

THE TWO DOMAINS
in several voices

by
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CHAPBOOK 21



Drawings: Robert Shetterly

overture

A heavy, violent sky:
ironmongery and smithy forges.
A night for murder. Then it settles
out of its kettledrum drama,
into zitherstrings of drizzle,
into a morning of drizzle, a noon
of after-drizzle, and a dusk of thick long fog.
A day for ghosts.

The year is 1888. The subject is
Samuel and Liza Ruby Williams,
dead on their honeymoon night
of random rifle-fire from a feud they aren't part of,
in a gabled hotel near the seacoast shingle.
That's all we know. The rest is fog,
is salt air eating up details.
Generations pass. It's now,
we're here. Hello.

A poem is about to begin. The sun
appears above the horizon, limited at first, like someone
matter-of-factly entering a warehouse, with a flashlight.
Then the overheads get turned on.
Time to start. The sun is taking its daily
inventory, shining with impartial force on every row
of what we know
and what we don't know.



We don't *know* if the Yeti really stomps its great splayed cinquefoil prints up icy goat-paths at the Top of the World, though there are over seven decades of photographs, and spoor, and depositions taken somberly with the breaths of the testifiers afloat like lovely, ivory jellyfish in the Himalayan air. Yeti. Sasquatch. Nessie. The Surrey Puma. The thirty-foot Tatzelwurm of the Alps. Iffy fellow creatures of an ecosphere beyond Linnaean tagging. We don't know what improbable vehicle spun like a pinwheel for Ezekiel, or didn't, in the desert's shimmervision, we don't know if the boggling monologues that so stirred Joan of Arc were in- or exterior, or what transcendent gizmo (or quintessence) (or infinitessence) speaking at the heart of the Bush on the Mountain – what Rosetta Fire – deciphered the thought of the Lord Almighty into the language of wandering tribesmen. We don't know. Kaspar Hauser: who? Amelia Earhart: where? The Shroud of Turin: how? and even: what? The sky folds open over the otherwise unremarkable village of Cam-at-Wye, and a minutes-long fall of ibises and cormorants – hundreds, dead but spookily perfect, as if killed by a look, and then preserved in salt – heaps up the gutters and thunks on top of the fish-and-chips carts. O we never tire of this unending catalogue of what-we-don't-know, of Tut and Bigfoot and Jack the Ripper: maybe they distract us from more intimate not-knowings. There are strange beasts at the back of every brain, and there is burning inside every heart but, lo! the heart is not consumed, the heart is not consumed but burns with want and fear unceasingly, and why we're who we are, and how to get through any day of it, we don't know – so, "I have seen the tracks of mountain bears on numerous occasions. Believe me: *these* are not tracks of a bear in snow."



"You dirty-mind SON-OF-A-BITCH!"
(the splat of a flung ceramic saucer)
(a slap: the flat of a hand to a cheek)

"Yeah? THAT'S for calling names..."

(once more: a smack)

"...and THAT'S to give to your weirdo freak of a son,
who stole my lapel pin today, and when I catch him
I'm going to kayo his ass from here to TimbucTOO."

"He took your pin? No."

"Yes, I sez."

"Oh, bay-*bee* . . . I'm sorry."

(some rustling sounds: then very damp moaning, very low)
(tiptoe noise over linoleum: the boy slips out the back porch door)



My profession, my job, my – I would say
my calling. And this is why: there was a nowhere-land
of uncompleted viaducts and abandoned drainage pipes
a child could hide in, could be lost in, that, when I was
a child,
dour adult wisdom determined off-limits, and
to which I ran to hide in with limitless dedication anyway,
day after day. When I was . . . seven or so, eight. I was
a troubled seven or eight, in that troubled-up house
with her shifty series of live-in pseudo-husbands (“uncle” X,
Y, Z): “Hey, you spell trouble, buster,” she’d always observe,
and I came to learn this meant – but of course – he’d be staying
a season or two, until her ire started powering
kitchen dishes through the air again (“I’m WARNIng you,
lady” / *duck* / SMASH) with a rapid flight of saucer
after saucer, of the kind (for this was 1955)
the UFO believers watched for, on a larger level. I
was a fey and elfin thing, in the midst of this
melmac-and-pinkyring opera. And the more
I fumbled mumbletypeg and petty theft and spudball – all
of the standard boyhood pastimes in my neighborhood –
the more
I was alone, and longed to be alone, and had predictive
dreams (that cat we found half-dead from hunger on the
stoop,
for one, and also the fire at Zelman’s Discount Sundries); and
shivered,
or flew inside of myself, in what my mother described as
one of my “moods,” or sometimes one of my “witch moods”;
and,
defiantly, I’d visit that prohibited nowhere-land
of mazed industrial dead-ends, which was as good
as the Foreign Legion for me, or being lifted mystically to Mars.
Oh I’d *always* heard voices; but those,
they weren’t words and didn’t have
originating faces. They were insect-music,
planet-music, something inhuman. But then one night,
one runaway night in the pipes, I heard somebody
call my name – from out of my pocket. Inside
I had a garish, chunky, rhinestone men’s lapel pin

that I'd play with, for a crystal ball. I took it out.
The air inside the pipes seemed alive – it brushed
my cheeks like a risen nap. It seemed
the microorganism life of the muck was demanding
my child-attention. And my name
came out of the bauble. Someone called my name
– my father called my name, my father
I'd never seen, who was dead, they told me,
before I was born, he called my name
a number of times in a voice I thought of then, and
still can't improve upon, as milky. All night
I hid there, hearing the one word
that was me, intoned repeatedly, with a constance
only the dead know. Then the sun
appeared above the horizon, limited at first, like someone
matter-of-factly entering a warehouse, with a flashlight;
and I headed home, to face
the punitive music. That
was the first time. Now
it's thirty years, and many voices, later. The media
cheapens what I do – they say
“ghostbusters,” as if this were an arcade game, or
the rotorooting-out of spectral blockage.
But houses are . . . troubled,
let's say. Let's say all houses are troubled in ways,
and some in ways its people find
requiring of my talents.
They try others first, I know.
And then they dial my number.
Let's say I'm called.



But we *do* know, assuredly, SLIPCOVER TOP
TURNS ANY BROOM INTO A MOP! (its "Fleecy Head Grabs
Dirt!")

and EASY STRIPPER ZIPS OFF PAINT
WITHOUT STRENUOUS SANDING, SCRAPING, OR
DANGEROUS CHEMICALS,

fourteen-ninety-eight. The age of the fishes and loaves,
of the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire, is long, long gone,
and a day is an irksome, crummy thing, but still we know that
in our darkest hour

MIRACLE KLEEN and MAGIC SPONGE and MIRACLE CAR
BRUSH

work "in a snap!" and that their snazzy confrere,
Mr. WASHABLE, REUSABLE LINT-OFF ROLLER, consists
of "Space Age Material" – "Great . . ." (if that's not
understating it) " . . . Stocking Stuffer!" Yes! And
SUPERKEGEL HELPS END INCONTINENCE and
AUTOMATIC CARD DECK SHUFFLER is "Great for Arthritics,"
and CORDLESS ELECTRIC SAFETY TRIMMER
NEATLY REMOVES UNSIGHTLY NOSE, EAR, BROW HAIR
QUICKLY, PAINLESSLY, with the merest of swiveled insertions.
We *know* this. It uses one double-A battery, and fits in purse
or glove compartment, and comes in vinyl carrying sheath,
and if it tumbled from out of the heavens
onto the ziggurat-dotted Babylonian plains, the peoples
there and then would build it a golden altar of wingéd bulls
and never again let it touch the defiling ground.

A day is a burdensome thing. A day is an entropic,
burdensome thing,

and moves to the random piping of Chaos,
a multigalactic organization represented on Earth by the firm
of Mess and Clutter. But still we know that

OVERSIZED FOLDING LAUNDRY RACK OFFERS OVER
79 FEET OF DRYING SPACE, and here to help
in that valiant effort are SLIDING UNDER-SINK ORGANIZER
and TILT-FRONT WICKER HAMPER and UNDER-BED
STORAGE BOX and COMMUTER SHOE TOTE and
OVER-SINK SHELF and DISPENSE-A-BAG, o *everything*
is accounted for, and CEDAR TOOTHPICK TOTE

"Keeps Toothpicks Always Handy and Sanitary Too!"
The sky is endless, the world of particle and wave by
definition

is unknowable, the sky will swallow the grandest plan
and shit it out ulcered in fungus. Still, we
lattice the sky with recognizable pattern, Cup, Bear, Throne.
And so we rung a day, we give ourselves
these handholds to climb through a day, and
I'm happy to say some come in decorator colors,
I'm pleased to announce that polypropylene
"will not rust, dent, or chip," and I'm delighted to know
that I know these things, these sweet dependable things
that are yours, and mine, and come in our sizes,
and are affordable.



"I tell you, that child was no more raised than a weed."

"Oh hush – she'll hear you."

"She's heard worse, I can tell you that. (pause) Gypsies. (pause)

Not *even* a weed, a weed has roots, a place. *She's*
just this patch-together hibbleyjibbledy thing."

"I think –"

"She only knows chaos and mishmash and superstition. It's sinful.
She needs to get a mental . . . (what's the right word?) . . . rolodex."

"I think I hear Mom Bend-your-dick-off coming."

(footsteps)

then (together): "Good evening, Mother Benedicta."

(on the other side of the wall, the girl is suddenly determined:

whatever

it is, she's going to get herself some rolodex: LOTS of rolodex)



August 22

Five years ago, when the business became successful enough – unmanageable enough, to be frank – and I hired office staff to help me keep the wayward tufts of the work day neatly tucked, I put up a modest bulletin board at a corner of the corridor, where I told them they should feel free to express any quibble, compliment or tasteful witticism of their choosing, and next to the bulletin board I fastened a plastic dispenser of 3x5 note cards, one of the kind we stock, with the note cards done as a toilet-paper-like roll of perforated units, with a small toothed edge for neatly tearing them off, and with a magnetized pen in a groove along the top. A slow seller, but steady. And I like to think it's a testimony to how precise I am in choosing office personnel, that not one time in all five years has the pen been "missing."

Gretchen, Nora and Ramon are more like family than hired help (I have no other family, in fact, and if I *had* to have a family, had to select one in a week, had to interview would-be parents and siblings, I'd try to model my choices on these three) and the number of complaints that appear on the bulletin board is close to nil – but a "joke of the day" is something I always welcome, and some of the puns and jibes from over the years have later enlivened the catalog.

I may as well say now that I'm the founder and the president of a mail-order company called Notions and More, and I'm proud of the service I offer. How shall I put it? Every day, we feel the universe slip out of our control – friends die, friends stubbornly refuse to follow the scripts we keep in our head, impervious marriages suffer erosion and split asunder, international economies boom or bust along trajectories of such immense scale they're practically invisible and certainly beyond our comprehension, the papers are nothing but flood and fire, fire and flood and savages massing in packs at the city limits, and eventually our own bodies begin to betray us. . . . Well! But the smallest touches can reassert a sense of organization.

On top of everything else, there shouldn't be the worry over how to launder your baseball cap without its being crumpled

in the cycle. (Try my inexpensive ball cap frame, of durable white poly.) Misplaced keys? (My keychain that beeps when you whistle.) "Ring Size Reducers Make Your Rings Fit Properly Without Costly Repairs." (Set of four, only two-ninety-eight.) "Cat Perch Clips Onto Window Sill." "Clear Acrylic Platter With Imbedded White Lace Doily" compliments any table decor, and eliminates need to launder doilies! Suffering, take it from me, has a 24-hour watch set on our houses, but with Ball Cap Door Rack Organizer and Hanging Vinyl Shoe Organizer and Twenty-Compartment Thimble Spinner and Handy Carry-All Tote With Your Name (Up to Fifteen Letters), even Suffering shakes and pales. Do your throw rugs slide? Is your hosiery tangled like orgiastic octopi? There are questions that MIT and Cal-Tech haven't yet tried to answer.

But *I've* stared hard at those questions, unflinching. And tens of thousands of thoroughly satisfied customers (and a few recurrent grumblers) seem to be happy I have — enough so, that next week we expand our operations, adding a humor division (comic slogan t-shirts, underwear, mugs: that kind of thing) and a warehouse section of other businesses' discontinued supplies: a shipment of unused hospital hypodermics, service station funnels, and diner matchbook dispensers, has just come in; I'm waiting now for an order of cocktail shaker sets, some souvenir vials of Holy Water of Lourdes, and turkey-silhouette turkey basters. This branch will be located in a former (rickety, under repair) three-story nineteenth-century hotel, The Golden Gull, a lovely gabled building right near the tide-rippled beach shingle. Ribbon-cutting ceremony is September 1st.

Anyway, *that's* the joke of the day on the bulletin board, from someone: that today I'm expanding and shrinking at the same time. I've been honest with the staff, all three of them know that I've just started seeing a therapist. (Shrinking . . . maybe for the humor division, "shrink wrap" Christmas gift wrap for your favorite psychotherapist? See if anyone else has done it yet.)

And that's why I'm keeping this journal-of-sorts. Vivian says the small melange of complaints I've brought her way (the "same-ol'-same-ol'" syndrome, she calls it: a thirty-five-year-old's string of tedium) is probably just a matter of six or seven weekly sessions. The journal is her idea, and I'm supposed to report today, at

session two, on how it's going. Boringly, I think. (Can I cure tedium by tediously writing? Well, Vivian seems to know her job.)

But I can't write any more now. Ramon was just on the phone, and his voice was . . . strained. He's been out at The Gull all week, to oversee the stock rooms. "Something's happening here, Miss Carter," he said. "Something's *supposed* to be happening, Ramon: you're fixing up the stock." "No, something bad." "To what degree?" My heart flipflopped. And all he said, in that laconic voice of his, was "Come on out, and bring a broom and a camera and a tape recorder, Miss Carter." So no more journal today.

Hm.



interlude

time: 1888

place: a seacoast hotel / room 8

He: Into this vial I have compressed the vital male principle from a bullock, and from a he-bear, and from the fighting cock that they breed in the hills of the Orient to wear sharpened malachite spurs. And in *this* vial I have collected the female marrow-juice out of the peahen, and out of the dam-bear, and out of the great complacent dairy cow of our own well-grazed back pasture, with her sweet breath and sweet feces. Do you wonder what I will do now? Do you wonder at this portable pylon set at the foot of the bed?

She: I do not wonder. Or if I do, I wonder how cold our dinner is growing in the common-room at the far end of the hotel. I envy the woman in the suite above, on her honeymoon, later tonight *she* will be grazed, yes *she* will be a pasture open to tongue and teeth, while I curl up here in these tentacles of sulfur, in the blue sizzle of your experiments. Why do I do it?
– *that's* what I wonder.

He: I was not speaking to you, my dearest. I was speaking to Posterity, and addressing its way a few academic questions, as transitional devices in my discourse. Now I must get on with the Grand Work. As you know, my current scientific equipment (*out of a carpet bag, he begins unpacking a steady stream of beakers, tubing, electrodes, etc., piling it in front of himself*) was acquired with the kindly fiscal enablement of a gentleman – a speculator in other people's fortunes, shall we say – who thrice already has sent his associates my way to request his investment back: they left a strong and lingering impression

amid the wreckage of our living room, and the sooner
I complete my studies and find the right
appreciator of them, in either government or industry,
the sooner will I be free of those financial bonds,
and the sooner will The Work Itself rise up
like a flame in the midst of our unlit ignorance.
Besides, as you know, it is not becoming . . .

*(she continues moueing into the dressing-table mirror,
arraying before herself an arsenal of cosmetics
and cosmetic dabber-onners,
and a curling iron, wigs, a corset lacing-hook, etc.,
in this way balancing the items of his slapdash laboratory;
as he continues speaking, she intermittently, overlavishly
moues his words at the mirror)*

. . . for the enamorata of one who has already patented
successfully

The Pneumatic Hat-Tipper, The Wonder Suction Restorative,
and The Combination Electric Bedbug Exterminator and
Nighttime Emissions Preventative, it is not becoming,
I tell you, to be so dismissive, even if
charmingly so, my orchid, my bird of paradise.

She: By now they will have completed the ices
and finely diced fruits of the season, and even
the silver tureen of turtle soup will have been returned
to the kitchen, happily emptied; and the presentiment
aroma of a plate of butter-rumbed leg of lamb,
with garnee of squash rosettes and a dish of mint jelly,
will be floating above the table in filaments
finer than my hair, which is the finest hair in the county,
as Senator Clamshack has opined, and General Loppingstock.
There will be gaiety at the table, and worldly tales.
But the honeymoon couple will not be there, oh
they will have made their apologies early, retiring
to room 18 above us, there to satisfy
hungers of such a basic and elemental nature,
as to make the startling crackles that I brush through my hair
become a virtual lightningstorm, in empathy with their passions.

He: And what of this portable pylon set at the foot of the bed, you inquire. And I reply: With this, I will generate fiercesome power through my separate vials of gender-resplendent ichors, and I will simplify, and emulsify, and mix, and remix, and render, until finally I have a single vial of Salient Human Liquid – the One, the Whole, the perfect marriage of male and female, so that imbalances of our wholeness (and *who* knows *how* many common infirmities this covers?) can be ministered to, with the proper application of this, my Medicant of The Ages!

She: I wonder if it will cure a case of rampant garrulosity of the talkus-loquacious, my dashing, my ram.

He: Oh don't feed *me* your lavenderwatered nyaah-nyaahs-nyaahs of envy and derision!

She: Well –

He: So –

(sudden knocking on the door)

Voice: Your fish dinner is here.

(she motions him to the door, with the frantic gestures of the dinner-deprived; he opens it; the rest happens quickly:)

Voice: COMPLIMENTS OF LOUIE THE FISH!

(blam! blam! blam!)

(screams; running)



We don't *know* if the *ba*,
that elegant hawk-with-a-human-head
(the head of the deceased), *does*
periodically return to the tomb
to hover over its mummy and feed on the funerary offerings,
but the literature attests to this, and also that
"they flutter under the rays of heaven and speak
with words of weeping," and also that other possible shapes
"are as a heron or swallow, a falcon or bittern,
whichever thou pleasest" (the hawk, though, is the hieroglyph);
on a mummycase now in Copenhagen, the carved *ba*
is at the side of its carved mummy with sad familiarity
that makes it seem as if it would mew
instead of skreel a raptor's cry, and the *ba* shown
on the Papyrus of Ani seems to be leisurely sculling
through the thick, closed air of the tomb, its wings like oars
that have been draped in beautiful feather-pattern afghans.
Birds – as one example. So seemingly easy and everyday
a thing as birds – and we don't know. The *ruk*,
or roc, of Marco Polo and Sindbad: "one of them
can pounce upon an elephant and bear it aloft."
The gryphon. The phoenix. Whatever "real" bird is their
explanatory provenance. We don't know. (In February
1992, a golden eagle "plucked a day-old lamb from a field"
near Chinnor, in Buckinghamshire, "and killed it nearby.")
Since 1880, New Zealand has given rise to nine alleged
sudden sightings of a moa – that wingless, ostrich-more-or-
lessish,
six-foot-tall-bird, thought to be extinct
by 500 years. Who knows? A new species of bird
was first reported in October 1992 (New Guinea's
hooded pitohui, whose feathers and flesh are naturally
saturated with powerful poison, "10 milligrams of which
is enough to kill a mouse or frog") – so who knows?
The rain of bird blood (so claimed by the Italian
Meteorological Bureau) in May 1890. The Holy Ghost
as dove. The Thunderbird. What do we know, and how lightly
does it fly from our fingers? Of Tut's tomb, even

seven decades after its excavation: "It is impossible to determine the original position of . . ." and "Nor does one know where . . ." etc. Now does he hunt the Nile duck and the succulent river goose in the reeds of the Afterlife? We don't know, and it flocks in the air. We don't know, and it filleth the skies with its mocking keen, it darkens the land, the way the swarming wild passenger pigeon did for Audubon, "until we were benighted by that solid overhead mass."



The invisible, ectoplasmic stitch by which
the worlds attach – I mean this world
of human interplay and baskets of radish
and airport paperback spinner racks; and
the other world, of otherbeings
living out the terms of other spatialness –
is a perilous place to be, if “be”
is even vaguely accurate, if modes of concentration
can be places. You see? – I only have the language
of the world of human interplay, and it is,
I’m sorry, insufficient. Let me try this:
when a friend of mine goes bow-hunting deer,
he wears the colors “tree,” and clambers into a tree
where he waits all day, unmoving and scented
in deer pee. Me? – I
“ghostify” myself, I go a partum-epidermis closer
to *that* world. It isn’t a visible change
(although I might start in a trance), I’m not
translucent in a moment. I don’t begin
to fume like a block of dry ice. But
mentally I *do* flimmer a receptivity – a willingness –
toward the plane of ghostly presences
(I think of it as “the twixtworld”) and I don’t exist
right then so much as *transist*.
Sometimes nothing happens. I grope my way
like a mole’s starred snout
through empty psychic goop, and
nothing happens. There are other times . . .
they come, with their various grievances and signs.
And we start talking.

In *Landscape in the Style of Ni Tsan*

by Wang Yu (dated 1690), the fisherman/scholar
seems to glide in his sketchy one-man craft
on breath, from out of breath, and into an endlessness
of breath, like a gnat
into billows of stiffened eggwhite – no,
the eggwhite has more substance, more
interior geography, than this

suffusion of mist-and-void
we lose ourselves in, looking. I'd go
ghostified that way, into the spectral realm,
and sometimes so successfully
be a part of its acorporeality,
the way back wavered like smoke, and started
blowing away like smoke, past
my reclaiming. I was always bad
at the things of *our* world: income tax
has left my mind as well as my desktop
something like the rubble after a bombing raid,
and studying the absolutely untranslatable
zeppelin rudders and robots' bungs and metal lasagna
under my car hood leaves me
ineffectually giggling – I'm up-front about this
with clients – but set me to parley with a wandering spirit,
and I can cross the border
speaking spiritese in a jiffy. There have been times
when only the serendipitous squeal of outside traffic,
or a jackhammer's clamor, or baby's squawl
– some tendril of Earthly interconnection suddenly
beseeching – served to rouse me, and bring me
hand-over-hand up its length, back
to the body.

In that, I'm somewhat like a ghost.
They have a tendril yet
that ties them to the world of the living.
The tendril's the problem.
There's no such thing as a ghost without a problem,
a ghost without a request.

You can't tell from the photographs.
Under that sepia administered like a ham glaze,
everyone's uniformly grim
or uniformly pitching smiles at the camera like softballs.
Some, though, will die
with a quiet acceptance, wanly waving
one last time,

as if for the nailpolish to dry.
While some . . . the air
inside the air is torn, is stained, with the violent, struggling
reluctance of their going. Maybe a vow
is unfulfilled, maybe a love is sundered, it could be
even a hate is sundered – a tendril,
an anchor, that keeps them from becoming
elementary again. And all I do
– it's usually simple – is help them snap
that tie. I once delivered up
the cloth bag of a stillbirth buried for twenty-nine years
behind the back porch steps,
so someone dead for twenty-seven years
could offer a humble prayer of goodbye
that she'd been too ashamed to make at the time.

This case! This wonderful case! You know
the clanking chains, the creaking stair, the clouded mirror.
Last week I was called to a warehouse:
hundreds of mirrors, ladies'-purse-sized compact mirrors,
flying through the air like jet maneuvers on the Fourth,
then crashing like supersonic kamikaze lemmings into a wall!
Ten gross of plastic parrots (purple and yellow residua
from some out-of-business cake-top decoration company)
swoooooping through the room, and making this chowdery
seacoast building
(an abandoned hotel) the tropics! Of course,
as is typical, I followed the police,
five university professors from geology and physics,
a priest, and – obviously – the media, though
my client seems proficient in keeping those video vultures
mollified and away. Weeks passed.
The factory-reject hiball glasses continued to soar and dive.
So now it's my turn. It isn't that these
specific spirits are any more troubled than most
– but what fine props they've been given! Ah, but
my client! She's driving me crazier than nosediving rosebud vases
ever could. I need to sign in. I need to sign out.
I need to file receipts each day in some elaborate

color-coded accordion-like case with a microchip lock. She doesn't believe in what I'm doing, and she *tells* me she doesn't believe in what I'm doing, even while telling me how to most efficiently do it (using her Sleep-Eze White Noise Hum Machine for trance states was her yesterday's suggestion). After an hour of her overlyorderly fussing, I finally ghostified myself . . . the world turned fog so thick I could grab it like bolls of cotton . . . there were shapes in the fog . . . the first faint feeling of contact . . . and her fucking beeper watch sounded. I told her: it only takes one pinhole in the darkroom wall to ruin things – right? I told her there was liable to be one more ghost here before the day was out.

On the way home, in a deserted stretch of rocky coast, with rain coming on, the car died. And after my panic attack, I did, I admit, take out the pamphlet she'd pressed on me insistingly this morning, *Car Survival Step By Step*, and in the pitiful flicker of light remaining, I did plug wire one to wire two, and the car did start again, I admit it. And now I also own the voluminous pleasures of *Income Tax From A to Z*.



But we *do* know the feather is keratin.

A bird about the size of a swan has twentyfive-thousand-*million* barbule filaments in a single feather. The hummingbird beats its wings as fast as eighty times a second, so hovers over its chosen blossom inside brilliant ruby-and-emerald parentheses of its own making. The beak of the Andean sword-billed hummingbird is four times the length of its body: a nectar-sucker. The beak of the buzzard wouldn't be out of place on a tool-shed wall. We know this. The beak is keratin as well, and we know its kajillion manifestations, tong-beaks, skimmers, drills, the intricate sieve-and-pump beak of the flamingo, the robin's forthright pinch. We know these sketched and graphed and (lately) computer-enhanced or video'd things, these

fascinating, indexed things, these bounteous, *countless* ornithological wonderments-turned-facts. The cassowary is a loner; twenty-thousand pairs of gannets will nest in a colony that looks like a swatch of French petit point. Jackdaws, starlings and jays are known to pick up individual ants in their beaks – a kind of ant that spouts out formic acid – and swab their bodies with these: a way of killing fleas and lice originally, but sometimes now become a form of pleasure, so that they also “ant” their bodies for excitement with wasps, with pebble-edges, even lit cigarette ends. The sooty tern will fly for up to four years without landing. Some birds: ruffled pompadours. Cheerleader pompoms. Fluffed-up barroom darts. Three geese will make a sexual menage-a-trois. A cardinal will feed a gaping goldfish, so alike is the visual stimulus. We know this, and know more than this, we trove it away, then go out and look to know more. We've always been looking: Keats's nightingale; Shelley's skylark; the stalwart, heraldic herring gull of a sketchbook *circa* 1400. In fact, our data base on the gull alone is encyclopedias'-worth. The semiotics of body posture (the herring gull from 1400 is, presumably, captured in the “upright stance

of intended aggression"). The research on which of many possible signals induces a herring gull chick to beg food from its parent (it's the red spot on the parent-bird's bright yellow lower mandible).

The nesting patterns of kittiwake gulls. The survival value of camouflaged eggs. The "courtship feed" (the cock-gull vomiting fish or offal onto the ground in front of the hen, or – this among kittiwakes – into her opened gullet).

Birds in literature (The Golden Gull). Or birds in aerodynamics studies.

The folklore of birds. The jazzman: "Bird." The birds of major sports teams.

Knowledge. Treatises: emu, cockatoo, quail. So much we know, so much we need to know: to salt its tail.



September 28

Flustered. Flummoxed. Frantic. Panicked. I've always been one to check *Roget's*, I *like* going down its orderly rows, like walking a well-tended garden and sampling the flowerings there. But no word even comes close.

The ribbon-cutting ceremony has been, of course, delayed. The loan from the Northeast Business Association has been consigned to a fiscal limbo. Ramon has quit – an insubordination I *will not* tolerate. But who can blame him? Yesterday a flock of plastic spatulas zoomed through the room.

I'm almost used to it by now. It has an eerie grace. It's come to be predictable – the ghostly moans, the circumnavigation of the goblets – I can live with something predictable.

But this moonstruck, clutter-skulled, gamin-eyed ghost exterminator that Nora finally persuaded me to hire . . . ! Grrr.

When I was a child, back in the Home, I came to admire – maybe I can even say I came to love – the thrice-a-day methodical call to prayer of the bells. They made / how can I say this? Although it was invisible, they made a *structure* I could depend on. They turned time into an architecture.

But what I couldn't bear (and couldn't say I couldn't bear, not then, not there) was the moopy, goopy content of the services themselves. There's only so much fluttery talk of fluttery Spirit a person can take.

He's spent all week with his eyes rolled up, like hardboiled eggs in his head. His "initial approach."

He doesn't wear a watch. *I've hired someone who doesn't wear a watch.*

October 1

As current recording secretary of Business Card Collectors International, I'm supposed to have had the August minutes

transcribed by now, and available to the membership. Beyond that, I had promised to research a handier way of arranging cards for display – it's exactly the kind of practical challenge I enjoy. But of course that hasn't happened. *Nothing* has happened, except for "tangle-free" pocket combs and shotglasses banking off walls.

Samantha, the lawyer's assistant, called. She doesn't think I can sue the company that sold me the damn hotel. There are, she drily said, some things a termite inspection will not cover.

He's lighting black candles today. Mr. Mood. Mr. Cloud. Mr. Haunted House.

The original hotel sign, which I've tastefully restored and kept in front, is a wooden shingle with its eponymous (*Roget* there) golden gull done in a charmingly clunky folk art way: and I reproduced it, flying into the sun, for my business's logo, only stylized – *moderne*, as Gretchen says with a prideful hoity-toity Gallic gurgle. It's on my new business cards.

Ten thousand business cards.

He's standing out in the rain right now, poor thing, in mismatched tennis shoes.

I brought him one of my Pocket Rain Ponchos. He growled. I guess I interrupted some séancely palaver with the infinite, silly me. Mr. Pneumonia. Whatever it was, it seemed to be ruined, and so we drove to lunch through a sulky drizzle. He told me still more stories about the spirit world, early mediums who hoaxed the public, Houdini. He's into his "second approach," and says a solution should only be a day or two away. Then no more pencil sharpeners doing the watusi, he said. It must have been the first time I've laughed in a month. What a martini will do.

Miss Ruler Edge. Mr. Ouija Words.

Why am I even writing these things, keeping this journal? I never made my second visit to Vivian's therapeutic couch.

I said to Nora: I'm too busy.

And yesterday Nora said to me: It's amazing, I'd think that lately you'd be even *more* flipped-out than you were before, you know, more tense, and more shrink-needy. But if anything, you're *calmer*.

Well, if my problem really *was* teduim. . . .

Then I don't have a problem *now*, do I?

He brought champagne tonight, and we had a "ghost toast." He says he believes we're ready.

I actually think I'll miss those migrating ballpoint pens and faux bone buttons.

October 2

Something happened tonight.

I mean

More later.



interlude

time: 1888

place: a seacoast hotel / room 18

He: I'm a simple man,
I'm a steak-and-potatoes man.
My brother Silas and your sister's husband Dell
have kindly sponsored this honeymoon night
at a hotel that pretends to a kind of homespun
ritziness, and I appreciate this generous sign
of their blessing our union, but even so
I'm not a man for terrapin nor the mango chutney
that quivered on its white plate
like the pudding-meats of a squirrel
when I first chuck it into the gutting bag; and
so we've made our excuses and returned
to our room before the third course, and lit
the candles you brought, that are scented of fennel.

She: Is that why we left the dinner table?
Really (*shyly*) is that why we left the dinner table?

He: No. I'm so simple a man,
I'm still a boy. I'm a steak-and-potatoes boy . . .

She: I love that in you.

He: . . . and I didn't know how to say it,
but I say it now, and to your face
that opens and closes and opens again in the candlelight
with the complicated shadows of a rose or a lettuce:
we've come back to the room because we couldn't wait
another slurp of prawn-and-pumpkin-consomme longer
to consummate our love!

(*falls to his knees before her*)

I haven't wept since I was ten, and Festus died.
I placed my lucky penny inside his jaws
and we buried him out near the wild columbine.

She: I'm weeping too! The candlelight
licking the corners of the room, the heirloom double-ring quilt
that my Aunt Teodora gave us and that I packed

in the leather satchel below a layer of lilac sachet,
your own enormous passion I can see is exploding
deep inside you like fireworks bursting forth in a foreign
country . . .

everything is alive with an animal beauty!

I'm so glad we waited. Even when your tongue discovered
a nerve at the base of my neck that made me feel
as if my body stretched to the moon and back
and contained the heaving Atlantic, even then
we waited, my agitated muscles-flexing boy/man
kneeling before me in your brand-new nankeen trousers and
suspenders

(and only that), and I in my sleeping gown
with the delicate shell-pink ribbon trim (and only that)
– this is what we have waited for.

He: Oh I wish at this moment

I had the gift of golden-tongued expression,
like that wild-eyed Professor in the room below,
who we met yesterday in the whist room,
and whose speechifying left the ladies
intoxicated on language – *then*

I would come to you with the proper words of endearment,
lust, and fidelity.

She: You ninny. That Professor
is a gassy fossil. And, as you know, your tongue
may not be gold, but it can mine
my treasures exquisitely. Come
(*she opens her arms*)

the stars are sprinkled across the night
like the angels' own bijoux, and this is our hour,
and this is its first impetuous minute.
Come –

(*noises*)

He: There's some commotion below in the corridor.

She: Let's peek out and see.

(*They open the door an inch, peer out. More noises,
shouting. They look at each other questioningly,*

and they both step gingerly into the hall.)

(some seconds of silence; then:

blam! blam! blam!)



We don't *know* what's truly shakin' in the basement clubs
of matter: we don't know what sax,
what open, throaty, come-an'-get-it laugh,
what tinkle of change on the bar, is filling
the joss-sweet air there in the back rooms
of the protons and electrons in a rock or a Chinese elm
or the hand on your hip as you sleep.
We look, but we don't know. The very looking
alters the rules of the game as often, as continuously,
as the look itself occurs. That sassy,
flash-and-zen atonal trio,
Quark and Quasar and "Doctor" Quantum Physics,
sways in waves on the stage,
in a slick of sweat so seemingly sublime
that they can tickle tunes out of the vacuum
in the pulse of the heart of antimatter: all night
bringing the house to its feet
or its knees with their stable of favorites,
Probability Theory Blues and *As I Wandered the Streets
of the Black Hole* and *Electroweak Baby o' Mine*,
and the rest; but *we* can't hear these viably enough,
and what do these have to do
with the price of a can of beans, although
this buildingblock *amour* and *triste* and cello dub-dub-dub
is taking place in the tin, and the beans, and the price,
and the living and dying eyes of the girl
who rings it up at the counter. Dub-dub-dub,
and wah-wah-wah, and at the dancefloor everybody circles
their favorite rhythmbellied couples,
Death and Transcendence, Being and Non-Being, and
(the surefire winner) Sex and Divinity, as they slither-step
in the dark of Le Club Impossible, and the bubbles of *-on*
float giddily through the air: I mean boson,
fermion, lepton, gravitron, gluon, baryon, hadron, muon,
and the most evanescent, keep-on through another crap day.
We'll never find that winding, unlit street,
although we've been given a map. We'll never get past
the front door. But one note of that music,
the size of a paramecium, is always swimming crazily

up the vein that snakes at the side of an ear, at the temple,
and sends us correspondingly crazy
with brainsick longing. And we'll never exit
the club's back door, to the alley, to open the trashcan there,
and dig through the gristle,
the tripe, the kraut, the spit-up bones,
and wrestle out
the bottommost rag-wrapped shoebox,
sloppily crusted in old yolk blackened to coal, and
finally face the no-face of the secret
our languages all call – when their other words sicken
and fail – the soul.



Once, the great Sasha Mangini negotiated the vanishing
of the persistent after-images of a family of seven
circus aerialists, who had died as one
in a big top fire and stayed, like the odor of smoke
in a pillow, to haunt the grounds for years.
Once, Alma Lorttimer – although very few
were destined ever to know it – rid
the White House itself (I won't say during
whose term) of a baleful presence that moved
among the gilded furniture and portraits
like a smudgepot. Once Emilio Zagrep
reunited a whale and a dead lighthouse keeper.

Like any longtime professional
who's entered his field out of impassioned dedication,
I revere (may kid about, but truly revere)
the legendary figures. How many of us
might have the inner capability – I don't know.
Few are given the opportunity
Lorttimer had, or Zagrep, or Mangini. I thought
for days, with a tonic jolt of hubris
adrenalizing my system, that I'd found my chance
at stardom in these dear, disrupted honeymooners
so bent now on disrupting the scene of tragedy
in their turn. The scale was large enough:
a century. The poignancy was about the size
of an opera house or a cruise ship. But
a tragedy is only the sum of its individual tear ducts.
When I spoke with them
– though “spoke” isn't right, and really
“them” is misleading . . . when we overlapped
our sentiences in the hazeworld, I began to see
how wrong I would be, to use these two
confused, mistreated presences – they were
children really, no matter her strawberry nipples –
for celebrity's sake. Their story
was simply two people big, was sad and scared

two people big. As if that isn't woefulness and heartache
enough for any of us.

The final time we – “overlapped”
When I was a child, self-sécreted
in that ragged-edged viaduct jungle,
I would look out at the ocean
(it was far, but not impossibly so)
and study the massive banks of clouds
that weighed down on the horizonline like a mountain chain.
They looked as if a bullet would bounce straight off them.
Every now and then a cloud extension, genie-like,
would rise by a thin connective wisp
and take its own shape in the blue
– a camel, a submarine, a lady's boobies, an ogre's nose –
but it couldn't maintain integrity
for long, its border would fluctuate,
its core would grow transparent, and finally
the wisp – the part I thought of
as its road back – thinned, then broke,
and there was nothing left but air in the air,
nothing.

I felt that happening to me.

I'd felt it on other cases, but not this
gooseflesh direly, and I was as frightened
– heartstop, drymouth frightened – as anybody
who chatted with ghosts for a living could ever be.
To talk the talk of Samuel and Liza Ruby Williams
in their spirit-essence, I *became* – a portion of me –
spirit-essence, and in my fascination
with their plight and its current drygoods-flinging
devolvement,

I became too much an element of their world,
I was char in sunlight, only char in sunlight
in my mind, my body emptying all the while, going
comatose, and I saw the gossamer tendril
of attachment to my physical life
begin to fray, then further fray, then more,

I was lost, beyond recovering, lost, lost, lost,
fray, snap

doop doop

She'd seen, and set the beeper on her watch.

She'd seen, she'd shrewdly guessed at what was happening,
and pressed her watch's beeper. It was
lifeline back enough.

That night,
when we both went to bed
at a little motel up the road from her office,
I have to admit
the watch, that she set on the bedside table
on top of her pile of undergarments
folded regimentally neat,
was as wondrous to me as the sex itself,
although the sex was wondrous aplenty,
the weight of her, the sweet salt flesh
of being here and not elsewhere.



*B*ut we *do* know we can use a velocipede mounted on several brackets, to churn the butter. We know that patent number Six-eight-four-two-nine-nine is for "Home Hygienic Billiards," in which the balls are propelled across the table by breathing through a tube apparatus, and this is "conducive to exercise of the lungs." We know the breath will also warm the feet "which suffer, especially in winter, by reason of contact with floors and frozen ground," and patent number One-eight-six-nine-six-two offers, therefore, "a simple contrivance," again of engineered tubes and a mouthpiece. Patented August 25, 1868: "Improved Burial Case" – essentially a package containing a ladder and a bell, for the advantage of the prematurely buried. December 13, 1898: "Electrical Bedbug Exterminator." Five-eight-seven-nine-nine-four: "Surgical Appliance" for the prevention "of involuntary seminal emissions during sleep," by means of a tucking ring and pricking-points. These nineteenth century drawings are precise, and love their diagrammatic letters and numbers showering over schematic bodies, as if our problems might truly be solved if only the rain of labels was thick and explanatory enough, and maybe they're right. Our feet are cold, our deaths are daily, and about our lusts and savage attacks of pestiferousness I will not write, except to say that all of the ingenuity we can bring to bear upon such terrible peril is terribly needed. We want to *know*. We will not fool with hoodoo guesswork, no; the line between our waking and our sleeping is a slippery, jagged line, and what we need to persevere is knowing "weightblock 30 vibrates the upper end of arm 29-a, which pushes rod 31 backwards," and there you have it: "Automatic Hat Saluting Mechanism," and many another. Walter Mosley's detective hero, in *Devil in a Blue Dress*: "It was a simple, ranch-style house, not large. There were no outside lights except on the front porch so I couldn't make out the color. I wanted to know what color the house was. I wanted to know

what made jets fly and how long sharks lived.
There was a lot I wanted to know before I died.”
We want to leave our bite-mark in it. Swedish doctor
Nils-Olof Jacobson placed the beds of terminal patients
on scales, and calculated that twenty-one grams was the
average
weight drop at the moment of death:
the weight of the soul. And there you have it.
And now you know.



October 3

Well! Nobody's going to see *this* entry!!!

Last night made it easier.

Though, in its own crazy way, it was easy enough.

We met at the warehouse, at 9 p.m. He'd already "cleared the ethereal bridge," as he put it.

It seemed to me that the dim-lit air of The Gull, and the merchandise on the shelves there – rustled. Barely, but rustled. As if in expectation. That was the only sign.

We used what equipment the shelves could provide. That was part of the physics, part of the aesthetics, of this transaction, he said – we needed to use what was there, in that building, ghosts "are very cosmos-bound to their buildings." Okay with me. We'd gone over this rigamarole before, I knew its outline. And it's not as if just then I had anything better to do with my unused stock.

He took a funnel, he placed it into a vial of Holy Water. That was for Samuel Williams. He did the same, right after, for Liza Ruby. There was more of his trance-like mumbojumbo. Mr. Abracadabra. Two scented candles. Fennel, he told me. The air was – pressure air, as if before a storm.

I'd found the hospital hypodermics (what was left of the original shipment, after some fanciful aerial loop-de-loops). He injected himself from his vial. Then he injected me, from mine.

It was easy enough. On the floor of The Gull, by fennel-light, we made love.

And at last, after one hundred years of waiting, love was being made *through* us.

Long after the candles guttered, we lay there heavily in each other's arms. The air was still. The air seemed to say to me, OPEN FOR BUSINESS. Ribbon cutting. Champagne. Reporters.

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The air was calm, and I was calm.

Untenanted by restless spirits.

October 4

Questions:

Can they return? No (he says)

That's a written guarantee? Yes (he says)

Is any of the damage tax deductible? No (Samantha says)

Should we continue to "see each other"? No (we both say)
then Yes (we both say) so who knows?

Aren't we married already, in some strange way, for a century?

He gave me, with gestures that seemed to attach a vast importance to it, an old-time rhinestone men's lapel pin. I imagine my eyes said: *So?*

"It's a token," he told me. (*Of what?* But I think I know.) "It was my first –" then he searched a minute for *my* terminology "– intercom system."



postlude

time: 1938

*place: the seacoast, where its rock jumble thins to sand;
an elderly man is pensively walking the edge of the water*

Nobody knows. Sometimes it makes me want to giggle like a five-year-old who's just got away with a stash of prohibited cookies unobserved. Or maybe five-year-olds today go right for the cash, who knows? A ten here, twenty there, it adds up. It added up for me, once – there was a night at the Royal Palms, just me and two well-seasoned blondes of Valkyrian stature, and I filled the clawfoot bathtub completely with hundred-dollar bills. Go take a dip, ladies, I said, or I *think* I said, it was so long ago. Whoever he was, that dandy wiseass of a fellow with the feather in his hatband, I don't know him anymore. I'm – look at me! Seventy-five: who *could* be, just as easily, a ribcage and a rusted knife overgrown in the woods, like a Dutch still-life gone morbid. Instead, I walk my skin of venerable liver-spots into the seaside sun each day at four o'clock, and I tip my yacht cap with a frail, but appreciated, worldly charm to the passing parade of young mothers; my own gaggle of grandchildren runs to my arms and fills them like a basket of peaches – so small, so fuzzy and sweet, etc. (and five-year-olds among them: I could ask about the cookies-versus-money question, if I remember: lately, though, the memory is blowing like confetti out an open window . . .); and even surface learning has been made mine (the Dutch painting! the Valkyries shtick!) and occasionally a deeper learning – as when I enrolled three years ago for Talmud class – has touched a sanctum-place inside me, lighting a tremulous lamp flame there. Isn't *this* Respectability with a large, gilt, filigree "R"!

Then why do I think it's really just tinsel and ash,
they *do* know, or they soon *will* know, I'll give it
all away in some defenseless, confessional moment.
There are voices in my head sometimes
that aren't mine, they coil like a vapor
through my braintwists. What are they saying? The words
stop short of any sense, but their urgency makes me afraid.
One day I'll stand on the beach and shit
my old-man's breeches, and stink in the afternoon breeze,
and the spots on my own skin will arrange themselves
into a brief, denouncing message. One day
my foulness will explode: I'll kneel
in front of my five-year-old granddaughter
and I'll slobber my face in her innocent muff
and yell out who I am. And if not . . . the world knows,
and the world can bide its time. I've heard the gulls shriek
as they rake the water, calling out
my name that they used at the billiards club and the pony halls
in the days when I could snap a man's small finger
like a match, for laughs, or just to wow
the silk pants off some slinky, winky,
rouged-up downtown dish,
the fish! the fish! the fish!



"CRYSTAL BALL" LAPEL PIN! – for men, or "crystal ball" pendant for ladies! Send us a black and white photo of any friend or relative (up to 8x10), we'll turn it into a hologram that, at the touch of a microchip dot, appears in this stylish one-inch-diameter glassite globe. Conduct your own seance! It's a great gag *or* a serious memento. Allow six weeks. State men's or women's version when ordering. Only \$15.95. *Gull Gifts*.



poet's diminuendo, with quotes

Most of these poets do not seem to be as informed or well-read as some of the best poets who immediately preceded them; but each of these poets feels that he knows one big thing: what it is to be, in a particular skin and at a particular time and place.

— arranged

from James Dickey's introduction to Paul Carroll's anthology *The Young American Poets*

It's a nothing-sky over Wichita, Kansas.
Invisible cloud, and a few barely-visible stars.
The poet's out for a walk, with nothing to distract him
from himself, his spitting flame-of-a-self
he's brought out to the dark streets of his city
at the close of a poem. Whatever light we give to,
or withhold from, one another — whatever
burning we do — we're larger than the stars,
when it comes right down to our own necessary
perspective. He's been up all night
— it's 5 a.m. — to write, been
“counting wolves,” he calls it, forcing himself
awake and — hopefully, anyway — aware.
But then the imp-voice in him rises and asks
who's *he*, to believe his rippled thoughts
and windblown words should be set down on paper?
He knows — what? himself? his wife
asleep upstairs in her familiar sweetcream skin?
But . . . in the opium den, at the drear start
of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Dickens shows us
people, and maybe by implication everybody,
harboring (as the pop-psych texts would implausibly
nautically phrase it) a secret, inner life, unknowable
except through such extreme release; and even
objects: the opium pipes are made
“of old penny ink-bottles, deary.” Everything
drifts in a smoke-gray, purplish *else*. Is it
because of this that Dickens loves his lists
of what's been safely mapped and captioned?

– so, of somebody’s almost museumly larder: “The pickles, in a uniform of rich brown double-vested coat, announced their portly forms, in printed capitals, as Walnut, Gherkin, Onion, Cabbage, Cauliflower, Mixed The jams announced themselves in feminine calligraphy, to be Raspberry, Gooseberry, Apricot, Plum, Damson, Apple, and Peach. . . . Lowest of all, a compact leaden vault enshrined the sweet wine and a stack of cordials: whence issued whispers of Seville Orange, Lemon, Almond, and Caraway-seed.” These hasty notes he’s taken from that same erratic, incomplete novel. We’ll never know its intended end. Our poet mumbles some 5 a.m. frustration over this thought. He’s in that awful state of being simultaneously sleepy and jazzed-up. He’s – me, is who he is. And: *So?*, as one of his characters recently put it. She walks the beach now in her own contemplative mutter (although for her it’s afternoon) and idly watches the lapping cover and uncover the sand – a lace mantilla peekaboo game. That’s all so far from landlocked me in Kansas, it isn’t a smear of brine, it isn’t even the ghost of a smear of brine, on my horizon. But I’m off-and-on reading a fantasy novel, Fletcher Pratt’s ornate *The Well of the Unicorn*, and its shipdeck-and-fishing-village scenes persuasively offer a second-hand touch of the coastal. Of a river meeting the sea: “. . . from the left hand brown Vålingsveden swept to slip his waters almost secretly into the blue.”

And so it goes – the great length of what we know, into what we don’t know.

