover's leaning against me. I lied to both of them; you never forget the next step or the rebuffed one in any relationship.

He was about to stand, I thought, but as I slowly set the glass down on the table, he sat back again.

I thought of what happens ...

But I said nothing.

Like Schrodinger's cat, or have I already made that obvious reference?

The futures unknown until the box opens and the cat dies as does all within and hope itself as well.

No steps, no progress. We were no nearer to anything. No further from the past. Even all that talk of sex was no more than game-playing. It could have been, for all its eroticism, as I once said, about the market price of pork bellies.

No one speaks, fearing to say the wrong thing; you stare into each other's eyes as if in that old kids game one plays with two-year-olds to see whichever of us laughs first!

"I used to do just this," he said. "It was with Sarah, when she was two. My best friend, I often claimed, and everyone who had not had younger brothers or sisters cocked their heads at me like a dog who has no idea what you just said to it.

I told her or imagined that one day
I would be on my death bed.

And Sarah, still the same person as the two-year-old I used to compete with, will say to me 'Whoever laughs first loses.'

It would be the last thing I would ever wish to hear.
Like that, you mean."

And it was just like that for me, although there was no laughter and barely a threat of that. Maybe something to cover our unease and embarrassment at not knowing what was the most appropriate, most compelling, or simply the right thing to say. Feel nothing. Show nothing. Like making love with a complete stranger and even at the most critical moment, not even acknowledging it. Steeling oneself to the experience, or rather sealing all within oneself. We could have done that too.

I would have sat up and dressed slowly, not ignoring him, but paying only the attention you would to another human in your presence. *Politesse*, I've heard it called.

I stood up.

I walked down the precipitous stairs at the same speed I ascended them.

I closed the door and heard it latch behind me.

I should say perhaps I forgot about my drab living situation, but I did not. That my hipster boyfriend stopped coming around, the coffee not to his liking. I should say I thought about getting a cat; that that's how bad it was. But there is no reason to say anything.

I carefully adjusted the window blinds.

I remember my father telling me about the goshawk. Some large bird flying headlong into the garage door window and shattering it. When I came home that summer, it had been replaced by plexiglass and everything shimmered and bent in its refractions. Maybe a grouse of some sort, because true to his nature, my father carefully examined the carcass, making sure of his identification, then skinned enough to uncover the breast meat and they ate it for dinner.

X.

I danced for him. Spontaneous, if anything is really that. Inadvertent, then. I came out of the shower and walked into the bedroom without thinking. I threw on a camisole that barely covered my ass, no more modest than a handkerchief. The louvred blinds were set open, alternating vertical strips of light with vertical strips of cheap vinyl. I imagined myself in the light strips, the surfaces of my flesh still damp beneath the cloth, and through the louvres I saw him clearly looking as if casually back at me over the expanse of the alley. Like those clubs, I guess they call them—although they're more stores than clubs, stores of booze and stores of whores—where from the street you get only a peek, teased with a stripper or pole-dancer or maybe just a vertical strip of an exhausted and drug-addled hooker taking a cigarette break. Stripe / strip—what's the difference? That's what he got through the blinds of the window-blinds.

I raised my arms, always staring back at him, but without expression and without any emotion that might have shown in my face. And I danced. Nothing erotic. Nothing even exotic. No pole. No g-string. I remembered rather a few positions I had learned as a young girl in ballet class. Innocent then of

where this dancing would lead me. And I struck the classic poses, the same ones I saw from his Eloise, always turning my head to face the window, and I turned away toward the ceiling light as the cloth fell in studied folds about me. Then I reached out, almost as if still *en pointe*, and flicked off the room light as he had once on me.

And where does my dancing for him fit in our history? Even as I struck the first pose, that's the question that came to me. That's the question anyone, even the most casual of viewers, *seers* they are in a literal sense, might reasonably ask, I thought. But it's not the right question. Maybe one would consider this a revelation, however small, sudden, and unplanned. An epiphany they call it in the academy. We are not fantasies, we discover, but humans, individuals with histories, relatives, pasts. But that also is not correct. Instead I saw what years ago I might have called the very abyss of things: the depth into which you stare as Nietzsche did, the despair that finally stares back at you. As if ... as if ...

Or not quite that;
it wasn't "as if" we were new lovers now
or closer to becoming that.

It was not "as if" we were high school kids pawing at each other, thrilled with the prospect of "getting some."

Remember how that goes? The guy has some philosophy or as close as he will ever get to one, something he believes he learned or had revealed to him when he was a junior in high school; and its guiding principle is "You know if you've done it once you get to do it again"; or more strongly "anything you've done once you *have* to do again to keep from

slipping right back into childhood.” No no. It wasn’t that. Dancing with the camisole would never lead to dancing with a towel or veil. It was the opposite of that, or maybe not really opposite at all; it was rather derailing the whole question. Nothing changed because nothing had happened. There was no step to take.

I think that’s what he understood or what he expressed when he first stood up in his living room, the time we were sitting there as near strangers, talking just to frustrate the silences. There was this day, there was that day, and there was the day I broke into his apartment. Each was one more point in our ... “relationship,” I’ll say—bad word!—how about our “being-together,” “being-for-each-other,” or some Heideggerian term like that. Ten years ago, I’d have a dozen variants. Beings nothing part of anything.

This should go without saying,
his look said to me.
The saying is what ruins everything.

XI.

I said to him I see life as radiating out from its essence—that’s what I think, at any rate, that’s what I once said to him—with possibilities extending like spokes on an old-fashioned wagon-wheel. Schrodinger’s cat again. As long as none selected, none is excluded. All these futures live in *potentia*, each as real as the other, until the box opens and the poor cat dies.

I went on to describe those three dimensions represented in the wheel as reduced to two: life as vignettes, like my

looking through the windows of the opposing apartment building, oh yes, *Rear Window*, even *Caché* by Heneke if you are able to endure it. *La Belle Captive* by Magritte: each window has a story. But reality is not like that at all.

There are no crimes; there are no hidden criminals.

What do those eye-witnesses see, seers in the most literal sense? What do they swear is true?

I mean those who walk the streets looking through windows or those of us who drive past the townhouses glancing through unshaded window frames?

Two shirtless women. That's all he'd ever seen, he claimed, in 70 years of voyeurism. You could have bought that or prayed for it! You could have paid me for that or had it for nothing.

Oliver Sacks tells of a patient who had lost her sense of motion or the ability to process it. Reality became cinematic to her—flickering stills of varying durations, like the magic lantern of Proust, or a stagecoach caught in the camera, the wheel-spin reversed on the movie screen. She had no sense of cause, no sense of movement from state to isolated state, losing thus the self we understand as ours, based on the continuities we believe is reality.

XII.

The apartments across the alleyway must be shot-gun style, maybe four in the building, though from here, of course, I can only see two of them. I don't have a good angle on the far windows toward the parking lot. Maybe there is a townhouse style apartment back there. It seems unlikely.

I remember my once boyfriend telling me of his friend Sandra leaving her brownstone in Brooklyn to come to a

conference in San Diego. They went to the room they had assigned her. Not the main conference hotel. The spillover, I guess, and he tried to put a good face on things, but when you “try to put a good face” on anything, it’s inevitable that you cannot.

It smelled like what you smell in garden-variety motel rooms, despite the price. She pulled back the beige drapes. You would want to wash your hands after touching them. Across a narrow walkway was a cinderblock wall, all that was visible through the needlessly expansive windows and sliding doors to the walkway. She caught the next plane back to New York. No accolade, no line on her c.v., no advancement in her career was worth two nights of this.

I sometimes imagine our buildings as two eighteenth-century sailing ships offering their broadsides. One, his, both older and more rickety. The kind of ship modern sailors pretend to admire. I close my eyes and let the false details emerge—prow and stern, complex riggings, ratlines and the crews endlessly at work.

It’s like one of those hallucinatory games you might play as a kid, staying home from school with a fever, or sometimes only the thought of one. You lie back in bed. Nothing to be done until an adult brings food for you or something bland like ginger ale. You invert the space and see the ceiling as the floor of your new living space, the light fixture now a floor ornament on the popcorn-like carpet, the doorframe now flush with the new ceiling, but you have to take care to step over it entering the hallway. No furniture. Once-clutter fixed to the ceiling. The freedom from possessions suddenly in brilliant clarity.

Or like two sailing ships.

The old-fashioned windows across the alley had no shades and likely had no need of them until recently. Before our crappy stucco building was built in the 50s, there was likely no more than a single-story shack where this architectural eyesore now stands—just another cookie-cutter block of chicken wire and stucco, now equipped with whatever louvered shades were fashionable a decade before they were installed. Their second floor, his, that is, seemed a half-story higher than ours; so in order to have effective blinds, he didn't need to measure and order something modern. With no windows in the neighborhood higher than his own, he just taped up colored crepe paper, bright-blue fading to robin's egg, extending it no further than "boob-high," he must have thought, and let it go at that. He didn't care about anyone ogling his neck and pecs as he headed to the shower, and all even the highest perched speculator could see of his lovers was down to their shoulders, or to put it as Milton would:

I him himself naked from the head to chest
(not badly turned, that!—my reading always flashing
back to me).

One time he turned the lights down and stripped off his sweatshirt in full view over the bulwark of crepe paper. And you know how it is, your tee-shirt rides up getting stuck on what you have of chest and he must have walked around for a full half-minute absurdly dressed, apparently, only from his shoulder to a few inches above his nipples. Must have been from the bathroom, he came, which I assume was back in the middle of that apartment somewhere, maybe behind the stairwell leading up from the one doorway to the place. A

clear violation of modern building codes.

And one day I just got home from maybe it was a party or I was out somewhere, all dressed up in what passed for going-out clothes, but I'd met no one there I wanted to come home with. So here I am tired and disgruntled at the lack of interesting sex partners in the world and I just tossed off my coat and threw myself back onto the bed, hoping the room wouldn't spin, and I saw him.

That was the first time.

That's what started it.

The tee-shirt covered his shoulders; he looked down at me and I froze in position, hoping I would not start vomiting on the floor or over that bright red party dress which was all that was covering me, like the apparently spent-partier in the Matisse painting at the Norton Simon. At that point, oddly enough, all I could think about was the time he brought home a woman I suppose he never had imagined seducing and she was a good three or four inches taller than he was and I realized the phrase "boob-high" applied only to the women 5'2" or so, my height say, and there she was oh perfectly and admirably displayed and I heard her answer his warning of the crepe-paper height, "What do I care? I don't know any of the people here." And for a week, I got to admire her as much as I assume he did, her perfect but nonetheless magnificent chest clearly the work of the surgeon.

XIII.

Intimacy!

What's the point?

What's the purpose of it or its benefits? to speak as young people do today using the crass sense of that once innocent

word. What do you suppose he could possibly know of me? Or care to know? Exposing so little of his own self as recompense?

Who said it?

Proust I think.

What you can know of others is only what you can know of yourself. *Gnothi seauton* to the ancients. Unprocessed film to those of our generation, always mishandled, exposed to the light. The young have no idea what we're talking about.

He was only what I knew of him,
no more than what I learned from induction.

He didn't seem to have a predictable schedule, no normal job, 9 to 5, I mean, but what has *normal* become since the last meaning proposed for it? My days of observing him were no less irregular. I rarely saw lights on or any sign of him after 10PM. None before mine in the early morning. No pets, just those he borrowed or cared for. He had few extended visitors. Maybe a woman in for the weekend, or a friend up from San Diego. I rarely saw his car; I'm not certain the car I associate with him is his. All he knows of me is the red dress striped by the blinds that he saw me once wearing as I lay back in exhaustion.

I was on my way to work and had left my car parked on the street that night instead of back behind the apartment. Someone had blocked the driveway as often happens here, at times ending in a great scene as some neighbor storms out in a rage with a cell-phone, calling for the police and yelling loudly at whoever left the car there to move the goddamn thing, and then Parking Enforcement shows up in a tiny

scooter, and they negotiate on whether to write a ticket or call a tow truck, and finally the neighbor gives up and drives out right over the curb, oh it's great theatre I tell you. Happens every couple of weeks.

So I stumbled out with my coffee mug and purse, how girly!, and you can envision this because you've seen it many times, if not in life, then on tv or in the movies, maybe in a commercial. Some chick dressed in what they call "business casual" (that is, dressed better than you are) is walking to her car in gleaming white, trying to balance a latte, overpriced and full of fat she will have to work off in Pilates class, looking both alluring and deadly serious. You know, "professional" they call it, though the range of connotations of that word make it now completely without meaning. What office did she work in? What sweatshop or brothel? Why would she need such an outfit simply to take calls at a switchboard?

The artists at the ad agency make sure as she bends her head down struggling with her keys, maybe the lanyard holding her professional id, that her perfectly styled and perfectly pressed and virginal white blouse opens as if by magic or happenstance, almost but not quite revealingly, just as mine did, ensuring that whoever sees the commercial once will look more carefully the next time it appears on their computer screen or tv, and yes the next time after that as well.

And suddenly he moves directly into this scene, or someone did, stepping from the landing, walking that small white dog I realized I had seen him with a week earlier. The fluffy one lent to him for a month or so by his girlfriend, I guess, normally nowhere to be seen. And though I have stopped to pet every dog that passes me on the sidewalk most of my adult life, I pretended to be distracted, working my way

around the car to the driver's side, always faced away from him, the old-fashioned key stuck in the door. The coffee, real or imagined, unbalanced in my off-hand. Don't force it; breaking the key off in the door lock, asking the nearest human for assistance, a call to Triple-A. No way to stop and chat publicly, no time to exchange civilities, a modification of everything, that is x and now δx . The world got too complex for both of them: Newton and Leibnitz, of course I mean.

That's the point, after all. There was a sign I saw once, or maybe it was just a meme on the internet.

Change.

Change is bad.

I've never forgotten it.

XIV.

I had a boyfriend—a man, I guess, but his psyche a boy's. He scoured the internet and local coffee shops for the latest fashions, then spiked up his inch-long black-dyed hair as the grand capstone of his research. He looked ridiculous, and my bedsheets ended up dark with his hair-grease: Brylcreem, it used to be, but I think now some off-brand they sell at CVS or Walgreens. A reverse mullet, or upside-down, I called it in derision, but all he could think about was the envy of the hipsters he copied it from. Even making love I could feel him laboring, as if timing himself to ensure he did everything right, in accord with the latest teachings on the internet. Thus when the topic of sex arose among his coffee-mates, he could recount the details with pride, puffing out his chest no firmer

than mine was, and I in turn would confirm all, spreading news of his prowess, or that that he dreamed of.

Of course I'm not the first one to note that Narcissistic boobs like him have a virtue other men rarely suspect and are never willing to admit: arch-amateurs of love-making, they turn out to be, as many women know, a secret not too often kept, among themselves, I mean: "The assholes are the best," my friend always said—they sacrifice all their own pleasure to promote yours. Maybe they are fools for doing that, but for us? life could be worse, as too often it has been.

You could be making out with a guy so madly in love with you he would squeeze you as if to be part of you or break into tears at the *dénouement*, I'll say, screaming your name for all your fellow apartment dwellers to hear while swearing his eternal devotion ... Good for the imagination, the grandeur of fiction. But you might be thinking you forgot to pick up grapes at Trader Joe's or Pavillions. You need to keep focus and not be distracted from the task at hand by household chores, sports scores, or emotions.

This is something you learn when you're way too young to have to do so. Abstracting yourself from reality, from the material situation you're in. And it might be some teacher feeling you up or worse some relative, and you can't say anything, or at least, in the old days when I was going through all that you couldn't, as it would only lead to "Oh I'm sure they were just fooling around you know how kids are," or "He's your father, for God's sake!" or "Mr. Brown has been an outstanding employer for over a decade and gives his heart and soul to this institution, and I'm not going to let his reputation get sullied by some disaffected teenager."

So you learn what you have to do and any time later in life you can call upon those skills to find the innocence and solitude stolen from you by some creep in your childhood.

XV.

He saw me.
When I least expected it;
when I gave no thought of it.
The worst, you'd say.
What else is there to say?
He saw me.

I turned on the night light. The one that reflects his, the same as his, that is, which throws the same pattern of lights onto the window glass. Brighter, his is. Xmas spirit, some say. Or a cheap and easy alternative to real decorations. Chinese junk put together by slaves worse off there than even here. The ironies of holiday—no vacation days for them!

I still had the vertical louvre caught on the window frame, leaving a long thin triangle of light to see and be seen through. Other louvres caught as well, maybe the way the building settled after the earthquakes, Northridge, or the one that followed it, just as I was pulling off my sweater to go to the shower. Casual. Nothing under it but the rounded curve of my shoulders, and I guess a small pout I've developed from looking into the full-length mirror, at first to critique what I saw, then developing it as part of what they call my look. And as I held the sweater before me, ready to drop it before the mirror, I felt his eyes, then saw his eyes although I never turned to face them. I stepped forward and through the light past the vertical louvres and my shoulders came into view, my body

Joseph A Dane

to the small of my back where the luckiest of us have two small dimples, just like his Eloise.

“Oh my God,” she is said to have cried out to him after he planted an affectionate kiss on her butt. “Oh my God I can never kiss you again,” and that was as short-lived a vow as she ever made. And I’m sure she made many, as he did for her.

He saw me. He did not see the dancer’s body that shocked him when he saw it in his darling Eloise. My breasts small like a teenager’s, twenty pounds to work off in the gym, if I cared, flesh almost flawless when softened by the unwashed window glass, the sun damage dimmed by the dim light, colors reflected from the reflecting Xmas lamp.

Nothing more to imagine than the lighted strips of us. Dark hair. That’s what he thinks I have. Maybe shorter than average. You can always have Mexican blood here. That accounts for the soft curve from my shoulder to my waist. The progressive shading of the skin tones.

Remember *Bullitt*? The movie, I mean. Steve McQueen. The car chase in San Francisco, soon to be classic, and everything starts slowly as the two criminals in their standard fedoras follow the red Mustang, or maybe it was black; it turns left and disappears around a corner, the criminals in fedoras follow and suddenly the car you were following, McQueen himself in the Mustang, is following, then chasing them and the iconic scene begins, each car launched into the air on the cross-streets, stop signs be damned. Yet when I think about that sequence, the most striking image or scene is the serenity of the two villains, just instants before McQueen appears

behind them. Those are the moments I remember best. The moments before the chase begins. Lessing. Laocoon. Or maybe it was Wallace Stevens in that stanza about the blackbirds: the blackbird whistling, or just after.

XVI.

Making love, that was ... what should I call it? An act? A time? A moment? Let me put it this way: making love was when I would be most alone and always free. As for him—my hipster boyfriend? He hardly wanted intimacy; he hardly wanted anything at all, other than the mysterious essence of hipster-hood, whatever that was in general or in particular. Thus (or should I say *despite that*), whatever I did or said, he would follow me and of course things just tended to work out in the most material and best of senses. Falling in love with him, however, or letting him fall in love with me would have ruined everything, if you follow me.

Of course you follow me!

And yes those evenings when he was randy or thought he ought to be, yes, it was routine and predictable but if the routine is good, why would anyone want to change it? You don't need to be creative; oh no oh no! just keep doing *that, that*, unimaginative and mechanical though it may seem to you. I'll take care of creativity. I mean you like peanut butter sandwiches for lunch, then eat them. It doesn't matter that endive salad is more interesting, kale a more exotic fit.

And it was on one of those routine but always satisfying evenings that I imagined looking up and past him, my boyfriend, that is, (or what I had of him) to the open window into the apartment across the alley. He, the spiked hair guy (in case you confuse him with others as easily as I might) would

not feel me drift away if I breathed predictably, always in tune with him; he would never sense that lapse in attention, the insult to his character or manhood; he would simply follow me in all senses, even of sense itself, I guess. Like McQueen did with the men in fedoras.

I looked through the window across the alley and I saw him—my ersatz lover louvred in jalousies, I'll say, like recreating the first time he laid eyes on me—I saw him looking down on us and I too saw us, all three of us I mean, as if standing apart in my schizoid out-of-body game-playing, or in that ecstasy described by the medieval mystics. I saw all of it, the entire shebang, as Mother might have said, seers and seen, the way you see it always shown in the movies: you establish the point of view, the voyeur, standing above the lovemakers, then all is composed as if through his eyes, the lover, me in this case—not quite lover—looking up to him past the man who is making love to her. Our eyes meet and he slowly turns away and flicks off the light behind him, the one that backlit him in the window frame.

The ecstasy was gone with the windowlight. No longer did I share the vision of my alley-mate, watching myself making love and looking up to him. I was back to my self again, living what I had envisioned and leaving that vision now with you.

Watching a lover making love with another—it's not as you might think: neither joy in the Barthian or even the pedestrian sense nor excruciating and primal as depicted in the movies or in the ancient law codes regarding *in flagrante delicto* or is it ... is it fourth declension and terminal *-u*? or some kind of supine we all forget a week after it's explained to us. It's not at all the extremes you imagine it to be. Your eyes

meeting—no anger or jealousy—just the annoyance of it for both of you. *It could have been us it should be us.* That moment, hurt but without rancor, that must be the greatest intimacy there is.

A friend once said that very thing to me, using of course the variant guys think of first: the vision of his girlfriend with another man was the most erotic thought he ever had; proof that she was worthy of the love of another made her worthy of his. I told him it was true but sick. Who in the end is unworthy, not of love, but of loving you?

Maybe I could have acknowledged him; maybe I should have signaled him, silently, as in *Blow-Up* by Antonioni where the photographer walks in on his lover and her husband, all flat-mates, I think, or maybe she's only his mistress, not Vanessa Graves, but the other one.

She looks at him.

Sad. Or simply emotionless.

This is nothing.

That's what he wants her to say to him.

This is nothing.

It was always you, is now always you.

That's what he hopes she will signal him, but at best she shows indifference to both of them.

"I don't know why I agreed to this.

I don't know why I let my family publish the banns."

The light is gone.

My lover nears the end of his performance.

Nothing changes.

Joseph A Dane

Do not despair at things
unlikely to get worse than this.
Feed the cat for me.

These young men. You soon use up what they or you can know. Their inexhaustible *virtù*, or what they themselves consider that. Eventually, you stop answering the phone calls, or maybe they do, the texts and e-mails and social media posts and everything goes back to normal then.

So what if your next lover is less caring or proficient, you think. You can always keep the image of the boy alive, virile as ever he was in life or even more so, no matter how your next lover fumbles through the new routine of things. You've lost nothing, in that sense. You're even. You survive, say, even when that means a couple of hours out in the bar-scene so depressed you'd rather be alone. All you want is innocence, naiveté. All you want is to be caught in the gaze of your neighbor who just got home for the evening who maybe just got out of the shower.

Maybe he turns in early and collapses in private.
Maybe he reads himself to sleep in the dim light.

XVII.

I was kept up half the night once by my neighbors making love, and when that happens, you know, as I have often said, it is not your neighbors making love, but only one of them, with a new lover desecrating the marital bed in full hearing of everyone.

I had neighbors when I lived in the crappy apartment complex on Cochran Street. They were loud. Or some were.

And it might be protracted love-making or could be just garden-variety salsa music or some bass alone with no audible high tones, disembodied from its melodies. Or an argument, the loud insolence of teenagers or a guy coming home drunk. You never know and it's pointless to confront them.

"How do you stand it?" he asked, but I could sense he was moving closer. Barely perceptibly.

"I wait them out," I said and dropped my eyes, moving in as subtle a rhythm as I could embody closer to him still. He put his hands on my hips and gently turned me away from him. Then he brought his hands upward unopposed and encouraged as best I could. He pulled me back into him with insistence.

I was wearing that thin gold sweater I still throw on some days when all else seems to be "in the wash," so said, although never true of course. Thread-bare and alluring. Nothing under it.

I ate the drugs like candy in those days. Not giving a crap about anything, but not losing control in a blubbing and vomiting heap as used to happen when all I had was the alcohol some creep supplied me with. Mimosas, or whatever those sickly orange things are called, or the salty swill they serve in Mexican places. Who wants to jump into the sack with anyone with a stomach full of lime and ice? And everyone acts like a caricature of themselves and no one gives a shit, neither the waiters and singers in sombreros, nor the patrons with the hair greased like some dumb beast in a mating dance.

I remember J., "hard as they come" as I put it on social media for all our friends to see. A runner or athlete, he was, his muscles strong, I said, though all suspected what particular

virtue (in the old sense) I was referring to, thus starting a firestorm of curiosity or maybe envy and jealousy. "What did he say to her that I couldn't have? Why is he the one with the cute smile and summerhome?" All those guys on social media who wanted as much or more of me than he had! And finally he was asked directly by one who knew us both, and he answered in such a deliciously ambiguous fashion the topic never came up again. "Me?" he said. "With her? It depends what you mean by 'sex'." He could never get enough of me. Andrew could never get enough of me. It was that simple. And I held him at arms distance, moving my hips against him that night he gave me the massage, then laughing as I insisted I keep whatever virtue I still possessed, poor guy! for I meant it in the modern sense, of course, as I prepared to leave, returning to New York with all the innocence I had on arrival.

XVIII.

Her apartment faces a second one across the alley—her building itself a long and featureless stucco rectangle, her windows slightly lower and to the right of the second-story windows across the alley from where she is viewed. Her window is stripped with louvred blinds. Vertical. Like the 90s.

She is lying back on the bed or sofa; red skirt or maybe just a slip, one arm bent with the wrist supporting her forehead. Let's call it a red shift and extemporize on the speeds of distant galaxies. Like Matisse, *The Black Shawl*, with the colors reversed, a painting he is certain he has seen, the Norton Simon Museum it must have been. The image slowly supplants his memory of viewing her in life. Even in the black-and-white reprint below.



He remembers making love once, wasted and bored as always, free as always too. Both lost in private fantasies. What do I know of self? he thought, mine or another's? Nothing to distinguish Eloise herself from the slick-faced Asian girl with the sterile smile who once lived in the apartment beneath him. Her being itself a guess that splices together the frames of the film strip, the array of windowpanes. A world so unlike our own where we know nothing but superifice. The world of the dream-world where all the unforgotten can be known.

“Is that indeed so?” our heroine thought, turning the proposal over in her mind, skeptical, but answering civilly, weighing her words with the care usually reserved for professional encounters. “How interesting that you should assert such a thing,” struggling thus to keep her companion both distant and involved with her. It was the way she had been taught by Miss Carroll her second year in finishing school.

Like that. Stuff you read in novels. The complex machinations of characters in fiction.

Joseph A Dane

He felt the blood rush to his head and turned his flushed face upward a mere degree or two causing in her the slight shock of suspicion that all he said, and the stern admonishment he had delivered to her sister-in-law the day before in the drawing room of the visiting dignitary, might have contained a trace of irony lost on the sycophantic dinner guests turning their attention to the soup bowls, brought back from a visit to the Great Wall or the redug trenches on the battlefields of yore.

As if life were best expressed in minutes drafted up in the committee room.

“So what of realism? The banner under which armies of novelists have torn each other to shreds. Some critic said that once. Or ought to have.”

Well yes, that too, of course, that too. ...

XIX.

I can see them, the two of them, her lowering her chin as he comes closer to her.

They embrace: what else would you expect me to say? The light wavers as if in indecision. Then it vanishes.

I imagine only the aftermath, even what I cannot see.

They begin to speak. But they have no better idea of what they have started than I do.

“And now what?”

“What does that mean?”

“I mean now. What do we do now?”

“After the fact, you mean. As in Lessing’s analysis of *Laocoon*: the sculpture is shown not during the crucial moment

itself, the attack of the serpent, but ‘just after’—he is now factually in the serpent’s grasp.”

“As in Stevens too. The blackbirds whistling.”

“So in keeping with that, you mean do we ask each other for a cigarette and lie back, pretending we have forgotten we do not smoke?”

“As in the old joke ‘Do you smoke after love-making?’ ”

“Of course: *‘I don’t know; I’ve never checked.’* You could not tell that joke today.”

“It’s something I would do, in life, I mean. Speaking of smoking, not love-making. Something my mind would do. For years after I quit smoking, I would in a dream state smoke a cigarette and maybe a second one, then suddenly realize I had in so doing destroyed decades of tobacco sobriety and now I would have to start from scratch again. I woke up, still in the dream, that is, then in life, and I kept repeating ‘Oh well, since I’ve lapsed anyway, I may as well finish this pack.’ ”

“I don’t see what ...”

“What I mean is now what do we do? You and I. Given this.”

“Are you talking about a dream ‘us’? Smoking our cigarettes or love-making without thinking and now thinking of the consequence?”

“More the real ...”

“The post-coital us, you mean.”

“Well yes. Here we are.”

“And I guess further you are preparing to allude to the man I know as my fiancé, my life-partner as you woke Americans might say. I will write him or call him, (that is what you propose or imply), and tell him all our helixed futures have

unwound. Was I that good? Was I the best you ever had? I want to be the best you ever had.”

“You tell him you have been charmed from your complacency by some wonderful man you just met, and now, you are sorry, there is no going back to men of mediocrity.”

“And without you expressing so much as a trace of emotion or devotion, I give up my bourgeois universe—my husband, my children, my moves to suburbia? All for you? All for us?”

“Well, yes, or no, I’m not proposing that. I’m just stating it as a possibility. There are many more; I haven’t rejected anything, by the way. Or at least, so I’ll claim.”

“Well, in this state, you would likely say anything without any regard for its truth.”

“No no. Now twenty minutes ago? That’s different. I would have lied without hesitation, about your virtues, physical and spiritual, about my love for you.”

“Don’t make that joke you’ve made so often before.”

“The one ...”

“Yes. [Imitating me] ‘I’m perfectly sincere in my flattery. But don’t get me wrong. I *would* lie to you, if I thought it were necessary.’”

“So on now to the question?”

“Oh goodness what would P. say if she knew we were discussing this!”

“She would doubtless disapprove, and make one of those faces heroines in old novels make when they are ‘very cross’.”

“That may well be what you think now, although I promise you: she will hurt you more severely than you have ever been hurt before. A penny for your thoughts, as you Americans say. She’s just a kid, you know, though older than myself,

and like you as a schoolchild, so you say, wasting her youth seeking adulthood. 'But I'm happy!' she will cry out, protesting her innocence, as she leaves you for an opportunistic rival half your age. 'I'm happy!' she will say, and that will be the end of it. But perhaps your question addresses something else, a fear, perhaps. You're thinking perhaps I do not call or even think about my fiancé nor attempt to make things right with him because nothing has changed in my life. A fling on my way to seeing America—why would I abandon him for merely that? I love you, so take pride in that. That does not affect my nearly married life."

"The cultural barrier, of course. Aesthetic too. And the ironies I cannot hear, learned in what you call that 'small inconsequential village in western China of three million people' where you grew up. But yes, we are listing and talking around alternatives, at least. Is one the direction ..."

"Me? And you?"

"I ..."

"Or is this where I should say 'Put more directly, are we feeling emotions and possibilities emerge for us or were we just f*...'"

"When is life so clear in its Schrodingers of possibility?"

"Yes, now I have you in a bind. If you pretend you can choose rationally, with disinterest as if in, let's call it 'objective civility,' in this case you have expressed lack of interest in what you call 'us'—a hypothetical, if you follow me. On the other hand, if you spill the beans, as you Americans put it and as you tend to do, and answer directly, straight from the heart as you straight-shooters think you do and of course do not, you will never know whether what you say has any relation to the truth."

“In my present state, it is easiest to agree with you.”

“I suppose you could compromise—I would be bored with you in a year, so maybe you could have me as a side-dish, as men do. I myself don’t need side-dishes, and if I did, they would be easy to find: consider yourself, for instance! How much would that mean to you? More erotic than history is the dream where you dream of me as a celibate might do.”

“Nice! Let’s see now: ‘More erotic than history ...’ Thus ‘it would be more erotic to dream about ...’ etc., dream about you! I see: the mere dream is more erotic than any conceivable history, that is, love wasting away as it inevitably does in life. [And that is very much] as a celibate would dream.’ Oh yes. Of that, yes, I can attest to that. Sadly, it is easy to accept.”

XIX.

Older men. Who hasn’t experienced that? The first man who seemed to take you seriously. Or it may be just some creep whose persistence proved greater than your capacity to resist.

He loved me, or claimed he did, even though he never stopped talking about his former girlfriends or writing about them. And he promised never to get angry at me and that’s the best way he could describe what he meant by the word *love*, since what he meant by that could change—change as he got older, so he said, or change with the different lovers who found their way to him. And when he asked me right out what I thought of that, I told him it scared me to death. He wondered, I think, whether we were speaking of love, but what scared me far more was the promise he had made. And I think he kept his word, never once rebuking me even for the most childish of mis-deeds or even the most egregious ones,

until the hurt finally got the best of him and he took the perfunctory gifts I brought back after Xmas—a tea-set or something like that, not valuable enough even for me to remember—and despite what I considered a show of civility, the kind of thing I learned from those who grew up in Beijing, he slapped them out onto the roadway, nearly spitting in my face as he did so. "I wanted *you*," he said. "That's what I wanted. Not some piece-of-shit tea set from a sweatshop in China." Anything he found in the apartment, he said, anything that reminded him of me, was going to the trash or Goodwill if it was worth the cost of the gas to get it there.

And it could have been perfect I once thought; we would have been perfect, and I told him he was perfect: "You're perfect," I said, with complete conviction, even when I could see he had no faith in us and no delusions about our future. I was just a kid, well, not that, but like that in relation to him. And when I said that, I was standing across from him at the table where we had had dinner together so many times, where Sharon often cooked with us, flirting with him shamelessly to all of our delights. And he looked up from his work, or from his plate, right into my face, with an expression that I realized later was despair over the pride he felt at this flattery.

He grew so close to me, so confident, I felt like part of him, he of me. Something you never notice. Our movements in sync, you'd say, seeing us walk together, just as I always saw us too as a couple, out for a walk in the only neighborhood in Los Angeles I ever felt comfortable with him. No arguments, never missing each other, never feeling rejected, always glad to meet, no harsh words, none, except maybe that time, one time, I got angry at some story involving a former lover and I snapped something, and he sat there stoically "No, I am not

going to react,” he must have thought, remembering the promise he had made to me more than a year earlier, or so he later claimed, and then I said “Sorry,” and he nodded and placed his hand on my forearm, “Don’t worry about it,” I think he may have said, reading his lips. And that was the only time I felt the need to apologize until I left him for good.

He talked of love, or around it, I’ll say, as if in the obliquities of poetry, stating nothing directly. As if fearing when the words were right, the realities (that is, the *res*, as we learned in the academy) might evaporate. He knew well what might happen to me because it had happened to him—wasting his youth trying to be an adult, then trying to make up for it too late. He must have known that’s what he was now asking of me and what I would willingly do, not thinking my love for him might be simple adulation, and as close to a childish crush as I was likely to experience again. I had never felt the knee-buckling emotion he talks about in his books but never talked about to me, and I had too rarely felt that shock that runs right through your core when some beautiful man suddenly takes an interest in you. When I told him what I once had felt for him, I used the word *rapture*, in the old romantic sense, suspecting what I had felt was nothing more than sexual, something you can feel with anyone, rapture in the ancient and the modern sense.

It was when he reached for me in the car, one of the last times I saw him, after we tried so pointlessly to be friends, as women often say—meaning only that they don’t want to have sex—after we so pointlessly tried to have a civil dinner at a restaurant, something we rarely did even as a couple. He pressed his hand into the small of my back and then and only then did I feel what I claimed I once had felt, my entire body

giving in to him in a grand shock of desire, true rapture in all senses, not just what the poets say. Too late it was by then. And all I tried to do for him he took as condescension, my old mother-hen mentality he used to tease me so much about, and I suppose there's some truth in that. Like when I said to him "Maybe you're just not ready for a new relationship," and he spat in contempt, "You have one!" How was I supposed to react to that? What do the advice columns have to say for this?

Pee in a bucket, he once said to me. That's all you need to learn and we can sail forever even if only to Eastport and the tides of the Passamaquoddy. And I smiled, my red bandana tied loosely at my chin, caressing my neck in the sea breeze. Balanced over the tiller, as I saw him do, my eye to windward and ahead as he stood on the bow pulpit with the camera looking back to me, one hand on the forestay, steadied on the foredeck, in full confidence now, not of my sailing skills, but of his own that he had passed on to me. I have mastered it, I thought, anticipating the wind surge, the slow answering of the keel to the tiller, all the sails set to perfection as the hull pushed with insistence into the sea swell.

XX.

A sublet it must have been. There's nothing unusual about a young Asian girl living alone for the summer—we have students everywhere in this neighborhood. I can only see her magnificent black hair as it falls to the top of her shoulders, her staring up into his face in what he believes is adoration. Get it? Adulation/adoration. (Of course you get it, but I suppose it's considered racist to laugh at that today.)

Joseph A Dane

All summer she stays there, when he is away on the East Coast, summering I guess you'd call it but I in fact have no idea what he does there. Grateful for his generosity, she must be, but you never know what his motives are nor those he acted on.

I saw them only once together. Striking, she was—the eyes maybe a millimeter wider than you expect. The features sharp and the cheekbones prominent; they draw you in and you cannot escape. You are ... Oh God! Like one of my professors once said coming to class after an evening staring at the tight butts of the ballet troupe: “And I am not gay for *what* reason?”



And that must have been the year the possums took a liking to whatever tasty bug that found refuge among the vines

that grew across his roof. Every night he would hear them scratching through the vines, imagining, as you only can when you fall asleep, some cat-burglar or serial killer slowly and methodically trying to dig through the shingles and when he mentioned it to her, he found they shared the same exact fantasy. This one, I mean: the one about the cat-burgling possums.

She disappears from his life. For years. And like all women that age or most of them she goes off to get married and have a family and I guess her kid is about 12 years old when she texts him or messages him, maybe he's trying to get her to read one of his books where he has a section directly or obliquely involving her, or maybe she is simply worried that one of her colleagues might be harassing her and wants his advice, and whichever of those it might have been, somehow he deflects a perfectly innocent query and maybe she responds with something equally suggestive and one of them tells the familiar tale of working a night shift in New Orleans the Monday before Mardi Gras, and the plan was to get home at 1AM and get three hours or so of sleep before bicycling across town in the pre-dawn to prepare for getting to the Quarter in time for Pete Fountain's Half-Fast Marching Band, but it seems his friend Joe visiting from Baton Rouge, not the chess-player but the other one, was dumped off helplessly drunk at his doorstep at 1:30 by an irate cab driver, two plaster lions marking the entryway, "Can't miss 'em!" he always said, and Joe spends the first outrageous hour weeping and wailing at the banal tragedies of life and the next outrageous hour trying to seduce him, though in his condition that would be hardly possible, and eventually no sleep having exhausted two hours keeping his ass as virginal as the new-fallen snow,

Joseph A Dane

bicycling then through Bayou St. John up to the Fairgrounds to Linda Jane with a flask of wine all masqued up in their courtier costumes, and in any case she, the former student with the alluring eyes, responds “You! You were the cool professor in the running shoes and tight jeans. I can understand your room-mate’s persistence.” “But poor Joe wanted only to have sex with me, so you’re saying ... ?” “Oh yes. I looked at those running shoes and when you turned around, your tight butt in the jeans and ...” And all he can think is: Why I was not privileged to know this at the time?

XXI.

There has to be a measure of simplicity in everything. Have I finally mastered it? This art of getting dressed? Putting on my shoes without minutes of planning and analysis.

I put my feet on the floor. The laminates are warm—none of the early morning chill that surprises me no matter how used to it I must be and tell myself how used to it I am in fact. Getting dressed as if I were a paper doll with the clothes pinned on me or hung by tabs over my shoulders and around my waist. Nothing intimate. Nothing inside out. Nothing unwashed. Nothing like reality. Every fold in place. No urgency to run to the bathroom, and no error as I walk to the kitchen in perfectly adjusted light. Just past dawn. The way things should be.

Everything going like clockwork.

As it does in the movies.

The pages of romances.

As in the drafts taught in the academy.

Having fled the advancing armies, Jerome, never one to fear what cannot be and is not known, settled as best he could onto the bench of the bombed-out farmhouse and opened his rations. He slowly unlaced his boots, the caked mud dried to dust. He thought then of his fiancée waiting faithfully for his return (so he hoped) or for another of his letters home. It had been days since he had written her, perhaps weeks. Each time he tried to count those weeks he was distracted by the WHOMP WHOMP of the mortars, the trails of the tracers, rarely close enough to bother with. Numbers. What did it matter? He could no longer distinguish the letters he had written from those he had merely planned to write. The brilliant rhetoric of the unwritten work. The empty rations of a day earlier ...

He woke to the dawn light as he had planned and, so attuned to the natural rhythm of light and dark, the reflections of the morning mist on the windows, he had no reason to check the time on the clockface other than to ensure that the batteries did not need replacement. ...

Just left of the blue nightstand with the last coat of paint chipped on the edges, the light slanted to the closet door left ajar when he threw the laundry through and into it, fresh still with the smell of his own flesh, nothing intruding onto the silence. It was the taste of the summer air, the chill of the coffee, the bread knife still angled on the breadboard ...

And amid and engulfed by all this, I realize I am not living as myself, but rather as my neighbor, both seer and seen, imagines me, writes of me. None of the clumsiness of life—the

Joseph A Dane

way each time one makes the coffee, it becomes more of an affront. Knausgaard says nothing of this, the irritation of routine, unaware, I guess, that hearing the precise way he cooks his egg is annoying the first time and intolerable the tenth.

The way I move about the apartment means there is today no life for me. I act as characters do in fiction. Life-like and logical, not as we live in life itself. I will not slip clumsily, forget to button my jacket, spill the coffee—I cannot do these things now unless I have a reason to, unless I am motivated, or subject to external force I cannot sense. I am something “to be explained,” not a being whose thoughts and actions are inexplicable.

Inescapably fiction then.

Nothing happens by accident.

No avoiding it. ...

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That just for the hell of it ...

I stand. No reason to see if I am dressed properly even dressed at all. I gather up what goes out into the world with me, or I merely account for those things; four, I count, phone/wallet/keys/reading glasses. I walk down the steps and lock the door behind me, glancing once to the right, as if in indifference. I stride down the walkway, perfectly centered in the camera lens.

XXII.

This is what happened the night the EMTs came to the complex at 2 in the morning.

There was nothing unusual about that night. We noticed our lights, perhaps as they went out. 9PM it must have been. I didn't have the energy to create more life for him.

He got up ... it must have been 11 or maybe later. He got to the bathroom, but felt faint—that yellow ball suddenly appearing and slowly expanding, absorbing his vision. And he thought—what to do—get to bed—do it as quickly as possible. No more than 15 or 20 feet it must be and he “dashed” (that's the word he used to describe it) back to the bedroom, passing out as he crossed the doorway then dove, at running speed, head-first into the bureau.

It is not clear that he lost consciousness entirely. He brought his hand to his forehead, knowing that when you are hit there, you lose an alarming amount of blood—no need thus to be alarmed by it.

He pushed himself up to his elbows and looked to the bathroom door behind him. Two strides away at most, those two seemed hundreds, the range of a sniper shot in old war movies. He felt the floor. Board. Not mattress. It was then he realized he had not fallen into bed, but was now just regaining consciousness sprawled out on the clothes he had worn a day earlier.

His face was not cool from blood.

There was none pooled on the floor beneath him.

He pushed himself to his knees and pulled himself into bed, rolled into bed, almost immediately overcome with nausea as bad as he had ever experienced. Concussions do that he had once been told. Andrea it was; she had hit her head and was afraid to go to sleep and all he could think about then

was sliding her thin sweater over her shoulders and assuring her that he would take special care that she get no sleep that night. And don't worry, he added. We will prove as well that it is impossible to f*ck yourself to death.

That's the joke he had once made to his colleague Leo, when they arrived to work one morning at the same time. Eloise stepped out of his car, kissed him, and danced off to her film class. "A little romance?" Leo kindly said. And that's when he answered with that joke. "I have learned," he said, his baritone deepening, "that it is impossible ..." because if it were possible, you see, he would have been dead hours ago. But why bother to explain it?

He had no idea whether what she said was true.

About concussions, I mean.

Whether what he had joked about was true.

He recalled too the evening in his apartment in Venice, staring out into the street life, as a partier whistled his dog to jump into the bed of his pick-up. One of those large dogs with the raveled face. The pick-up pulled out, a car followed. The dog barked and jumped angrily directly into the grill of the following car. The dog stood shaking on the sidewalk. Finally vomiting. "You should go to the animal hospital," he pled with the owner, knowing he could not afford it.

Simon.

He'll never forget it.

Simon his name was.

The dog I mean, dead for a long time.

Whether he survived that night or not.

Like that it was, he thought. Like Simon. And he had just enough rationality to call 9-1-1, although it might have made for a better evening just lying there in his lascivious recollections of his lascivious history. Fortunate he had brought his phone into the bedroom.

What is your emergency?

What is your name?

What is your address?

Do not move.

Is there a light on?

Is the door unlocked?

How long ago did this happen?

Can you spell the road name please?

All of which he answered in cadences so unnatural he wondered why he was speaking so slowly, why he was being distracted from his thoughts of Andrea and he would be damned if he would let the EMTs arrive with him in a sweat-soaked t-shirt and underwear, so he took a shower, Andrea still not far from the center of his thoughts, and that may have been as stupid a thing as he could do amid the unprotected porcelain surfaces, like the time on the way to the shore, he tripped on the stairs broken by Christina, split his forehead on a glacial erratic, and determined to go for a swim to wash the blood away. He got dressed, sat down in the living room and waited. His thoughts on Andrea. The thin sweater. Her bending away from him. His arm around her waist.

Would it be better, say, had Andrea been right about the dangers of sleep or about the pressure to one's brain in the

Joseph A Dane

jouissance of desire and I guess he must have thought that there are certain things worth dying for but catching a bit of sleep after a head injury is surely not one of them.

Beginning of August? Was there sailing after that? Was it as if nothing had happened, like so much else turns out to be? He knows that his reflexes aren't what they once were. His strength is not as he remembers it. Does he have as quick access to his past nautical experience as he once had?

You cannot be forgetful at the helm.

You cannot vary your routines.

Like waking up and getting your coffee.

Each line and winch handled in turn.

No cutting corners.

The boredom of repetition.

"Seek not temptation," Milton says or Milton says Adam says—even a jealous fool can speak the truth! "Trial will come uncalled for."

I see a flash of color. I am moving and that's what animates what I see. A shirt-sleeve. Movement and an intent to move, the body rising, now completely unseen or -sensed.

"It was quite a winter," one's friends would say, as if in envy. The truth was that the experience of the seasons, in safety if not in total comfort, made them unenvious of anything.

XXIII.

It was the two of them who found the apartment, a standard two-bedroom with sheet-rocked walls and popcorn

ceiling. They were a dime a dozen and are so still but they do not cost that today, and of course never did.

More than a decade it had been. She still recalls the smell of fresh Latex house-paint—that scent enveloping them, unnoticed, almost as nothing. Always fading to nothing. The smell of freshly washed sheets. The novelty of setting up accounts, of meeting the landlord, of signing the forms.

Until he left.

And she vowed never to be hurt like that again.

When he left it was as if the groceries fell out of the grocery bag. Catastrophic like that but everyday as well. Who hasn't experienced this? What is there more to say of this?

It was as if her own suffering confirmed the banality of its cause. "Grow a pair!" a friend of hers cried out to her that day when, after trying to explain the injustice of it all, the precise and subtle ways in which she had been wronged, she collapsed in tears on the park bench.

It's acceptable for women to cry like that in a public space.

A man cannot do this even privately without feeling his friends recoil away from him.

So she went through a routine.

And each day it was the same.

All this familiar from the days just after college.

The "nervous breakdown," as it was then called, was likely no more than the usual despair afflicting all of us in our early twenties. All you had to do was survive until 4PM. Then the tv went on with the talk shows and interviews and then the news came on and then there might be a documentary, and every other night it was ok to take a Seconal and all you really

Joseph A Dane

had to do the rest of the time is reassure yourself that in fewer than 48 hours you would take the drugs to let you sleep again.

That was the way life was in those days.

No life at all.

Just living.

Through days with your ex fondling another woman
instead of you.

On what she called her "off-days" then, those without medication, she could try to sleep unaided and eventually she would sleep and then she would wake and it would still be dark. The clock tells her only how much sleep she will still miss that night. That "vicious precision of the clockface," she will one day write of it.

No need to go into the details of it;
you know them well.

Check the clock. Three hours. Four on a good night. Then her torturers of emotion lined up in boisterous review, laughing as the image formed of her lover with another woman, as she reviewed all the pain all the plans to forget him to get him back again to pay him back for what he had done to her maybe get a new lover and have a foursome or engage in wife-swapping—good God the thoughts she had!—how to prove to the world that she was tougher than they would ever imagine and how she and only she knew her inner strength.

The pain would persist as long as would the routines she used to combat it. Forget causes and effects! This was life itself, she grandly thought. Like playing the lugubrious music

constantly, at home, in her car, even linked to her phone, knowing she would never be cured, never be over it, until the day when she neglected to turn the music on, always resonating with her grief. All her resources would then be exhausted and she would be tired of the whole thing: the repeated songs she played, the books she tried to read, the shows on television which seemed to make no more sense to her than they had when she watched them, high on drugs, as a teenager.

And one day she lay back in the now familiar pain. A car passed or maybe it was just a neighbor walking her dog, or the Metro stopping a few blocks away or some birds screaming, but she glanced then, with no hope of changing anything, toward the light angling into her room from the vertical louvres of what passed for window-blinds.

That was it.

That's what turned her life around.

XXIV.

It was after I learned her habits that she first broke into my apartment.

There was no mystery or surprise to this. In old buildings, the locks are little better than what you have on closets. No landlord paid a nickel on maintenance except for paint; so the locks on all but the most recent of buildings "were a snap."

I'm sure that's what she thought.

Both landlord and neighboring tenant.

In our college days, we used to go in and out of our classmates' dorm-rooms with only a plastic id card on doors built, if anything, more solidly than the ones in my apartment. That was in the 60s when plastic id cards were still a novelty and

Joseph A Dane

locksmiths and designers had not yet considered their implications. Nor had landlords, who always then and still now shop for locks by price alone.

I remember one of my classmates returning from spring break to find us all lounging in his room before his tv set (the only one in the dorm), the wastebasket full of beer and ice, all his saved issues of Playboy scattered about us, cigarette butts pressed out on every make-shift ashtray we could salvage. My room was just above his, and one night I got sick on beer, vomited out the window, soaking his room-mate in the wind-blown spew.

Or breaking into this very man's family cottage out on Mere Point to spend the night with some girl I picked up at a party, having earlier passed out somewhere, likely on the bench where everyone threw their jackets. I awoke and got to my feet, and within minutes of regaining consciousness, this blond girl I had never seen asked me who I was. 24 hours later and I never saw or heard from her again. A friend, a month later, told me of the contempt she had for me.

It was odd how I ended up with her, and for better or worse, unrepeatably. I had been with a woman I both knew and admired from high school, probably the best math student at school, but with "a reputation," you know, like getting hickies as early as middle school—the scandal!—and that infamous history followed her until she finally moved away. Born-again now, with adoring grandchildren. Somewhere in Florida. A body, so unappreciated then, so perfect I still dream of it today.

We awoke with the discomfort of hangovers in the cot that smelled the way sheets smelled left out for the winter. There was no lounging around in bliss for kids like we were. "I know," she said. "I know something we can do that will be far better than drinking ourselves to unconsciousness. The sour taste of alcohol. The headaches, and wondering what kind of a fool you made of yourself the previous night. I have an idea." And that's how it could and should have gone and had it done so, we would be lounging now, although we did not then, in separate states, Maine and Florida, precisely where our lives led in the circuitous routes they did. "That was the best idea you've ever had in life!" I would later say to her and I would confirm that still today, though nothing, by definition I think, ever goes the way it should or could have gone.

I doubt she, my alley-mate, stood outside on the landing, my landing, for more than a half-minute, even though there were likely few in either building at home at that hour, fewer still who would be at their windows in a position to see this, and fewer still who would have cared.

She shut the door, opened easily, behind her, and now faced the narrow and unsafely steep staircase in the scent of an unfamiliar place. Those who knew me knew that smell of course; the known, the identified—your friend with the distinctive scent, such markers differing from place to place. Like John W., you always think, the scent of him, in his room, his clothes; John, your childhood friend though three years your senior, John W., who at age 21 blew his head away for reasons, as always in such cases, we are left to imagine.

She stood silently of course.

No one home, as she suspected; or so she was certain. She suppressed the slight rise in her heartbeat; it would have betrayed the cold-blooded calm in which she acted. They say you can't do that, can't ease your blood pressure, that is, lower your heartrate, but it's bullshit. Otherwise, why would they also say "Take a deep breath and relax." Or "Calm down." Or whatever other passive-aggressive cliché they come up with.

She climbed the staircase, *climbing* the appropriate word for it. Step by vertiginous step. I often joked I was planning to replace the unusually steep steps to the second floor with a ladder to make it easier to negotiate. Defiant of building codes today, that staircase was, but what are you going to do with old buildings like this one? Tear them down? Put them on the historic register? Surround with yellow tape and threatening signs to keep the homeless out?

She apparently surveyed the entire apartment before touching anything. I suspect she walked quickly through the entire space, front room to back room and back again, and maybe even sat down briefly in the daybed in the far bedroom. What could she see? A hair-dryer. Not his, she must have thought. Some paintings and sketches, most of them original. A few posters. One signed—a blown-up photo of a dory with a dozen shorn sheep tethered to the gunwales, off in the early-morning calm to the pasture on Monroe Island, an area "reclaimed" it was said, for sheep-farming, in fact, clear-cut in the manner of developers. She didn't have time to review the others in detail: angry abstractions with dark black lines cut through patterns of yellow and red.

It was a shotgun apartment, the main room facing both alley and the street, a dining room, kitchen, then the guest room, if that's what it was called, facing the parking lot. She stood up slowly and again walked the length of it, from the guest cot to the front room, pausing at the window from which her apartment was most visible. She looked over the crepe paper shades into her own room across the alley and regretted that she had left none of the lights on to reconstruct the views that he had seen. She then went into the front room.

She lay down on the open futon
She wrapped herself in the old duvet,
hardly more than a blanket.

It was like being enveloped in him.
Being him, in a way.
As close as it could ever come to that.

I loved the way he used to reach for me, she thought, and it may have been and often was no more than the pressure of his hand on my shoulder, his body warmth now my body warmth as I felt my own form form itself against his surfaces.



PART TWO:

BILDUNGSROMANE

- I. Parallel Rule: From Compass Rose to Compass Rose
- II. On Vacation with my Darling Eloise: The Seed Book
- III. Writing Assignment

Joseph A. Dane

Biography is a collection of holes tied together with string, and nowhere more so than with the sexual and amatory life.

—Julian Barnes, *The Man in the Red Coat*, 114.

I. PARALLEL RULE: FROM COMPASS ROSE TO COMPASS
ROSE

i.

Was it a ski trip to Chamonix?
The gravitous falls in early snow?
Virgin, some say, fresh powder, they call it,
the celebrities now two decades gone,
who died trying to act like the Kennedys.

Jack, Robert, Edward,
same as the next generation.
What was the name of the eldest?
Joe Jr. it was for all the good it did as a first-born.

Yet thinking that,
thinking and feeling that,
I am reminded absurdly not of revelation
not of sublimities of the snow-covered rock-face,
coldly indifferent as the very sea I have grown so much to
love,
I recall instead the first time
I went cross-country skiing in California.

The pettiness of my colleague.
The pettiness of my recalling it in the first place;
—the true mark of *res academica*—
extraneous allusions to the virgin snow,
Linda Jane protesting my show of affection;
like skiing in the fields behind her home in New
Hampshire,
now here in Mt. Pinos, where the condors were said
still to fly before they were all placed in captivity.

Joseph A. Dane

Against the snow
blue sky without impingement.

A trip to Chamonix, real or imagined.
Another gravitous fall in the spring snow.

Those to me, a Maine boy, are what true mountains are,
not "that hill," as my uncle called Katahdin,
the highest point in the state.
Mountains define the limits of Los Angeles;
or the road from Durango to Glacier
where I spent two summers, never suspecting
my self would be no more "found" having done it,
nor that all this landscape itself would be gone
by retirement, whole mountains dug up by mining;
the prairies replanted with silage.

You, my darling, felt imprisoned by landscape
the air of Los Angeles stale with exhaust,
imprisoned in the valleys
imprisoned later by the desert air of Santa Fe,
the house your family bought for you,
cloaked in smoke from the smoke-house.
Your hands on the bars as they
once so gracefully touched the barre.
Imprisoned by the animals you loved,
the men from whom you could never free yourself,
like that producer who could only get aroused
by having fellatio in a warm bath.
I never asked how you discovered this,
what the research entailed,
who served as the control group.

I set the phone down and let your voice drone on as a burden,
my then-lover lost in her hair-styling,

lost in the computer screen.

Thinking of what she thought the perfection of our relationship.

I was perfect, she said. We were perfect.

This only months before she left me for good.

I walked the shore with you, or perhaps I never walked the shore with you.

I sailed east of the Bar near South Addison, Cape Split or Eastern Harbor they sometimes call it now, just west of Jonesport, sailing back to Bar Harbor on the falling tide, timing the Bar with the sea state, yet you, my darling, you, I know you never once set foot in Maine.

When I last walked in the Maine snow I walked in the snow with Fran. I had flown in from California a week after her partner, my friend since college, the man who drove me to New York the day I fell in love with my wife-to-be—the most important day in my life—I walked in the fresh fallen snow after this man clutched his heart, tried to stand, and dropped dead on his piano bench. I wrote *Moments Musicaux* in tribute to him and to the score he had clipped to the music stand.

This thus is the tale I was told to tell as I thought of the lives of myself and of my darling Eloise. A tale of sailing, told so many times before, it was to be; so you insisted, and insisted again, mixing critique and flattery, you insisted I tell the sailing tale again, a tale of sailing, say, over the chart through compass rose and compass rose and back again, and all I could think of was that I never sailed with my darling Eloise and there was nothing I could say of sailing of interest to you or to anyone let alone something that has not been said before. All the sailing allusions here are here for you.

So this is what I tried to write at your insistence: coming of age stories, trite as taught; a tale of my Darling Eloise.

ii. Puppet Shows

Oh enough of your banalities. We've heard all this before. "We," that is, except perhaps for me. The love of you; the love of me. Something about subjection and objective genitives I recall from your lectures or simply from your hectoring. I guess I mean your love for me, or I should say, you the arch-professor, the love you once *professed* for me.

So when I look back, not on life, but upon my thinking of it, what then? The great statements made in chiseled prose, the insistent peace of the open sea, the conclusions I drew on this subject: all lies, I see. Deception for others and self-delusion for myself. Even my descriptions of love, never from life, but rather from other trite descriptions, all from those no more in love than I am. How can you recall or even envision what love might be? The curve of her face; the inflections of her voice. The way her name perfects her surfaces. Experiencing that, why would you waste time in idle analysis or chit-chat? Sonnet-sequences and chord progressions? The rhythms of the sea-surface ...

No no. You're not listening.

Think what Chateaubriand said: joy is particular, singular, whereas pain and grief call to mind all the griefs of life. Even you, perhaps, abstracted from time, might too be thought a singular and when that, a pure joy for me. Yet the fact is, any grief I experience today leads me to the grief I felt for you.

Enough of that! These stolen tropes of memory, as you, the scholar, often call them. It was always me, you say, you loved through others, or perhaps it was never me at all.

We were talking about our lives at age 10. That's what you were asking me before your choral lamentations. Who

was the relative who first had sex with me? I can tell you there were no emotions then such as you now describe. At least on my part. But then you got off on your too-familiar tangents. Childhoods nearly gone. All those years of chasing newts and tadpoles in the pond a quarter mile away from you. Puberty ahead of us. What was I doing at that age or stage in life?

I was directing and writing puppet shows for my family.

That's what I was doing at age 10. And dropping acid too but never by choice or will. That's what I wrote of it.

Now your age ten was hardly the same as mine. Not like life growing up as a child enslaved by the rich folks. This is the period of life your fiction always neglected, or passed or stumbled over. Maybe too embarrassing. You will never get over the naiveté you displayed at age 10, the derision of your supposed friends, the condescension of adults. Learning to row by unlearning all your father taught you, just as you would learn to sail by doing the same thing. Or maybe all was worse than that! maybe your whole life then too inconsequent, the telling too sentimental for your tastes, with none of the heroic horror of life as lived by some or most of us.

Remember telling me of the dream you had. A dream of storytelling; the protagonist sitting directly across from you. Or maybe just someone you recalled you had once told the story to a week earlier. A knower, you see? The competent or even ideal reader as the linguists used to say. Shifting identities as seen and known in the dream state. It hardly matters who it was. Likely a rival too, I guess. Another of the many women you loved instead of me.

You had to tell the story perfectly, you thought. Something you'd never done before. All its details in place, the beats, as we say in the parlance of film school, lined up in proper order, meaning proper to the events described. 'Decorum' to your eighteenth-century *literati*. The woman sitting

across from you, living there in life, the corrective to the story, there either to belie your history or to expose the fiction as the fraud it must have been, one only she could judge.

Don't expect a punch line. Don't wait for resolution. There are no such things as that in a dream-state nor such things in life.

Because who knows what the truth is or where the truth might lie? Who knows the history of the chess position you destroyed by slapping the pieces off the board, as in the Bergman film?

What about my own memories—the clearest things I remember from my childhood? What were they in history, I mean, not just as experienced? Who was I then? and who was remembering all this today?

"Oh Mom!" I cried out. "Remember the puppet shows? I made Gala memorize the lines and read them back to me, our puppets made from old and sometimes new socks, with a day's worth of modifications. We set the date and you were sitting there with Lars, a command performance, enraptured, you were, charmed by us, by the puppets, so we thought, charmed by the dialogue, charmed in fact when the drugs you took had time to kick in just when the imagined curtain rose. Maire too, or was she old enough then to sit on the couch with you? Laughing at the two of us? Was this evening one that occurred in time and space, or was it rather something that came into existence only when I described it all to you, or later when you gave your version back to me?" "Oh no, darling," she said in her Mom-voice. "That is simply not how it was. No no. Not like that at all."

I hated her. Especially when her memories or her mere view of things so opposed my own. You've heard me say as much. I hated not who she was but what she did to me. Yet I missed her when I lived in London that year, the year that D'Arcy died, poor thing, barely out of puppy-hood, the year you would talk to me by Skype, and I longed as childishly for

her presence and her love as I've done since I was old enough for consciousness; I wanted that so much that when she told me of some small favor she had done for me at home I called you instantly and burst out "She loves me. Mommy loves me." Though a year later it would be, with equal insistence, "I don't like her." Note, not "I hate her," like what I just said, something every child says of their parents, something every lover feels and often says. It means nothing. A tantrum. A tiff. Waking up too early. The toast wrongly set in the toaster.

No, the stronger form: "I don't like her." In four carefully measured syllables. A double spondee, you would say, though no one was listening. That is the worst thing one can say to or of a loved one.

Now I never said that of you, although there were times I too hated you. Times I thought you were silly and preposterous. Times I thought I meant no more to you than the women you ogled on the street or made crude jokes about. Times I thought you were low-class. Sand-poor. Like that morning I woke early to get to the polo match, and stark-naked out of bed you leap, roll up a tee-shirt, and like one of those centers or long-snappers in football, you tossed it through your legs at me while flashing a giant moon. Not funny! And a vulgar sport to boot.

For who were you then? Not my intimate. Just someone who woke with me when I wouldn't even wait for breakfast. Just another opportunistic teacher or professor.

As if I hadn't had enough of those in my life.

I was thirteen, and I kept crying crying, telling him to stop. No! Please don't! And he wouldn't stop. He wouldn't stop. And there were other things, probably worse, that I could tell, and thus worse things I could say of you. But what is the point of particulars? I could hate you, but never never I swear to you, I could never dislike you, even when you hurt me as you so often did.

I sometimes wonder if I could have written about you as you did once about me? I mean about us, of course, but with you as the focus. Thus no longer letting you shape our history. Not letting you portray it a symphony, say, Mahler's Second, so you said. I guess I'd think in terms of dance, like what I said of Mackenzie's *Juliet*, when drama supersedes the dancer's virtuosity. You've been repeating what I told you ever since.

What would I include in my *Elegy for Joseph*? I would describe our sailing trips, using the language you taught to me—sea-breezes and tides and avast and avaunt and all that sort of thing. I would speak of things that happened in your childhood that you never wrote about, things you never expressed to me. What could I say about your life before I was alive, or even after I had gone? Why should anyone take your word for it? All that catching the noon breeze just as you cleared the channel and set your course for North Haven.

You'll never hear me speak of that.

I'd write instead about how awful you were to your wife, loving her, then leaving her, and giving her no chance to get back with you. How awful you were to me as well. And don't excuse yourself through the agony you suffered when your P. left you in the end. As if you're the only one whose lover has abandoned them, or the only one astute enough to feel the pain of it. I'm talking of the student, you know, not your Polish girlfriend who made mincemeat of you. I mean the one who unwittingly stood in for me. Then paraded about your workplace with her new Intended, handsome guy, half your age, adding humiliation to the grief.

Pain was good for art, or so you said. It made you care about what you wrote, you said. That was what was wrong with your first version of *Rondo for Renys*, you said; so you filled it with your wailing only to have the publishers ignore all the soulful depth of what you wrote, concerned only for the sales figure from the book they'd already done for you. Who gives a crap about emotion when there's money

involved? You yourself know this all too well. The most successful seducers and all lovers by extension don't give a cr*p about feelings either, neither yours or their own. Maybe that's why it took so long for you to lose your unvalued virginhood.

So you embraced it.
When you felt nothing,
your work was nothing,
so you claimed. Just like Horace said
“ ... Si vis me flere, dolendum est
primum ipsi tibi. ... “

So you thought. Otherwise just words. Nothing behind them. Your pain then leapt into the words, or so you thought, and maybe that's why you always write of me. As you used to lecture from the podium: no one happily in the sack wastes a moment of that worrying about a cadence or the finer points of prosody, the scansion of the second line in the Horace poem. But who cares about such things in today's Academy?

For me, however, it was never like that. I just wallow in it (have I used that word already?). Pain, I mean. Pain just heaped more pain and sadness onto my head like the saints in the deserts did with the ashes, whatever they were. Not the saints. Everyone knows what saints are! But the ashes, the true sum of life.

I could only write the love of us when I felt the love of us. Like you just said. Love made working a thing of joy for me. To work after hearing you revile me was impossible. That's why you might compensate for the loss of me, but I could never make up for the loss of you. Remember the time, it was toward the end, you cursed or said something bad to me, and I was so upset I couldn't paint or do my pottery for days.

So at the very end, I turned everything over in my mind for a month or two, not listening to you or to anyone, not seeking or accepting consolation of any kind. And finally I

determine, entirely on my own of course, that that is that; there is nothing to live for, no compensation for the pain. None in the next life and none in what little is left of this. In March it was. Decision. Resolve. I knew I would be dead by May. I warned you, but you didn't take me seriously. No more worrying about anything. No more of anything.

For me, of course.

But not for you.

I am sorry. I know I still owe you for your kindnesses, all I left undone that I could do.

And as for you, there is nothing left to avenge after what I did to both of us.

Anyway, enough of that. My life at age ten was family life and for me all life is family life. The beginnings, and the tragic end of things. And let's include or at least allude to my stepdad. Let's start with that. Him seeing in me one day what he had seen in my mom some fifteen years earlier and never quite getting over it. It completely f*cked me up. Who cares about that, I suppose. Nothing to be done about that stuff now.

He was an artist. Much like your friend Allen. And like him, he worked every day, often through the day. Although in his case, the day often ended when the alcohol got too much for him. You never saw his work. Only, say, that ping-pong ball he decorated as a joke, which I sent and you still have on your bookcase. I never showed you the paintings; I hardly had access to them myself. The canvases dried in his studio—no way were you allowed to sneak a camera in—and when he felt they were done he would wrap them up in paper then slide them into storage racks with all the others.



Again, just like your friend Allen did; it took *Sketchbook* to drag those paintings out into the world where they would be no more seen than they had been in the dark recesses of his studio.

SKETCHBOOK



Art by Allen Grindle
Words by Joseph Dane

Joseph A. Dane

He wouldn't sell anything, my step dad, I mean. What did he need money for, once he married Mom? And why would he subject himself to the critique by the rabble in a public show, *hoi polloi* in the worst sense?

It seemed odd to me that you never pressed me for an example: a catalogue. A photo maybe. Even a description.

What was the genre or medium?

What were his subjects?

Were you incurious (a word I got from your *Sketchbook* itself), unlikely as that might seem? Perhaps you did not want to find yourself bested so thoroughly in art by a man who in some ways was more intimate with me than you were, and that in the best and in the worst of sense.

Or maybe (and less repellently) you thought you saw his art in me—the way I drew; the way I caught or made the world in the pencil edge. You knew there must be some of him in that; by knowing me, you knew his art as well.

You know how that goes, master that you are!

This is the way you claimed you loved me
through love you had for other women,
that in some strange and irrational way
you loved me in loving them.

Convenient for you as is the greater part
of your philosophy.

No wonder I blew my head away.

Mom loved the arts and gave money and bought air time on the radio, and even started a press for children's books. But the details, she left to me: dealing with disgruntled artists or the moms of supposed prodigies and I would be left to fix this and fix that and console this person and extort money from another and pretty much, everyone hated me—the last thing I needed.

That was life for me.

Those are the joys of the uber-rich. The kind of life you would have envied once, had you not been so naïve, and now you've grown quite beyond giving a crap about it. That's why you don't hear much of those days of predatory step-dads and the hedonistic mom—*hedonistic*, the very word another woman used of you—"the bountiful AR" you called her, with some justice—the one trait she hadn't seen in you—who would have guessed?—so little did she know you then.

Mom had her boy-toy. Someone she met at a benefit, or maybe it was his mom or his uncle she met there. An artist, I guess, although in Santa Fe it's hard to find anyone who is not a self-styled novelist, painter, or who does not write screenplays for amusement. And within a few months I was evicted from the small guest house I used as my office-space, in fact, a place where I lived, where I sometimes slept, where I worked, where I would go for peace and solitude. And back I went to the bungalow my mail came to, engulfed in the smoke from the smoke house, where my dogs ran wild over me, as the boy-toy took possession of my office-space. My once refuge from him and her and all the rest of them.

She wasn't good at it. Her boy-toy consumed her and she talked of him constantly—his art, his dedication, the way he worked. I think it was you who pointed out to me that when you are having an illicit affair (I know I know, how would I know anything about such things?) you must ...

"You must make sure never to mention your lover's name. Never."

Because?

"Because the natural tendency is to mention her brazenly, just to prove how innocent this relation is, how no one could suspect a thing, and that ..."

Joseph A. Dane

That means you end up speaking of her not only then, but all the time, any chance you get. Like a besotted teenager.

“Yes. You can always thus identify an unfaithful philanderer by the very bravado they show, thinking wrongly they are concealing their affairs.”

Just like her boy-toy. You see? All your teachings were not in vain after all.

She funded galleries and sponsored radio shows. I got to read at them; she got to read at them. Early in the morning. And later some fourteen-year-old would hear my voice and say: “I know you! I used to listen to you on Sundays.”

When was it that your own students, now nearing middle age, only vaguely familiar, stopped coming up to you in the street saying “Remember me? You were my English professor years ago ...” The one who did that in the waiting room at Kaiser you remember only for the reason you used the word *bountiful* of your brilliant and beautiful AR so many years ago. Amy H*, one of the few names you remember. Though maybe it was only her physique that prompted you.

I rarely took the lead; I never had a self in charge of anything. On anything related to my family, I simply had no control whatsoever—no control over money, of course, no control over where I lived or how I lived. And eventually that became who I am. A woman with no control of life. No control over how my art was read or mis-read, no control even of the work itself. You say that’s like sailing, but nothing is as much like sailing as you say it is. Think of the puppet-shows, where my tripping Mom sat in the first and only row and laughed delightedly, not because we were wonderful but simply because she was high. Then, only a few years ago, there was the film we were going to make in all adult earnestness and our plans went swimmingly; I even paid the kids we used as actors to take acting lessons. I had all the parts printed out and

sorted into neat piles, each with a full script. The way they teach in Film School, or program into FinalCut, the app always open on the screens of your local Starbucks. And I distributed the lines and cues and on the day we were thinking of shooting (because nothing was ever scheduled, oh dear God no!) Mom and the kids and my sister and everyone who had promised to help in this got drunk or high and improvised the whole thing, ignoring completely the lines I had written out for them.

That was how I did as a director. Until the Danes movie, that is. No, not the one about you, but about my relatives in Denmark. Although maybe my fascination with both is not a coincidence



So that was it, pretty much,
my childhood, or what there was of it.

Joseph A. Dane

They finally sent me away to school again,
to plague others with what they knew
would attend it.
And that is how I came to be with you.

Like vets on a protesting pet, they were. It was as if they never
cared, or felt what I felt. Like the surgeons operating on an
infant with no anesthesia. That's what my family did to me.

She's lovely.
Relax.
Look at her smile in the photo.
She feels nothing.
The synapses ill-formed,
nothing lodged in her memory
Do whatever you want to her.
Keep her alive
like the elderly
on drugs to prolong
the paying of the doctors' bills.

The life I wanted once and still want was yours. Puppies.
Newts. Tadpoles that will never grow to maturity.

And I know too what you are thinking:

*At age ten, I was chasing frogs and waterbugs and foot-
prints of animals in the snow—the life you wish you had, or
claim you wish you had when that was no longer possible, never
possible.*

**At age ten you were writing and directing puppet
shows for your family ...**

iii

I flew over Santa Fe on the anniversary
of the day you blew your head away.
Twelve years ago I think today.
The deserts of the southwest—
Monument Valley and all the rest—
opened up on the earth surface,
before and after me.
A plane I had seen only from land,
only in the sterile highway view,
no depth to things in the heat
rising from the asphalt.

The way they always stage that shot in the movies.
A symbol of dread, or maybe just background
for the credits,
surfaces I drove through
on the way from Maine to LA
and back to Maine again.

I doubt there's more than a trace left of you;
there beneath the desert air
pressing down on Santa Fe.
Maybe up in Taos at some gallery
a patron still remembers you, still cares,
marks their calendar as I do,
each year visiting you through
the on-line memorial to remind you
each birth- and death-day anniversary
that I still mourn for you.

I did not give up, as Nekayah does, forgetting her annual memorial for her servant Pekuah in Johnson's *Rasselas*, human

as she is and acts, representing all of us or rather acting as humans do generally, to speak as Johnson would. As maybe too those who hosted the website gave up on their acts of remembrance for you as well. Why bother with the update? they must think. He sends the same damn post on every occasion: "I haven't forgotten. Love, ..." Who needs to hear that having heard it once? The tortured artifice of it, they must think. Get over it. We miss her too, for God's sake; but we don't need to showcase our familial piety.

Flying over Santa Fe, I watched the Southwest desert expand beneath me, and then we passed you, where you were, where what is left of you was buried, if, that is, they bothered doing that, if, that is, it's not something I simply made up as a tribute.

The irrigation plots multiply. The plots multiply. Like one penny placed on the first checker square, two on the next, then four ... An astronomical sum. Two to the sixty-fourth, whatever that is! Too large to calculate. The squares and irrigation circles brutally stamped into the landscape and the only metaphor I had for this desecration was the way they plug holes into the greens of cheap golf courses. But there must be a better way to think about these things than that.

The clouds rolled in and everything I had of you was gone.

Oh Eloise. Do you remember that trip we took to the mountains, or maybe it was just a drive up the coast of Maine, visiting all the harbors we had talked of and visited when you used to sail with me?

You, who never once set foot in Maine,
still with me on all my sailing trips.

I remember you most on that drive from Harpswell to Eastport. I remember most crossing the bridge to Beals Island, right across from Jonesport, the most industrial port on the easternmost Maine coast.

Beals Island was like a brochure for a real estate agency, a cover photo for *DownEast* magazine. Like the imaginary lovely child they all say you were in the obituaries. The pictures in your picture books. You look down from the bridge at Jonesport, with just enough clearance to squeeze your boat through at half-tide or lower. You look down to lightly treed fields with gravel roads cutting through and around them, to and around the tiny wood-shingled cottages, painted in extravagant colors like the houses in Quebec—nothing like the grand cottages of summerfolk of southern Maine—Prout's Neck, the Pool at Biddeford, Kennebunk where you spent summers as a child. Modest. Airy. Quiet. Who, with one whiff of Jonesport, would think to pause here on their way to Lubec or Campobello? And so doing to disturb this place?

On that day DownEast, we gazed east over the water from Cutler, where Fat James died in the road race.. It was one of the few clear days they have there, and beached on the horizon like a dark sea-creature was Grand Manan Island, where J. and T. go for vacation, she in the days prior and after the day she stopped speaking to me for reasons I still do not know.

Such is life in the Valleys!

We stopped in Deer Isle on the way to Stonington to see my brother, and looked down over the old blueberry fields to the bridge over Eggemoggin Reach, the sister bridge of the one that collapsed in Tacoma Narrows in the film so popular in physics class. It is, I think, the grandest view in the state.

Do you remember I lost my reading glasses in the blueberry field, and days later, we checked the photos and sure enough, there was one of your stupid dog Jamaica or someone else's stupid and much-loved dog Jamaica squinting at the camera with the very glasses beside her. You can see them near her right rear paw if you look closely. There was a small granite rock there—how could I miss it?



And rather than ask my brother, who lived nearby, to back-create the photo, or maybe I did ask that, I finally took the three-hour drive up there myself, only to discover that the field, like all blueberry fields in Maine, was littered with small granite rocks like that in the photo, and it was like Sal looking for her tooth among the tiny look-alike clams in the mud in the McCloskey story.

All that work. Were those not the days as are the days today when I bought my glasses at the dollar store?

That's what I remember best of you, my darling. The things that never came to be.

II. ON VACATION WITH MY DARLING ELOISE:
THE SEED BOOK

So when I grew up, I left school for home again. St. Johns. Hampshire. And finally another leave from Film School. I couldn't stand the kids, who treated me like a dorm mom. I couldn't stand the predatory professors, like you yourself. Or the ones, like you yourself, who loved so many other women instead of me. I left you behind—"no pining," you always said just before collapsing in tears when we all left you.

I worked myself into shape, like the shape I had while dancing, and I had that picture taken, to show off my new haircut, I said, but in fact just to drive you crazy, same reason I gave you for wearing that sheer and way too revealing dress I left behind in your apartment. "For when I meet a boy who is really really nice," I said, then laughed. "To enflame him with desire, of course," I said. "No no! It's not like 'a gift'," no more than sending this picture on to you was that.



Joseph A. Dane

My life was never like your life. Your life was simple, and when I come to write my *Elegy for Joseph*, my version of the book you wrote for me, I will reduce it all to a paragraph. What good is narrative?

One day you grew up, I'll say,
and became what you are today.
One more professor in an ill-fitting suit.
You worked on the fishing boat, you say,
a child still then but with the strength of ten.
You married and divorced the first woman you ever
loved.
You got wasted by alcohol and ended up in grad school,
off to become a world-renowned scholar
or at least a better version of the father you grew
finally to resent.
You stuck me in prison—
never to come East
where all your other girlfriends live.

That's what you expect me to write in my *Elegy*?

You retired.
You gave your books away.
Those you wrote stuck away
in remote collections shelves and
in journals on the internet.

No one reads this cr*p,
you said to your junior colleagues.
"That's the good news."
And finally left to yourself,
all your books in transit
all your work on index cards
you realized you had nothing.

That's what I'll write in my *Elegy* for you when you are finally dead.

I went home because Santa Fe was like the nut-house, a place where I felt safe. Safe from what I endured from you in Film School where you teased and berated me, and told me all the stuff they were teaching me was crap. Just do the schmoozing thing, you said, with more than a trace of bitterness. You'll be fine. Story-line? characters? Why do you highlight those? As if nothing has happened in literature since the days of Aristotle. Or so you said.

I fell in love with you.
For all the good it did, and
I went home again.

Home was where I made my art,
Like the puppet shows I wrote with Gala.
And that's when I wrote my Seed Book
You were stunned, you said, when the galleys
came to you.

That was to be my break-out book, I thought. The book that would make me famous. I would be mobbed at the book fairs, and I wouldn't have to flirt with editors just for them to acknowledge me. I could come back to you, with the glowing reviews and the bank account full to bursting. I could then support you after we were married. How I would have loved to come home to you, to see what you were cooking, to hear what you had decided were our dinner plans.

All that planned out in my head, the same way I planned the puppet shows for Mom and Lars. And Maire too, if I could remember whether she was there.

"I loved your art," you said. "Like dance, it was, the light reflecting off the muscle tone, hidden beneath the surfaces."

But who knows if you were serious.

Who knows if what you saw in my art was art, or just your lust for me.

For I know well what you professors joke about: all girls in college with pretensions to art, as well as many of those without, do collages. They flunk an exam or miss a paper and offer you this as extra credit. Do you still have that awful Alice in Wonderland thing?—black, white, and red (ha! like the newspaper or embarrassed zebra!) all glued on cardboard that your student VA slapped together for you instead of writing another chapter of her dissertation? Maybe once you realized you would never get her in the sack, you threw the thing away, where it should have been in the first place. But as long as you were making progress, so you thought, maybe keep it around, ready for framing you'd say, propped against your closet door, like that night you lay with her and traced the scar on her abdomen; that night she paid you for listening to her poems with a kiss. You tossed it in the trash as soon as you realized you had no chance with her. But me? I never cared what anyone else did and never cared what the professors thought of me. Except for one, of course. Never cared whether my art was cutting edge, or rehashed principles taught in the eighteenth century.

You remember the day in the restaurant. I had gotten fat and fairly spilled out of the yellow dress with the spaghetti straps. I leaned across the table, exposing all of myself I could for you, just as did your large-breasted Armenian girl when visiting you in New Orleans. I skipped across the parking lot to Carmine's Restaurant, as others do on stage. I showed you the first move that occurred to me, the move you've forgotten the name for. Or maybe my body, turned away from you as it so often was, became the body I had in the parking lot of the drug store a year earlier.

You will never forget it.

In jeans that day, ass-tight even before the last ten pounds I gained. Now a few steps ahead of you, I leapt in a scissor-

kick, you called it. About all I could do within the confines of the dress with the spaghetti straps. Even thinking this is collage, you see: these histories combined as in the set moves joined in the choreography of Petipa, the spaghetti straps and the ass-tight jeans of a year earlier. An *entrechat*, it was, but as you so often say that Feynman said: “When what you know is just the names for things, then you know nothing.” Though if Feynman had seen my butt in the tight jeans, he would have forgotten all his philosophy! I know! I’ve read his works; I’ve listened to his interviews. And that night you had dinner with him, all the women at the table fell completely for his charm and left you mumbling inanities on string theory with the Italian post-doc physicists.

Collage was the medium: the support for the story. Maybe an exhortation. The seed growing underground and growing into a beautiful flower. A kids book, of course, and I had a poet do the words for me. You were chagrined that I didn’t ask you for the words, but too kind, or maybe just embarrassed, to say anything. “Grow, grow, grow”—how much literary perspicacity did it take for that? Mom and I would publish it in her press, and our love, yours and mine, would become known to everyone, and all your other girlfriends would slink away in shame and in defeat.

In the lower margin of each panel, I shaped two earthworms in a paratextual narration, as they might call it in the Academy; a story parallel to the main one told or implied frame by frame. Ignored, of course, by the poet, who could see nothing beyond the simple story of the seed. The girl worm initially rejects the boy worm in horror. Yikes! she thinks, dirt-poor, he is! Ill-suited in all senses! Uncultured! Get it? And he flops over one of the seed-roots in grief. Both buried in frass, I guess, or casings, as they’re called. Then a page or two later, she looks at him again. His devastation. She smiles, taking pity on him. And then finally the two are “making love!” as even my Mom saw in the galleys, the two shaping

their two tails together as a heart or Valentine from which the seed grows. All this story pieced together from the individual panels themselves created from disparate fragments of paper collected from around the world.

Collage is like life, you see. I spent a year collecting that paper. Hand-made. From Spain. From Cambodia. From everywhere. It was a marvel. That was part of it. The history of the work, diversity in its very materials, every paper and every scissor cut, all fixed in the work, even those you have to modify. Fragments ripped out of context, ripped from the lives of others. Then patched together again, reconstructed in manneristic ways, the way we gained our habits and our features when we were teenagers. I made the paper-makers themselves part of me, part of us, their work the material support for the tale of my love for you. It's like the way you took bits of your professors—a gesture from one, an ironic smirk from another, a joke from a third, or copied the way Charlie swung the bow expertly through the bow-wake. You formed from that a composite self in your own self and what some would style your style. Teaching, sailing, discoursing on philosophy.

In collage, you don't have to worry about what terrified your friend years ago in the days of Zip drives. You remember her, or the telling me of her at least. The one with the fake boobs, the first you'd ever seen. Too perfect, they were. No longer erotic. A real social climber she, with spiked black hair. She would not risk working on a computer without at least two of them (Zip drives, of course I mean!). What if she plugged in a drive to save her precious work, vulnerable only to catastrophe, and suffered a power surge? What if the national grid suddenly shut down?

But with collage, you don't need that silly continuity.

The detail, you see, the facts, the collecting of the paper types from all over the world—that's the history of the work, the backstory if you will, or history in general. There's no

changing it. Or there is, I guess. Or I guess that's what art is and art is for.

I did all this according to The Rules. The things I learned at St. Johns and Hampshire. The things I learned in film school. The things you always debunked in your usual debunking fashion.

They taught us about beats and arcs. Rising and falling action. Recognition scenes and the like—like the girl worm recognizing her suitor for what he is—not just a dirt-poor worm unworthy of her affection, but as someone who loves her. That's what I learned in school—the school where they actually taught something.

The story is the important thing; the plot the “soul of tragedy,” as Aristotle says. So they taught us. The seed growing, you see. That's the heart of it. That's life; that's the essence of things. Although I haven't forgotten how you pooh-poohed this as well. By “soul,” you say, he didn't mean soul in the Platonic sense—a being's essence, say; he meant rather what he called “form”—like form in the modern sense—the shape or, say, the extremity of a thing. The fulfillment or perfected form—all done, nowhere else to grow. The seed finally in full flower.

Now don't forget.

They taught us Greek at St. Johns.

Menin aiede, thea, and all that.

And I was good at it.

... *polutropon* ...

Ha! you in a nutshell!

Think the surface of a balloon, just before it bursts. The extremity or better still the superifice. What you always mean when you say my form just forms itself upon the pencil edge when you draw or write of me.

What value is the story or plot, you would say, this supposed essence of things? No more than the synopsis at the opera. The timing of the pieces listed in the program notes, the statement of movements. How long we need our bladder to hold out until intermission. The story is just a frame to put the words in, so you'd say. Like Aiken's *Ushant*, you said, where there's barely enough narration to keep the words in place, to make the sentences even mildly intelligible. *Ushant*, you see: a pun. A place you know only from your sailing books, written by your much derided Englishmen.

The end of the book slowly advances to your reading place, marked by a bookmark. That's enough, you claimed, that's the important thing, and that's all narrative is; we are not yet engaged in the chase of the whale; the good Negro is not yet dead; the murderer has yet to stand up and confess in the courtroom. That's all we need to know.

So much for what Film School says! you'd say. Where ailing theories long stale in literary studies finally go to die, their histories unknown to adherents. The stone then rolls away and they return to life in the form of the very art (drama and now film) they once served. Built into, or let's say with the critical *literati* "baked into," the movies and movie scripts they were designed to analyze. Ancient forms now central to the scripts pitched to investors, schooled only in what they were taught in high school: tragic flaws, the unities of time and place. All that b.s. of character: depth and coherence. Traits none of us see in life. All that Freudian mumbo-jumbo with its now neo-Aristotelian veneer and laminate.

There are round ones and flat ones, they taught us. Round ones are the best. Like the boobs of your friend with the Zip drives! And what's the point of either, I might ask?

You need to know your characters, we all were taught; you need to feel what they feel and as they feel that too; you need to know them as yourself. You speak not of them or for them; you need to speak as them, as if you were them.

All this we learned from Drew the Guru, as we used to call him. Or maybe you did. A work-study student would come to the podium at the beginning of each class; he would give the intro like Ed McMahon did on the old Tonight Show with Johnny Carson. Then Drew would make his grand entrance to the awed applause of his ephebes and begin his monologue. You claim you knew instantly when one of your students had taken a class with him. There was never debate as to the truth of what was taught to us

I remember you declaiming on all this in one of your enthusiastic fits: "What do we know of anyone? what do we know of ourselves?" you cried out, even though few were listening. "A lifetime of introspection in my case, perhaps in yours. And what have I learned? What insight have I gained?"

Like the two losers in Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, you would say. Studying their minds in pursuit of their self and will as defined by obsolete theories of faculty psychology. And after weeks of searching their minds, they discover nothing. But all I remember about that book is something about a boiled cat, the result of following old-fashioned theories of child-rearing by Rousseau.

You drove to the mountains once. To find yourself, you said, in both senses, I guess, although you hardly knew it then: 'to discover' and 'to invent', as we learned in Latin class. You kept a diary to document this, with a bad camera eventually stolen from your dorm room by a townie the week you graduated, thinking doubtless no Easterner had ever seen such sights before.

One day you camped next to two old self-styled prospectors, both younger than you are today, but barely so. Somewhere near Independence Pass, I think. A gold rush, they said they were headed for. They explained in detail how it was done—the setting out of stakes, establishing the claims, just like in the old days, or at least how we've seen done in Westerns on tv. We're on our way, they said, though for several

days they stayed encamped in the campground, boiling coffee and talking to all the hippie wanderers.

Unhurrying. That's the key to it! you thought. That's how life should be. Like sailing, I guess, although what do I know of that, since you've never let me come to Maine and sail with you.

You were twenty. How astute was any thought you had at that age? So, unhurrying as your new mentors seemed to be, you delayed your own drive to your beloved uncle's house, where you would fall in love for the first time with your beloved cousin, then a teen, for the first, I mean, of many times you fell in love with her. You sat at the wooden picnic table, playing badly the guitar your brother had lent to you, an instrument he played no better than you did. A car passed with a family from the great plains or maybe from upstate New York or Appalachia. "Look! Look!" the kids cry out excitedly through the half-open window, a/c still unreliable and much distrusted in those days. And you took pride, the worst form of it, at being mistaken for a hippie guitarist. Something you might see on a news show.

That's what you did on your summer vacation the summer after you spent the summer on the fishing boat, where you became as much yourself as you would ever be. All that determined and deliberate finding of yourself? The core principles of your being? It was b.s.

So old-fashioned now, this fashioning of character.
The fashioning of self that goes along with it
Searching for the tragic flaws, as Drew would always
say, although all Aristotle had said was something
about an arrow missing the mark.
Nothing is so old it cannot seem new again.
Relatable! Remember that word?
One of the forbidden words you used to rail about in
class? No one was allowed to use them: *symbol*,

represents, sort of, you and things like that.

It was the standard form of student criticism before AI destroyed the illusions of the freshman-writing industry.

If fictional characters were truly like us, they wouldn't be coherent or relatable at all. They would scare us to f*cking death.

Nothing fits together; it's just thrown together, as Heidegger would have it, no? Even my childhood was like that: fragments, pieces of a collage with no coherence. Puppet shows that may or may not have ever taken place. Mom with Lars, wasted on the drugs and alcohol. No aesthetic qualities at all. The stories I tell you. The abuse. Depression. Self-love and loathing. There is no essence to any of this. No base at all. No "through-narrative," or what you used to call it.

And I know you're not really listening. I know I'm talking only to myself.

Remember when you cried out to me,
as if despairing you cried out to me,
"my Eloise, explain to me these surfaces.
This world with no depth to things."

Yes. Do exactly that, you said.

*Explain to me, my Eloise, this flatness of things, the world
with no weight to it.*

The figures with a dimension missing or merely sketched.

The form with the life bled out of it.

Like yours, engraved in Santa Fe.

The things without the memory of them.

For this is the you I love. The surface.

Two dimensions bent to three.

The form that forms itself as Aristotle said.

The superface you meant. All that's left if we trash the things they taught to us in Film School. Do we just 'bin it' as your friends the Anglophiles would say, the ones who once referred to that arch-critic as the Stagarite?

Nothing more than clutter then.
The uncut paper of the Seed Book.
Shaped and reshaped by the shaping of things,
the things of reality.
Setting and superface.
Just a heap of things like
books you studied in the library.
Place. That's all that's left.
That's what you now say art is.
The props of the stage set.
The coast of Maine in your sailing book.
The deserts of Santa Fe.
 The Greek islands in the films of Antonioni
 The mansion of *Sunset Boulevard*.

Or simply Dirt.
The setting of the seed book.

To the right of the doorway was a dresser of deal, appearing aged mahogany, recently polished, with tiny brass knobs the servants had neglected. A treasure left by a dead relation. Photos of relatives few now remembered tastefully arranged by the dormer. A fireplace, long disused, with the fire dogs unmarked by soot, a mantle lined with figurines given in commendation of a birthday or anniversary. All at strict attention. A poker set to the left of the old-fashioned popcorn popper. Two old fire-buckets to the right, their purpose barely known. An elegant carpet. Windows opening to the garden.

“She’ll be down directly,” the servant said, gesturing toward a wooden chair in the style of the Shakers. “I’ll take your hat. I shall not mistake it,” he added, with unexpected wit, “for my wife.” He bowed, then set the hat dexterously on the hat rack.

“I’ll keep my woolen scarf, if you don’t mind,” the suitor said.

As if that’s life, then. Mere details of things. You enter a room, you barely notice what is there: a child’s project, greasy dishes, a pet toy, an unwashed shirt, that art project you never quite got around to finishing. Or like your guest house ... where I have never been ... full of knick-knacks discarded by your parents and grandparents. Their lives; in fragments, discrete photographs. Knick-knacks, with no connection. Or the famed hills of Galway so loved by the fan of your colleague the famous novelist. “Why it is almost as if I were standing on those hills today,” the blue-haired donor gushed, mistaking you for her *admiré lui-même*, despite your confusing Galway with Gaspay on the St. Lawrence and almost blowing your cover completely.”

You cannot tell that story enough, For nothing happens. There is no story, no revelation or moment of awareness, no character. Even here, even now, all you add to your earlier versions is that phrase in French, parodying what your much-missed friend Bob said in the taxi on the way to the Palais Garnier. Do you think you even got the genders right?

But there was nothing new in this, your pretending to be your much-fêted colleague. You spent your entire youth as someone other than yourself, for no other reason than to get the alcohol which would destroy what little of your self was left. You typed in a birthday on the blank id’s that came in wallets; you found a random number on your draft card that you convinced store owners was the last two digits of my birth date. Always risky, so you thought, though cashiers

were more interested in profits than the scrutiny required to distinguish faked histories from real ones. You borrowed id's from anyone stupid enough to lend them. Bruce, you once were; then the keyboardist of the band you briefly played in. You were anyone and no one. Just a kid of legal drinking age whose name and identity changed by the week.

It was consuming. Your closet full of empties. Oblivious to the smell which must have ferocious, were it not that both parents were also crushed by alcohol, and the entire house reeked of cigarette smoke from three chain-smoking inhabitants.

I remember I was in Europe. Traveling with my friend in a standard train compartment. We were both drunk or high and there was an old guy, your age, sitting across from us. Perfect gentleman. Just listening to us, taking this all in with no hint of judgment. Nothing more than a wry smile of amusement. This is the way kids are today, the old guy must have thought. Then we passed out, or I did, and when we awoke, the guy was gone, but both of us were somehow changed into our sleepwear and warmly and carefully tucked into our blankets. Like the time you woke up in your bedroom, and saw all your clothes hung on the line, and you had no recollection of rolling around in your own vomit and being driven home (or at least to your neighbor's driveway), and doubtless fondled by our own father under the guise of making you presentable.

I remember a class I took when I was dancing. Maybe I'll be a famous actress, I thought, a *comedienne* in the ancient sense. They taught us improv. It was the easiest thing in the world. All you had to do was respond directly to whatever your partner came up with, no matter how foolish or seemingly irrelevant. Never leave them hanging. Just keep going, whatever happens. Like the best seducers do, you say. So different from how we talk in life, never hearing what the other says.

Like listening to the confessions at AA. They made me go once; I fell asleep on the shoulder of the guy next to me and he felt me up amid the drone of the canned confessionals.

You went into book history; you never cared what your colleagues did or what was “in” to do. Collation formulae and endpapers. The blind impressions of the binding tools. Nothing anyone then would have any interest in.

That’s how you conquered my virtue. By being yourself, your sometimes pathetic self, rather than the loathsome creature academia only half turned you into. That’s what I’ll talk about in my *Elegy for Joseph*.

That must have been about the time P*na turned to you in the Reading Room and claims you “glared” at her. Her very word. You denied it. You thought the two of you were laughing at a reader with a loud computer, and thus you were well on your way to seducing her. The sad fact was the loud annoying computer was her own.

“... What was the text? If printed, who published it? Those were the things I cared about ...”

I never went. There were too many creepy Asian guys in the bookstacks, staring desperately at their calculators.

“The library for me was like the nut-house was for you—a place where I felt safe. Even the sea, which I loved and love, unnerves me in its strength and unpredictability. But a library is no mere heap of books, subject to natural force; it is organized, often in amusing and preposterous ways, and there I felt relaxed and truly free. Like some woman I knew who claimed the only place she ever felt that free was in the sack, even with a man she might despise.”

So tell me, did ...

Joseph A. Dane

"I was alone there. Even in those years before computers, I was alone, wandering through the stacks in the early evening. Where were the Great Humanists of the Coming Century?"

I swear, if it weren't for women taking pity on you, you would be a virgin still.

"Where the ..."

So let's get to the important part. Tell me: did you ever get it on in the library? I mean in the stacks with the laity, not with some hot librarian who for reasons I will never understand fell enamored of you. Unplanned, I mean, at random. Not just as a goof like telling, what's her name? Marique you called her: "Hey, how about sneaking into the PQs and having at it while everyone we know is at dinner?" Or that girl you never loved, but lusted for, the one who was always ready as if at command. If you so much as brushed against her, so you said ... I mean you're walking through the stacks, as if going about your business, no room for two to pass without touching ...

"Oh I see. No one could ask this who hasn't experienced something similar. Do you want to tell this lurid tale yourself?"

I'll do it in my *Elegy*. In my book of you when you are finally dead.

"I'm going about my business, which wasn't business at all, more like a gentleman walking his estates a hundred or more years ago. Or the lions of the Serengeti. Yes yes. The majestic male—I suppose they are too big to call mere toms—spends the day walking the borders of his territory, pissing on the boundary line. No energy left to hunt or procreate. And there she was. Sitting cross-legged, blocking the aisle. That's the way the scene would have to be filmed, right? From above. An overhead shot."

A cleavage shot, we call them.

“Yes yes. And she was taking a book out of the shelf, and it was one I’d written ...”

Must have been the yellow one.

“‘Now that is a damn fine book,’ I said, as she looked up at me, maybe thirty years her senior. ‘You must have written this,’ she said. ‘Of course I did. No one who hadn’t written it would recognize it for what it was.’ Despite the androgenous figure by Eric Gill on the cover, a bit too ‘excited’, let us say, as delicately as we can, by the occasion of his creation—and no I didn’t actually add that.”

A good start. Girls like humor.

“She was far too smart to fall for my practiced repartée, or any witty remark I cooked up on the spot. Likely gay as well, as most young scholars are or claim they are these days.”

*I tried to say the right thing.
I tried to remark on the coincidence.
In the grand scheme of things, I meant.
In fact, we rarely spoke.
Those women in the library
now I mean.*

“I remember walking in the ice of December and seeing my Latin professor, dressed as always in clothes he bought at the Goodwill store on East 92nd Street. Seeing him slip slowly sliding down the metal rampway to end up on all fours in the ice, not losing a shred of his dignity. He too had not written a book since

Joseph A. Dane

he was hired, and his may have been the only class where I learned anything."

I flew to England. You remember. I told you that when we were married you would have to buy me ballet shoes and I needed a new pair every day. My heart would sing when I thought of being married to you; but all I did was cry and lock my face in sadness since I knew it would never happen. Like in the woodcut Frank made of me from your photograph, the one you took during our Skype call; Frank cut your despairing face out of the photograph. \$100 the shoes cost, and I knew you would never buy them for me.

The ballet shoes.
Books without their texts.
That's what we cared about.

All surfaces, you see.
No more imagined depths of things,
No paragraphs or poetry.

"Remember," my mentor said, 'in investigating these procedures of early printing, we are essentially trying to reconstruct what goes on in the mind of a bored, possibly illiterate worker, pint-downed, just off his lunch break, in short, an imbecile.'"

Because it is the surface of the things, you always said.
Yes yes. The surfaces. Bindings and endpapers.
The paper and its surface grain.
It is such surfaces we most miss.
It is the surfaces we love.

That's what you always said.

Coda: Public Speaking

So tell me then that story,
from your days in the academy,
the story when you learned
one is not to be oneself.
The story when you learned
not to know yourself.

Michael listens to my talk. We are practicing our presentations for some conference that at the time seemed less inconsequential than it was. Like many things in junior academics' lives.

Michael had a disarming honesty about him, coupled with his arrogance, and that must have been why most people disliked him, except his last wife, that is: "I've been living with him for a year now," she sweetly said. "A trial period of sorts. To check for character defects I ought to know about." I was astounded: if you haven't found what is so obvious now, you certainly need not fear uncovering them in the future.

I had been late to dinner once. He challenged me: "Is this about sex?"

"I ... I ... Well, ok. I mean, not simply sex, well, yes ok, I had promised her and ... There was no way I could ... I'm sorry but ..."

"Oh. Then that's fine. If it hadn't been about sex, I'd be offended. But since it was about sex, there's nothing to apologize for, nothing to forgive."

I was sailing through Jaquish Gut, scene of many mishaps, with our former colleague Betty, old-fashioned girl. "Like one of those 50s appliances, a blender or ice-crusher!" David said. Denied tenure as Michael had been. So I just came right out with it: "Did you screw Michael H. when you two were collaborating on the writing project?"

"I like to think of it as confirming our commitment to pedagogy," she said.

It was in the early days of computers, when academics trying to appear hip or cutting-edge read from their computer printouts and ostentatiously flipped the pages, separated only by perforations, over the front of the dais. Like a roll of paper towels or toilet paper—a joke made many times. Like old people today, showing off their cell-phones.

I read, I thought, with conviction, imagining the perforated sheet unwinding before me. I read with a somewhat mannered and artificial but carefully controlled (I thought) cadence, smooth as the sentence you are reading now, and I sat back anticipating nods of approval, maybe an envious glance to the table surface.

Those were the days when work was rewarded. Those were the days when true virtue would inevitably (if not immediately) shine through all the impediments set by the old farts in the committee room.

"Wait a moment. Is that it?"

"Why yes. That's the paper I'm about to give," I said. "It has its good points," I added with false modesty.

"Well ..."

"Do you like it? Remember," I added, my false modesty swelling now unhindered, "it is merely a provincial conference. Will it do for that? Second-tier, that is, within driving distance. No need for air and hotel reservations. No need for setting up assignments in the conference halls."

"That paper?"

"That's the one. Should I save it for something more prestigious? The MLA? The Medieval Academy?" Standards have fallen, I thought, with a modesty no longer contrived. Perhaps now I have a chance. Everything deteriorates. "Everything oozes," as Beckett says with a nod to Heraclitus.

"My God, I thought you were giving a parody of a talk, not a real one."

“Something’s wrong with the paper? Remember, I’m not planning this as a keynote speech.”

“There is nothing wrong with the paper as far as I can tell. I know nothing of that field, and you have defined it so narrowly no one else will have the competence or background to challenge it. But your delivery is so bad—so over-the-top bad—there is no way I could react to the content even if I had the expertise to follow it. I’m sorry; but I am still adjusting to the fact that what you were doing was, in your mind at any rate (if, that is, I believe your protestations), ‘presenting a paper’ not ‘constructing a preposterous parody of some pompous lecturer’.”

“How is that ...”

“You swear you’re not just baiting me?”

“Why would I do that? I don’t know how I would do that, except perhaps by dressing up in a black-leather jacket, perfectly tailored, and sneer out a version of Marxist propaganda, you know, like a good English professor, defiant of society’s conventions, living in the fast lane [remember, this was the eighties]. I told my Linda Jane once I should buy a one, more extravagant than the one I wore as a twenty-year-old motorcyclist, zippers and lapels to the shoulders, like Brando in *The Wild One*. ‘You’d look like a little faggot,’ she said, rather more unkindly than necessary, in my opinion.”

“You need help. You need serious help.”

“But ...”

“I have no idea what to tell you, but it’s too ingrained in you to solve. You are an intensely dislikable person. Are you aware of that? That’s the reason we are friends. A certain affinity we have, as our colleague here would confirm, were he not so well trained in civility. So forget that ‘being yourself’ b.s. No better than the fraud of ‘knowing oneself’—something both impossible and useless to begin with. Why in the world would you want to act in character? Why can’t you simply embrace the duplicity of life and be someone other than who you

are? I have a suggestion. Based on the unfailing principle you so often pass on to your students: Never Solve a Problem You Can Avoid. You can't reform yourself; you cannot unlearn all that you have so proudly stored up in your word-hoard. What you need to do, and all you need to do, is pause at the end of every line."

"You mean at the end of every sentence? Every rhetorical period, of course. Emphasizing the sometimes brittle rhythm of the cadence, the cursus of the phrase end."

"No. Entirely the opposite of that. You pause at the end of every typed or printed line, regardless of where that falls in the sentence or paragraph. Deadpan. Emotionless."

"But that will ruin the whole ... the very arc to things."

"Exactly. That's the whole point. Whatever you're doing and why, who cares; I'm not a psychiatrist and I don't think you're a danger to yourself or to others. But it has to go. If adopting some untaught way of reading stops it, you will never have to worry about useless self-knowledge or self-awareness again. Remember what your beloved Amy told you after you got her to come to the last conference where you were ill-fortuned enough to read?

All the tweedy professors,
deeply within or having passed
their mid-life crises, free now
to hit on her, they must have thought.

Another paper, you had then,
maybe one as fine as this one,
presented with ignorant pride
by its benighted authorial construct.

" 'Why can't you just read it,' she said. 'Just read it.' It's all she dared to say, poor thing. She who had the courage once to

say what no one has ever dared to say to you: that she no longer was in love with you.

“You should have listened then.

“You should have listened then as you were forced to when she last spoke to you.”

There was a young scholar at the conference where I finally read this paper, dreadful still, but my delivery revised under Michael's tutelage. Il miglior fabbro in every sense, he would turn out to be, the only intensely ambitious scholar I have ever loved or respected. Months later at the Huntington, it must have been, this man introduced himself. “I'm Seth. I was there at the conference. That was the funniest paper I've ever heard,” he said, to one unused to flattery. “Let's do lunch.” Had it not been for the teachings of Michael Holzman—may as well use his full name here as tribute—I would have no such friend today.

III. WRITING ASSIGNMENT

i.

*There once was a beautiful dancer ...
You were about to ask for a story.
I tried for years to tell you this,
to you for decades now, I mean,
or was it when I first laid eyes on you ...
"I was wearing pajamas."*

*"Black. I see that. But some sort of grey sweater over it? I
have no idea whether it looked stylish or ridiculous. Everything
looked good on you and you looked good in everything."*

*"That's all I had. I forget where my clothes were.
I forget if I even had them."
There once was a beautiful dancer ...*

I remember taking an exam. You walked up to me and ... didn't your father forbid his students to translate a Latin verb, any Latin verb, with any form of the word *snatch*? You grabbed my exam, flipping the stapled pages over and I fell forward like a rag doll flat on the desk with my hair over my eyes, just as I fell on my face in my food that night; you've seen the photo on the memorial website.

"I remember that of course. And I remember the colors too: grey, as I said. Taking your exam, 'snatching' it, that was intended as a sign of respect, of course. I knew you had all the answers right. I assumed too you would know that I was only teasing you. But we can crush people with our so-called 'respect' and 'regard' for them."

You say this is the very first memory you have of me, after maybe the first day in class when you saw my famous name and looked for me, and you thought to ask me was I related to the rest of them, then realized everyone likely asks me this and how crass that would have been. Like my once boyfriend, the lover of Aldona or Antonia, who tried to score tickets from me to the museum in Spain. You remember a little of that: you recall where I was sitting—toward the back and to your right, although not in the last row—Claudine of the remarkable chest two seats away from me. My unreadable expression, a distrustful pout of some sort. Nothing else seems to stick, of that day, I mean. And nothing of the entire semester beyond that snatching up of the exam, you say. The day, then, your darling Eloise, me, your darling Eloise came to be.

“I remember when you came to class with the leg brace: ‘Oh no,’ I said. ‘Did you break that?’ ‘Surgery for my foot,’ was all you said. Those among the most important moments of my life, I’ll say to you.”

What about the time you learned to speak?”

“Learned to speak? You mean like Caliban?”

No no. What your colleague Michael did for you.

“Oh that. He did not teach me to speak. No no. He taught me how to read conference papers, to hide myself in artifice.”

You never had trouble in the classroom ...

“Oh yes, of course not. I felt perfectly myself, whoever that is, whatever that means. But this was about speaking in formal settings: like those for delivering ill-written screeds at

Joseph A. Dane

conferences. So yes, I learned to speak. But in contexts no one cares about."

You said ...

"I learned to perform. In a way that that made it seem I was speaking from a world-weary heart. And when you pretend to do that, it often comes true, comes to be."

Like saying you love someone.

"Exactly. Something you yourself began, initiating us into saying that ..."

You play-acting the entire time. You went from learning to speak—to follow my lead, whispering "I love you," as new lovers do—you went from that to teaching me how to lie. Even from the beginning, you were mean to me, like with that paper-snatching thing. And no doubt you would have been meaner still, had you not been distracted by the Haitian girl, Claudine, with the deep rasp, the almost baritone voice, and of greater note, the chest so admired by you and your post-modern colleague. Black tee-shirt—you had to concentrate to see the subtle and magnificent contours. You forgot about me entirely. On 9/11 they cancelled class. She took you aside and talked as she thought an adult might do; didn't want to settle for some guy blathering about the great weed he had on the weekend. But all she could offer were adolescent tales of her derring-do in high school.

And what's the key to it? My life, I mean. The "through-narrative," you would say, for me and I guess for you as well, or perhaps there's some more abstruse Teutonic word for it.

"Durch-something or other. That's what you never told me, never sat me down for the précis. All you gave me were

disconnected incidents: I don't know your path before St. John's and Hampshire. I don't know where to place the nut-house—the only place you ever felt safe. I can't date the mafioso husband and your dance training in Manhattan. Remember when you tried to fix me up with your great aunt on the East Side?"

Grandma Betty, we sometimes called her.

"I was staying with a friend in Park Slope or maybe up near Columbia. I knew where she lived because it was somewhere near the Frick. I ..."

You and your peculiar affection for ... who was it?

"Fragonard! Which led me then to Boucher, the best of all of them."

Grandma Betty. I loved her, my Aunt Betty.

"Fragonard—everything I hate in art. So one day, in a museum in Tulsa, ..."

Tulsa? Where you were cuckolding your lover's husband—with Linda Jane.

"That's one way of putting it! Very clever. I determined in that museum room I would make Fragonard my favorite artist through a sheer act of will. And it worked."

Like willing to fall in love with whoever happens to be available or convenient. All those women you loved instead of me. All those women you call the screens for me.

Joseph A. Dane

“And on I went to Boucher—a better draftsman, even in the smallest things. And I could regard him with less of the campy irony required for Fragonard.”

Grandma Betty would have had her way with you.

“A field day! Just think what she’d have done had I stupidly followed your advice and called her or knocked on her apartment door. What could she possibly think, had I ...”

She would have made mincemeat of you. My Aunt Betty turns the best of men to mush.

“ ‘Hello; I’m a friend of your grand-daughter,’ I say in the deepest of baritones, ‘or your grand-niece, I think it is, although she calls you ‘Aunt’, visiting Manhattan from California.’ ...”

Yes? she answers in her deepest and most stern inflection.

“ ‘I’m, uh, her professor ...’ ”

And?

“ ‘That is sadly all I have to say.’ Except maybe that part about being in love with you. ‘Her’ I mean, you for God’s sake, my Eloise! Perhaps I could have added that in my imagined tête-à-tête with her. Who would have thought she might out-live you, if she did.”

Tell me a story. Since you keep claiming in your *Elegy* that I always ask you that.

“What should it be?”

You choose. That’s part of it.

"Well, since you customarily reject anything I suggest, I may as well pick whatever topic I want, 'certain to be refused,' as Milton says Satan says. Then 'us', I'll say. That's the topic. That's the prompt, as the writing masters say."

Us?

"Yes."

Us. Why 'us'? What more is there to say of 'us'? And where do we come in?

" 'Whence us,' you mean, as it once was said. I remember from my childhood a long routine on that word by Jack Benny."

The guy on Nickelodeon. With Rochester.

"And an alligator in the moat. You couldn't show that show today."

And the story?

"I'll think of something, my darling. Right now, I could simply claim it's done. The story, I mean, answering you even before you ask a thing of me. All I said, all we said above."

That's the story? Our story?

"Yes, even the coda you added of Aunt Betty."

That's far less that what you said in your *Elegy*. There's no arc to things. Is that it? No sense of getting there, from the past, I mean, to here ... That's it, right? What you were talking about. The importance of setting.

Here it's the Upper East Side, with you and Aunt Betty. She establishing all the rules for you. You in her doorway simply because I asked you to be there. Wearing the wrong clothes; a rube from the provinces. A product of the one-room school-houses of your youth. You without the faintest idea of what you were doing. Me in my black pajamas—you mistook them for something fashionable. For something that Aunt Betty would wear on the least of occasions. I wore them because I had nothing.

"Setting indeed! Setting resetting! Everywhere is where I fell in love with you, as Donne might say."

ii.

I tried; I really tried. You know I did. I tried to do the girlfriend thing.

Not quite the same as being one, as Sartre would say. I got to your place in the afternoon.

I drove to Trader Joe's. I bought bags of stuff just as did the women dressed in business casual. Adult food. Stuff that proves you have a rich husband or family, or maybe you are getting snacks for your ladies' tennis club. Gluten-free whole grain bars and kale it would have been had if they had that then. The type of crap rich women pretending to be bourgeois or worse seek out just to demonstrate that they are nothing whatsoever like the kind of people they pretend to emulate. Trader Joe's indeed. The truly rich folks send their nannies and their servants there, while they're at Bristol Farms.

I tried.

I tried.

And I told you so. Not in a phone message—what if you had answered? What would I have said? "I tried I tried." We didn't have cell phones for texting in those days, or you didn't, so I wrote it out for you in my distinctive hand. No hearts to dot the *i*'s, but just as bad in its own way. I'm left-handed so a

Palmer or a Fairbank hand is hard for me. You can see it instantly when you come across examples in your desk. Even without the green and perfumed ink I always tried to use for you.

"I tried," I wrote with genuine emotion. I tried to do the girlfriend thing, I wrote. I went to Trader Joe's. I bought groceries. I made up the futon as a bed while you were off teaching or maybe playing tennis or golf with your friends, or maybe all your other girlfriends, you know, the ones you loved instead of me.

And then I had an asthma attack right there in the living room. You can die from that, I wrote. But you must know that even though you're not a scientist. I needed my nebulizer. It was the only way I would live through the afternoon. I had to go, I wrote. I'm sorry. I love you, I wrote. I couldn't do the girlfriend thing. I went home to my apartment and the nebulizer.

Don't call.

I'll be asleep.

That's what I said, or what I wrote, or something very close to that. You knew, of course, it wasn't true, but you accepted it anyway, that and the pain that came with it, although you could have always called your girlfriend (or one of them) for consolation. And probably did, but I never mentioned that when you finally got in touch with me. You never found out who I spent the night with.

It's not the first time.

I've tried before.

The girlfriend thing. Like who am I really and why is every girl I know a girlfriend except for me?

I tried. I've tried before. I don't mean when I was married. That guy never loved me and I only married him to piss my family off. I don't mean the time I tapped the shoulder of the cute guy from the business school who sat in front of me. Must have been a general education class. "Do you need a girlfriend?" I asked, as if in all sincerity. You knew him from the

football team, although he rarely got to play. When he finally took the field, last game of the season his senior year, you called me to let me know. It was sweet of you.

I mean with X.

Too bad X was married. To Aldona. Now that's not her name, though close. Let's just call her that after the "crew-member" of the guy who wrote the sailing manual you so love of the Maine coast, a girl who sailed with him up and down the coast, from Kittery to Rockland, collecting periwinkles and foraging for berries; she gets no mention in Vol. 2 describing the Downeast coast from the Penobscot to Passamaquoddy. Probably dumped just like me. Or maybe her name was Antonia: that's better, but that may be only the name of the beautiful daughter of your friends from Columbia. And of course she hated me and still hates me even though none of this was my fault. I never tried to steal anyone away from anyone. Not even then.

We would be lovers, we thought. Me and the husband or boyfriend of Aldona or Antonia. Like in the Old Country. Master and mistress, and it would hardly matter if he was married or committed to someone else. I would have my little *pied-à-terre* and he would pay for it or maybe we would split the cost. And we would have dinner there and he would cook for me, and we would lounge at the table after that, sipping wine and gazing into each other's eyes just like in the romances of yesteryear.

I did all I could.

No one ever taught us how to act when we were kids. Me and my sisters, we're all alike in that, though I'm the worst.

That's why so many people mistake me for, not an ingenuer, I don't know, but being ingenuine perhaps ... is that a word? Or maybe just a narcissist. But it's not that and not something I cultivate. Not the garden I tend as you say Voltaire says, not without irony.

Because you know what I want. I want a life like yours. Boring. With puppies. But no one ever taught me how to do that, so I go through life acting like a clown and people hate me for that because they assume it's some kind of affectation. But I assure you, it's nothing of the kind. It's just the way it is. Just the way I am.

We never got the *pied-à-terre*, which would have been perfect to complete the illusion, me and the husband or boyfriend of Aldona or Antonia. We just used my house for all that debauchery, which wasn't the center of our lives at all, at least not for me—great sex is pretty easy to find if you're a former dancer like myself—but rather a nice, very nice side-note or addendum (you called it epiphenomenal, but I don't really know what you mean by that).

We did what we called "tens"; do you know what that is? Likely you don't want to know. Anyway we rarely went out for dinner, because it was there, in public, that reality impinged on the fantasy: what would happen if his wife or his girlfriend or whatever she was or her closest friend walked in? Aldona or Antonia. Instead, we ate at my house.

That was what I tried to do for you: I would go to the store, and I would buy everything I could carry easily. Like the trite and ubiquitous domestic scene in those old sixties shows where the guy always barges in with stalks of celery protruding from a single grocery bag. You think that's Freudian? No you don't! You don't give a sh*t about that stuff. You just say it sucks when overcooked, whatever that could possibly mean. Like the canned Chop-suey your mother tried to make you eat before you realized no one eats that crap.

I usually bought a few frozen chunks of fish. I could always cook salmon. Nothing to it. I used to cook that up and share it with d'Artaegnon, who ate better than any human I've ever lived with.

So here I am now, trying to do for him what I would later try to do for you, the girlfriend thing, even including the

requisite bottle of wine, but I never learned about wine. I buy by the font used on the label. I had to have him open the bottle and it took us a full quarter-hour to find anything we could use to pry the cork out. Maybe it was a Swiss Army knife, or maybe he did that desperate trick we learned as underage naifs where you punch the cork down the neck somehow and use a knotted string to fish it out—the civilized version of that movie about Robert Crumb and his New Age brother who used to sit cross-legged and talk about the virtues of swallowing a knotted string the day before he planned to have sex. But let's not get into that.

All I knew is that if you drank, you got drunk and felt awful and you'd probably do or say a lot of stuff you'd be ashamed to acknowledge in the future. Sometimes if you were lucky you would fall asleep or pass out, like I did that night at the restaurant—face first into my plate of pasta. You saw me wasted on drugs all the time; you never saw me drunk. You would have seen too much of me had you ever seen me drunk.

Yet all that girlfriend stuff—what good was it? Usually he would come over, the husband or boyfriend of Aldona or Antonia, and no matter what fancy meal I was prepared to cook for him, he ate nothing beyond maybe a chunk ripped from the baguette. Always an excuse about not being hungry, but I knew of course he'd just eaten, probably some exquisite lunch put together by a happy couple, friends of Aldona or Antonia, or by Aldona or Antonia herself. Just give him his time wandering, she must have felt. He'll come back.

Now "tens," as we called it, is a technique whereby... Come on, don't get all embarrassed ... It was just a way of combining teasing me with ... Are you with me? ... He would take strokes in series of ten, the first nine being tentative and ... Hey! look at me! ... and this would ...

You're not listening. I can see you squirming. Of course you don't care who I sleep with or what guys I've had in the

past, but this one somehow unsettles you. I'm sorry, honey. I don't sleep with other men to hurt you, any more than I lived my past life with any thought as to how it might affect you, or any thought that such a human as yourself could or would exist.

Poor guy!

I never hinted that any man was better than you; remember what Meg said? You were with a few of your colleagues and you were in the midst of a familiar self-deprecating rant, saying you were a klutz and stupid and useless in the sack as well. "That's not what I hear!" she said with emphasis, looking you straight in the eye, referring to what I told her in Santa Fe when she was there with your gay colleague Bruce for the opera. He gained a new respect for you because of me, he said.

I loved your friend Meg.

I wanted to be your friend Meg.

Remember that first night? I used to punish you by telling you I only slept with you because I felt sorry for you, and all you said was "Really? Please tell me what I need to do to seem even more abject and pitiful?" And once you made me laugh, all those great plans of belittling you vanished.

So finally, Aldona or Antonia must have lost patience, or all those tens we did exhausted him. I never wanted to be a "bit on the side" as in the Aykbourne play, *Norman's Conquests*, I think it was. His calls became less frequent. He never answered when I called him myself and I assume sometimes he just shut the phone off. You know, the way you used to do when you got tired of me. And finally I just ... I just ... I couldn't.

I couldn't be like your Amy. I didn't have what you would call the "stones" for that. She gathered up a pile of her lover's clothes, dragged it right up to his door, and when it opened, reviled his wife for everything, not even certain whether the poor woman had known anything at all about this on-going

and now apparently past cuckoldry. Only later did she realize it was she herself who was the villain or the fool here. For just because she had slept with the guy all those times, often in a drunken stupor, that didn't mean she should give an ounce of credence to all the things he said, particularly those sweet but laughable promises to leave his wife for her. Yet as she told you when you were waiting in the line at the drug-store, "If I need satisfaction, I can tell you I now know the best place to go," meaning, alas, that that was something she never got with you. And then that night you were out for dinner and she kissed you and you could feel her breath catch, it was like old times, and you thought maybe we could start up again, and maybe I will fall in love with her as I had ten years earlier, and the next thing you knew, she had the job in Boston and you didn't see her for months. Crushed once again. As it always was and is with you.

So that was me, you see. Left behind with a bunch of wilting groceries that I would end up throwing into the compost, those things I couldn't in good conscience feed to my beloved d'Artaegnon. That was me, doing for this bastard only what I later tried to do for you, except with you, the groceries ended up in your refrigerator. Oh yes, except for the salmon. I kept that for myself imagining it was for the dog.

All that planning,
trying to do the girlfriend thing.
I didn't work then, for me or anyone.

I never meant to hurt you.
Not then, I mean, did I mean to hurt you.
Though you were cruel to me,
unbearably, as it turned out to be.

How could I repay you for your kindnesses?
Why would I exact revenge on you?

It was finally without a thought of that
that I hurt you in the worst way possible.

I remember one day driving out to your apartment when you least expected me, sneaking quietly up the stairs, expecting to find a rival lover there, or maybe you just pleasuring yourself with thoughts of one of them. And there you were by the window, with the chest-high crepe paper that you assured me was high enough to shield my boobs from view, but which I suspect you liked because you could imagine me flaunting my dancer's body for all your neighbors and curious passers-by.

You were staring as if in space—that's what you claimed. And it took me a while to realize that was not the case at all. That you were staring at the apartments across the alley-way, like the way we all stare at the slab of apartment windows when we pass them on the street. Two rows of soul-less window glass. Most blinded. Some lit by the back-light. And it was her, not me, that entity created when you stared off into space, that you were in love with, just as you were in love with a fantasy of me when you locked yourself onto your elbows and stared into my face and repeated, despite my objections ("None of that!" I cried out) "My darling. My darling Eloise."

And I pled with you to stop
just as I pled with that teacher who assaulted me as a
thirteen-year-old.
Stop your protestations of love for me.
There were better ways of showing that
than saying it.

iii. There Will Be No Pillory; No Lacerating
Flesh for the Camera Lens

“No pining,” that’s what you always said: “If you leave, ain’t gonna be no pinin’ away for you.” In that macho voice of the man you never were and likely never wished to be. You pined plenty when I was gone even for a weekend or a day. You pined more when I was gone for good, although as much for P., I think, as you did for me. You deserved what she did to you, faithless as you were. Then I went off in ways far worse, and you deserved that too.

We hadn’t spoken for a month. I must have screamed over the telephone that if you contacted me again I would call the police or have my once in-laws the Gambini take a hit out on you or burn your apartment down. You then called me out of the blue, like nothing had happened.

You were driving to the Huntington. Maybe three miles from your apartment you decided to call me, right there on Monterey Blvd. That was the road you associated with your Polish girl-friend, the Renaissance scholar—how many times had you driven hell-bent to her apartment hoping this would be one of the few evenings when she didn’t revile you.

“Gosh,” I said teasing you, having not heard from you in weeks. “A phone call from the roadway. That’s illegal, you know. What if you’re pulled over?” “Do you know who I am? I’ll say to the arresting officer. ‘I have a recent article in *Notes and Queries!*’ ” Raising your nose slightly the way your colleagues do when speaking of their latest conference presentation. “I’m an English professor,” you added then in your deepest baritone. “The rules of society mean nothing to me. Mundane laws and conventions (‘worldly’ to the laity) simply do not apply to such as us.”

That’s the way it was with you and me.

Everything disconnected.
Women from here and women from away.
A call from Monterey Blvd.
An e-mail at Xmas.
No continuity. Like reading the roster
the first day of the school year.

Like my collage of academic history.
A month at the London School of Economics.
A year at St. Johns or Hampshire,
mostly schools for the rich kids.
Drug taking and sex with complete strangers,
rich kids from rich families.

Your friend Howard made a living in his early career off film-makers like them and like myself; low-budget independent films funded by trust funds.

I chastised the kids for playing soccer in the hallway
just outside my dorm-room,
a dorm-mother now for real.

Kids just like your colleagues,
children of jewelers and real-estate tycoons,
lawyers in law firms, surgeons and physiatrists.
Those who made it in the cosmetic industry.

Smart men like yourself,
raised to be that way,
not to let their families down,
not to be unnoticed at reunions,
good at test-taking.
The kind of men smart women like.

Men your friend Susan likes,

Joseph A. Dane

falling for the boy in high school
whose heart raced at the chorus in Mahler's Second.
"That's the man for me," she thought,
"not those who want no more than help
with their homework for chemistry."

Like your student Nathan,
the Greek student,
named as if after your father,
never got an answer wrong,
always formed the most difficult of questions.

I just wanted to learn stuff.
Like all of them had.
To learn how to write.
And I wrote you that note at the end of the semester.
You were one, I said, who could teach me.

"Words," you said.
"That's all it's all about.

"Write what you mean and read the poems in their most
basic sense. Grammar. Like in Latin class. No symbols. No list-
ing of themes on the chalkboard. Enough of the mysteries of
hidden meanings, in your work and in other work as well,"
you said.

But you never considered
that to your students, the nouns and adjectives,
the verb agreement, tenses and moods,
all the definitudes of sentence structure and the like ...

this was as abstruse as the worst rumblings of the collective
unconscious. The worst absurdities teased out by your thick-
reading contemporaries.

Your students smiled and bent their heads over their notebooks or over their cellphones.

“Will this be on the test?”

What else did you expect of them.

Race and class.

Gender fluidity ...

It was easier when you had the answers before the questions were formulated.

Your beautiful and affectionate

Linda Jane, fourteen years your junior,
moved in with you;

you claim you had nothing to do with it.

You loaded up with pens and reading glasses,
whatever paraphernalia

(as your mother would have put it)

you needed for that day,

and she patted your shirt pocket full of writing
implements,

promising with a straight face she would buy you
a pocket protector for your birthday.

That was the you I loved, I said.

The nerdy one fit for a pocket protector,
the one I felt sorry for.

And when you promised to be worse,
even nerdier and more pathetic,

if that would help your cause,

I patted your pocket as she had.

“That would be impossible,” I said.

Remember what you said of her,

Remember what you said two years ago?

Joseph A. Dane

“Why did I not take her lovely face into my hands,”
you said,
“and tell her to her face her lovely face, you are the best.
You are the best that ever was.”

Why did you not say the same to me?
You know I never cared about the bunk of sincerity,
like second-hand admonitions in textbooks.

Remember lying in bed with me that first night?
I was wearing a red shirt with buttons down the front,`
old and worn,
pajama bottoms too I think, as best I can remember.

I had a way of signaling that I was ready, open to
anything.
Like that way that other late lover of yours
would stretch in that majestic stretch
and you said, “Does that mean what I think it means?”
and she said, “Yes it does.”
And then she turned her smiling face away from you
and you laughed and said
“Am I supposed to chase you? am I supposed to chase
your lovely face when you turn your lovely face
away from me?”
and she smiled and gave you merely that “uh huh!”
no words at all and you fell almost instantly in love
with her.

I had those dimples,
two of them just above my ass.
You’d never seen such things, you said.
You used to kneel down next to me as I fell asleep and
kiss them.
It was so sweet.

I called and told you of my weekend in San Francisco
with my film instructor.
It sucked, I said. It really did.
I mean we did it and all, but it sucked.
His best far worse than the worst of ours.
You and I? We really had it down! I said.
Oh yes. You and I, we really had it down.
The most loving thing I've said to you
and said to you from a distance.

I told you of my teacher.
I was thirteen.
I begged him to stop,
crying like kids that age do
and you've seen me cry like that as well,
but not, of course, for reasons I had then.

You shook your head.
Didn't want to hear about it.
For you, it was always a goof, nothing more than that:
the time your own father rubbed against you as a
teenager;
the time you tested the suspicions of your friends
that the local barber was a predator
and sure enough, when he took up
the cape they drape over their customers,
he picked up the hem between your knees
and drew it up to your crotch and lingered there.
That's what adults were; that's what you were thinking
to grow up to be, you and your cheerleading girl-
friend, as naïve as you were.
Your friends were right,
for all that's worth,
including the one whose father took a baseball bat

Joseph A. Dane

to kill the guy who made his son go down on him,
or so he said.

That's just the way it was, I guess.

The way things were in the days before the internet.

Couldn't you see?

All I needed was for you to make it right.

To make up for those teachers, uncles and step-fathers,
psychologists and the predatory film instructors,
the guys in the rehab groups who f*cked themselves up
just so they could do the same to all the chicks they
met.

I used to fall asleep in the crook between your
shoulder and your neck.

Like the night of my birthday.

You drove to my apartment and parked illegally.

I was wearing that brown-flecked sweater, badly worn
and nothing under it.

You felt me up in the living room.

I promised to show up after our wrap party
for the crappy student film I did the sound for.

We could sit in the music, I promised you,
making out like teenagers,

and all aroused you dashed out to the cops with the tow
truck,

told them you were just leaving, sorry,

and later you said they could have towed your silly car
away for all you cared,

that yellow station wagon no one in LA would drive
except for the Armenian dad

you passed on the roadway

and both of you waved wildly at each other.

You promised your student Jessica,

lovely Jessica, with the bra you called an engineering
miracle,
that she would recognize your car in the parking lot
even though you provided no description, no make,
model, no color, style,
nor country of origin,
and as you walked there
she cried out "My God, there it is. I see it!"

I left the wrap party and showed up at your apartment
where you were all ablaze.
I stripped down to my tee shirt and posed in the living
room
among the balloons and crepe paper you had arranged
as if in high irony in your cluttered and disordered
living room.
I swore to you it was the best birthday I ever had
I swore to you it was the best day of my life.

I told you I was hungry and you cooked for me, still
ablaze.
And I told you I was all sweaty and you drew a bath
for me.
And I kissed you as I lay next to you and claimed as I
often did I was way too tired for anything,
that the last thing you would have wanted was for me,
the best lover you ever had, to lie there like a robot
or some kind of sex toy,
and you foolishly went along with it, only to wake up
alone, even though I was the one exhausted by
sleeplessness.

I don't know how I got dressed and left without waking you.
I called and said how sorry I was to have disappointed you,

Joseph A. Dane

just like the time years earlier when I tried to do the girl-
friend thing.

Remember when we went to the opera?
You in your professor suit,
costume as the French would aptly say,
me in my fancy blue dress.
You wanted to leave at intermission.
but I made you stay.
I dropped my hand into your lap
and it was the best night we ever had.

You know all it would have taken was blocking out a
week on your calendar
telling your then girlfriend you were going to Alaska,
or making sure she took that trip,
inviting me to Maine to spend that time with you.

We would still be making dinner plans today.

EPILOGUE

It felt strange returning to Maine returning to Los Angeles returning to the rhythms of life without my darling Eloise.

No longer would the phone ring at 4PM, an hour before dinner or two hours after that when my darling Eloise fixed something for herself to share with whatever dog she had that year. Most of them died, not of neglect—there was nothing but love for animals in my darling Eloise—but of a surplus of care. Drugs and surgeries. Trips to the vet. The omnipresent “cone of shame” she called it and we would always laugh at the poor dog’s predicament.

When I think of this, the return to life without her, I see myself with Nancy, powering their Hampton after its spring launch at Mere Point, on the way to the mooring field outside their house in Harpswell, Charlie waiting to meet as at the dock in the harbor; life-long sailor, no longer able to keep his balance in the motion of the hull. I am telling her this story—the loss of my darling Eloise. I see us as if from a viewpoint off the port bow of the Hampton—some sort of action shot they would explain at film school. Or so my darling Eloise would say and never explain to me again.

Strip-built, the Hampton was, “one-by’s,” as they call them, nailed or screwed vertically. Built by the rich and indolent cousin of the man, now dead, I used to lobster with, a man who never recovered from the motorcycle accident. Friends and even family finally gave up on him, unable to tolerate his belligerence—the last of one’s personality to go, it seems.

It was well past the days when, distant from her, a continent away from her, I would take out one of what she called her head shots for the film career she never experienced and

say to whatever East Coast friend I was talking to: “See? That’s what has so disrupted life for me.”

I walked slowly and found myself jerking my head to one side, the way dogs do who have been slapped as puppies; even fully grown among the gentlest of owners or dog lovers, they will still pull their heads away and close their eyes when you reach for them. It was as if in that physical gesture I could avoid the unassuaged pain of her very name. I then raised my hand to brush that unseen threat away, like a kid, alone, toying with a glider, real or imagined, and I would think then, “Thank God I am unseen, no one here to think: ‘He thinks he is alone, not viewed or regarded. Yet no one has that luxury today.’” Cameras everywhere; viewers everywhere.

It was hard just to sit there and take it. Take life as it seemed destined to be. The loss of my darling Eloise. I adopt the same set-jaw expression I saw in her face the day I left her at the airport. “I have been hurt too much in life,” that expression said. “There is nothing more you can do to me,” she said, or would have said. “No one will humiliate me again.”

I wish I could recall the time we drove to the mountains, the day we went skiing in the mountains of the San Gabriels, the day we just took the PCH up the coast past Malibu and Zuma, areas mere names to me from the music I heard as an East Coast teenager. I wish I could recall the days we fought the gentle breezes sailing up the Maine coast, looking for the Northwest winds that would take us anywhere we set our course, east to Roque Island, west to our home port. I wish I could recall the many times we laughed over coffee, or barely picked at our food in the restaurant—but that was Linda Jane, I think. That was something I imagined in a dream-state.

There was the night at the movies when we sat on the

floor between the audience and the key-stoned screen; something required for your film class, something we all watched in grim appreciation. You fell asleep there, your head in my lap, praising me for years afterwards because I let you do this, with no self-consciousness. "You let me be myself," you said. "You loved me for what I was, for how I am. Not for how you wished me to be."

Though what you were, however small
part of what you were, of course,
that is what it was, however small
the efficient cause of all of it ...
the worst thing you could do.

Joseph A. Dane



Bill Dane, 1976, Honolulu

PART THREE

OUTTAKES

- I. Tenancies
- II. Masked Ball
- III. Your Call is Important to Us

Joseph A. Dane

It is overwhelmingly probable that you are dead.
—Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, 3.

I. TENANCIES

i. A Death in the Family

When they finally climbed the stairs to the old guy's apartment, said to be little better than a hotel room, everything was in disorder. That's the label for what we do not or cannot understand. A temporal history, say. That's what any space, a corridor, say, seems like when it doesn't fit the image we bring to it, platonic or simply cartoonish. The one you have of this.

The door was locked and latched; even the landlord's key had done nothing, unable to turn in the key slot. Maybe the lock was changed or the key corroded from dis-use. Maybe it hadn't worked in the first place. But doorframes of that age are easy to pry open, even with the most primitive tools, even with the owner standing by in protest. The worst damage you can do kicking them in is splitting the doorframe. I've lived in places where you can still see the repair of such violence effected with wood filler and silicon. I've stayed in hotels where the only door lock is a hook latch.

The smell of old buildings, moldy window frames and casements. What was it? The general odor of the place, even in the hallways, the inevitable corner where a visitor or lazy tenant had urinated, unable to find their house keys in time. Once inside, you knew the smells special to the place itself would blend with the unused heat. Dust smoldering on the steam pipes, exposed and wrapped in asbestos. Unwashed curtains and blankets. The rug unvacuumed, frayed at the

edges. No way to tidy up what they would find there, they thought.

A rug had been rolled and bent against the door, or that's what they concluded after forcing it in. Perhaps it had served as insulation, the way you can use those "snakes" they call them on the base of the doorframe to keep the drafts out. I always thought they were ridiculous until one week with a cold I discovered they worked perfectly and likely would have cut my heating bills in half.

Here, heat came from old-fashioned steam radiators. You can't turn them down; they must be on full or closed completely; anything other than that and they will clank and you will never sleep again. You regulate heat by opening the window to the street—that's what the old man had apparently done if he bothered to do anything. Now the windows were closed and the heat staled along with the uneaten food, the cigarette smoke, the unswept rug. The sweat and the body waste.

The man was dead, uninterestingly. The body sprawled I guess you'd say, on the chair, the television tuned to a channel with no reception; maybe the converter box had timed out on him. Or maybe the cable bills had not been paid or maybe an antenna connection had come loose, or any number of common electronic glitches that occur with all electronic equipment, even that manufactured in the Golden Age of American industry, whenever that was. This one had a hand-turned dial. No remote. And had the investigators been a bit older or a bit more perspicacious, they might have assumed that it was not only a "tube" tv (meaning its video came from a cathode tube), but a "valve" tv, as they call them now, meaning that the audio was from an old tube amplifier, like those

treasured by audiophiles and guitarists, suffering the infirmities of all old tube equipment. Had they had such tastes (perhaps in the Proustian sense as well, one might joke), they would not have been able to resist examining its model and condition. Lucky it had not gone up in flames long ago, although it's difficult to imagine what *luck* would mean in this case.

The chair he died in was what you would expect: overstuffed, a product of the fifties, you'd guess. The fabric worn and in some places worn through. Of course there was a lamp table beside it doubling as a magazine rack, although I suspect few reading this today would know what that is, and will have to imagine it from the words alone or from one of those domestic comedies of the fifties. The ottoman—perhaps it matched the chair or perhaps another it had replaced—showed signs of use as a coffee table.

The rug had absorbed all that had fallen onto it, and you could sense the smell of it, although all was quickly overpowered, of course, by what must have been the gasses from the body itself. Trying to sense more than that? it was like listening for silence beneath the music, beneath the surface noise from a turntable.

The walls appeared darkened with cigarette smoke. There was a photograph showing one of many interchangeable couples depicted over a half-century ago. The photo in black and white, the figures posed in fifties attire looking hopefully but grimly at the camera. It could have been him. It could have been anyone.

The oversized ashtray lay on the floor beside him. One of those large ceramic ones you find today only at consignment stores, designed for days' worth of crushed cigarettes, or just

those of a chain-smoker. There was no open pack, no lighter obvious in the area. It might have been that that killed him.

Or maybe he was just worn out from the whole damn thing.

The three shelves of the bookcase held no more than a few dozen paperbacks, disordered, some stacked vertically. One lay open. It was impossible to tell which had been of interest, and which had found their way there by serendipity. Some common, others esoteric, fit for a stay-at-home like him. A Norton Anthology, interchangeable with all the others; the period covered interchangeable with all the others too, its spine cracked at the pages once assigned by a professor. Something that appeared to be by Vonnegut. Something by Everett, Rowe, something by Kincaid or one of them—all prized, even signed apparently but apparently unread. Many with scholarly pretensions. Titles beginning with a bad pun or the word *Prolegomena*. Something in Italian. A biography of Bach. A discerning or skeptical viewer would almost unconsciously distinguish them Read/Unread, or more equivocally, Used/Unused.

You could attempt a sequence or history: a growth and progress narrative, like those constructed a century or more ago; from grammar and lexicon, on to practice readings, on to a classic. But there was no such apparent program here. No principal field of interest. Connecting the dots would be like naming the constellations in the random field of light points and intensities.

Official duties of the police and coroner were simple and straight-forward. Everything by the book. Almost formulaic. My brother says this is why few law students go into Personal Injury. It's not that the whole field is corrupt, immoral, and

unnecessarily combative; well, it is that of course, but that's beside the point. The problem with P.I. is that, despite what you hear implied on tv, it is not exciting or spirited at all; there are no threats and counterthreats, plots and counterplots as implied by the ads on tv and the radio. Everything by the book again—nothing more than following the forks of a flow-chart. The non-quantifiable details?—the things of life? They don't matter. Every case is like all the others. The whole thing is a bore.

This is not what you spent those years at law school for,
first in your class, you were,
or, as here, the years at the Police Academy,
years working your way up through the ranks.

You find the wallet, or get the id from the landlord. You notify whoever it is that can be notified most easily. You take pictures. You take inventory and gather boxes up or find someone to do that. Maybe the landlord. You go back to the office.

No shots were fired.
No lives saved or affected.

These are the items collected by the investigator, all of course to be supplemented *in potentia*, one might say, by what was removed, that is to say, stolen by the landlord, salvaged by other tenants, or binned, as the Anglophiles might say, as valueless.

1. Wallet. The driver's license was expired. The car registration had lapsed five years earlier, and the landlord swore the place came with no parking space. The expiration date on

the credit card was two month's past. There was a library card, but it was not local. There was a ten dollar bill and three ones. No reference to the books in the book case.

2. The picture of the couple on the wall, which did not seem related to any other one, nor to anything found in the wallet.

3. A trunk—like those old army trunks they used to send with kids to summer camp in the fifties and sixties. Something to be set at the foot of the bed; something to reproduce for 10-year-olds the glorious experience of serving in the military. Perhaps as it was in Korea.

4. Music. Sketches. Layered in the trunk. The sketches original in a repeated but unidentified hand. The hand-written music likely copied from printed sources. There were yellow Schirmer scores, most for piano—the usual—nothing telling. Some were used and the notes and fingerings worked out apparently before he possessed them. Some were new. No new score was annotated.

5. A notebook, which also served as a diary, although the entries were unsystematic both in form and in sequence.

“Sunlight. Temps in the 80s.”

“Woke up.” Well of course. “Nothing for breakfast but coffee.” What's the difference? All that b.s. of the most important meal in the day. As if the day would not start without it. Why would you trust anyone telling you how to eat? Or what to do? But we all know the Kelloggs' history.

It went on like that—page following page, the dates obliterated or never entered. The concrete references vague and ambiguous. No reference to a historical event; nothing to suggest a coherence.

It could have been from the day before he died.
It could have been from years earlier.
The whole thing smelled of dead people.

“Cold. Medicine gone. You’re on earth. There’s no cure for that.” “... I told her I’d been saving up all my life for her.”

In your report you would note the damp towels on the bathroom floor. The toilet was filthy but at least flushed—something that distinguished it from a number of toilets you had found in similar circumstances.

What the authorities wish to do, what anyone would want to do in this situation, is to get rid of the entire matter. Sweep it under the rug; bury it in a police report; wash it away in a flood of bureaucracy. With no will, no next of kin, the estate (essentially what they confronted when they broke the door down) passed to the state, who would gain nothing by it and lose the disposal costs.

The landlord wished this done as quickly as possible. The police wished this done as quickly as possible. The old man might have gotten a kick out of frustrating them, but to think that, we would have to know much more about him than was possible to know from the evidence.

It was sad, they all said, with forced piety. Here was an old man of some artistic pretensions with plenty of life left in him.

Had he lived, he could have told them the tale of the hunting trip up-country, even though he rarely claimed it was his. It was just before the ice set in and on the first covering of the land with snow. It made tracking easy. It made hunting easy. You just followed the tracks as the deer bedded down in the morning.

There was a swamp surrounding what in rainy seasons was a small pond—not large enough even for a canoe, no way to push it through the reeds and the remains of the alders. And that’s where the tracks led. You had to think before you shot how you would pack the carcass out if you happened to get lucky or find, much to your surprise, that your hands were not shaking from the cold or from anxiety. “Buck fever,” they call it, like the metaphoric fevers of all obsessions, even those it would today be indelicate to name.

He had raised the barrel, but paused, seeing suddenly how the tale would end were he to tell it in the manner of his friend, who had caught his deer in perfect quarter-profile and put a bullet straight through its heart, hoping to drop it instantly. The deer, now his deer, though doomed on the edge of the swamp, had three bounds left in him, and those bounds put it right beyond the thickest of waist-high reeds, and the calm circles began to build around it.

He sat down. “Deal’s a deal,” he said, referring to a pact the two had about whose responsibility would be for what if everything went right, or more likely if everything went wrong. If you couldn’t drop it right where it conveniently stood, then the gutting and hauling out was entirely on you. He was on his fifth cigarette by the time his friend waded back through the icy reeds with the last quarter of deer carcass dragging behind him.

He would tell the story of the day his friend the art professor was leading a seminar on baroque art, his students all from the deep South or the swamps of the bayous and one of them was giving a report on an allegorical painting and noted the “R” in the lower right hand corner.

“R?” Joe asked genially, thinking there might be an artist signature there or device to be deciphered by experts.

“R!” the kid insisted.

“But I don’t see any R. Where?”

“Well, Lawd hep me, R! Raht there with the other sins: Prahd, Invy, R ...”

When your family member died—parent, brother—they knew secrets about you so sordid neither of you ever alluded to them. Like some poor teenager masturbating and thinking that the least slip up in his routine or in the way he cleaned up afterward would lead to his exposure and a life-time of shame. Before his family. Before his friends. You would never be free of it. Like the time, he thought, at lunch in grammar school and he drank from a neglected milk carton and some kid said “You know, Fred spat in that” (well, he said it a little more graphically than that), and life would never be without regret again. Only when that kid died, the sole witness or jokester, would the whole humiliation be gone as well.

It was the same when Annie died. So beloved she was, as all the clipped eulogies would claim. Friend to many, savior to the girl she befriended as a teenager, a stranger from The County (so they called the remotest area in the state), both fiercely loyal to each other to the end. She was central to our lives as teenagers, “one of those,” you know, like a mock-Confessor, one of those you tell all your secrets to, as a young colleague once said of me with far less justification, trying only to excuse the malicious gossip she shared concerning a senior office-mate. If you give in to that, believe for a moment that secular Confessors

exist in life, constrained by civility into silence, years later, and only years later, will you and do you realize how vulnerable you have made yourself.

Annie had a fall. Twenty years ago. Drunk I assume, but what does it matter? It cost most of her memories and motor control, her body staggering, submitting soon to a walker, then to a wheelchair, and finally to a hospital bed in the back room from which she moved only to relieve herself and often not even then. And rather than lament the loss of one of the closest relationships he had ever had, he wondered instead what part of her memory had deteriorated, or if one day she might throw away her litter, stand tall, and denounce him before all her guests, "You!" she would say, laughing, as if adults could so much as smile at the missteps of their teenage years. "You were the worst! Like losing at spin-the-bottle and kissing a twelve-year-old."

And all the progress he had made in forming his personality, his life, his very being—all that would be gone in an instant.

He would have to move away.

He would go to Alaska.

He would become gay.

He would start a new life in the provinces.

And when the time came, as it surely would, would his ex-lovers queue up for the funeral to deride him once again in their eulogies? Would old friends suddenly "come out of the woodwork" whatever the origin of that simile? Would the family gather to assuage their forced

collective grief, even though he had not heard from them in over a decade?

Do you remember that couple from high school? Dave, it was, good-looking guy (insofar as a teen-age compatriot could judge of that), French, although I'm told it is insensitive to note that, with Janice, also French, "well-rounded" in the teenage sense (but we had cruder ways to express it), and hot as anyone could be at that age. They married like the perfect adolescent couple, and like so few of them, they stayed together until he died. We gathered about her, still with her teenage smile, no more than expected weight, to offer consolation, and check out, of course, her once marvelously rounded physique. What were they doing, do you suppose, living nothing more than the complacent life they foresaw leading when they graduated from high school?

The police inspector opened the window. It took unusual effort to crack the seals formed from the swelling; it took care to avoid cracking the panes or the frame in the process. The dust and soot and cold blew in with insistence only to mingle with the smells of the place.

Remember playing in the back field as a kid? Or maybe wandering as he might have through the alder-infested woods—wilderness to you—or the artificial pond where you chased the animals? Did you think, or did he think that his childhood would lead to death in such a dismal place?

Remember his wedding vows? Or perhaps they never really did anything officially, and maybe after five years or so, or twenty-five if they had kids, things just fell apart, and maybe all are now in the same condition, or maybe he is the

sole survivor, like the soldier in so many medieval epics who gets to tell the tales of battles in which everyone else was annihilated, tales of battles now to be told no more.

That must have been in college or just after, in the first summer he drove west through the Great Plains to Colorado. He had never seen the flatlands of Illinois and Nebraska. He had never met the woman he fell in love with in Oklahoma. He stared at the sagebrush on the prairie, never imagining that the cattle-men would one day resow this space. Never imagining that he would ever say "How lucky to have come this way when the landscape was still worth the viewing." He drove into the mountains and learned to fish the way his uncles did, although never with their success, skill, and determination.

It was all like something to *have* experienced, rather than to experience, he thought with satisfaction.

No one cares about trout-fishing in the Wind Rivers.
Or the eddying back-wash of the Popo Agie.

ii. Positional Advantages

Joe P. was chess champion of New Orleans. A modern Morphy he could have been ("that chess-playing fool!" I called him once in my poetry). Worked in the oil fields of Alaska, thus like all convenient friends gone for six months a year. Maybe 25, big guy, if I remember, not unlike the law student who bragged he played Division I football merely two years earlier and wrote on yellow legal pads, like most law students did, with a hand so large each half-sentence filled a page. He introduced me to a type of reading light combining incandescent with florescent lights; you don't see them much today,

but I own two after nearly a half-century. Smart, assertive. I believe “Napoleonic Codes” were his specialty, their last stand in America, where “what the wife owns ...” as Stanley says ... but you surely know that line.

Joe P. I met through Al, who had served in Vietnam with my classmate James. “Fat James,” I called him in the book I wrote with my cousin Bill; he died, James did, after taking a handful of salt tablets minutes before a 10K road race in Machias some 50 years ago. Al took me home to his redneck family for dinner, Gentilly maybe, somewhere north toward Lake Pontchartrain, and I discovered what I thought real gumbo was—crawfish and crab piled in heaps with okra sauce as if an afterthought. How unlike the flour-thickened soup you got served at bad restaurants all over town, I thought with newfound pride, at least, the ones I could afford. Years later, Ron from the bayous told me that what I ate with such appreciation was not gumbo at all, but seafood stew. That the much despised swill served in what I thought were bad restaurants was as authentic as the accent even his years in Chicago had not erased.

Al would stop by for dinner. He had few other friends in town after his discharge from the Army. Not sure whether he lived at home or in an apartment I never visited. He set me up on a double date with the young and astonishingly beautiful Linda Jane, who would love me, so she said, myself deluded too into thinking that. But it wasn’t that; she wanted merely to be me, a much lesser thing, to live as she imagined I did. I met her years later in Santa Monica—one of those beach-houses bordering the bike path. “He taught me about sex toys,” she coldly said. “Professional help, we called it. He was

patient. He was very good at that.” Unlike others, I added silently.

On the Alaskan pipeline, then infamous, I believe Joe was an inspector. For most of the day, he studied chess positions, and worked on his sketchbook. In his months off, he set up shop on the wrought-iron fence outside Jackson Square, peddling his paintings of the best-known and thus popular street-scenes in New Orleans. This, the provincial version of what you see outside the Met in Manhattan, although I believe there was some attempt to put a stop to all that.

“What a great job,” I said, careful never to disparage a life-work or a hobby. “You’re an artist. You paint and you get paid to paint. Working. Practicing. Doing what you love as who you are.”

“What do you know about such things,” Joe said “not quite yet the great novelist of your dreams? In this world, the real one where we met, with its wars and dropping dead of exhaustion, you never showed the drafts you wrote to anyone. For two weeks, or was it three? you bicycled to the hospital. Night clerk. Great job. Bill, the guy who lusted fruitlessly after Linda Jane and paid you to write his term papers for him, got you the job; forty years later he hooked up with her and within two years died of a brain tumor. Nice work: just sit there, ready to retrieve the files when called, type in the id’s of those ambulated in from an accident or convulsed of an overdose. It’s more or less what I do on the pipeline in Alaska; it’s what I do painting street-scenes for the tourists. These are not aqueducts for ducal palazzi; what I hang on the wrought-iron fences of Decatur are not frescoes of Creation scenes.”

“But I know many artists. They want to paint. And you. You’ve found a way to get paid doing that.”

“Like Hitler, then, who too painted landscapes and street scenes. How come you’re not writing copy for an ad agency? Why aren’t you composing manuals for washing machines?”

“Well that’s ...”

“Oh yes. ‘That’s different,’ you were about to say, knowing nothing of anything. I’m telling you it’s not different. It’s all jingles for Hallmark.”

“But ...”

“Do you ever wonder why you haven’t seen anything beyond what I clip to the fence on Jackson Square? Even to see that, you have to come down as a customer. The stuff I really do is packed away in what I call my studio, the back room of my apartment. When you get to Los Angeles, you’ll meet a script-writer, another friend of the beautiful Linda Jane, who makes friends easily and it’s little wonder why; he too has ‘his screenplay’—his, one he never shows to anyone, unlike those he writes and pitches to producers in order to eat and pay his rent. You’ll never see that one either. Look at your typewriter there. A professional accoutrement, you claim; you type papers for college kids. A slave to them, in fact.

“One year, you got the bounced check at semester’s end—everyone, students and you yourself, about to leave for the summer. Fifty bucks it was. A lot of money. I said don’t worry, we’ll handle it. Come with me. The two of us went to the apartment. I puffed myself out, remembering my old football days, like the half-blind law student you typed the moot court briefs for, and I put on the no-nonsense scowl I had in Alaska.

“He opened the door. I leaned against the doorframe, my jaw set, ‘as if greater things concerned me,’ as Dante I think says. It was like that night in high school you talk about, when Dave P., that rough customer known for fighting anyone from

away, leaned into the sailors' car and you could see his very weight collapse the springs, so Here goes! you thought, but all he did was kick at the open door as the sailors drove away, not willing to take up the challenge. 'I have ... I can't ...' 'Fifty f*cking bucks!' you said, apparently encouraged by me, your would-be enforcer. 'We go to the cashier at the university. You ...' 'I have ...'. 'I'll just type for you, while you accompany Joe here. I suspect between the two of you, you'll find a way to get the cash. I may or may not charge you for the pages I type while you're gone.' It was beautiful. I gripped him by his jacket sleeve. He was scared to death. We drove to campus and he got to the cashier. 'They only do \$25,' he said, handing me the money. His hands shook like ... what do you call it? Aspen. Aspen leaves. That's it. I remember from the time I spent in Colorado. 'Give me your jacket, and put your goddamn collar up. Here are some shades. Go through the damn line again, and if you don't get the money, I'll take it out on your face.' "

"Fifty was a lot of money then."

"Yeah. It would have been a bad season for you taking a hit like that."

"Or for him!" I said I thought with wit. "And to think. I had a policy: no personal checks at the end of the semester, but I stupidly made an exception. Felt uneasy right away. Called the bank and sure enough there was hardly a dime left in his account."

"You're lucky you have friends like me, who aren't intimidated in the least by skinny college kids."

"But it's still not the same as ..."

"It's exactly the same. You take pride in your work—making words, you are, on that machine of yours. But it's not your

art. And the crap I sell to the tourists? It's the best crap money like that can buy. I'm proud of it. Like you doubtless are, when you pull a perfect sheet from the platen. But I hate every minute I stay down there. And you never type, say, just for the joy of it. That's when I started smoking dope for real. I don't know whether the time passed slowly or quickly, but it did pass tolerably. And then when it came time for the chess tournament—oh yes, I took pride in that as well. But the only way I could endure it was the same way I endured sitting outside Jackson Square, trolling for tourists."

"All that ended when I went to grad school, the uncompleted novels, all the work with the Selectric."

"And why go to school at all, having hated it so much as an undergraduate? Why not life on a fishing boat? composing as your captain did, those high-romantic chants, diction decades out of date, in the style of Gerald Manley Hopkins?"

"I remember what I said some 25 years later. I had a transsexual student, long before that became fashionable. She had served in Vietnam. Came home and bought herself some enormous boobs, but kept her voice and her macho personality as well. Finally ended as a master's student with us. Always wore the shortest of shorts and had legs, as the hottest of her classmates used to say with some envy, that went on forever. 'I can't stand this shit' she said. 'I'm a writer. I don't give a crap about structuralism and post-structuralism and feminism' [those were the days when that still mattered]. I want to read what we read at Cornell in the mid-sixties. Old school stuff. That's why I'm studying with you and those most like you.' 'I hope you don't pretend that's flattering,' I said. 'But I will tell you that these academic papers you so despise, these scholarly notes and articles ...' I said, having never

thought of it until that very moment, ‘they’re my poems. Those articles ... they are my poems.’ The only thing I ever said to a student that caught their attention.”

“You should have gotten it on with her. Can you imagine that? You never asked her ... well, you would have taken your chances, I guess. She left school and wrote you from Hawaii, lying on the beach, her legs still said to go on forever. ‘This is where I belong,’ she said, having been tossed out of school as a plagiarist.”

Can’t remember his last name. There was Joe B. from Baton Rouge, who spent nights in tears, a failed seducer once again. I once took two dollars from his wallet just for the hell of it, I guess. There was another Joe P., the photographer, who shot Allen’s art for our *Sketchbook*. But it can’t be him, of course. Nor is Allen the Al who left town, I think, after my first year in New Orleans. I drove him to Maine and he continued on to see his old friend from the Army, Fat James in Machias, soon dead in a road race, and I don’t believe I ever heard of him again.

We played chess, Joe P. and I, that is. I beat him once, not through any skill of mine, but because my game against him mirrored his, and I can still see the look on his face as he stared at the board realizing he had lost, lost against a version of himself. It was the same look my chess-playing seat-mate on the plane gave me when he realized he was about to go down a piece, although only in the first case did I actually win the game.

Al puts me on the back of his motorcycle. In the days I rode, I rarely took the freeway, and when I did, I never split lanes, as it is now called, passing between cars barely feet apart. I was terrified. It was like riding in the pick-up which

stopped for the stranded hitchhikers in Hope, British Columbia. The guy bought beer for all of us, fed us in a sit-down diner, then drove so recklessly I refused to share the cab with him. I sat faced back in the cab-bed, closed my eyes and wondered what it was like to be dead. I no longer wonder what it is like to be dead. I just know it isn't all that far away, and hasn't been at many moments in my life.

Al chased after Betty, lovely but dumb as a pile of rocks. She told her professors and would-be employers she was set on graduate school. They all shrugged and dismissed her with "Why don't you just go to graduate school," which she mistook as a compliment. I wrote papers for her as well; she complained bitterly of the C she got on what was likely the best work the professor had seen that year. Something about the paradoxical depth of the characters in a Beckett play. The professor knew she hadn't written it, knew she was incapable of thinking or expressing what she said. The capstone work could do no more than confirm judgments made of the first.

My wife came to visit. She called me "Joey" which was repeated by Betty which was passed on to Linda Jane and she is now only one of two people who calls me that. The other heard the name from the sister of a friend I had known in second grade and teases me now using that name alone for me.

Linda Jane, of course, knew Al. One of the last times we were together we sat cross-legged on the floor of her apartment and sang folk songs. Those were the days I could still make something approaching music on the guitar. Linda Jane sang with the authentic twang she grew up with in Little Rock. We could have stayed there forever.

iii. SWAT Team

I lived in what must have been a second-story maid's quarters with a separate staircase, serving what was now a fourplex. An old woman lived in the one apartment that shared a wall with me. Housedress, rarely washed. That's all I ever saw her in, and that only when she walked out onto the fire escape, which for her served as a balcony, her sighs and complaints of life the way it is today always audible.

Maybe I am projecting onto her the condescending laments of the supposed ex-ballet-dancer who somehow had reading privileges at the Huntington, which she rarely if ever used. She sat in the coffee room, dreaming, I suppose, of the lithe body she once had, her ankles taped securely, all now lost in the fat of age and indolence. "Young people today ..." she began disapprovingly in a double spondee. She smelled bad, I remember.

My neighbor in New Orleans, by contrast, did not seem to care if anyone was listening, or perhaps, as with the dancer, these were public proclamations. I can smell her inflections. I remember Joe P. once looking up from the chess-board, about to break up my position, and I could see my defeat was inevitable, nothing to be learned by playing out the position to its dreary conclusion. "Who or what the hell is that?" he said.

The only words I can clearly remember her saying in the year I lived as her neighbor: "They're shooting at Howard Johnson's!"

Remember that? When mass shootings were rare in America.

Every uniformed gun-carrier in the bayous rushed to the scene, all wanting to be part of it.

The chaos of the police state and its unofficial deputies in full view.

An embarrassment for law enforcement,
police then still capable of shame, I guess.
The origins of SWAT teams I'm told.
A police state worse than the first.
The collapse of society.

Such futures, even thoughts of them,
hardly more to her
than general injustices of life.
Too many to enumerate,
too many even to think about.
The oppressive humidity in which
she'd led her seventy years or more of life.

Dead for over 40 years, I estimate. I never saw a guest or relative in the place. Maybe she thought that the landlord, Mr. Ignazio, Mr. Sam as we called him, did not allow visitors.

She ate when she remembered.
She boiled the water for tea,
when she had nothing else to do
and she had nothing else to do.
As far as I knew
she never left the apartment

What "her" was there other than the one I experienced in the adjacent living space? Was that a self that is knowable at all?

Joseph A. Dane

What was it like in those days, being her?

Like the bat in the article by Thomas Nagel: a thought experiment.

What was it like to be her?

A sleepless night.

It was good when you only had to wake up once to stagger to the bathroom. In a year you might be making that walk with a walker.

You would wake up and it would be to the kitchen, the only change of clothes throwing on a bathrobe if it was cold enough and stepping into your slippers.

You washed your clothes in a pail, and those that you couldn't clean to your satisfaction, you left in plastic bags in the bedroom.

You would eat what you always did, never requiring cooking. We've seen that in so many old people, have we not? Their cooking skills reduced to opening a package. No longer trusting the way they used to set the oven or prepare the stove-top. No microwave in those days. Maybe a toaster oven. All ending in disuse.

You read the paper if you had one delivered.

You listened to the radio if yours was still working.

You would die in the only chair in which you were comfortable.

You would not be found until the evidence of decay alerted the neighbors.

I can clearly see the images I associate with her—the shooting at Howard Johnson's, the assault of the police on the empty equipment room on the rooftop. They had killed the

shooter from a helicopter the night before when he charged into the open in defiance—.50 caliber rounds flying all over the city. The body left on the rooftop. All is clear in my mind, even the two officers who fell as the whole team of assailants fired with no discipline at the open door, the only threat the body lying among them.

I can see all this. But no one I knew owned a tv
in those days.

What could we have seen and known?

It came on the radio.

They were shooting at Howard Johnson's.

Hard to stretch the joints out at her age,

her moan just audible to her neighbor.

Almost sexual. But we made that joke and
neither of us thought it was funny.

You sighed because it was morning.

No day could disappoint enough.

Then came the shooting at Howard Johnson's.

Turn of the century she had been born, I think, and lived thus through most of it. Hearing of the war as a child—the war that explained the confusion around her. The Depression with deprivations no worse than those you grew up with. You reached adulthood suspecting peace would lead only to another war, worse than the first. And after that, even the most important things did not affect much life in New Orleans.

There were no riots in the late 60s there.

They eliminated Basin Street.

Joseph A. Dane

They replaced it with low-income apartments.
They built the Superdome.
Then came the shooting at Howard Johnson's.

If there were paupers' graves in those days, she would likely be in one. If there were those with money to invest in her memory, she might be in one of those above-ground cemeteries—St. Louis or St. Roch.

I saw them in the movies.
I stayed away from them in life.
They remind me of Paris, I say, but in truth
the Old World reminds me of what I missed
in America.

I stayed in a basement apartment in Montparnasse, with paneled walls dripping of linseed oil. The owner told me I was not to look out the windows. A legal matter; something about building permits. You needed to stand on a chair even to reach them.

It was there I saved up enough 5 franc pieces to call Linda Jane in Los Angeles, still as strikingly beautiful today as she was some forty years ago. My friend Hirsch once saw us walking the beach together and nodded in approval. From her hesitation I could tell that what I thought was love was nothing but a lark for her.



I remember the music
more embarrassing to admit today than then.
Phil Collins of course,
nothing classical, nothing of interest.
Every hour they would play it,
just as in America at mid-century:
the Top Ten,
payola, the Hit Parade,
transistor radios.
Every hour they would play the song again.

iv. The Worst I Ever Had

The worst landlord I had, years before Mr. Sam, whose racism at least kept the rents down at my sprawling garret near Freret and Napoleon, handed me the signed forms, took my deposit, and when I showed up at the apartment with everything I owned in the car I found the locks changed with the new tenant measuring the windows for drapes. In those days, louvred blinds were still in the future.

I may have gotten my deposit back.
No apology came with it.

My next apartment burned to the ground a month after I moved into it. Navy wives in modern-day confinement there while their husbands were fighting for our freedoms (so they ludicrously were said to do) all hit on me, but I was too naïve to sense what they wanted. For and of me. I lost everything I owned in the fire; the service wives cuckolding their husbands deployed at sea lost everything they owned, next to nothing; and it was the most liberating moment of my life.

And then there was the woman a block north of Esplanade, renting a place described as “Quarter Adjacent” as the

realtors would have it. We don't allow guests, she said off-handedly. Why would you want company? Why friends of any kind? When we have visitors, we take them out.

I guess as in *Streetcar* when Stella takes Blanche to Galatoire's or maybe it was Brennan's for brunch or maybe some other place that only in fiction could they afford to go to.

Guests are like the gay guys you meet on the street.
Even the rednecks of Elysian Fields know that.
And with the northern accent of yours,
it's best to take no chances.
With them or with anyone.



Bill Dane, 1970, Tracy

Why not drive back to Baton Rouge for the nightlife there? her look suggested. That was what she was getting at. The culture of lawyers and drug-addled undergraduates.

Joseph A. Dane

Carpetchaggers all. It's people like you who have ruined this place. Outsiders. Those with no sense of their northern roots. No sense of order or propriety. Where is your family? Where the snows of yesteryear? Where the silence beneath the surface noise?

You all know the Klan-clad pretty-boy politician who later became famous, losing many close election races. A Grand Dragon he was in the KKK when the KKK was at its nadir, almost in receivership, when anyone who yelled the n-word in the street was promoted to the officer corps—Dragons and Wizards—I don't know the difference and don't wish to; no one really cared then anyway. Too bad we can't go back to that today.

He gained fame with his homophobic and racist rants on television and on the radio when anyone (those unfit few) bothered to listen. When we knew him, he was a student at LSU, making the weekend trek to New Orleans like so many others bored with the provincial tedium of Red Stick, as we called it. Often spotted in Pete's Bar, on Bourbon and Burgundy, I think, pronounced BurGUNDy of course, preening with others in for the weekend. Pete's was the best known gay bar in the city then, for those who don't and need to know. Now don't pretend or suggest they crowded in with a bunch of fag-hags; don't pretend they were there for gawking or gay-bashing, like the thugs from New Jersey who take the PATH to the West Village on Saturdays to hurl insults at the locals. Joe B., once from Baton Rouge himself, claims it has gotten so bad he just stays home on weekends. No one had any trouble at Pete's, and the pretty-boy Wizard or Grand

Dragon fit right in. Particularly sporting that blond hair like Jeffrey Dahmer had.

Why don't you just leave for the big time, the landlord said, like others might have said, those who did more than just rent out a guest house.



*Bill Dane, 1973,
New Orleans*

Slink back to the North East, your liberal tail between your legs, unfit for urban life in the still deep South.

Joseph A. Dane

Or why not turn not back, but ahead?
West to Hermosa,
to the now Great Wastes of America
prairies rising to the foothills rising to the mountains,
the grandeur of hills you have not seen since childhood,
with your family on the train to Denver
not seen since you drove there to find yourself
as a college kid.



Bill Dane, 1972, East of Mt. Diablo

You can't think the factory farms have killed all that;
it's only the 70s today, for Crise sake.
Give the corporatists a chance, at least!

How about the cities in the sandstones of Utah?
Arches or Bryce Canyon?
Mormons in black underwear

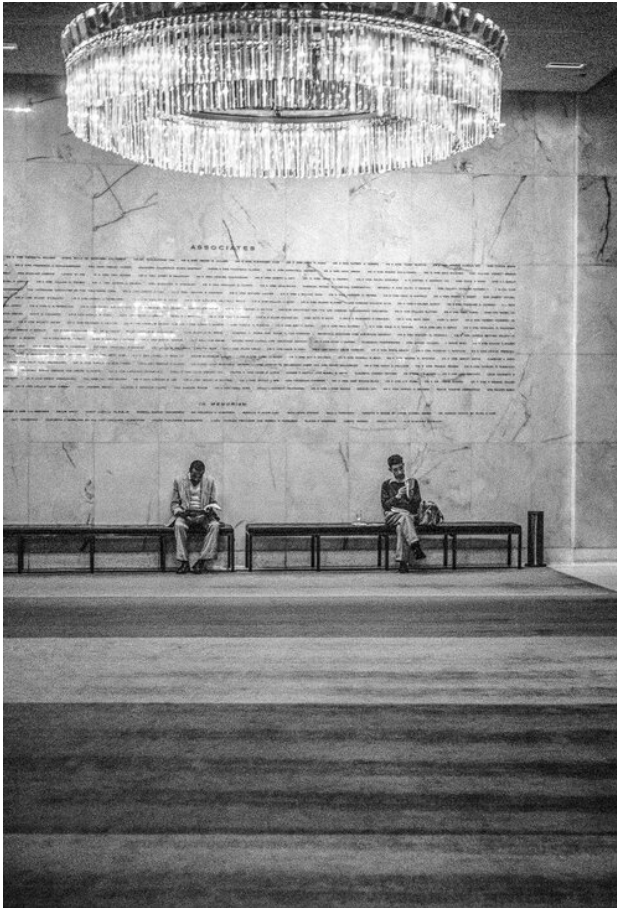
The Bundy cattle raping the landscape.
The Ivar Theatre in Hollywood.



Bill Dane, 1982, Ivar Theatre, Hollywood

See the wonders of Long Beach where Linda Jane
lives a block from Linda Jane herself.
The grand cul-de-sacs of Irvine;
the stucco facades of Cerritos.

Joseph A. Dane



Bill Dane, 1980, Los Angeles

Time to get out in the world, she said. The landlady, I mean, or the potential one. Make the date that you will talk about for decades. Sip wine with the starters, as you wait for the entrée, a preposterous term for it! The habits of the well-groomed well-to-do on vacation in America.



Bill Dane, 1974, Berkeley

“That’s where we’ll meet,” Seth determined, calling from La Jolla. “Half-way.” The Costa Mesa Mall, of course, a mid-point any idiot could find from the Thomas Guide, GPS still then in the future. There must be a Nordstrom’s Rack and there has to be a side entrance there. That’s where we’ll meet.

Four Punkt!

Or as close to that as we can get.

You never know with the traffic.

You must understand—this was before the advent of cell-phones. I say this for those who consider the plan incomprehensible.

I arrived fifteen minutes early, helplessly lost in the shopping mall, the whole thing split by the six lanes of

Joseph A. Dane

*Bristol Avenue, nothing Bristol about it in the yacht-
man's lexicon.*

*All the bland restaurants I remember now out of busi-
ness. The book store unfindable or no longer in existence.*



Bill Dane, 1982, Costa Mesa

*There were a half-dozen loiterers at the side entrance
to Nordstrom's, when I finally found it
(Nordstrom's Rack precisely),
perhaps as many as ten. Perhaps ten or more.
Each had come from LA or San Diego.
Each was waiting not quite patiently
for a friend from San Diego or Los Angeles,
startled as we were.*

Landlords lived in fear in those days: what if the rent is late? what if his family moves in with him? They expect you to live like a college kid in a dorm ruled by parietals. “Water-bugs” they call cockroaches big as rodents. You have to get your heel into them, a long-time resident said. They will face you down in the doorway, and eat up all your scrap food. A friend found one on the floor of my kitchen in Los Angeles. She trapped it under an overturned glass and left it cruelly imprisoned there. By the time I found it, alas, it was too late. For it, I mean.

It was Sherman Oaks, the apartment bordering
the four-lane artery,
only a sidewalk between them.
The apartments were as bad as those in Cerritos.
Rose took a break from lunch preparation to score
a hit from her neighbor,
the guy she bought meth from
or got it in exchange for special favors.

You laid out the cash for the lunch she had prepared for you; not much you could do about it—What were you to say? “Why not we ask your husband for the money?” Months later she texted me: “I need \$100,” she said. “It’s the perfect time, hubby now away to teach his classes.”

“I’m in Maine,” I said. “Remember the time you called me from New York: ‘Oh God, J., I need to get away from this. All the sex. All the drugs and alcohol.’ ‘Oh don’t worry,’ I said, ‘we have none of that sort of thing in Maine,’ already planning on how to belie this claim as soon as possible.”



“How many times do you think you can make this joke? I’ll be at the bus station,” she said.

“Or what passes for one,” I answered her. “Just the stone curb outside the 7-11 where all the teenage stoners sit, and with you in the white dress, stretching tall in the full day sun, you can be sure they will welcome you with that stoner mixture of envy and desire.”

“All men feel that when they see me, even in the provinces.”

“Well frankly, wouldn’t you?”

“Remember going to the grocery store in your hometown with your young Asian honey? two blocks from where I once waited on the curb for you, flashing the stoners as discreetly as possible in my thin white dress. She was raised in Beijing and Toronto, and as you bagged up the potatoes and tofu, the clerk looks you over carefully, and asks, in as civil a voice as possible, maybe a touch of Acadian in his accent: ‘So, you’re with the music school?’ Like, you’re Asian; where’s your damn violin and why aren’t you taking a selfie? ‘Welcome to Maine!’ you said to her, and all of that went right over her head. Just as what she had planned out for you—leaving

you for a man half your age—that went over your head as well.

“Nothing goes over my head, I assure you, for when I look at any man, I can tell instantly what is on his mind, just like sitting next to you, working on that landscape and I dotted your nose with the acrylics, and turned back to the landscape.”

There.

The lobster buoys.

Angled right in the tidal flow.



I speak of one assignation there in New Orleans, years ago, but it was likely two or more than that. I went back to meet Linda Jane from Little Rock, and a year or so earlier I

had gone there to revive my interest in her or maybe it was Sherry with the pink shift, and Linda Jane had grown depressed and stand-offish although somehow had still found the money to fly there and stay with her friend from the Quarter or someplace out in Metairie and Sherry had put on enough weight to still turn heads on the sidewalk but which cloaked her once-magnificent body in a mere allusion to it. And that didn't work neither one of them worked even the love-making in the Hotel Toulouse was mechanical and I went to a conference, meeting Linda Jane at the Doubletree Hotel, who taught at UCLA or once had before she left academia for law school, and I told her in full hearing of everyone that she was going to embrace me there or I would drag her to her room as I had in D.C. a year earlier, or years before that at an MLA conference where I stayed at the Jackson Hotel in the Quarter, and met Linda Jane at that exquisite restaurant a block away from my uptown apartment on Jena St. where we would have an exquisite meal on her husband's nickel only a year before she told me he was leaving her.

I loved them all, those times in the city now I mean. I loved the weight of the air and the smells of Jax Brewery. The subtle undulations of the landscape.

v. "They Hate Us," the Renter Said

I was drunk in my Mardi Gras costume, no sleep in a day or so, and my lovely fellow celebrant, Linda Jane, no trouble making friends and always finding the worst of them, introduced me to her as we passed on Bourbon Street and for fully two blocks I turned, walking backwards, screaming 'Patty! that's Patty! There she is!' never having met her, followed by

some amusing and convoluted rant which, oddly, is one of the few of that day whose words I've since forgotten.

Sub-letter. Makes you understand what landlords are going through and why they hate renters as much as their renters hate them. She stayed in my apartment for the summer with a room-mate, and wouldn't answer the door when after three months I knocked, having driven two days from Maine to get there. My own damn apartment! When I returned with my key (having left one with Linda Jane, perhaps foreseeing this) she laid down the rules for the three of us living there, and I just laughed at her, living the way I liked to live. She told me finally it would be best for all of us if I moved out and left the place to them. I laughed again.

Patty was the kind of person we often see in the grocery store, and God knows what grocery it was; if there had been Trader Joe's in those days, that's where I would have set it. You go to the bananas and you're trying to figure out whether they are 25c each or 25c per pound and in either case, did it make more sense to take the larger ones or the least blemished and whether the proportions of banana to peel might vary depending on ripeness, then determining which bunch had both the type you determined best and would ripen at the correct rate ... You remember the kid in grammar school? The one who would take the slice of birthday cake then spit or sneeze on the rest of it? ... And despite the infinite variety there for the taking, without fail Patty would select one of the bunches, after long inspection, then tear off a single banana and throw it back, now unsalable, onto the display case. Sometimes two, separated into singles, if she felt singularly irresponsible. It takes effort to do that; it is not something one can do without thinking. You know: this is like the guy in the

Joseph A. Dane

lycra running-suit who picks up a bunch of grapes, sold by weight, and eats them all the way to the register while making a great show of apology in the check-out line.

“It’s not that I can’t have it, and therefore no one can. It’s that I can have it, and therefore you cannot.”

Like that, she was. Schwegman’s or the local Piggly Wiggly. Always the same. To this day I buy only fruit left behind by people such as herself in the highest spite of them.



*Bill Dane, 1973,
New Orleans*

Her ire and attempted eviction likely had not a little to do with my attempt to seduce her co-renter room-mate. Old-fashioned girl, little distinctive about her. Hardly worth the effort it likely would have taken.

She took me to her room and showed me her weaponry. A .22 revolver, which she kept in her dresser, laughingly unversed in its operation: no idea how to load it, where or even what the safety was, knowing no more of the magazine cylinder than what she'd seen on westerns.

She lived in the real world, she said, a world where, however subject to assault, she assured me she would never be a rape victim, even if it meant almost certain death for her, the unfamiliar weapon a full five steps away from her, hidden amid the clothes she no longer bothered with. Useless for defense. But enough for an assailant to decide to take no chances and simply blow her head away. Useful too for self-slaughter and the like.

How, I wondered, did my darling Eloise ever get the hang of it? Or did the survivalists in the gun store, clad in their preposterous camo, dry-fire it, then load it for her, making her promise not to rely on the safety. Probably a 9mm. All you had to do was chamber the first round from the magazine. The second loaded itself into the chamber and was ready to fire when they found her.

So we took the streetcar downtown, and I threw my best mid-day moves on her, thinking to impress her with my worldliness, or was it rather the authenticity of living on the coast in a northeastern state—all of this completely ineffective and laughably inept. Yet to others, if not to her herself, I'd apparently charmed her almost out of her shirt and Patty worried about losing her, or a shift in communal living alliances, and dragged her away to some place in the Jackson district, leaving me with my six-room garret-apartment to myself and to the bulldog I brought down with me.

It had two stone lions guarding the stairs to the porch, my entrance to the right.

Across the street they built condos after I moved away and one of my students, with a name right out of Spenser, Britomere Fennel is the closest I can come to it, claimed she grew up in one of those hideously inapt condos, years after I moved out of the house facing them.

Great voice, she had. Husky, you'd say, like the voice of Claudine the Haitian girl. She had the lead in a Shakespeare play and I spent two hours admiring her.

I came home one night to find a plastic crèche, each figure life-size and lit from the inside, the baby Jesus and the baby Jesus alone blinking slowly off and slowly on.

"Kiss the Jesus? Would you like to kiss the baby Jesus?" my downstairs Honduran neighbors asked.

My other neighbor was a single mother of an adolescent son. He took the BB gun she had bought him for Xmas, and blew out my car window practicing his riflery.

vi. The Napoleon Café

I took the street-car to Canal Street or sometimes the Freret bus through what they now call the "hood" but was then known as the ghetto, where I imagined the locals spitting in contempt, or glaring in a threat of doing so. Then a five-block walk up the Rue Royale, as I remember it, to an interior like those in old Westerns, I thought, modeled after courtyards in Paris, I now know having never been there then, the surfaces reminiscent of the Old World. I ordered a single draft beer and sorted through the record bin, picking out Goodman's Mozart, It was a way to hear classical music in those days before public radio, no money for symphony tickets, no

way to pick up the signal from the amateurish station at the local university: Tulane, Loyola, or something from across town. I knew Goodman's Mozart from the Time-Life series of records my parents owned, my musical education before the founding of Tower Records and the opera-queens who worked there. The room filled up with customers, loudly theatrical, circling their pitchers as I nursed my beer and the Quintet marched toward conclusion. I got up for the rest room and when I returned my beer was gone, the table cleared and re-occupied, Goodman replaced by some awful and trite number by Al Hirt, who was good enough to know better. I walked out slowly, as if this were my intention all along. A tough-guy from the Westerns. In fact, entirely in the wrong, not wishing to make a scene. Obvious to anyone. So much of life like that.

I met Linda Jane here a decade later, she with her colleague and his fragile wife, all of us on the way to the airport following our assignment disguised this time as a research trip. And Linda Jane told me repeatedly to be nice to this delicate flower of a woman—her colleague's wife—and not to make fun of her or to test her with levels of irony. Anorexic likely. And for God's sake don't keep shifting your gaze and weight trying to look down her shirt.

She was non-descript, Patty-like or her roommate-like, and thus what would be called "plain" or more kindly "sweet" but hardly more than that, no reason to ogle her, and I dutifully tossed out what I thought my most charming lines at her, trying to follow my Linda Jane's directives as naturally as I could, flattering without fawning, one might say, and I would say things like "That's so interesting. And what did you do or think about then?" and "The humidity here, it must be

Joseph A. Dane

difficult for you flying here all the way from Oklahoma ...” And a day later or so after we had all gone home, me giddy with my show of congeniality and charm, Linda Jane called me in hysterics how dare I hit on her colleague’s wife in public like that in front of her and even with her colleague the poor woman’s husband right there beside me, following my every surreptitious gaze, and how appalled they all were, all three of them, or at least the two of them, or maybe only one, the wife herself having no say or opinion in this, I suppose, given that one might indeed be embarrassed by excessive flattery but far from appalled!, so really, how appalling could it all have been objectively, and who knows what she felt, or had been perspicacious enough to notice, but then, when Linda Jane got on a rant, as is the case with every jealous woman I have known, there was no stopping her, and I assume her colleague just nodded in agreement, if even that, and in retrospect I suppose this was at the very time when she, that is Linda Jane (god knows who the colleague’s wife had her eyes on) was getting “acquainted” shall we say with the guy she would soon leave me for, and of course, projected all her indiscretions onto me. Are you there, Skippie? Are you still alive or listening?

That’s the way they are, these *femmes jealous*
with their drunken accusations on the telephone.
Like the Woman of Today, dragging herself away
from her on-line dating sites
just long enough to denounce you
for imagined infidelities.
And just because you, I said,
would hop into the sack with anyone

with an inheritance and an internet connection,
that does not mean I would do the same.
And just because you, my Linda Jane,
would leave the man who loved you for some
 puppy-dog consort who would give up all his
 ambitions for you
that does not mean I would do the same to you.

I took the flight back to Los Angeles in innocence and ignorance, assured that my Linda Jane would leave her husband and we would now live openly just as we had that weekend in New Orleans, unaware of the accusation awaiting me, no thought of the weekend months later at another purported research trip to San Francisco where we spent days in tears in the cheap hotel room, knowing without saying anything, that this was the end for us.

I stared at the checkerboard farm plots, less despoiled than they would be decades later when I flew over these same corporate defilations thinking back on my darling Eloise and her brutal ending of more than ten years earlier.

A strange peace in both cases.
In one, an assurance of the future,
in the other knowing there was nothing left to do.

I sat back in the constricting seat,
imagining I could die there like the old woman
and the old guy did in New Orleans,
dying in their body waste in the only chair
they were comfortable in.
No one knew a thing.

Joseph A. Dane

Some uncle he must be.
Some distant relation.
His eyes on the woman next to him.
“You can’t get on a plane without id,”
the would-be knower said.
The pious listeners
nod in assent.

II. MASKED BALL

i. Welcome to Vietnam

Where was it, do you think? A rice-field northwest of Saigon? Search-and-destroy still the operant tactic. In the mid-to late-sixties we always caught the news to hear the official body count, not lamenting the dead, just thinking how it proved we had been right all along. Progress, some called it, meaning different things, all uneasy with the irony. When the weekly number passed 500 for Americans, that's when the populace finally began to take notice, ignoring the fraudulent body count of the enemy—blood trails, dead soldiers, civilians said to be caught in the gun-sights or cross-fire—1000, 2000, tens of thousands? No one took that seriously. The enemy had been through that so often, it was nothing, even on the off chance it was true. 50,000 dead? You could do that on a single day and nothing would change.

Kurtz was right.
In the movie, I mean.

You can read about this anywhere, even if you haven't experienced it. You can see the same standard shots in the movies that you see in the documentaries. America's wounds and crimes salved by tearful self-analysis and grief counselors, the invention of syndromes for returning soldiers and rape victims.

Our enemies never wasted time with that.
That's why they won.

So she went to the Ivy league school not only as a returning Vet, not only that, but as a different person altogether, now a woman who turned heads on the sidewalk, and instead of an M16 or humping the M60 it was a camera she said she had carried in the jungles, the threatened cities, the dug-in positions, all her compatriots stripped to the waist, she wanting none of it. She included a photo in her applications to grad school. It looked like something from a porno shoot.

Where the peace medallions?

The cries of civilians in the mortar strikes?

Where the commendations from her superiors?

“It was when I was sitting on the sandbag of the bunker, lacing my boots, and listening to the war-stories told by the guy next to me, lacing his boots up as well, and the redundant phrase, ‘And this is no sh*t’ marking, as Tim O’Brien says, all departures from the truth, inaccessible to begin with.

“It was different in those days, you know. You didn’t have news reports about us, nor did you have a name like ‘trans’ for us, a name that changes month to month. You didn’t have lawmakers freaking out and worrying about what pronoun you used for yourself or what bathroom you used or what sports you could play.

“I didn’t give three sh*ts about that. When I wander into a bathroom in my shorts with my legs going on forever the only stares I get going into a stall in the women’s room are angry and envious.”

Maybe the Army did that. Maybe Vietnam did that.

“You lived your life. You weren’t exemplary in any sense. Not an example of anything. You didn’t have political capital and wouldn’t know what to do with it if you had.

“You see what happens when you collectivize, to speak as your black-jacketed colleagues once did. You become pathetic. Like, hey, I’m fourteen and I feel weird about sex and suddenly everyone claims to give a shit about me and the depth of my self-awareness.

“No. It wasn’t that way in the old days.

“Nothing was as it is today in the old days.

“It was when I was lacing up my boots, bent over, lacing up my boots, I saw the leather rising to my knees, not something for combat, but something for an S and M show in the Village of New York or the valleys of Los Angeles.

“F*ck it, I said. I heard myself say that and everyone turned to me, smiling, scowling, questioning. But I gave them nothing. I don’t need to listen to bullshit from my platoon-members. The raised eyebrows. Cat calls. The slow shaking of the head. I just need to embrace it, and I will never hear such things again.

“When they flew me back stateside, that’s when I started on the treatments. What were they going to do? You know how it was in those days. The briggs were full. There was no sense in signing anyone up who wanted nothing to do with it; who wanted nothing more than to smoke dope and toy with the camera, you know, like the craze that hit a year after Antonioni’s *Blow-Up* came out.

“You can read about that too.

“That was how you yourself avoided it. Don’t pretend you won your own war with the Draft Board—a war of attrition like we sometimes claimed in the jungles and rice-paddies.

They wanted no more to do with you than you wanted to do with them. That works for all of us.

'Oh you would have made a great soldier.'
That's what your brother always said,
having served a year in Korea.
For all your grumbling, you are entirely conventional.
You would have done what you were told to do.
And would have come back unscarred as I was."

ii. America for Americans

So you want me to "tell my story," as you say. That's what you're getting at. Like some dwarf or disfigured knight carrying his head in the forest. Like one of those characters who appear out of nowhere in 18th-century fiction—the old woman in *Candide* with half her ass blown away.

Do you want me to hurry into the middle parts?
skip right past my grandparents' coupling?
How much history can you expect from me?
How about when they came to America?
That's it.
That's when life and culture began for us.
It was in the holds of the ships berthed at Ellis Island.
They did not see the sun or draw a breath of clean
ocean air for twelve full days at sea they said,
the music of Verdi and the songs of their homelands
in their head.
The music and the tale, each day of it,
were important to them, they said.

But my research suggests that even a routine liner
such as they were crushed into
could make the trip in barely a week.
Maybe they were counting
the days in the ship when the ship
was not technically at sea?

Or maybe, given their obsession with curtain times, having
paid for their passage and reserved (insofar as that was possible)
their berths, they were at the wharf two days before
departure.

They boarded as soon as the ship was cleared.
They stayed aboard until the last civilian left.
They wished to ensure that they did not mislay their
luggage or forget their belongings entirely
in the wonder of the New World, where they would
have nothing.

They needed to be certain they had arrived.
That the ship had not docked in some fanciful land
in Tahiti or Terra del Fuego,
mere places on the map if that to them, or
somewhere in the Caribbean or Australia,
where they would be bound as prisoners or
sold as slaves and forgotten by humanity.
Their papers might well be not in order
dooming them to be returned to their home port,
deported from their new.
Wars had begun—only a naif
would not prepare for that.
The borders had been closed ...

Joseph A. Dane

That's the way they thought in those days.
That's how life had always been for them.
That would have seemed the norm to them.
They had learned to take no chances
even if the unweighed ship rotted out at its moorings.

And what do you know of me having learned all that?
what of those who died before I came to conscious-
ness?

In what sense are they mine or me theirs?
What trauma could be traced to their negligence?
Were these the stories told to me by my parents?
my soul warped by the very imagining?
One doesn't recover easily, they say.

Or perhaps what you want has nothing to do with my past at
all. Just some untoward perversion in yourself.

Some reason to give in to it.
"Oh I can live like a degenerate
because like you
I too have suffered thus."
Dissolution and regret—
life would be enough if nothing more than that.
A repetition of the first ...

But you're a scholar;
you know the error of Nietzsche.
What the old man whispered to Zarathustra
(or the other way around!)
all that b.s. of Eternal Return.

That's what happens when notwithstanding
your dithyrambs on Dionysos,
you do not know what irrational numbers are,
the vanishing points of a series.
Science, you see,
as Eloise always says to you.

The wheel turned discreetly at π intervals never comes to rest at the same point for all eternity. Nothing is the same; nothing repeats by necessity. The inconsequent twig, as the evolutionists now have it, snaps off in the wind, and no one knows the difference.

I kissed my first boy when I was ten. That must be
the turning point in life, you think,
for others although not for yourself of course.
This is the story you want.

And it was spinning the bottle maybe it was strip poker or something similar made-up on the spot just some vaguely sexual game of the pre-pubescent. And the next thing you know two blind-folded kids are making out trying to determine gender by mere taste, I guess, then someone had a shirt off, and the next thing you know the next thing you know ... no point in listing or even outlining all the good stuff and all the embarrassing stuff and all the humiliating or triumphant stuff that may have followed, the games that finally went too far. You can write your own version and you will hardly be far from the truth.

Joseph A. Dane

And that is the gist of it.
How it was that I would end up
“drawing the bead down” as we put it
on that VC soldier thinking of nothing
at the time as the weed erased the tedium the
fear the pain of fighting the Americans.

Perhaps you want none of such heroics. Perhaps you wish to hear of wasting one’s desultory adolescence in desultory jobs with a desultory attitude and one day finding oneself with a lover with no virtues other than those he sucked from his partner’s soul and one day exhausted at midnight throwing oneself on the cot in the living room and that was the first day he came into view, staring down across the alleyway.

It was one of those scenes framed as if in the cinema—the unnatural shadows you can almost smell the light.

They talked softly, the two soldiers,
the enemy, framed in a clearing,
relaxed, no idea we were fatally there.
VC, maybe. NVA, as I remember.
It’s sometimes hard to tell.
I think they were high.

iii. School Days

Whatever it was her professors or fellow students might be thinking—that didn’t matter. Her professors thought the way the professors they had had as undergraduates thought; and as for the students—they were fresh out of college and knew nothing of life, nothing of anything. What were they to her, she with two years of military service before even

considering returning to school-life? Vietnam. You could get killed in Vietnam.

She was unlike the others, but she would learn or perhaps she knew already (avoiding a professional death sentence, it turned out) that you can only push your independence so far in this or in any other walk of life. Few academics celebrated what she was in those days. To be part of them, to be part of anything, you have to make sense in their sense. You'll need friends, authorities, lovers versed in discretion. Eventually, you must be, in some sense, just like all the others. Or enough like them, at any rate.

For what they define as work is not work.

Work to them is conventional work,
the kind of thing everyone else does,
the kind of scholarship you can teach
to a sophomore.

Writing conventional truths in conventional prose.
or what this month is conventional.

All the labor you perform in good faith,
the day's work for a day's pay sort of thing,
thinking problems through to their resolution—
all that is for nothing.

She laughed at what her professors and their august administrators claimed about innovation and cutting-edge thinking. It didn't matter who you studied with; it didn't matter where you were in the academic hierarchy—the only innovation recognized and even acknowledged was that which most closely resembled whatever had preceded it.

That was just not her, she thought.
How could it not be obvious to everyone,
she with barely the trappings of conventional life.

She had killed a man once. As a soldier, you do that. Or at least, she suspected that she had done so. Another one of those wet and murky evenings that serve as settings for all war stories. Two VC or NVA, talking lowly at nighttime. Or laughing. But maybe in a forced manner, if it is possible to determine that for those of a different language and culture. The story does not include who was on the move, who waiting in ambush. Background dismissed with a wave of a hand. How can you concern yourself with forensic trivia like that? The nighttime of narrative, you might call it. Backlit. Or a fire. Moonlight or the ambient light of a nearby village. No location, neither geographical nor local setting—a trail, a road ... Read any Vietnam novel or memoir for those, or notes of a wartime correspondent. Just the pressure on the trigger and the spit of the round. “I think they were high,” the story goes. “Must have been.” No one asks how it feels or felt. No one asks what happened next; who dragged the bodies out or listed them among the casualties. Everyone knows that the story is now over.

She would be a poet or novelist, she thought. She would author an unflinching critique of modern American society, as Fat James dreamed of doing soon after discharge, before he died in a road race. Or a celebration of her own eccentricities. Transsexuality was not quite “in” back then, but “in enough”; no one pestered her with administrative trivia. She took courses only because and when required, holding all the things conventional scholars said about literature in high

contempt. Holding what she herself passed on to her students in contempt as well. She then inverted it, turned that discourse inside out, as one of her genial but benighted advisors recommended, knowing nothing of what that meant. That was the origin of her research project.

She had once written a story of a student who used their own creative work as the subject of a critical essay. It must have been just after she got home from Vietnam, when she still had faith in the ordinary genres of literature.

Burgess under a pseudonym, she had heard it said, did exactly that for A Clockwork Orange. Maybe there's a grain of truth in that. And did not you yourself once offer to do same? For one of your early books you feared might otherwise not get reviewed at all; your offer rejected, of course, but "only after a five-day wait!" you added slowly and proudly, each word weighted in its proper weight.

In that story, she named the fictional student with an early pseudonym she herself had once used. Now, as a grad student charged with a dissertation, she made this story her own, inhabiting it in full.

The time was propitious. Her very being "prevented all reply," as Milton's Satan says or does. What critique would they dare construct when they could not risk so much as assigning her a pronoun without subjecting themselves to ridicule or moral disapprobation? So much for the courage of professors!

Such a far cry from the old days. Remember the first PhD student you had? Married. She liked Chaucer. She got pregnant and months would go by before you would hear from

Joseph A. Dane

her, a mother caring for newborns. And she liked animals too, she said, showing up with her kids in tow. So why not animals in Chaucer? *Beestes* and *briddes* and things? And you passed that, signed the half-dozen forms all looking like the next one, thinking yes each of you had done your best in that situation.

What were you going to do?
her kid or was it two kids
waiting in a carriage in the corridor?
A “pram” your colleagues called it.

You bought flowers for one of her exams and watched her carry them alone down the corridor, balancing them on the carriage back. You became a soft touch after that. Genial. You’d sign off on anything.

How she would rant!
the ex-soldier of course I mean,
reviling the very institution
she was bent on reforming.
The best defense is a good offense!

Your colleague, a babe in and of herself if we are still allowed to say that, claimed this woman would show up to seminar in running shorts exposing legs that went on forever, ease her surgically-perfect breasts aggressively onto the table surface, and dare anyone to take up the challenge (whatever the challenge was). “Despite those boobs, despite those legs that go on forever,” your colleague said, having lost the stand-off, “she’s a man. It’s not just the voice; she’s a man like the rest of you.”

Obscurity! she sneered, at an off-hand but pointed critique from an advisor. Is that an objection? Or praise? a promise of support? Or is it all simply envy—another manifestation of the student/teacher pairing where neither has the slightest idea of what goes on or might go on in the mind of the other. You've never heard of my subject? Pearson DeJohn? He's too obscure for legitimate work, you say? That's what your esteemed colleague said to Christina, who wanted to write on David Foster Wallace, uncelebrated then, undead still. It can't be done, the advisor said with authority. I've never heard of him. And that was the end of it.

Obscurity indeed!

You know Warhol may have been right, but he may have been wrong too, in the only thing you believe he said. We will not get our fifteen minutes of fame; instead we can be assured of endless celebration, blending into and parcel of life itself, where no one cares about or ever hears of us. Realism, you see. A fit with the real world, not the world as described by criticism.

How she would go on! Little of it was persuasive, but it did not have to convince anyone of anything. The forms got signed regardless.

Remember what you, her advisor, always said in the committee room. This is their work, theirs and no one else's. Not yours and your ideas of what work is:

lines on your c.v. or resumé,
lines never to be read again.

iv. Opus magnificentum

“This dissertation examines the proliferation of modern authorship, re-imagining the future as the elimination of readers altogether. The heart of this project is a single case-study of an artist whose works are effectively without reception. No audience beyond himself, and that due only to his obsession with revision. No evidence of any readers beyond a few hits on defunct web-sites on the internet ...”

Fan fiction (inchoate then) was probably the closest analogue to this, although most mainstream academics didn't know a thing about that either. Her advisors simply nodded in embarrassment.

“Now Pearson DeJohn is a name you likely do not know,” she wrote or would write in her introduction and would restate more forcibly when facing the “suits” in the committee room. She used that alias as a teenager, dressing up as a boy and attending parties, school dances at distant towns, and again while stationed in Vietnam, in a unit far from danger, composing her war-time juvenalia, as she now called it. All those war stories with form and sources like all the others, authored by DeJohn as well.

She could give to the genre some fanciful name—onanistic fiction (although I imagine that's been taken), the committee could do no more than shake their collective heads.

DeJohn wrote during what she liked to call pre-amazon days—amazon here referring both to the on-line department store, and her own bodily transformation. Books were real and physical in those days. You carried them to work as a shield or threat. Like Prof. Lazar used to do, deflecting criticism at a conference, waving the book at his audience: “It is all in the fabliaux!” he would insist in the voice he had used as

a tank commander in the Six Day War. "I do not have time to go into it!" an aside his colleagues never tired of repeating as if in highest parody.

Chap. 1: Finding the real author

From internal references, so she claimed, she eventually determined the work was composed somewhere within a small section of the Northeast, and not, as suggested by setting, Manhattan. There were two colleges in the area, and it did not take much time checking through the yearbooks and collating a few photographs and oblique references to narrow the search down to one. Things like dormitory names, policies for attending chapel, parietals.

To identify him took only a few tedious hours reading through that college's literary magazine (a horror that cannot be accurately described but only experienced); an authorial biography soon emerged (or would emerge) at least in its outlines. A middle-class kid from a provincial town moving to another one, gaining more experience than sophistication, and ending both his life and history on the very pages her readers were confronting now.

The closest he came to being revealed, he claims, or so she herself claimed that he once claimed, was when a professor accused him, not completely in fun, of being that young writer/medievalist who killed himself just after writing *Confederacy of Dunces* O'Toole or something like that. "That was not a bad book," she writes, quoting now DeJohn directly. "But it is not a good one either."

Chap. 2: The works

“There is space only for cursory summary,” she would write, thinking of Prof. Lazar’s belligerent dismissal of detail in the conference room: “I do not have time to go into this!” “The work itself in fragments, asides, in those empty ‘descriptions’ that litter and clutter novels, descriptions most readers skip entirely. Who was it who ‘reminds us’ of this?” The characteristic tics, easy to uncover with a fussy stylist like DeJohn. Much like, she added when pressed, that clutter of detail in a Martin Amis novel, intended, apparently, to describe not their referents, but rather the chaos of waking with a hangover in Manhattan, his father having done it better years earlier.

It was like a student version of what Old Scratch once did, as he was known, the professor of French who reduced everything to an abstruse allusion to a work he claimed we all had read as schoolchildren in our Latin class.

Like what was done in the 60s.

Like what she had learned from the old professors
at Cornell in the winter
in dull grey suits.

Chap. 3: Implications

The chapter writes itself, she said.

The committee members sit back, maybe stroking their chins as they try to recall the generic responses they have made so many times in the past.

The single-author of the possibly inexistent text. What more is there to say? Literary onanism then (her term): a reductive form of the vanity presses of the old days, the days when texts had their “thing-hood,” she said, with a dismissive

toss of her head, imitating the gesture of an old professor from Cornell.

I don't even pretend to understand this.

"And here's the point. You yourself tried to find a purpose to what you did," she pled, with genuine emotion. "You felt that there was an obligation, not to make the reader better, as Plato was said to have it, but simply to bring beauty into the world. That's what you said. Even if only a phrase or a *cursum*."

That's what she said to me.

"You know Wilson's 'consilience'? The demand that art and science must work together? That one must be conversant 'with' if not entirely conversant 'in' divergent fields: literature, psychology, biology, even if one has merely an amateur's grasp of each. All that scientific mumbo-jumbo, spliced onto criticism three decades out of date."

The committee members were silent, waiting for a prompt or opening, shifting their weight in the still fragrant furniture which had appeared as if by magic one day in the winter, thus the repeated joke, not funny, "80,000 dollars a year for tuition and all I get is this damn chair!" Not funny, as I said.

"Evnine's *BatMan Project*; that's what you're doubtless thinking of," she said, but few were listening. "A self-commentary on work he'd done earlier. Nothing new here really,' you might say, though willing, I predict, 'to accept the committee's judgment.' ..." a coda she did not express aloud.

And I have no doubt all would have been a capital success, as the Anglophiles in the committee room might say. I know too I would have done all I could to assist her.

Joseph A. Dane

But getting herself booted from the program for submitting that plagiarized or “borrowed” story to the Fiction-Writing contest? The one written by a close friend of the contest judge himself?

What was she thinking?

So unlike her then I thought. So like her as well.

v. Anagnorisis

It was years after concluding all this that I heard from her again: long after my conversation with Joe P. over the chessboard, for whom she was no more than an object or instance, exemplifying one of those specialist categories of porn sites, that “she” existing only in his head. I received a card, I think, not even an e-mail, its terseness a fit for either medium.

She has found herself,
she has found her place.
She has found what she should do
as she lay in hedonistic grace
on a beach in Hawaii.

Self or place—either one, I think, chosen from variants most popular at the time. How does one “find” anything? the scholar in me mused, thinking of the Latin *invenio*, of course. And is that too not an “essentialization” or “reification” as it was known in those heady Marxist days of ... But you get the idea.

Most would say she was delusional, others, as they sometimes put it, that she hit life right on the goddamn button.

I can see her on the beach of Honolulu or Maui or wherever those photos came from, clichés in the literal and the

normal sense. Annie herself used to live there and years and decades later when she returned with her friends for vacation, they couldn't drag her from the open bar in the hotel room. She casts an impressive sight in her pink bikini, a reduced variant of what she wore in the corridors of academia. Always shorts with her legs going on forever and some pink top letting her breasts—miracles of modern design—spill out over the seminar table.

Lying back on her elbows.
One leg bent with the knee raised,
the pose most often seen
in beer commercials,
ads for sun-block,
vacation deals,
or something from the airlines.

Her perfect breasts incongruous on the forty-year-old man's body she grew up in. The body hardened in the jungles of Vietnam, humping the M60 and later the camera, the source of all the shots that filled her portfolio. Her voice unchanged. "It's me," she would say in regard to that. "My voice. I would never change it," she said. "It's me, just as is everything else I have physically."

Too bad about that story and the writing contest. Herself exposed, spared the plaudits, I guess, of one step further on the dead-end road of a short-story writer. To put it more crassly: the beach in Hawaii less to do with finding a self than being shown the door in California.

I remember my neighbor. Two months behind on rent she was in the single apartment of the crappy stucco building

with picture windows cut in as if an afterthought. Easy access to the beach if you could stand the noise and avoid the broken glass on the sidewalk, and every morning at 7AM she would exercise to music so revolting we essentially moved out of the bedroom that shared a wall with her and slept on the futon facing the walk-street.

I could hear the confrontation and later got it from the source—the genial son of the genial landlord who wanted no more of life than his dad had, just to live on the beach and have the time to go shark fishing in the morning surf.

I guess it was the dad I heard asking her when the rent would come, and she said she had things out there, and when pressed turns out all that was out there was “a story.” “A story?” the landlord asked quietly. These were the days when you could still imagine hitting *The New Yorker* and becoming set for life, as Eloise herself believed, though it was years after the editors stopped accepting unsolicited manuscripts.

“She finally ‘fessed up,’” the orphaned son said when she left. “It was sad,” he said. “She really had nothing.”

Nor did my downstairs neighbor, the self-styled “day trader,” who built the coy pond in his patio. Everything of value packed into his PT Cruiser and taken away, weeks after the rent was due and days before the sheriff came and broke the door down. “You never know what you’ll find, what I myself have found in such cases,” he said to me.

But my student’s story itself existed in fact (or the text did, but let’s not get into that!) and that’s what did her in. “Always liked that story,” my colleague said, recognizing it instantly as written by the friend now teaching at a dreary rural school in New England. Not one to let this sort of thing pass (why bother? I myself would ask), he “pressed charges,”

whatever that meant. And our Vietnam-vet-novelist-transsexual moved away or disappeared, notifying only a select few of the beach in Maui, the inspiration for her next oeuvre that would bring the literary world to its knees, with a younger generation gasping at the audacity of her periods.

Like Aschenbach says.

Same thing.

I once proctored a class for a colleague, and I told the kids as I passed the exams out or maybe as I collected them or maybe as they were trying to concentrate on their answers that she had been bitten by a snake, then, catching my breath and regaining my composure, I added that, in fact, she had been swallowed by an anaconda—couldn't allow these poor kids to be taken in by my first fiction, perhaps credible in some unintended sense. She tells me she got several notes that weekend sympathizing with her snake-bite and wishing her well. So I guess the most egregious lie suggests to its listeners that all statements less egregious than that one are likely to be true?

Oh well, I thought. You learn a certain duplicity pretending you are who you are not and eventually it becomes ingrained in you. Not to mention all that terror now known as trauma from Vietnam. That and all that followed when she returned home from combat. Like my high school friends who sat on the bench for football games, often not even in uniform, and showed up years later at the reunion with their wives fully indoctrinated in the myth that they were super-star athletes with football scholarships from prestigious Ivy-league schools that did not even offer them. Danny still could not see

through his thick glasses; Gene had no more athletic ability than he had had in middle school, “junior high” we called it then.

It was years before the evident discrepancies in the dates got my attention. How was it that those friends of mine who died young in Vietnam were all a decade or more older than she was? How was it that she never spoke of her unit to my Marine colleague down the hall who did a contemporaneous tour there? or why did she not talk obsessively about the jungles the way all my friends who served there do, so unlike our fathers returning from the war in Europe and the beaches of Normandy who rarely if ever referred to this life-altering experience.

The fact was, the Vietnam War was well past its classic war story period and in sharp decline when she was born, and there had simply been no camera-laden reportage or humping of the M60. Nothing beyond the words in the applications, calqued from news reports.

“Oh you’ll look good in uniform,” the recruiter said, ogling her. “We can use good men like you, soldier,” he said patting her chest in a show of camaraderie and it was then that she knew the die had been cast.

Joe P. listens in amusement. The artist-dominatrix reads her lash. “You still should have jumped into the sack with her,” they say as if in unison. “Imagine the stories you could have told us then.”

III. YOUR CALL IS IMPORTANT TO US

i. 'Tis the Season

My father died at Xmas vacation, never making it to the first class of what would have been his last semester. Or rather, the last time I saw him before he died was Xmas-time.

No one knows what vacation is these days. No one plans for it. Two weeks at Christmas, what's the point of it? what too of the two days I spent with family two weeks before he died? In the uncomprehended past, families would take the train east to cottages (the size of modern estates) where their servants waited for them. Water running clean; the pipes for human waste dumped straight into the ocean over which they gazed each evening drinking cocktails that made them not give a crap about anything.

I used to sell goods to these people. It's embarrassing to identify that product here, as this is not a comedy. Chicken. Fresh from the packing house. My boss cut off the green mold that occasionally grew over the surfaces; she then rewrapped everything in plastic without even re-weighing the package.

Even then, just past the middle of the last century, these cottages barely held on to their natures from the old days. The generation that built these places died, and there was never enough to satisfy all their descendants. The land got divided; the out-buildings refurbished as rentals; the scourge of Air BnB's hit the coastline. It was better in the days when you could at least hope, albeit futilely, that the past might be reborn in the future. These days, it's barely history. You can find it on the internet. That's the closest you can get.

My grandparents moved from Maine to Massachusetts and learned to take the train back to the town where they had

been born. They bought the cottage with the money they had inherited. They learned to drive the barely passable road to Kennebunk and let their children play in the laughable swim suits of the twenties in the surf with other rich folks, several to die of suicide, most felled by heart attacks. That's how it was. You didn't think twice about it.

The women in black dresses, freed now to expose
themselves on the beach-front.

Parking restricted now to locals.

The water never the same as it once was when you
swam twice daily and never experienced frigidity.

The senses of the adults who looked after you blunted
by alcohol.

For the most part, they didn't involve themselves in your
lives at all.

I can still smell the smells of the cheap charcoal at the cottage once owned and forever claimed by my grandparents. Must have been the alcohol and cigar or pipe smoke mixed in that makes it indescribable today. Must have been the cooking of tinker mackerel on the grill. Better to be alone walking the beachfront with no one to behave to. The same smells—close enough!—tangled in the sea moss.

Xmas by contrast was a time like that depicted on television or in Hallmark cards, now those seasonal movies you see on subscription services I never once thought of signing up for. Snow and sleighbells. Decorated houses. Institutional cheer. The pomp of family life. Singers who otherwise never sang at all. Blue lights, never seen in nature, washed over the snowscapes. Someone dressed in a bad Santa costume. The

grief of those caught up in it. Why the anticipation of joys known only in childhood and suspected as not quite up to snuff even then? Why the bad food? Why alcohol? The evenings of dinner? Why the calculations of gift-giving?

Playing in the snow. In those days semesters ended in January; everything up in the air. Nothing quite done. Nothing honed to perfection.

I have work,
but I am not working.
I have things to do,
but I am not doing them.
We pick up where we left off.
We practice our test-taking.
There is no starting up again.
Good training for life in a bourgeois society.
If you fail once, why would you head down that path
again?

The blizzard left three feet of snow in the roadways,
drifting up past the windows and the doorway
such that they could only be shoveled clear from the
outside.
After three days soaked in,
the memories and reality of family life inescapable,
I returned to the apartment,
one more empty apartment I have returned to,
and found the walk-way shoveled out by neighbors who
never took the credit they deserved for it.
That was civility in the days before cellphones and the
internet.

Joseph A. Dane

I drove in the early evening a half-decade earlier with my then girlfriend, barely kids we were, and the night was dark, no moon, lit only by Xmas lights, in a silence softened by the snow. Two decades later flying over the wastes of the mid-west or what was once the mid-west, now nothing more than industrial farmland, I looked down to small towns with their street-lights, imagining every home and hearth the way we thought of them that December as teenagers, driving around in Xmas lights knowing not a thing about the families who had put them up for us.

This was the way life was, we thought,
or would be. Coupled up in complacency and ease
while life passed in search of Xmas lights.

It was on one of those holidays that I was sent the Xmas light. Like a post-modern or proletarian lava lamp, I joked. Some cheap product from China where the only Xmas lived and experienced, according to my once-lover from Beijing, was in the ubiquitous decorations, or, as Seth remarked as we stood in the check-out line of the supermarket in San Gabriel,

“There is no human walking the earth today,
however hot, however plain,
old, or not yet of drinking age,
who would not be sexier in a Santa hat.”
Everyone looks good in that.
Some look good in everything.

ii. Convertibility

I grew up alone—an only child and often left that way with the accoutrements of privilege, so I never really had to work or worry how I would combat my boredom, and I pretty much got used to doing things my way, marrying a significant other happily stuck in the closet then, happy for both of us, and later some guy who would finally ditch me because his Persian mom thinks I'm not right for him but who still thinks it's ok to try to f*ck me in our once communal bed, while some creep looks on in the distance.

There was a time years ago. I just hopped into J.'s car—a Miata—all the joy of owning a sportscar but none of the aggravation—at least according to him. “I know exactly what you are thinking,” he said. “Some old balding guy attempting to recapture his long-vanished youth, though in truth I am years beyond such afflictions. You should follow what I'm certain was your mother's admonition: if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all.”

“Don't worry,” I said pressing against him, pushing aside the hand that pretended to resist me, “I won't say anything. I plan on having my mouth full for a while.”

And it was like driving around the way we did as teenagers, looking for a private spot on all-too-public roads and backroads. It was as if we were not ourselves “way past child-bearing” as Swift says in that screed we read (or he says we read) in high school and again as college kids (or so he says we did), finally getting old or smart enough to understand the irony (so we were told). Ourselves as others, ourselves as we wish we were or even as we wish we had been once. And then for the sheer audacity of it we would stop the car where there were no houses or few enough of them and likely to be

minimal traffic and just go at it in the bucket seats trying not to pop it in gear and grinding off 100K miles from the clutch or transmission, grinding the gears instead of us, that is, trying to joke as young kids might today.

I was wearing a jacket from the local marina, dark or Navy blue, they always call it, a jacket he claims to associate with me any time he sees someone wearing anything similar, thinking also, I suspect, to rip it off from her. In his favorite picture of me, I'm wearing it. A windbreaker, they call it, pretty much useless for anything else and barely that, maybe as a skin like the exoskeletal barrier of insects. Then I pulled my arm free not of him but of the jacket, so that he could glory in the natural fabrics first of that jersey he loved so much and then the natural feel of my skin. "Where did you get these?" I remember he asked the first time he got my shirt off, revealing the work of the surgeon. "The doctor!" I said and without so much as losing a beat he answered "You tell him he did a damn fine job!" I knew then that I would end up loving him, even though our relationship was impossible, even the very thought of it. That's the way it was when we were teenagers, as I said!—or at least so we like to think. And the decades fell away from each of us like the scales did from the eyes of the saints in the Old Testament.

We knew next to nothing of our pasts. There was thus no thought of the future, like teenagers or like adults who have simply gotten old and given up on things. We had no idea what we would do as a couple, how we would live, who our friends might be, or how many we would have to renounce. All would pass, I thought. What's the point of anything?

All was present.

Nothing else is, so he said.

Existentialism, I think. Maybe just something Donne once said, this bed an everywhere. Or so we were once taught, he said.

And I guess that's what loving is; you forget about the world you're enmeshed in—my ex-lover still calling me, and cheating me out of furniture, my friend Betsey ready to leave Maine for Texas, another irreparable loss for me. My kids ... well, what's the point of giving you details you can imagine for yourself or even have experienced? The conversations that wound their devious way to an appeal for cash. The promises to get the car running again. The quitting of jobs and the dropping out of schools. "I think I can be a boxer," my youngest announced to us, having not bothered to go to any classes that semester, spending all his time in the weight room. How are you supposed to react to that? And my ex-husband Mike? Didn't say a word. Just cut the lazy kid a check. Thank God J. gave the scoop on how registrars at big universities work, and what the deadbeat kid would have to do to get the credit he needed or Mike a partial refund, so I guess, besides the Miata, there were other things he was good for. And all those guys from Match.com! Let's forget about them.

I loved waking up in the summer cottage to the sound of the screen-door slamming a floor beneath me. "Skippie," Betsey would yell up to me, although there was only one person who ever used that name for me. "Get up!" I loved it; there was no past or future to that as well. Just having coffee like that every morning and remembering it as if each morning were warm and windless with the sun streaming in through the bank of windowpanes, and talking on about what we would do with the rest of the day the rest of the week next season even forever while my kids or guests slept

undisturbed above us. And maybe that's what he meant when he kept saying "Each day is like the other ones." And here in this narrative of life, my neighbors basically keeping me under surveillance, my friends and family in New York expecting so much of me, "You're not *dating*, are you, Mom!" my daughter spat in contempt, there, in that world, there is no place for loving a man like this, or even hooking up with him, in any of its senses. Imagine what she would do if I brought a scruffy sailor back a half-head shorter than myself. My daughter. There is history for you. Lives at home away from her devoted boy-friend who makes \$400K in the city, dreams of getting an apartment in Park Slope with her sorority sisters. All you need to know. And my son ... oh God what's the phrase? "Don't get me started."

And I was horrible, I know, to him. I could not get past my jealousy and what everyone would say of me being "just another one of them," letting a guy like that take advantage of me as he had so many others in their sight, so much so that Andrea at the lobster shack joked openly of his womanizing. And I put on a nice façade of virtue while spending half my time on Match.com, all the while accusing him of infidelity. Then one day I found and read his old mail from a past lover. Seemed innocent at the time, my reading it I mean, although it was a month or more before I admitted what I had done. Like that night I called him drunk and berated him and I guess that was more than once, both involving his going to a symphony on the other side of the country. As long as you apologize, it's as if nothing has happened. Well, that depends I guess.

The last straw, I think, for him at least, was my demanding and getting back the money I had invested in our planned

sailing trips, on accommodations that I myself insisted on. That pretty much said it all, from both sides I mean. "Well, at least I know the upper limit of what our relationship is worth to you," he said, writing out the check: \$800, all I had given him, although I had promised a thousand two months earlier, generosity always valued more in my circle in the abstract than in reality. He said if he signed that check, it would be the last communication we would ever have, and of course, I said nothing. I knew he would never follow through; he's not the vindictive type. I could cash the check and buy myself a nice black dress, maybe like those in the catalog I skimmed through that night he was crazy just to put his arm around me and I pushed him away, gaslighting him into thinking it was he himself who was acting out of character.

But there. There it was. In the unreal world of his car modeled after the one he had owned in the 60s. British racing green, he claimed, even though the car was manufactured in Japan, and thus, he claimed, one that, unlike the originals after which it was modeled, had a chance of starting when you went out to it, and an even better chance of ending the day back in the garage rather than on a roadside somewhere while its owner waited on hold for Triple-A or the tow-truck.

There we were in the front seat, both angling past the gear shift in contortions barely possible for a college kid, and the whole world seemed to stop or go into inexistence and in those moments in the car absurdly stopped on the gravel, oh yes, during those moments I loved him as intensely as I ever could.

Joseph A. Dane

iii. "Oh, Please, Stay with Me ..."

The concussion! What a story that was!
Damn shame you missed my telling it.

Oh I had it down, the beats and arcs, my circus-like performance, the narrative honed down to the finest of points, and all would have gone so well had you not died on me. All would have gone so well had others not done the same to me.



Bill Dane, 1980, Englewood

It was a marvel, the story I mean, the event a marvel too, I suppose. For days I worked on it, whatever the context. Walking with Scott, our Parkinsonian pace. With friends around a lunch table. Posting a version on-line as if in spontaneity. Even here, "on the white" as one might say.

Drafting and redrafting, shifting the plot-lines, like the varied courses from the harbor out to the open sea. I understood where the interest lay, when to pause, how to laugh—all that laudable self-deprecation—me heroic and reticent as well, even in the telling it.



Bill Dane, 1982, San Mateo

I will never get to tell you how the EMTs backed the ambulance into the driveway, how the driver waited patiently in the driver's seat,

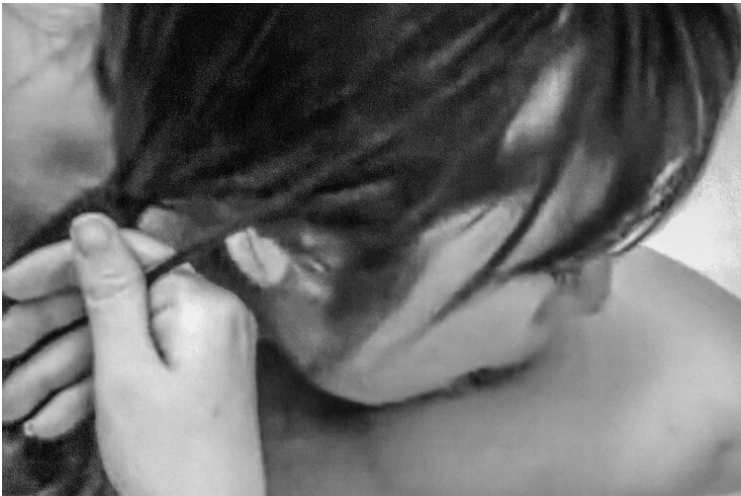
fearing infection, the kindly captain said,
not wishing to offend. Covid, you know,
whatever I had said to make him answer that.
The neighbors lay awake in lurid curiosity,

Joseph A. Dane

unwilling to disturb what was then peace;
the captain or the sergeant
(how to rank them I don't know!)
asked questions from the Flow Chart.

While I was going through it, telling it, redrafting, you lay in a near coma and would be dead that week from cancer.

It was in fifth grade. Neither of us had life before that. You sat a row behind me, one of us reading *Moby Dick*, doubtless an abridged version. Odd that I remember the dark blue dress with the tiny polka-dots Mrs. Simpson wore. Odd that I too remember ridiculous and embarrassing things I did—unforgivable to me still today, like signaling the teacher that a classmate was not paying attention—a shame to admit. Even Richard, numb as a post, as we would say then, reprimanded me.



Bill Dane, 2011, Albany

Or a different class it was.
Mrs. Wilson, then,
same name as the bass-player
whose amp, stolen from a band-mate, I later
returned to him,
a redeeming act of rectitude.
Maybe you were thinking of other things.
Maybe then there is nothing I need you to forgive.

I came to, sprawled out on the floor, bloodless to my surprise. Had I made it from the bathroom to the safety of the bed? I wondered, and slowly realized I had not. I raised my head, feeling the floor rather than the couch or bed I ran for when I dove, a real header that, onto whatever furniture carved the wounds into my face.

The surreal look of things. Like Cousin Bill's photo reprinted on the cover. Almost what you would pay for drugs to do. The yellow light narrowing to a point. That's when I called 9-1-1, as we are always told to do.

I spoke to the EMTs as if in an amateurish sketch of things. Baudelaire's *ébauche*. Coherent, only a hint of what was true. Everything completed through and in the artist's mind.

"All I can tell you," the kindly captain said, "is that there's nothing noteworthy or unusual about what you say." The least assuring thing for a wordsmith like myself.

"You are a book reviewer, then!" I joked.

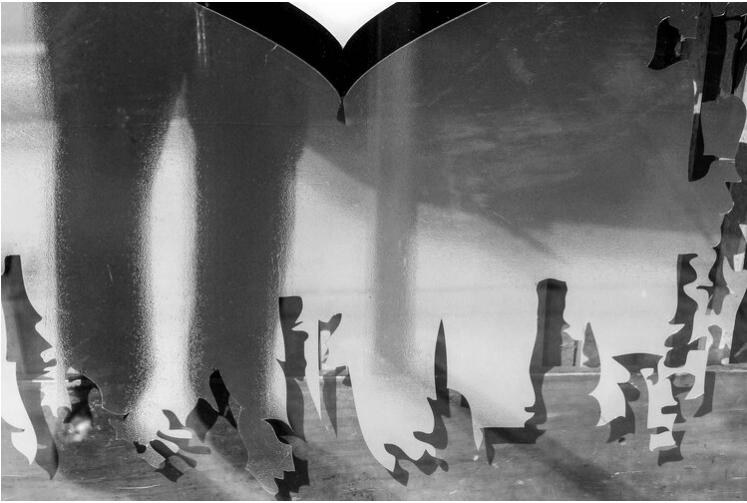
Oh what I would have given to have said such things.

You would have laughed at that one, I'm sure, had I explained it well. The well-trained EMT politely smiled, the quip unexpressed in the Flow Chart.

Joseph A. Dane

A true civil servant.

I thought of walking through the cemetery—the one up by the fire station, old headstones with the dates intact, the one with names like ours, names we recognize from family names established more than a century ago, known from life or just from being here as visitors.



Bill Dane, 2014, San Francisco

And I thought then, of course, of things I could have said to Eloise that would have changed everything. That would have left the fatal round still in the chamber. But there was nothing I think I could have said to her, and nothing I could have said to you, nothing so brilliant, dripping in irony, nothing so loving, that would have changed anything. Caged by it

you were, I guess, the disease I mean, as Eloise by the mountains, or from another point of view, it caged by you as all things are by us. Us not fighting disease, as Sontag says, but us the disease itself.

I read or perhaps I was told third-hand or perhaps I pieced together allusions from the memorial, and maybe I added details of my own—I learned that your sister lived in New Mexico—a stoner’s throw (they used to joke) from my darling Eloise herself. They say she died, your sister now I mean, a suicide I think, or maybe from drug addiction—it was all the same; and they say she was embroiled in the arts, like the drug-manufacturing aristocracy in which my darling Eloise once lived.

She must have seen the obit, her own two years into the future. Perhaps she heard her neighbors talk of it, emotionless as the family of Eloise would be when hearing of her own. Did she know her well enough to disregard the funereal ironies and look right through them to the tragic truth of things? Or was she too too snared in the heart-wrenching lies of the eulogists?

I will never get to tell or promise you this story now.

“Oh no,” you said. “I can never come to see you. Not at a table with your dinner guests. I would be intimidated.”

“That’s ridiculous. Remember the photograph?”

“Of me?”

“Yes of course.”

“The one with the cigarette. The one I post twice yearly each time you fly from Maine to California or back again.”

“The hippie chick with the granny glasses and the cigarette, none cuter then nor now. I am still in ... still in awe.”

“You are in love with your fifth-grade emotions. In awe only of the art of the one who took the photograph.”

“It was ... No. That was when I fell in love with you. Seeing you smile in the old photo.”

“I know. That’s why I cannot be your dinner guest. It was that, the photo, that you fell in love with. Seeing that and imagining yourself part of it. Where would we be now had any of those futures come to be? Selling real estate or burning out as school-teachers.”

For what do we know?
of each other other than our resumés?
And what of those sixty years or so
since the seats were set for us in grade school,
where we never so much as spoke to each other.

“I haven’t read your books. I’ve only heard of one of them—the one you signed for me. I wouldn’t know an academic accomplishment if I tripped over it. Where was I when you did all that? Somewhere in the southwest. Somehow near your darling Eloise. Maybe with my sister who died out there as well. Or here with three generations, mine the first to go. You met my daughter, with the flaming hair and the face so shockingly beautiful you could hardly speak to her: the eyes a millimeter wider than what you would expect and looking as if right through you. I wasn’t gifted that. The best I ever did is what you fell in love with in the photograph.”

“So then ...”

“Then no. I won’t come there to see you. You can come to my office during lunch. Neutral ground.”

“That’s hardly neutral ground.”

“It is where I work; not where I live. Not who I am. You’ll know me; I’ll be ...”

“You know perfectly well that I would know you anywhere.”

“I’ll be dressed in black. ‘In your honor!’ Weren’t you told that by your student? coming to your office wearing no more than a sweater? I’ll be dressed in black.”



iv. Endgame

Even here, even at the end, conventions demand a narrative—a biography, not the real life, but the coherent one experienced by others, say, or expressed in the obituary. But the man I knew did not live within such histories.

When I first saw or met him, he was of average size, unathletic, an ambiguous mustache—one that could signify anything in those days—riding, I believe, a Honda 305 motorcycle, a year before so many of us adopted that enthusiasm. His weight on the passenger seat of the bike I bought a year later nearly caused the second wheel-stand of my brief bike-riding career. The first, remarkably, was with a BMW 600 on my first attempt to ride two years earlier. A heavy road bike whose owners always claim that is impossible. I released the clutch as I was laughingly instructed then picked myself up from the asphalt as Coop stood by in amazement, one of the worst humans I have ever known, something I can say without fear of pettiness.

The man I knew as R. had an accent I knew nothing of at the time, something of a sneer to it, one I now recognize as a traditional, if faked, Oxbridge, under-laid with an English public school affect. But R. had no such past. No life at all before I met him, and never once referred to one. Hometown? Early education? I heard none of that.

Student uniform at this provincial New England college was eclectic: standard hippie, L.L. Bean woodsman, varsity jacket, not quite retro then—reflecting the late sixties in America. R., by contrast, wore a three-piece grey suit. Always. I never saw him in anything else. At that time, the only men to wear suits were the oldest of faculty, still caught in the old

ways, still trying to make a go of it, or the oldest friends of my family, those colleagues and businessmen they knew as undergraduates decades before the 50s when the photograph of all of them was taken at the tail-gating gathering.

I suppose in preppy fiction, R. would be the rich and wild eccentric—the Sebastian in whatever that awful tv series was—or any number of heroes of these fictions, most of whom tragically die, like the good Negro of the movies, suggesting to us all, or teaching us I guess, that really, one should just “go along with all of it”; stay within the lines on the roadway, say, or just in the pages of the coloring book.

It was best finally
to do as all others do
and had done for generations.

I remember trying to drum up support for a local political cause—nothing serious like war or civil rights; parietals, I think, oh yes, we still had them in those days, incredible though it seems to those who now hear of them—and when I talked to him I said “Oh I doubt you’ll be interested,” thinking that his conservative dress made for conservative thinking, which it did not, at least, apparently.

He was friends with a thuggish friend of mine from Long Island—Italian, loud, belligerent. Central-casting, we’d call him now. Their friendship hardly conceivable if what I assumed of him were true. Though where had he been the year before, when we were juniors? And why did no one speak of it?

We did drugs, of course, the three of us; we read Shakespeare, and one night spent a good hour repeating to each

other “Give me your neaf, Monsieur Mustardseed,” which seemed much funnier at the time than it does to me now recounting it.

I drove with Fred to the Wind Rivers, trying to re-experience the fishing trip of two summers earlier. Then to Denver where I fell in love for the second time with my much beloved cousin, unsettled suddenly by the presence of the two of them, Fred and my cousin, charmers both, unsettled by feeling two selves of mine suddenly at odds, frat-boy and philanderer. I flew from there then to Chicago, to drive with R. back to Maine, and I don’t really know what he was doing there. An interview, he said. Likely as anything. All I remember of the two-day drive was that he wore, as always, a suit and bow-tie—a look I adopted in my own cross-country trips—and waking up in the evening not knowing what day it was, where I was, what I had been doing for two days, and finding myself at home. We house-sat together and sat outside on the evening of the moon landing. I can’t remember which drugs we labored under.

I remember he made a pass at me, but only once, and I didn’t recognize it at the time. After we had parted exhausted one night, likely drunk or maybe coming down from the drugs, or maybe it was the night we read Shakespeare together, I heard a knock on my door, and there he was. He stammered some nonsensical question, then turned away as if embarrassed and walked back to his room.

We left one of the two places we house-sat that summer, or I did, after a heated argument, involving class, I assume, and his use of the word “ill-bred” in the accent he always affected, one that made conflict inevitable. A month later he showed up at my door to return some books, and although I

didn't speak to him, I was touched. It was his form of apology, or maybe just a plea for reconciliation, the only one he could come up with.

He spent each morning listening to Bach, writing his novel, a thriller about smuggling bananas in a banana republic (get it? how could you not!) that an agent told him he could sell in "about six months," a time-frame he always used, even of a haircut. I finally read it and it was awful. As bad as the ones I wrote soon afterwards. Written in a style bland and transparent, so far below the contrived Oxbridge he affected.

I knew nothing of music, and of his Bach, I said it seemed almost freeform to me and he retorted in high pretense Oh no, it is actually strictly mathematical. Both of us far from the truth, I realize now, yet I had the excuse of knowing nothing of music then, ignorant too of the latest fashions in criticism, no more valid than the ones preceding them. *Switched-on Bach* the album was—I'm sure you remember it. Bach on a synthesizer. The album itself produced by the lover of another young professor at college, good friend (he thought) to the much-missed Gabor, who so enjoyed spreading delicious and lurid gossip about both of them, slander I was later to discover was God's own truth. That's what being gay in a small college environment meant in those days. A good number were to die of AIDS, as Gabor himself did, and the lucky ones by suicide.

I don't remember when or why we got in touch again. But by the time of my divorce, R. and I were friends again.

And yes.

Now I remember.

He was the one who suggested I go to New Orleans, and not the provincial coastal towns I thought I would flee to. He

sent me to stay with an old lover of his in Baton Rouge and the instant I met him, Joe B. it was, the scales fell from my eyes and pretty much the ruse of Platonic friendship was gone. Poor guy, Joe B., I mean, central-casting too, I'd say. Art-historian, effeminate gestures, even a lisp; he spent a good month trying to seduce me, and if he had been physically more appealing, who knows what life would have been like for me; likely I would have died in the late 70s with the rest of them.

It must have been when I stopped in Chicago on the way South. Or years later when I flew there for the opera. It was hard to maintain the fiction of a celebrated academic career when his live-in lover joked openly about it. Hard to maintain other fictions as well. I am certain he had a library degree, and certainly more certain that he was not, say, leading graduate seminars in Dostoevski as he claimed.

He had a penchant for insisting he did not want anyone to know, given his uncommon last name, that he was the nephew of a popular novelist, famed for his long-winded pot-boilers, who would visit him in anonymity when he was a senior in college. Gabor would later laugh at this pretense and reveal that the two were not related at all.

We last talked when he called, using the pronoun *we* exclusively (the royal "we"? a dual?), saying "we" (he and Mickey? he himself?) decided it was time to make the move to Princeton, which, for an academic with no publications, seemed impossible, although I guess looking back, sliding from one ill-paid position as an adjunct to the next was not all that difficult even then. A friend at Princeton told me of billboards for speakers R. had invited to campus, the speaker's name always in modest capitals, no matter how esteemed, and the sponsor's in large bold-face.

And of course at that point I came to think that anyone who had spent a life-time in the closet was unlikely to emerge from his sexual chrysalis, but live like certain convicts do after a decade or more in prison and finally getting the hang of it, more comfortable behind bars than on the public side of them. Or so I hear.

As a young man, I just wanted all the cards on the table.

I just wanted friendship to be based on reality, or as near to that as one could hope to get.

I just wanted not to challenge other aspects of his history or the being he had constructed, like his deep learning, which was shallow, like his accent, which was artificial, like the cat box in the apartment that I guess he and Mickey were so used to they no longer knew it made the place uninhabitable.

We sat for dinner at his apartment in Chicago—a grand feast for me, and some professor or administrator with “pull,” apparently, concerning the job I had applied for. Not sure why I didn’t get it, but I do remember sitting at the interview table with six questioners seated as if in the round, and having an unusual fascination with a stray staple that was on the table surface. I don’t remember what I said, or what the questions were or how I answered them, but I know I never took my eye off that staple for more than a glance at who was grilling me. The explanation I got later was that they felt “I didn’t understand the position,” as if there were any difference of note among the positions advertised for junior academics in those days, or that there was anything to be understood of any of them.

At that dinner was a woman who modeled for Mickey’s drawing class. After a half-hour Mickey said in a low whisper—“Did you see her in the kitchen? She ate half the turkey

Joseph A. Dane

in a few gulps. I don't think she's eaten in days. Keep your wallet hidden."

Who knows who she was.

Model.

Drug addict.

Artist dominatrix.

I never saw or heard of her again.

When I was teaching on the Great Plains of America, he scored two tickets for Jon Vickers in a sold-out *Tristan* by going to the box office supervisors and reminding them that despite their policies he knew perfectly well that they always reserved seats "just in case" and demanded that those tickets be released to him, and it worked, I guess, or maybe he sweetened the deal with some lurid sexual act. Who's to know?

And maybe he has died by now, having never known or acted who he was in life, except in circles to which I had no access. A man with no job, no famous relatives, no academic work of any note, no novel, maybe living off an inheritance from a real-estate investor. There are circles, like the one I live in, where things like that don't matter. Nor do things matter like our junior year, which he spent working as an unpaid intern for a Congressman in Washington. He did that because he had signed up for an independent study course the year before—writing the novel that would become the dormant manuscript on the banana republic. Turns out he had done not a lick of work on the entire project, but turned in the last week a portion of a work similar to the one he had planned, a work he had copied word-for-word from a second-tier pot-boiler perhaps by his name-sake, one that his instructor,

remarkably, happened to know well enough to recognize it instantly. He was thus suspended for a year, and no one, until I heard directly from Gabor and confirmed this through the professor who was briefly my colleague some ten years into the future, ever spoke a word of it. ...

It was when Charlie died, the man
who taught me to sail,
that I again considered these histories.

A more authentic man never walked the earth.

Charlie too rarely if ever spoke of his past, not because it was hidden, but because it had so little to do with his present self. Nothing of his education, nothing of his time in the Air Force, nothing of family life.

“This getting old,” he said to me ten years ago.
“It sucks.”

He sat me down in the cabin,
the navigation table between us,
the anchor secure and Nancy fussing with a fitting
on the foredeck.
He brought out a parallel rule,
with dividers, they call them.
Even with RADAR and LORAN,
the most sophisticated electronics available,
he set his courses the old way,
and taught me to do it that way as well.
Walk the rule from compass rose to course
and back to compass rose again;

Joseph A. Dane

walk the miles off with the divider,
marking the course, distance and degree,
true or magnetic, bearing and reciprocal,
as in the old days
when sailing was easier than it is today
because labor and life itself were cheap.

This is the photo taken the first year I took up
sailing.

Quite sure that's Charlie bent over the port winch,
Nancy steadying the helm in the evening air.

It was shot by my beloved Linda Jane, fourteen years
my junior,
who called him the most handsome man
in existence.

It is really all you need to know.

