

I did not know whether, or how, or when I might return to this (or be able to), and, if I did (or would or could), what might happen then. Perhaps it no longer matters. What follows is what remains, even if not fully an ending. There is, of course, more to write. There always is. The question is: who will write it? As for me, I cannot promise anything. In someone else's words:

"I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it."

NOTE: The characters in this story are not "real" people. This is a story.

ALONE/TOGETHER

CHAPTER 47: TO THE END: Time Recaptured.

". . . all the old accumulated rubbish-years which we call memory, the recognizable I, but changing from phase to phase as the butterfly changes once the cocoon is cleared, carrying nothing of what was into what is. . . ."

~William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*
Vintage Corrected Text, p. 159.

Is there any terrestrial paradise where, amidst the whispering of the olive-leaves, people can be whom they like and have what they like and take ease in shadows and in coolness? Or are all men's lives like the lives of us good people—like the lives of the Ashburnhams, of the Dowells, of the Ruffords—broken, tumultuous, agonized, and unromantic lives, periods punctuated by screams, by imbecilities, by deaths, by agonies? Who the devil knows?

~From The Good Soldier: A Tale of Passion, by Ford Maddox Ford.

What cannot be said
Will get wept.

~ Sappho (Greek poet, circa 630 BC)

I. Of Another Orphan Borne.

Grief fills the room up of my absent child,
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,
Remembers me of all his gracious parts,

Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form:
Then have I reason to be fond of grief.

~ From King John, by William Shakespeare

This was his fourteenth flight like this, with the *woop-woop-woop-woop* of the helicopter blades not much deadened by the clamped black headphones he wore, with the still stinging stink of antiseptic soap clinging to his skin, with his body hunched over and protecting the red plastic cooler that contained—so improbably he believed, his awe undiminished—a human heart, alive, or at least alive enough, stuck in an impatient dormancy, waiting to be electro-shocked back into its full-beating life, woken from its slumbering half-life, its pendency, the organ that waited as he carried it to one who without knowing waited, laid out etherized upon a table, for this (hopefully) soon life-saving heart, so not the heart of romantic cliché or paper-doily framed valentines, but a vigorous ugly muscle the color of a bruise.

The sky was the color of a slate chalkboard, cribbed from an old schoolhouse, each star a chalk-smudge on the dim horizon. He peered deeply into what seemed to him an indecipherable blankness, trying to divine the distance to his destination, even though with a glance at his watch he could know how much further it was, making a quick calculation of time-spent and time-left. He had flown this route before: from Madras to Portland it took seventeen minutes from take-off to touchdown. Once he had tried to count his breathes, for the calming effect and to know each breath like a rosary bead fingered and past, progress toward benediction. There were many ways to measure things, some more precise than others.

He knew there would be someone there waiting to take the cooler when he arrived, him handing it off by rote, then running to the surgical suite where the transplant team awaited him, his head, and his magic hands. But for all this routine, for all the rote steps, this time it was not the same at all; it was not routine. The nagging fear that something might go wrong would not leave him. He tasted it in the back of his throat, and felt it in the tightness of his chest.

Aaron inhaled hard and held his breath for several seconds, letting it out in a throaty sigh as he caught first sight of the sprawling medical center ahead, the pale lights around the landing-pad, looking like some fallen constellation. He gripped the cooler as he felt the helicopter start its swift swooping descent. He thought he might vomit and inhaled hard again to stanch the nausea. He felt ashamed of anxiety. Even his first time had not been like this, not this bad.

This heart he carried had come from someone he had known, not well, but well enough to have made his hand shake before the first incision. He had heard Barry talk of her endless times, about her travails, about her endless poor decisions, bad luck that was both proof and disproof of karma, her addictions and short-lived sobrieties, and finally the illness that seemed to sap her life of what little purpose she had managed to collect along the way, like litter scraps that she picked up along the highway, doing community service, an endless probation, never parole.

She had been—or *was*, since using the past-tense felt wrong with her heart not yet dead—one of Barry’s too-many clients at Warm Springs Tribal Reservation.

Raven-eyed Marie.

Marie of infinite hungers.

Marie full of fear, not Grace.

She had careened like an ill-balanced wheelbarrow down a mountainside, each jarring event a bump loosing more of what little was left of the load, of her, in a kind of slow-motion avalanche, leaving behind a debris-field that was a map of failures, the wide-strewn detritus of a short reckless life that found only in its denouement a miracle of peace, and of balance, that had eluded her until then. So there had been a miracle after all, and with it some Grace.

But that and the end had been a long time coming, Barry said, telling one of many stories, told by one gifted in the art of hearing what was really said.

“The missionary that claims to have written down—*captured*, really—the language of the Cree, had no linguistics training, and knew only of the systems of English, French and German. So he completely ignored (or did not hear) the voiceless-whispered vowels, and got it all wrong as a result. I try not to make that mistake,” Barry said. “I try to hear it all, to listen in the gaps. It is in the silences that the meaning resides.”

(

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There had from the start been more stories about Marie than the others, stories that Barry would share over dinner, or in the waning hours of the evening after they had retreated to their bed. Aaron had gladly listened, not chastened by his own lack of stories to tell, or an inability to tell them, even when goaded—*Don’t you wonder sometimes what that heart might feel some day, in its new person, in its new life? Each beat, each chest reverberation, must speak to whom the heart was given, don’t you think?* But he did not think one way or the other, did not wonder what a heart might say, or how. And—truly—he did not ever ask why, even on his way tonight to give Marie’s heart away, delivering healing that Marie had not ever been able locate, or to deliver to herself, not completely anyway. That is until she found herself pregnant, by whom she was never certain—not that she really cared. But with pregnancy it seemed that she had found hope inside herself, a hope so indefatigable that even her own deteriorating health could not subdue it.

(A surrogate for hope is what he had called her, called her more than once, along with the Bitch-that-just-wants-money-for-a-baby, a name he been told not to say because it would since it was certain to bring bad luck. The nurse at the clinic had stirred their stored semen together, a bit of prestidigitation that would allow them both, they agreed, to truly be the child's father—that is, unless the child when grown decided to try to solve the mystery of his progenitor, tracing the arc of his blood-line, and all the characters that comprised it.)

She had been advised to have an abortion once the cancer was found, told that the chemotherapy would injure, even likely kill, the baby she carried. She shrugged and said no in the quiet way she had, her eyes glimmering like black ponds that Barry saw himself in, knowing that there was no use trying to change her mind.

And so it was that two incongruous things came to grow inside Marie, as her breathing turned into a dry wind-whisper and she could hardly talk. Her voice was like a faint transmission, a remembered song the radio played, a song in his head—*Meat-eating orchids forgive no one just yet/Cut myself on angel's hair and baby's breath/Broken hymen of your highness I'm left black/Throw down your umbilical noose so I can climb right back*—a song that ended in an ellipsis, the lyrics ebbing into night-silence, the sound of the wind behind him as he raced ahead.

Barry winced as he double-pumped the clutch trying to get the twenty-year old truck into fourth-gear, or its unknown equivalent, since he had no idea how transmissions worked, only that he needed to get back to Portland as quickly as he could. He guessed that Aaron must already be there, or nearly so, to give Marie's heart to someone else, with the same cold-eyed precision he had used to cut the heart from her not long after she had slipped away, at peace knowing her son had lived, been born, and given a name by her, a name culled from one of the many stories Barry had told her over thirty weeks of pregnancy, told to her more than once, with elaborations like an impromptu arabesque, an intricate pattern added in the telling, filling in blanks left by others. He had heard the story first from Aaron, who had heard it from James, or maybe it was Toni, either of whom could have heard the story from someone else he did not know. It was a true story though, that much he knew, or had been told. And a love story too.

“Can you imagine ever loving someone that much?” Marie had whispered, the words said despite the strangling pain she felt, refusing medicine for even that. “Can you?”

“I can,” Barry said, gazing at her, holding her hand. “Yes—I believe I can.”

There had been a long silence after that. They both knew labor was set to be induced the next morning, and she was supposed to conserve her strength. He had stayed later than usual this night to be with her, with Aaron to join them there in the morning. Somewhere down the hall music played, a classical piece for piano that he did not recognize. He wondered if it was a piece that Aaron might have played once, long ago perhaps, when he was still a child. Listening to the

simple melody, he smiled, and some of the tiredness he felt seemed to go away, or at least he did notice it as much as before. It was at that moment that Marie spoke again, faintly; so faintly that Barry would never be sure if the words had in fact been said—*Jeremy. Name him Jeremy.*

Marie never said anything again. This much Barry was sure of—he had listened, holding her hands together in his own, watching her slowly slip away, losing a consciousness she would not regain. Her last breath hung forever, like a dead-dry butterfly wing caught a fence nail.

(He imagined what his life was like after, roaming from place to place, unable to stay any one place for long, stirred always onward on an ill-defined quest to find what he was looking for, which was nothing really at all. This journey was fully about escape, not that he had ever able or willing to admit it, even when he had asked him, walking with him through Lena grove, asked if he regretted leaving, fleeing, running away. The only response was silence, which said it all.)

After that she remained alive for over a day more, leaving time enough for Jeremy to be born, as it were, surgically removed from her womb, a caesarian section, a procedure named after Rome's first emperor, Julius Caesar, who also was saved from a dying woman's womb. He had stayed with her until the end, until still warm, but stone-still, she was taken to the operating room to give up even more, to donate (or leave behind?) a heart, and other organs, further hope, further possibility, and a further future—but none as pure and new as Jeremy, who to him, Aaron would years later say, "Another orphan you were, son, an orphan for an orphan, you were, born."

(—*It's a toy, he said. It's just a fucking toy! It's not like it shoots real bullets or anything! What—you never played cowboys and Indians when you were a kid?*)

Stepping from the helicopter, keeping his head down without needing to think about it, he just as instinctively handed the cooler he had been holding to a nurse waiting there. "Got it," she shouted, following quickly after him as he headed inside to scrub and re-gown. Nearly two years into a post-residency fellowship, Aaron still marveled disbelievingly at what he was becoming, the shape and direction his life had taken, the detours he had avoided. He had turned his back on an actor's life, and stayed in Portland to finish his undergraduate education. Barry had gone back to school too, and they had graduated together. Then with nod to a father's dream for him, it was off to Harvard Medical School he went. That was where he fell in love with surgery, discovering a deft and knowing touch that had made him in the eyes of his professors and mentors: a natural.

"It's like playing the piano for me," he had told Barry more than once. "My hands know what to do, and all I have to do is trust them."

(He listened for the music one last time before he died, he was sure of it.)

Settling Marie's heart finally into place, he stood back and watched as this reddish blue-

black thing was shocked back into beating life. He smiled beneath the mask that covered his face and said a silent prayer of thanks, acknowledging the Grace that the gift of this heart represented, and the awful paradox. His father Josh would have no doubt called this a miracle, this heart that beat again after dying once. But he did not traffic in such thinking; this heart was a fact beyond metaphor to him; this heart was a heart to him, and, as someone once said: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." So now nodding to the transplant team, and whispering *Good work*, Aaron left the room, leaving two assisting surgeons to close-up. It was only then he cried, falling to his knees, sobbing. So much in life went wrong.

(And so much went right. But how to tell the difference?)

Watching the baby sleep, one hand on the crib, seeing the rise and fall of his chest under the blanket, the near-imperceptible movement of translucent pink fingers clutched and unfurled, JC slowly sighed and nodded, wondering again against his will what it would have been like if Aaron had not come to them, had he not become their son. Or worse, if he had become their son and then they had lost him, not been able to take him home-again-home-again-jiggedy-jig from the hospital that time after little Aaron had been so deathly sick, after he had come so close to dying. What if he had died? How would he have coped, survived, except by trying to erase the fact of it, scribble over it, obliterate, or create somehow a different ending, for what was lost?

Closing his eyes against this thought, and the world it tried to conjure, the history it tried to make him write, JC felt the ashes in his right hand again, a chalky rough-dust filtering through his fingers, loose-fisted and weakened, shuddering as he recalled the feel of Ryan's remains, the first such ashes he had ever felt—or maybe not, but still, wondering whether he could have burnt his son so, to ashes and to soil returned him, or not returned him, but put him? Where? Past the gazebo probably, so he could always see and hear the ocean, interred where he stood and stared, so often, out at the night-sky, questioning it, waiting for answers. Yes, that was where.

(It was not his loss though. The loss had come before him, and indeed made him possible, created the very ground from which the tree of their life together had grown. That was the part omitted, the real lost and missing piece—the buried child, this curse laid upon them by an unfair, power-mad god, saying *Your remembrances are like unto ashes, your bodies to bodies of clay?* And indeed, he remembered holding him as he wept inconsolably, like Rachel weeping, refusing to be consoled, her children gone, and no comfort in that, because—

*No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.
Comforter, where is your comforting?*

Where indeed? To leave him alone, like that, trying to create something from nothing, *ab nihilo*—O, that is how it might have been, might have been, with him alone, trying to make sense

of what could not be made sense of, neither explained away, nor distilled to a single story, one with a simple beginning, middle, and end. Sure, some may say death is an end. But it is not. It is cessation. It is the full stop—period. The silence when *Fado* ends. Period.)

JC finds himself again, finds himself reaching out to touch the forehead of a baby he tells himself he recognizes, knows. It is a gesture of unintended benediction, and unknown origin, not instinctive, not accidental, but done while his own face is made mysterious with *sfumato*, by an eerily occluding fog, leaving his visage without sharp-lines or contours, instead, it bleed-blends and recedes into the dim background, as if he is now the memory of himself, remembered dimly, by someone else, someone who did not know him well, and is an awful caretaker of memory, so sloppy and imprecise, ever losing the details that actually matter, leaving him as just a smudge, a fading pentimento, lost to even history. And so JC tries to gather himself, to reassert himself into being, called forth séance-like by the sound of his own breath. *I am not dead*, he thinks, *I cannot be*. He hovers over a dusty crib, blinks hard, sees Aaron's infant face, reaches down to adjust the quilt, tucking it tightly under his pale chin. He can hear the *beep-beep, beep-beep* of the monitors attesting to continued heartbeats. He feels the fear and fatigue of waiting for Lance to get back.

—He'll be fine while you're gone, he had said, regretting it still, its false optimism, even hubris. Who had he been to summon the Fates to his side, daring Lachesis to measure the thread of Aaron's life, to tell him how long it was? And there was the problem: he could never stand the mystery, the not knowing how it would end—even if that was the whole point of it.

“No,” he said, startled by some sound downstairs, its reverberations—a hard-closed door he thought, not right on its hinges, needing fixing. This was something he could recognize, know for certain, not doubt.

(He stared at the window and his reflection in it, wondering how was it he had slipped away so, going (or dragged) back to the particular time that he had no desire to revisit. There was nothing to be found there. Some rooms are kept empty for a reason, and he had long insisted it be kept that way.)

Blinking and running his hand through his hair, he fixed himself again in the room, with Jeremy before him, not baby Aaron, who had not died that day, or yet, but had grown up to have a son of his own, whom circumstance had brought this baby, not born of him, but surely borne now by him, a precious burden—that is what he had called him once, telling Lance as they drove from the funeral—*He is our precious burden now. Yes he is. Oh, yes he is.* And still, too.

Sitting down again, he arranged arms and legs, and concocted a smile. He was too often impassive anymore, pliable, and he hated it. He reminded himself to appear animated, or at least alive in the present-tense. Too often, it seemed, Lance would ask him what was on his mind, and too often he heard himself saying, *Oh nothing*. And it was true, or felt that way. He was slipping

away somehow, eroding, and he did not know how to stop it—except that now there was this, a baby, a grandson of a kind, and so another member of their family, another unfinished project, as it were. “Yes,” he said, finding the pillow he had dropped on the floor by his feet, picking it up, brushing off dust he could not see but was sure was there, then situating it on his lap, his hands pressed atop it as he waited for footsteps on the stairs he knew must soon come. It was late. And if only Lance was there with there with him.

(Too late for that, really.)

Past midnight. Only Lance was downstairs when Barry arrived back home. “Is he okay,” Barry asked, shrugging his heavy coat off, and hanging it on a tarnished brass hook next to the front-door. “He’s fine,” Lance said, smiling at him through a half-stifled yawn. “Josh has been upstairs with him, probably asleep too by now. I was just going to go check.”

“He didn’t have to do that,” Barry said, stepping out of his shoes and kicking them next to the door, into the pile of shoes there. “So far—a couple nights, not much I know, he’s not been too fussy at all.”

“He wanted to,” Lance said. “We used to do the same thing with Aaron...well, at least for a while we did. We were pretty paranoid at first.”

“Like he might stop breathing if you weren’t watching him?”

“Something like that I guess.”

“Where’s Aaron?”

“On his way home,” Lance said. “He called not too long ago wondering where you were. He said he tried to reach you several times but...”

“My cell-phone battery died,” Barry said, rubbing his eyes with the back of his right hand and then blinking to focus his sight again. “Crappy timing.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Not really. My stomach hurts.”

“Maybe if you ate something.”

“Yeah,” Barry said, slowly nodding and rubbing his eyes again. “But I think I’ll wait for Aaron to get home first, to see what he wants to do.”

“All right,” Lance said, stuffing his hands into the back pockets of the jeans he was wore. “I’ll be heading upstairs then.”

Barry nodded and offered Lance what smile he could from his weary face. His back hurt, and he wondered if it showed. Lance said nothing before turning around, heading for the stairs in the back of the house, like he had gone that way hundreds of times before. The location of the stairs had been a mystery to him and Aaron since buying the house, a ramshackle collection of remodels that had resulted in a house that was large, but not logical. And strangely, that was what had most appealed to them—the bathroom a urinal but no toilet; the big garage door in the kitchen that opened up to reveal a patio, and beyond that the sloping tree-choked backyard; the huge drafty attic with dormer windows lining each steep-slanted side, letting in columns of dust-choked light; the big bookcase in the den that swung open to reveal an underground passage to the rusty, swaybacked greenhouse at the far edge of their property.

(The battered body and broken bones would haunt him always, the surreally remembered image of someone fallen from a height that appeared insufficient to have done such damage. The comparison to Icarus was as inevitable as it was insufficient and maddening. It was not as if he had tried to fly before falling. He had always doubted the powers of Greek myth to explain what really happened in life, and this was his proof, all for lack of a fence.)

Walking hand in hand through the passage, the flashlight beam bright-tunneling the dark, the house officially theirs now, but nothing yet moved in, Aaron and Barry had counted each step out loud, like little children needing the reassurance of knowing how far they had ventured, their interlaced fingers tight-clenched, *now following Lance down the steep slope to where the ocean rumbled unseen that moonless May night, down the winding trail that led through natural unkempt part of the property north of the house, past the stone cabin where tools and other things were stored, and where he had heard a crazy man once lived, down along a ridge that crept through a clearing, and then to the shore, out into the open.*

When Barry pushed open the overhead door at the end of the passage, and they noisily climbed up into the greenhouse, the sun had just started its rise above the tops of the trees and a rainbow glimmer of light surrounded them, shining through the prism of fractured leaded glass. Broken terra cotta pots were strewn here and there, among dirt clods and dried roots and empty seed packets. At the far corner of the greenhouse, there was what looked like a soiled mattress. Aaron led him closer, directing the beam of the flashlight, revealing several used condoms, neatly knotted into semen-filled globes. Kneeling, Aaron touched his finger-tip to each condom.

“This one is still warm,” he said, turning to look back at Barry. “Weird.”

(Paying the bail was always the easy part; it was only money, after all. The hard part was

being forced to see him again, the evidence of further disillusion. Or was it desolation? Not that it was his own shame or reputation that he had to be concerned with. His behavior had always been beyond reproach, beyond suspicion even. He had always been the good brother, the one his parents had used to testify to their child-raising capability: *See, we were able to raise at least one good child.* And there was always the genetic excuse, someone else's genetic makeup to blame it on, then an artful change of subject. This erasure had started early on, the revised text, as it were. But that is another story entirely.)

"Was the drive awful," he had asked, guiding Barry to the bed, sitting him down, then getting into a crouch before him, and clasping Barry's knees. "Alone like that?"

"It was all right," Barry said, soothing the hair from Aaron's eyes, smiling at him. "I've done it before—that drive. But I am certainly glad to be back too."

"So am I."

"Thanks," Barry said, feeling himself blush. "Did it go okay?"

"No problems at all," Aaron said, reaching up to unbutton Barry's shirt, starting at the top button and working his way down until he had to wait while Barry undid his pants and pulled his shirttails up and out. "I'll have a better sense in the morning though, when I do rounds and check on her and see what's up."

"You make it sound so casual."

"You know it's not."

"No."

Aaron stood and undressed before him while Barry watched, leaning back on his elbows, and letting his head loll back. At thirty-one Aaron no longer had the tautness that once defined his body, the stored energy that made him look always on the verge of motion. His body had an ease to it now, an openness that welcomed touch, but did not seek it. He was comfortable, if not content; it was no longer about having something to prove, or making an impression. As Lance had said when Aaron had tried and failed to find the words to describe how he felt about his life now—No, I understand. I do. It doesn't need to be said.

(But maybe it did, later, then and now, and years and years before, for what follows, this:

He reached to steady himself as his heel caught the last tread at the top of the stairs. The newel was loose and wobbled as he grasped it, still fighting for his balance. So many times he had

imagined falling backward down these stairs, crashing to the landing below, his neck snapping or the back of his head cracking open, blood pooling like a halo, creating a morbid tableau for later discovery by whomever was first to come home. This was how a badly-plotted murder mystery might start, an evident accident only later revealed as foul play. “The butler did it,” he mumbled, steady on his feet again, the broken newel in his hand. It was near midnight, but not too late for a brandy, he thought. So he walked into his small cramped study; it was where he liked to work a little at night. Absently, he sat the newel on his desk among the scattered papers, it becoming already a *de facto* paperweight. The bottle of brandy—nothing pricey—was on the table near the window next to some kind of toy, an action figure he had sat there for quite some time, how long he could not remember. He nodded at it almost as if expecting the figure to greet him, which in a manner it did, silently, with its still deadly smile. He had clutched this toy as a child, a little boy sitting on his father’s lap, entranced and happy, oblivious. This was long before he’d learned the truth—or “truth”—of his origins, not that it had ever meant a bit to him. It changed nothing, not of his life. His brother was another story though entirely.)

The penetration was rough and urgent. He winced and lightly bit his bottom lip. He knew that this would not take long and he need not worry about his own pleasure. He heard and felt his hard breathing beside his left ear; it had a gasping quality he did not recognize. Was it fear? The sheet and blanket covered them entirely, like a blanket fort two little boys might play under. The air above the bed was cold but could not get to them, could not alter the sweat-scented tropical climate that their coupling created beneath the bedclothes. It was not like this the first time, in no way at all. But that did not bother him right now. To feel the heft of him, and hear his breathing, was enough. He knew this made them partners still, married by each thrust, waiting for orgasms to overtake them, then panting rest, and the clumsy uncoupling and empty sadness left behind. It could not go on like this, not without one of them finally saying what both already knew. He did not love him anymore, and maybe he never had.

On the brink of waking, he dreamed that he was pregnant again. He wondered how long had he would have to carry this one, so heavy that his feet would in the last month hardly lift or move? He stood fixed to the floor, trying to shuffle but suddenly unable to flee his pursuers. His arms flailed as he tried to take flight instead, a surreal Plan B, clawing at the air in a manic dog-paddle, like the air was water that he was trying to swim aloft into. And then was, and the ground was receding behind him as he surveyed the horizon for someplace to flee, a safe place. Home, he thought. Of course! Go home. But where was home? How would he find it? He recognized nothing; it was nothing but foreign terrain below him for as far as he could see. Until suddenly it was dark and he could see nothing and he did not know if he was flying still, or where he was at all. Worse, there was an awful pain in his abdomen. He reached down and felt something hot and wet, maybe blood. His baby was gone. Someone had taken it. And he started screaming and could not stop even when he forgot what he was screaming for, or why.

He sat up in bed and silently looked around the room. Outside the sky was dark still, but

he knew the first suggestions of light would soon appear. So he waited, lied and waited.

And died waiting, it seems.

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Marie had clearly stated that she wanted no funeral, no ceremonial rite of passage to mark her departure, her death, her ending. She was to be buried as was custom in ground made sacred by the act of burial itself, and the resulting freeing of her spirit. No longer were these the times in which burials grounds would be raided by white settlers to steal bones to make buttons from, the bones becoming elaborately carved decoration for an expensive coat. Barry had told Aaron about this, the rampant grave robbery that had occurred in the middle of the 19th Century. “Digging up my ancestors to steal their bones to make buttons from...” His voice had trailed off in the telling of this, while Aaron looked away and shook his head, staring into the distance, thinking, *And it’s the heart we harvest now, and the children we can sell.*

(“Daddy? Where did I come from?”)

II. Of What We Are Wedded To.

Suspect too much sweet talk
But never close your mind.
It was a fortunate wind
That blew me here. I leave
Half-ready to believe
That a crippled trust might walk

And the half-true rhyme is love.

~ From the final chorus, of “The Cure at Troy,” by Seamus Heaney.

“What’s this?” David asked, holding something up as he continued to paw at the contents of the box that sat on the floor before him. Stopping, he turned around and saw that James was staring out through the open sliding-glass door. Outside the deck was littered with the remains of their unpacking—torn newspaper and bubble-wrap and collapsed cardboard boxes. It was their first day in the condominium they had bought together, a south-facing penthouse with a partial view of the Seattle skyline to the right, and a collection of hospital buildings two blocks in front of them. They had purchased the place from an elderly gay couple who had hardly lived in it for years, but had come back to Seattle for the closing, and to give them the gift of the furniture and much of the art the place contained.

—None of this would seem to fit anyplace but here, and I don’t believe in putting things in storage: counterfeiting history, that is.

—I suppose, James had said, shrugging at the old man. But sometimes there's simply not enough room, and you need to store certain things away.

—That's simply a lack of priorities, the old man harrumphed. What is worth keeping that cannot be kept on display? I don't like secrets, you see?

—Well, yes then, David said, his looking back over his shoulder as he turned away from staring at a large photograph of a black woman's sad-looking face, her eyes imploring him to understand what her life had been like so far. Different points of view, yes, you two. Interesting. But really, you know, this photograph is amazing.

—It was one of our first, the old man's partner said. She'll keep you honest, that look in her eyes, that's what we always said, didn't we Denis?

Silently the old man nodded, catching his breath, then spoke:

—We mostly stay east of the mountains anymore; in the house we built there. We could never quite bring ourselves to give this place up. We have so many memories here.

—Yes, the other one said, coming up behind the old man and gently stroking his back. Denis denies being sentimental at all, but you can see how true that is.

—That was where our first Doyler always slept. He loved that couch so.

—He'd sleep next to Denis while he read the newspaper each night.

—We're on Doyler three right now, but it's not the same. They call it cloning, but its not like you would hope at all. There's still no way to reproduce the past, to bring it back to life, not in a way that convinces anyone except those who need convincing at the cost of truth.

—I guess you never get over your first love, David said frowning. Nor beat death.

—No you don't, Denis said with a certainty that was frightening for all. Never.

“James,” he says as he steps up behind him and gently strokes his back. “I was asking you what this was.”

“Oh—sorry,” James says as he turns around to look at David. “What?”

“This.”

“Ah, that,” James says, squinting and biting his upper lip. “That would be a ring, I’d say. Most definitely a ring.”

“So much for telling me the obvious,” David says, closing his fingers around the ring, it disappearing into his fist like an amateur magic trick. “Thanks.”

“Hey—I’m sorry,” James says, catching David’s shoulder as he was about to walk away, returning to his unpacking. “It’s a ring that Stephen gave me.”

“Stephen.” He let the name trail off.

“Yeah Stephen,” James says, glancing back over his shoulder, almost as if he’d suspected someone was following him, like you do when walking an unfamiliar street. “I thought I’d lost it. Or thrown it away. But I came across it again when we were packing up to leave Madison.”

“And so you kept it.”

“No reason not to really.”

“I suppose.”

“Don’t tell me you’re jealous,” James says, stepping forward, putting both of his hands flattened on James’ chest. “Not of some ring. Not of Stephen—of all people.”

“Not jealous, no,” David said, shrugging. “Just curious, since you’ve never really told me what the story was with Stephen, except that he was a jerk. Were you guys like married?”

“Like, but not really, I guess you could say.”

“But you wore a ring that he gave you.”

“Yeah,” James said, nodding. “And he wore one from me.”

“So you want to tell me about that?”

“I just did,” James said, stooping down to gather up more of the crumpled newspaper that littered the floor. “Do we have garbage bags somewhere?”

“Look in one of the boxes in the kitchen,” David said, pointing at several boxes that sat on the granite countertop that extended from the open kitchen into the living room. “Probably in

with the plastic wrap and foil and stuff from the pantry.”

David let the subject of the ring drop, and like a valve let the pressure from the moment. He would focus on the unpacking instead, and ripped open a cardboard box that had on its side a word scrawled in a careless script. MISCELLANY it said.

8

“*Fuck!*”

“What?”

“Fuck!.”

“James—what?”

“I can’t believe I forgot to mail this. Fuck.”

“What is it?” Shelley asks, glancing down at James from where she sat on top of a short ladder. She was taking down a string of Christmas lights that had for the last two years encircled the windows at the end of the James and David’s bedroom. “A book?”

“Yeah,” James says, tossing the parcel on the bed, a mattress stripped of its blankets, and so not really a bed anymore. “At Swim, Two Boys—you remember it, right?”

“Of course,” Shelley says, climbing down off the ladder, the tangle of Christmas lights, free now from their previous attachment, clutched in her right hand. “Are you planning on taking these to Seattle with you?”

“Just throw them away,” James said. “They cost like a dollar.”

“I’ll put them in our Goodwill pile then.”

“Suit yourself,” James said, sighing noisily as he sat on the bed in a sudden, loose-bodied way obviously intended to approximate some kind of collapse, or melodramatic exhaustion, with most every muscle giving out. “I’m sick of all this packing and moving shit anyway. Maybe we should just have a big frigging bonfire in the front yard and let it all go up in smoke.”

“And there came a fire out from before the Lord, and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering: which when all the people saw, they shouted, and fell on their faces.”

“Shelly—you did *not* just quote Leviticus in my bedroom, did you?”

“Seemed fitting,” Shelly said, laughing and sitting next to James on the bed. “You always were my favorite Sodomite.”

“Thanks,” James said, rolling his eyes and then laughing too. “But I was serious about the bonfire—well, half-serious at least. It seems so much easier not to drag possessions from place to place, cardboard boxes filled with stuff you might not even remember having, or why.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Shelley said, nudging James’ knee with her own. “Besides, the true-blue American method for simplifying one’s life is not a bonfire, it’s a garage sale.”

“That’ll be the day,” James said, standing up and putting his hands on his hips. “Letting a bunch of strangers paw through my stuff looking for bargains, or worse—no way.”

“Well, we’re almost done anyway,” Shelley said, picking up the parcel that James had set on the bed. “You can still mail this you know. I’m sure it’s not too late.”

“Now how would you know that?”

“I don’t know,” Shelley said, shrugging. “But people always love to get stuff in the mail, presents or letters or whatever. It’s exciting. And fun.”

“Not this time.”

“So who were you sending it to? There’s no name or address on it.”

“Aaron,” James said, too quietly to hear, looking down, as if looking for something he’d dropped. His eyes searched the floor, noting the dust motes, the paper clip near the bed-stand, an envelope with something written on it leaning against the wall. He took a deep breath and held it in for several seconds, before speaking again, the words pushed out with the noisy exhalation of depleted air. “It was for Aaron. I told him I’d send him the book, but then I forgot, or couldn’t. I don’t know—not that it matters.”

“Was this when you were in Dublin?”

“Yeah, for the christening.”

“And Aaron was there.”

“Of course.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because it didn’t matter.”

“That’s a lie.”

“Everything I say is a lie,” James said. “It’s just a matter of degrees.”

“Right, right,” Shelley said, having heard this riff of his before. “Secrets and lies, and all the world is a game of Three Card Monte.”

“Only if I can deal.”

“Right—I remember.”

“Anyway, you can keep the book if you want,” James said, stooping down to pick up the envelope he had spied earlier, folding it in half, and slipping it in his back pocket. “Or put it out for your next garage sale.”

Shelley watched for a moment, saying nothing as James straightened himself up and then walked from the room. She still had the book in her hand, although she was no longer conscious of it, her attention focused on James. She knew he must have something more to say, or confess. It was always this way with him—making everything more complicated, which was to say, more difficult, than necessary. And always forcing you to come after him, to follow him into the dark places to which he was always slipping away, to hide or brood, she was not sure which. But after while she had learned to be patient, and to let him alone.

Slipping the wrapped book into the nearest box with any room left in it, Shelley stooped and quickly folded over four cardboard flaps, loosely closing the box. She had not looked closely enough to notice what else the box contained, it being none of her business anyway, and she was never one to snoop. James and David would be on there way back to Seattle in another four day. She wondered if she would see either of them again, and assumed she would. The three of them had formed as tight a bond as three people could, given that two of the three were lovers, as well as friends. —We’re a polar molecule, David had once offhandedly observed. —Like water. She laughed remembering this, still getting the joke, and wondering whether James ever did.

8

“I can’t believe my son’s a lawyer now! I just can’t believe it!”

“I’m not a lawyer mom. I’m a law school graduate. I won’t be a lawyer until I pass the bar exam back in Washington.”

“Oh, whatever anyway—you’re sure talking like a lawyer, splitting hairs like you always did, which is why I always said you were going to be a lawyer, splitting hairs and arguing every damn point with me until I gave up from sheer exhaustion.”

“So give up already.”

“Let’s not bicker sweetie. I’m an old woman now and I deserve a day to be proud of you, and all you’ve done. You’re my son, and I’m your mother, and that’s what goes with it.”

“If you say so.”

“Do you mind if I smoke in the car?”

“Yes I do. I though you’d given those awful things up?”

“Well, mostly I have.”

“Wait until we get home and you can have your smoke outside on the porch.”

“Fine.”

“When’s you’re flight back again?”

“Anxious to get rid of me already?”

“No mother. I just wanted to be sure to ask David whether I could use the car to take you to the airport. He might need to use it too.”

“You’ll be able to afford a big Mercedes soon. Or one of those fancy BMW’s.”

“Why would I want to waste my money on an expensive car?”

“Because you can.”

“Oh mother.”

“Anyway, I think David is absolutely lovely. So much better than that awful Stephen.”

“Stephen wasn’t so bad.”

“How you can say that, I’ll never know.”

“When it comes to men, mother, you get what you choose.”

“What a fine philosophy that is.”

“Well, I had an excellent teacher in that school of thought.”

“Oh, please—don’t start up on that again.”

“I’m just saying.”

“I know what you’re saying. God frigging knows, I know what you’re saying James. It’s always all about your father, and you should just get over it.”

“Right.”

8

Shelley handed James the letter and waited while he looked at the return address she had already read. She had given serious consideration to throwing the letter away as soon as she had seen it. But in the end, she could not bring herself to be involved with a conspiracy that might be forced to confess to out of a sense of guilt. She had always been an awful liar.

“It’s from Stephen,” James said, his head jerked up, staring at Shelley. “What the fuck?”

“My thoughts exactly,” Shelley said. “Aren’t you going to open it?”

“I’m not sure. It’s going to suck either way though.”

“What do you mean?”

“If I don’t read it, I’ll end up imagining versions worse than the real one, or just as bad.”

“And if you do read it, you’ll have the badness of the real version to contend with.”

“Exactly.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“Maybe let you read it first and then...”

“No way, José,” Shelley said, interrupting. “You’re not getting *me* in on this.”

“Some friend you are,” James said, pretending to pout. “But that’s cool, I guess. If you really don’t want to help me out here, I can respect that.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Shelley said, shaking her head and rolling her eyes. “Bad ol’ me, and poor ol’ you.”

They both started to laugh at this point, and James laid the letter on the kitchen table, next to ceramic salt and pepper shakers that were shaped like a pair of dice. He had decided to read it later, if he read the letter at all. He had class in less than an hour, Trust and Estates, which he was taking pass-or-fail, so he could spend the time spent there pondering further what to do. He was already less inclined to read the letter than he was to destroy it. Of course, sliding it inside some odd book of his, leaving it for later to forget and to find again, was probably the best tack to take, and also rather fitting. He thought of the Fado he had listened to long ago in Lisbon, the songs of a true love lost, and the letter that turned up in the end to explain the love, but never the loss. He remembered meeting Cristina Branco, hearing her sing—

The night carried you away and left me unfinished memories

Secrets merely hinted at

And silence instead of some whispered words.

And behind my voice

The silence of the barely said words between us

Calls your name on every street corner.

8

“With others together we are now, we both are, and not so alone as I be feeling even with you beside me now, a silent sullen lump of yourself beside me here on the bed.”

“What’s his name again?”

“I told you twice it was Barry if I told you a hundred times there James. I told you of ours meeting, and my love for the good man he is, and for the better man he makes me.”

“I was teasing,” said James, staring at the wall the narrow bed was shoved up beside. He felt the heat of Aaron’s body behind him, emanating through his clothes. They had taken off only their shoes before climbing onto the bed, and pulling a thin blanket upon them. “I remember all that you told me.”

“No you were not teasing,” Aaron said, whispering to James. “You were being angry, or something right worse. And so why is that?”

“I’m not angry Aaron—seriously.”

“Hardly a moment I be knowing you that you weren’t angry at something.”

“You’ll wake Orion you keep up like this,” James said, tilting his head back to look up at Aaron whose face he found closer to him than he’d expected. Hiding his surprise—and fear, if he had been willing to admit it—he cleared his throat and continued. “I thought you wanted to sleep here with me? Not much sleeping we’re doing.”

“No, tis true,” Aaron said, smiling at James. “And a right far bit past midnight it must be by now. Near toward twilight we be moving, I’d say.”

“And in more ways than one, I’d say.”

“Twas always more than one way of saying something with you James. A man of many words you are, and always been.”

“And you of few, I’d say—except perhaps tonight.”

James felt the movement of the bed beneath him, the reverberations of Aaron rearranging his position, moving closer, or so it seemed. He found himself holding his breath, waiting for the movement of the bed and Aaron to end. It was like one might hold oneself during an earthquake, frozen and waiting to see how bad it was, deciding whether to stay or go, while the sense of time distended until this single moment encompassed a lifetime. He felt a terrible sadness, a readiness to die somehow. He wondered if this was how the end had felt for Ryan—inevitability accepted as such, since you cannot stop an earthquake, nor push away death, the own most possibility of being. Yet, the feeling of Aaron’s hand upon him drew him back somehow, back from edge of what he was not certain, but back until he gladly let Aaron hold him, hold him until he soundly slept, as soundly as he had in years, or would again, for some time.

“Promise me that you’ll never ask me to be in a three-way with you.”

“What?” David said, quickly closing the book he had been reading, then setting it on the table next to the bed. “A three-way—what?”

“You know—a ménage a trois,” James said, looking up at James from his pillow. “Three people having sex together at once. Don’t ever ask me to do that with you.”

“And why would I do that, pray tell?”

“Because you’re a man,” James said flatly. “And most men get bored sexually quite fast, which means they start craving variety, which means that, if they are in a relationship, they want to start having three-ways their partner.”

“Or so says you.”

“It’s a well-documented fact.”

“All right,” James said, shrugging. “But what’s your point really?”

“I don’t do three-ways, that’s all.”

“All right,” David said smiling slightly. “Note to self: no three-ways for James. Does that mean orgies are out too? I assume so.”

“Very funny,” James said, turning his back to David and facing the wall. “I was trying to be serious, but take it as a joke if you want.”

“Sweetie—come on,” David said, squeezing James’ shoulder. “You have to admit, what you said was a bit out of the blue.”

“Not at all,” James said, still facing the wall. “We’ve been together six months now, and that’s usually when men start getting bored. So now was the time to say something.”

“So are you bored with me? Is that what this is about?”

“Not at all,” James said, flopping onto his back and looking up at David. “I’m not the get bored type at all, not with men at least.”

“So you’re still happy with me.”

“Of course I am David.”

“And sexually, you...?”

“Are as attracted to you as ever.”

“That could be interpreted as faint praise,” David said, frowning as he slid down next to James and wrapped his arms around him. “But I’ll try not to feel too insecure.”

“Good—because you shouldn’t be,” James said, snuggling up now next to him, slipping his hand beneath the sheets and finding David’s crotch and squeezing there. “Not with this down here to drive me wild.”

“Great,” David laughed. “Now I’m stuck in a bad porno film, unconvincing dialogue and all. Now all we need is a weird techno soundtrack playing in the background.”

“Yeah—anyway,” James said, not laughing. “I was serious about no three-ways.”

8

He was not sure how he had first learned of the bathroom in the Humanities Building, its reputation for serious cruising and anonymous sex. It was the last thing that he could conceive of himself ever becoming fascinated by, a fascination that became quickly a compulsion. At first it was purely voyeuristic, thrilling to look over or under the partition separating a toilet stall, seeing some guy not even twenty slowly stroking his cock, gladly offering it to whatever mouth or hand or ass willing to take it. He could see that here was a democracy of lust, where even those not so attractive were at least allowed to watch. Sure, there were a few prima donnas who would cluck their tongues in disgust at those they deemed unworthy. This narcissism seemed in some way to violate the implicit rule of the place: you were here to get off, not judge.

The first time he touched a cock, of some guy who had crouched down and thrust himself beneath the stall partition, the swollen bell-end glistening with spit or pre-cum or both; it made a slick-squishy noise as his fingers wrapped around the top half, slipped up and then slipped down. He clearly heard the guttural sigh of the guy on the other side, and imagined him licking his lips, anticipating the orgasm, which seemed already near. James silently counted the strokes, smiling when he heard the guy gasp. The first spurt splatted on the floor. The rest warm-dribbled down his fingers, making a sticky mess that he resisted the urge to taste as he let go of the guys wilting cock and watched it disappear back into the other stall.

Some days James would spend hours in the bathroom. His favorite stall was second from the wall. Here there was a stall on each side of him, often with action in both, some now that he

took part in. He had sucked over twenty cocks, and been sucked himself maybe thirty times over a dozen or so weeks. He had fucked four guys, one a young professor, and been fucked six times himself—although four of those times had happened elsewhere, in a classroom on an upper floor at night, or back to his bedroom. Once he figured out that it was possible, as one guy had put it, laughing, “to get the goods to-go,” that became an irresistible challenge. Suddenly, a reach-under hand-job was boring, and a blow-job only slightly less so. But getting some freshman so worked up and wanting it that he was willing to follow him home to get it—that was nirvana. It was as if he understood for the first time the predatory urge that he had both loved and loathed in Stephen, an urge that he had long ago recognized as a desire to keep something desirable from another, to win the battle for something merely by denying it to someone else. Stephen had always been his most attentive when he was most jealous, and the least when he felt no outward threat.

It was not until near the end of his first year in law school that James stopped going to the bathroom in the Humanities building to cruise for sex. He had not dated anyone in the entire time of this particular adventure, nor even thought of doing so. He focused on his studies, enjoyed his friendship with Shelley, and never questioned what the sexual encounters might say about him. It was not, he told himself, as if there were witnesses, not ones that might testify, so to speak.

8

“James—is that you?”

Coming down Bascom Hill, heading home, James had thought a moment earlier someone was calling his name, but he had ignored it. He was in an awful mood. Stephen was calling him, telling him that he had learned his lesson, that the two of them were meant to be together, he had had his heart broken two now, twice in fact, *Fucking flight attendant boyfriend who you couldn't trust as far as you could throw him*, now he knew how it felt to be betrayed, and he could not in a million years ever cheat on anyone again.

“James!”

He stopped and slowly turned around. It was David. He had known somehow that their paths would cross again, it had just been a matter of when. And the now the time had arrived, as if on schedule. Not his schedule though. If he had been honest, he would have admitted that this was not a moment that he had ever wanted to happen. Mostly because he already knew the story, how exactly it would play out. How they would go for coffee, probably at Mother Fool's coffee-house, and how he would invite David back to his place, but he would say no, and that he wanted to take him out on a “real” date first. There would be sex after the real date, and within weeks he would be in love—not for the first-time, or again—but the facsimile of love he was capable of, a proxy for what he assumed was the real thing but had too hard of a time imagining since, when it came to love, he considered himself damaged goods, unclean of body and spirit, cursed.

David would not mind though, because he could tell he was the kind of person who liked to take care of people, who mistook devotion for love, and accepted the surface of things, instead of seeking what was behind them. And so, with the kind of dispassionate calculations few could perform better than he, James decided that he was fated to be with David, another placeholder in a long line of placeholders, playing the part meant for another, one he could never be with, never love in the way he wanted. And this was fine with him, a necessary trade-off, and the price to be paid. He had been faking it for so long acting love was a charade that required no effort anymore. He was an actor at essence, more than Aaron ever was, and his life was a stage, now with another new player upon it.

“David,” he said, letting the smile play across his face. “I was just thinking about you.”

8

James pulled the van, the one he had rented in Seattle for this trip to law school, off I-90, Exit 260, following the short looping exit road, up the gentle-sloping hill to the Oasis Inn. There was no way to know whether he would stop to stay here until he actually did it. Bringing the van to a halt in front of innkeeper’s office, he smiled then started laughing. Ryan would love the fact that he was staying here. He just hoped that Room 13 was available.

8

He sat quietly at the top of the stairs; his book bag slumped beside him as he read the post card for the second time. It felt flimsy, had scalloped edges, and an old-fashioned look. On the other side was a reproduced lithograph of a Ferris wheel, with a vermilion metal skeleton, and its thirty six cars golden cars hanging suspended against a violet sky. A crowd gathered at the base of the wheel and watched or waited their turn to ride. A long painted banner stretched across the bottom of the post card read, St. Louis. Worlds Fair, 1904. Celebrating the Louisiana Purchase . It was a faux souvenir, like post card someone who had really been there might have bought to remember the event. Now it was the souvenir of something else.

James could hardly see what was written through the tears that hazed his vision, see the tight cursive script in blue ink that he could almost hear being scratched into the postcard—

Stephen,
Your mother told me the good news about
you getting married!!!
And a April wedding too!!! **How Delightful!!!**

A hundred congratulations to you and your
bride-to-be!!! I can't
hardly wait to meet her.

Love,
Aunt June

But he did not need to see clearly. He did not need to read. He had memorized the words already, and knew that he would be able to recite them for what remained of his life, saying them sadly or laughing, with or without irony, hauntingly or self-deprecating, all depending on what version of the story he chose to tell. But at this moment there were no versions yet, no variations on a theme of secrets and lies, infidelity, abandonment, or how all men are pigs. He had not yet stepped outside himself to stare at his own reflection, not yet turned observer to observed, not yet considered how to explain this turn of events, this new-found knowledge, this awful pain he felt. He had not yet begun a journey through the dark and abandoned places of his life, examining the dense history of their lives for evidence that this moment had been inevitable, preordained, fated.

No, for now, he would simply sit there waiting. Time would pass and eventually Stephen would come home and find him sitting there. He would ask what was going on, ask if something was wrong, ask why he was sitting there, why he was not saying anything.

—Say something for fuck's sake, he would shout, reaching out to shake his shoulder.

And he would just sit there saying nothing. He had nothing to say that the post card could not say for him. So he would hand it to Stephen, and without expression watch him read it. That would be when Stephen would say something like, *Oh fuck, Oh fuck*, and start to explain. There was nothing that Stephen could not try to explain, and this would be no exception. And at the end of it he would, if he allowed himself, he could accept the explanation, accept that getting married to a woman was something he needed to do, for his family, and to get it out of the way, like an item on a To-Do list. And then when law school was over, he could get a divorce, and the two of them could be together again, forever this time. They were meant to be, you know? First love is something you never really get over, even if you try. Isn't that right? Isn't that right?

Isn't that right?

III. Of Another Year Again.

A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;

How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is, any more than he.

~ From *Song of Myself*, Walt Whitman (1891)

This time it was a simple rite, this time the two of them alone, renewing vows vouchsafed to time not passed, nor past. They stood alone in the moonlight, the house dark and looming—a sole witness to this event, *illud tempus*, seeking the eternal return, to the time of origins, a kind of cosmogony, when the gods created the world by and through hierogamy, sacred union, fecundity unto itself—*coincidentia oppositorum*, the gift as a giving that creates no debt.

“I would marry you again, and do,” he said, staring into blue-eyed longing. “Give myself to you alone, and do.”

“And I you.”

“Imagine if I could have made you pregnant somehow.”

“More than you have?”

“Yes. My seed would have meaning then.”

“It has meaning now.”

“Yes.”

“Remember how I made the tree grow.”

“And it grows still.”

“Yes.”

“The leaves beside the bed each year...”

“In testimony.”

“A testament.”

“To our anniversary.”

“Another year together.”

“Forty-seven years. Imagine.”

“Fifty it should have been by now, except...”

“Three years lost.”

“I should have known.”

“You did know.”

“Yes.”

“But that’s all in the past now.”

“Forty seven years is a long time.”

“To be together.”

Naked in the cool air, beneath a silvering sky, wading into water warm against their skin, sinking beneath the surface, then rising slowly, their mouths pressed together, saliva-sealed lips mouthing words foreign to anyone but each other, elaborate fictions truth-told to the other, words weaved into stories, into myths, canonical yet prefigured, adumbrating future from a pentimento of the past, regardless of what time remains, or remains time—decades together, and no harder to summon ardor, as that first lit flame, as promethean heat, and still be startled, astonished, by it, with cries exultant and grateful, a barbaric yawp sounded over the roofs of the world.

—Did you hear them last night, Aaron whispered, pressing his mouth to Barry’s ear as he watched him fill a mug with coffee. —It was all I could do not to laugh, or die of embarrassment.

—Oh, go on, Barry said, pushing Aaron aside with his hip and turning around to give him his coffee. —You’re dads were having sex, so what?

—I hope it didn’t wake Jeremy is all. Or Blair.

—They’ve probably heard worse from us.

—Not in a while they haven’t, that’s for sure.

—Yeah well whatever.

“What do you mean you didn’t set up the Christmas tree this year? Dad—you know he would have wanted you to get the tree up. Do you want me to fly down and help you? I will...”

“No, it’s not worth it—all the boxes, the ornaments, the effort. I’m too old for that now.”

“But dad.”

“Look—I have to go. I’ll call you next week. Give my best to Barry and the kids.”

“But Blair wanted to say hello to his grandpop.”

“Tell him I’m not feeling well. Tell him I’m too tired. I have to go now. I have to go.”

—Did you do something different this time? A new ingredient or something?

—Nope—it’s like I always make it. Don’t you like it?

—No, it’s good. I love your shrimp salad.

—It’s probably just your taste-buds getting old.

—With the rest of me.

—Well, at least we’re growing old together.

—Yes.

“Burnt down?”

“Arson.”

“Who would do such a thing?”

“Someone with no heart.”

“That’s for sure.”

“All that was left was the piano, a smoldering ruined piano.”

“I’m just glad Shirley’s not alive to see it.”

“Amen.”

—You know where he wanted to be buried don't you?

—Yes.

—After all these years too.

—You'd have thought he'd gotten over losing him.

—He never did.

—He never did.

—It's so hard to lose a child.

—It's not hard at all.

—I meant getting over it.

—He never did.

They'd made love in the shower, something they once did more often, a ritual begun for a reason they no longer clearly recalled, except that when the boys were up, the shower was where they could be together without fear of being overheard, the water-noise and locked door creating a place where they did not worry about being heard or seen or discovered.

“Happy Anniversary honey”

“You too.”

No one heard this but the other, which was what was intended and assumed, so there was no other perspective on what had just happened but their own—or so they thought, not thinking the boys might imagine what was going on, with native curiosity, knowing the rhythm and sound and routine of the house.

“Are they upstairs going at it again?”

“When else is the shower on for so long?”

—I don't want anything fancy, no parties. Maybe just dinner or something.

—Just the two of us.

—Yeah, just us, alone together.

—What about the boys?

—I'll figure something out.

From his point of view, the twenty years his parents had spent together was a wonder, an auspicious event worth considering, even celebrating, given all that they had been through, alone and together. He didn't kid himself that he knew the whole story, but he'd lived through enough of it to know a big part, at least as it had affected him over the years. His Dad had told him they were going out "for a quiet dinner, nothing big, nothing fancy, just the two of us." In year's past, they would have gone to their usual place, where his Dad had first proposed getting married. But that was impossible now, with the restaurant no longer there. Even if it had been there thought, it still sounded pretty boring to him, this "quiet dinner, nothing big, nothing fancy" thing. If he had been with someone twenty years, he would have wanted a big celebration, something noisy and joy-filled. Smiling, he toyed with the idea of surprising them with something more elaborate. But he knew he'd never get James to help him, and he couldn't pull it off by himself, not alone.

IV. This Is the Dead Land.

"...his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn, back-looking ghosts..."

~ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* from Chapter 1 (on Quentin Compson) quoted as an epigraph in *Losing Time*, a novel by James Craig.

He held the book in his hand, admiring the glossy cover with its simple type-face, and its simple title. It had been on the bestseller list for months, and month after month he had meant to buy it. Barry had mentioned it once or twice when the book first came out, but then let it drop, as a topic not off-limits so much as one that he was happy to leave Aaron alone to struggle with. He had troubles enough of his own to deal with, anyway.

Carrying the book to the counter, Aaron decided he would read it on the flight home. The five hours it took to fly from New York City to Portland would give him plenty of time to finish. He was a quick reader, and the book was under three hundred pages. He smiled as he imagined being able to show Barry the book and say, "Okay, done. No big deal."

The young man at the counter nodded hello as Aaron approached him. He wore a white t-shirt under which his pierced nipples could clearly be seen. Aaron tried not to stare, but he could not hide the fact that he thought the young man sexy. He admired his long neck and the taut, thin

body it testified to. It had been many years since he had been in such good shape, a fact gnawing at him more and more lately. He had always before been oblivious to his own good looks, that is until he noticed them disappearing. Without thinking, he sucked in his gut.

“Just the book,” he said, sliding it toward the young man. “I don’t need a sack.”

“Okay.”

“You read this yet?” Aaron asked, glancing at the young man’s nipples again, noticing an employee name-tag now. His name was Jared. “I was wondering if it was any good.”

“Well-written, I’d say,” Jared said. “But pretty sad. And sort of twisted.”

“How so?”

“Will that be cash or credit or what?”

“Cash,” Aaron said, pulling his backpack off his shoulder and sitting it on the counter. He unzipped a side-pocket and pulled out a fifty-dollar bill. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.”

“So twisted how?”

“I wouldn’t want to spoil it for you,” Jared said. “Just read it. You’ll see.”

“Well, give me a hint then,” Aaron said, frustrated by curiosity now. “Something big, but without spoiling the whole thing.”

“Okay, let me think,” Jared said, pausing for a moment from the counting of change into Aaron’s hand. After a moment he started counting again, still obviously thinking too.

“So?”

“It’s about a guy with AIDS who thinks he fucked his brother.”