

## **EPILOGUE**

### **DAS KAPITAL**

Capital burns off the nuance in a culture. Foreign investment, global markets, corporate acquisitions, the flow of information through transnational media, the attenuating influence of money that's electronic and sex that's cyberspaced, untouched money and computer-safe sex, the convergence of consumer desire—not that people want the same things, necessarily, but that they want the same range of choices.

We're sitting in a pub called the Football Hooligan. There's a man at the next table and I've been waiting for him to turn this way so I can confirm the uncanny resemblance.

I'm talking to Brian Classic, old buddy Brian, and he seems to listen intently below the music. This is a thing called cult rock, loud, yes, but mostly piercing and repetitive, on an icy kind of wavelength, and Brian sits with his head low, nodding now and then, in agreement or fatigue—it's hard to tell. Some things fade and wane, states disintegrate, assembly lines shorten their runs and interact with lines in other countries. This is what desire seems to demand. A method of production that will custom-cater to cultural and personal needs, not to

cold war ideologies of massive uniformity. And the system pretends to go along, to become more supple and resourceful, less dependent on rigid categories. But even as desire tends to specialize, going silky and intimate, the force of converging markets produces an instantaneous capital that shoots across horizons at the speed of light, making for a certain furtive sameness, a planing away of particulars that affects everything from architecture to leisure time to the way people eat and sleep and dream.

Here the people are eating ethnic fast food and drinking five-star cognac and they are crowding the dance floor and falling down, some of them, and being dragged half senseless to the sidelines.

I have to lower my head to speak to Brian, who seems to be sinking into his drink, but I resist the urge to nod along with him. True, I am mostly quoting remarks made to me earlier in the day by Viktor Malt-sev, a trading company executive, but they are remarks worth repeating because Viktor has thought about these matters in the very ruck of every kind of changeover a society can bear.

Brian mutters that he finds this place frightening. I look at the kids on the

bandstand, five or six gawks with fuzz heads and fatigue pants and bomb packs strapped to their bare chests—college boys probably who've appropriated a surface of suicide terror.

But it's not the music, he says, or the band and its trappings. And I think I know

what he means. It's the sense of displacement and redefinition.

Because what kind

of random arrangement puts a club such as this up on the forty-second floor of a

new office tower filled with brokerage houses, software firms, import companies

and foreign banks, where private guards hired by various firms to patrol the

corridors sometimes shoot at each other and where the man at the next table, with

a bald dome, slit eyes and a jut beard, turning this way at last, is clearly a

professional Lenin look-alike.

We take the elevator down and go out to the street, carrying our luggage. We can't

find a taxi but after a while an ambulance comes along and the driver sticks his

head out the window.

"You go airport?" he says.

We get in the back and Brian goes to sleep on a collapsible gurney.

About twenty minutes later, out the glass panel on the rear door, I see a huge

billboard advertising a strip club.

## INTERACTIVE SONYA Nude Dancing on the Information Highway

We get to Sheremetyevo and the driver wants dollars of course. I wake up Brian

and we go into the terminal and manage to find the man from the trading

company. He tells us there's no particular hurry because we're at the wrong airport

anyway. "Where should we be, Viktor?" "No problem. I have arranged. You went

to club?" "The club was very interesting," I tell him. "Lenin was there." "There is

Marx and Trotsky too," he says. "Very crazy thing."

This is what I thought after we arrived at the military airfield and boarded a

converted cargo plane that went bucking down the runway and lifted swayingly

into the mist. And after the plane reached cruising altitude and I got up and found

a window slit in an emergency exit behind the port wing and pressed my face to

the glass to gather a sense of the great eastern reaches, endless belts of longitude,

the map-projection arcs beyond the Urals and across the Siberian Lowland—a

sense mainly of my own imagining, of course, a glimpse through falling dusk of

whatever landmass was visible in the limited window space.

And this is what I thought after I sat down again.

I thought leaders of nations used to dream of vast land empires— expansion,

annexation, troop movements, armored units driving in dusty juggernauts over the plains, the forced march of language and appetite, the digging of mass graves.

They wanted to extend their shadows across the territories.

Now they want—

I explain my thinking to Brian Classic, who sits on the opposite side of the aircraft

facing me. We're on parallel benches like paratroops waiting to reach the drop

zone.

Brian says, "Now they want computer chips."

"Exactly. Thank you."

And Viktor Maltsev says, "Yes, it's true that geography has moved inward and

smallward. But we still have mass graves, I think."

Viktor sits near Brian, a slim figure in a leather coat. We have to shout at each

other to converse above the noise that drones and rattles through the hollowed-out

interior of the massive transport. He tells us the plane was originally designed for

mixed loads of cargo and troops. There are dangling wires, fixtures jutting from

the bulkhead. The aircraft is all cylinder, all ribs and slats and shaking parts.

"It's a company plane, Viktor?"

"I buy it this morning," he says.

"And you will use it to ship material."

"We fix it up good."

His trading company is called Tchaika and they want to invite our participation in a business scheme. We are flying to a remote site in Kazakhstan to witness an underground nuclear explosion. This is the commodity that Tchaika trades in.

They sell nuclear explosions for ready cash. They want us to supply the most dangerous waste we can find and they will destroy it for us.

Depending on degree of danger, they will charge their customers—the corporation or government or municipality—between three hundred dollars and twelve hundred dollars per kilo.

Tchaika is connected to the commonwealth arms complex, to bomb-design laboratories and the shipping industry. They will pick up waste anywhere in the world, ship it to Kazakhstan, put it in the ground and vaporize it. We will get a broker's fee.

The plane comes into heavy weather.

"There's some concern in Phoenix," I tell him, "about the extent of your operating capital. The kind of safety equipment we're talking about to move highly sensitive material can result, Viktor, in expenditures that are quite dizzying."

"Yes yes yes yes. We have the expertise." He unzippers this word with a certain

defensive zest as if it sums up all the insufficiencies that have mocked him until this point. 'And we have the stacks of rubles that are also quite, I may say, dizzying. *You* didn't read Financial Times? I will send you." Brian is lying on his side wearing his coat and gloves. "I forget," he says. "Where are we going exactly?" I call across the heaving body of the plane. "The Kazakh Test Site." "Yeah but where's that?" I shout. "Where are we going, Viktor?" "Very important place that's not on the map. Near Semipalatinsk. White space on map. No problem. They will meet us." "No problem," I call across to Brian. "Thank you both. Wake me when we land," he says. I look at him carefully. It's cold and we're dead tired and I look at Brian. The knowledge of what he's been doing, the calculated breach of trust—I want to stay awake while he sleeps so I can watch him and fine-edge my feelings and wait for my moment. Viktor takes a bottle of Chivas Regal out of his overnight bag. I do a mime of polite applause. He goes to the flight deck to get some glasses but they don't have any or won't share them. I go through my bag and come up with a bottle of mouthwash and take off the cap and lurch across the aircraft shaking out the

grooved plastic piece as I go. Viktor pours some scotch into the cap and I return to my seat.

We have no seat belts and the passage is growing rougher. I have the bottle of mouthwash wedged upright in my bag so the stuff won't spill. We are the three of us alone except for the person or persons flying the aircraft and I think we feel a little forlorn in the huge tubed space, more like people in a shabby terminal late at night than lucky travelers aboard their plane. I sip my Chivas from the cap, listening to the shaking structure around us, the minimum ribbing, a sort of endoskeletal arch that makes every groaning noise in the hymnal of manned flight.

The scotch tastes faintly of gargled mint.

"What did you do before you joined Tchaika?"

"I teach history twenty years. Then no more. I look for a new life."

"There are men like you in many American cities now.

Russians, Ukrainians. Do you know what they do?"

"Drive taxi," he says.

I notice the way his eyes leap to catch mine, slyly, a brief merged moment that allows him to mark my awareness of his superior status.

He is drinking from the bottle.

I see the plane as if from some protected position in the sky. It is a swift shape

hurtling through the dark—I felt sure it was dark by now. It is a mass of dark metal racing through the rain and wind as if in a swift scene from an old black-and-white movie, scored with urgent music.

Viktor asks me if I've ever witnessed a nuclear explosion. No. It is interesting, he says, how weapons reflect the soul of the maker. The Soviets always wanted bigger yield, bigger stockpiles. They had to convince themselves they were a superpower. Throw-weight. What is throw-weight? We don't know exactly but we agree it sounds like hurled bulk, the hurled will of the collective. Soviet longrange missiles had greater throw-weight. They had to convince themselves with numbers and bulk and mass.

"And the U.S.?" I say

Eyes flicking my way, happy as carnival lights. It was the U.S., Viktor says, that designed the neutron bomb. Many buzzing neutrons, very little blast. The perfect capitalist tool. Kill people, spare property

I watch Brian sleep.

"Do you have your own capitalist tools now. Don't you, Viktor?"

"You mean my company?"

"A small private army, I hear."

"Also intelligence unit. To protect our assets."

"And scare the hell out of the competition."

He tells me that the name of the company was his idea. Tchaika means seagull and refers poetically to the fact that the company's basic business is waste. He likes the way seagulls swoop down on garbage mounds and trail after ships waiting for the glint of jettison at the bow. It is a nicer name, besides, than Rat or Pig.

I look at Brian. It's better than sleeping. I don't want to sleep until I'm finished looking. Traveling with the man from Arizona to Russia, side by side through all those time zones, sharing magazines and trading food items from the little peel-off receptacles, my dessert for his radishes because I'm fit and he's not, Sky Harbor to Sheremetyevo, all those hours and oceans and pales of plotted land, the houses and lives below—maybe it was just the seating arrangement that made me want to wait before I confronted him. It's much too clumsy to accuse a man who's sitting next to you. I wanted a quiet face-to-face in a cozy room somewhere. I see us hurtling through the dark. I tell Viktor there is a curious connection between weapons and waste. I don't know exactly what. He smiles and puts his feet up on the bench, something of a gargoyle squat. He says maybe one is the mystical twin of the other. He likes this

idea. He says waste is the devil twin. Because waste is the secret history the underhistory, the way archaeologists dig out the history of early cultures, every sort of bone heap and broken tool, literally from under the ground.

All those decades, he says, when we thought about weapons all the time and never thought about the dark multiplying byproduct.

"And in this case," I say. "In our case, in our age. What we excrete comes back to consume us."

We don't dig it up, he says. We try to bury it. But maybe this is not enough. That's why we have this idea. Kill the devil. And he smiles from his steeple perch. The fusion of two streams of history, weapons and waste. We destroy contaminated nuclear waste by means of nuclear explosions.

I cross the body of the aircraft to get my cap refilled.

"It is only obvious," he says.

I see that Brian's eyes are opened.

I return to my seat, an arm out for balance, and I sit carefully and pause and then knock back the scotch and blink a bit.

I look at Brian.

I say, "The early bomb, Brian, they had to do the core material in a certain way as

I understand it. They had to mate this part to that part. So they could get the chain

reaction that's crucial to the whole operation. One design had a male element fitted into a female element. The cylinder goes into an opening in the sphere. They shoot it right in. Very suggestive. There's really sort of no escape. Cocks and cunts everywhere."

I see our plane racing through the wind and rain. Because I knew unmistakably now, I was completely certain that Brian and

Marian, whose names sound SO nice together, a good friend now and again, that

he and my wife were partners in a deep betrayal.

In my jet-crazed way I could almost enjoy the situation we'd found ourselves in. I

was so time-zoned, dazed by fatigue and revelation, so deep in the stink of a

friend's falseheartedness that I started talking nonstop, manic and jaggy, babblemouthing

into the plane noise, hinting—I hinted insidiously, made clever references. Because I knew it all now, and here we both were, and there was no

place he could go to escape our homey chat.

At the gate we are given badges to wear, gauzy strips that register the amount of

radiation absorbed by the body in a given period. Maybe this is what makes the

landscape seem so strange. These little metered tags put an element of threat into

the dull scrub that rolls to the overwhelming sky

Brian says the gate resembles the entrance to a national park.

Viktor says don't be surprised there will be tourists here someday.

The car is driven by a Russian, not a Kazakh. He wears pressed fatigues and carries a radiation meter to go with the two badges clipped to his shirt. Far from the road we see men in white masks and floppy boots bulldozing the earth and when we come to a rise we are able to see the vast cratered plain of recent underground tests, depressions of various diameter but all seemingly wellfigured—pale-rimmed holes formed when dirt displaced by the blasts slid back into the gouged earth.

The driver tells us that the test site is known as the Polygon. He tells us a few more things, some translated by Viktor, some not. Farther on we see signs of the old tests, aboveground, and there is a strangeness here, an uneasiness I try to locate. We see the remnant span of a railroad trestle, a sculptured length of charred brown metal resting on concrete piers. A graveness, a spirit of old secrets gone bad, turned unworthy. We see the squat gray base of a shot tower, most of it blown away decades earlier, leaving this block of seamed concrete that rises only seven feet above the stubble surface, still looking oddly

stunned, with metal beams a-jut. Guilt in every dozed object, the weathered posts and I-beams left to the wind, things made and shaped by men, old schemes gone wrong.

We ride in silence.

There are mounds of bulldozed earth around a camera bunker daubed with yellow paint—yellow for contaminated. The place is strange, frozen away, a specimen of our forgetfulness even as we note the details. We see signs of houses in the distance, test dwellings blown off their foundations with people still inside, mannequins, and products on the shelves where they'd been placed maybe forty years ago—American brands, the driver says.

And Viktor says this was a point of pride with the KGB, to assemble a faithful domestic setting.

And how strange it is, strange again, more strangeness, to feel a kind of

homesickness for the things on the shelves in the houses that still stand, Old Dutch

Cleanser and Rinso White, all those half-lost icons of the old life, Ipana and

Oxydol and Chase & Sanborn, still intact out here in this nowhere near Mongolia,

and does anyone remember why we were doing all this?

I say, "Viktor, does anyone remember why we were doing all this?"

"Yes, for contest. You won, we lost. You have to tell me how it feels. Big winner."

Brian sits next to me, sleeping now

We see a rusted tank with yellow brushwork marking the turret.

There are roads

that end abruptly, weeds pushing through the asphalt.

The car reaches the site of the test, our test. It is a slightly elevated tract of land

cleared of brush and graded nearly flat. I wasn't going to be the first one out of the

car and for a moment nobody moved. Drill towers stand in the middle distance.

There are a dozen trailers arrayed on the flat, all packed with equipment that will analyze the blast.

The driver opens his door and we all get out.

The wind comes with a labored drone. Several technicians and military men stand

talking nearby. Viktor lights a cigarette and approaches them.

He looks misplaced

in his long leather coat. Out beyond the road we see bluffs scarred white by earlier

detonations. I keep glancing at the driver for signs and portents.

Viktor comes back and points to a corner of the cleared area where thick cables

snake away from several pieces of equipment set in a pale square of earth. He says

this is ground zero. We stand there nodding in the wind.

He says the shot will be fired in granite about one kilometer down. Reactor waste

and cores from retired warheads are packed around a low-yield nuclear device. He says the hole drilled from the surface to the firing point has been tamped and plugged to keep radiation from venting.

The driver puts a finger to his tongue and rubs some dirt off his sleeve. I check my sleeve for dirt. Then the driver heads back to the car and we all go with him.

He drives us to a bunker complex some distance away. About four dozen people are assembled here. Generals with braided caps, uranium speculators, a man and woman from the Bundesbank. We are introduced around. Many chesty bureaucrats with interchangeable heads. There are industrialists, bomb designers, official observers here to monitor the test. And every one of us wears a badge that measures off the rads. I follow Viktor into a briefing room where tureens and serving plates are spread across a table, heaped with smoking food. I meet executives from Tchaika and high officials of several commonwealth ministries.

There is a palpable wave of expectation. Dark young men in round caps serve glasses of peppered vodka cradled in porringers of crushed ice. I talk to a veteran of the Polygon, a weapons scientist looking for work. A Russian tells a joke to a

huddle of burly men and I stand on the edge, startled to hear the name Speedy Gonzalez mixed into the rolling narration. I look around for Brian. I want Brian to be in on this. The joke teller is in uniform, his middle finger extended skyward, his face going ruddy as the plot winds down. He does the punch line very well, speaking the words to his lifted finger, and the line comes back to me as he does it in Russian—back in English, of course, after so many years. The huddled men nod and rock, sending plosive noises from their moon jowls. Caviar pulsing in chilled bowls. There are geologists and game theorists and energy experts and a journalist with a book contract. I see waste traders and venture capitalists, piroshki and skewered lamb. There are arms dealers looking to make bids, Viktor says, on the idle inventory of weapons-grade plutonium floating at the fringes of the industry. this explosion," I say. "Not banned by international accord?" "Banned, not banned. We are exception. Test site was closed by local decree. But we are exception. It is necessary to do a trial demonstration. Plutonium waste is getting to a point that's very crazy. Worldwide, who is counting? Maybe twelve hundred metric tons." "More."

"More. Okay. Has to disappear somehow."

The food makes me happy for a time. I eat everything I can reach. Meat, fish,

eggs, my appetite is enormous. The vodka looks beautiful, with a lucent ruby

softness that belies its spice and bite. I fill myself to near capacity, feeling rebuilt,

fundamentally sound and content, pro-teinized, and I watch Viktor mingle with the

nuclear brass. He looks a little lost among those mainframe bodies. He needs to

get adjusted to an environment in which fixing and hustling have come out of the

shadows of black-market speculation to create a wholly open economy of plunder

and corruption. I'm not sure he can forget all the things he has to forget before he

can become a man who flourishes here.

I talk to a woman with a pastry flake fixed to a corner of her mouth. Eating saves

us from the fatedness of the landscape, from the dosage meters we wear on our

bodies. We talk about this. How nice that the unprinted record of some stray

pleasure might rebuke the exclusion out there, the forces that make it chancy for

us to take a simple breath of air.

I go looking for Brian Classic. The bunker complex is set on several levels with

one large section clearly off-limits to guests—sealed and guarded. I go looking in

and out of map rooms, sleeping quarters, a medical setup, down  
concrete  
passageways, often ducking my head under low openings. An  
economist from the  
U.N. is searching for a toilet. I ease myself down a hatchway  
that has an iron rail  
and hobnail steps and there he is in a small room, asleep again.  
A chair, a cot and a sink. I'm carrying a plate of food. Not for  
him— food for me. I  
sit and watch him sleep and I eat my food. He is wearing his  
loden coat, one of  
those hooded Tyrolean things of coarse cloth with wooden  
toggles for buttons.  
How right for his old-fashioned face, narrow and boyish, that I  
could probably  
crush with five earnest blows. I imagine this with some  
satisfaction. Dealing a  
serious blow. But we don't do that anymore, do we? This is a  
thing we've left  
behind. Five dealt blows to the pinkish face with the paling hair.  
But I sit there and  
watch him, you know, and I'm not sure I want to hit him.  
Brian thought I was the soul of self-completion. Maybe so. But I  
was also living in  
a state of quiet separation from all the things he might cite as the  
solid stuff of  
home and work and responsible reality. When I found out about  
him and Marian I  
felt some element of stoic surrender. Their names were nice  
together and they

were the same age and I was hereby relieved of my phony role as husband and father, high corporate officer. Because even the job is an artificial limb. Did I feel free for just a moment, myself again, hearing the story of their affair? I watch him sleep, thinking how satisfying it would be, ten serious smashes to his prep-school face. But it was also satisfying, for just a moment, to think of giving it all up, letting them have it all, the children of both marriages, the grandchild, they could keep the two houses, all the cars, he could have both wives if he wanted them.

None of it ever belonged to me except in the sense that I filled out the forms.

I don't have to get out of the chair to kick the side of the cot. I just extend my leg and kick.

Then I watch him come awake.

"So. The fastest lover *een Mayheeko*."

"What's that?"

"Old joke, *You* don't know this joke?"

"Jesus, I was dreaming. What was I dreaming?"

"A guy's worried about his wife because there's a famous lover on the prowl.

What, you don't know this joke? The Speedy Gonzalez joke.

Goes way back. Took

decades, this joke, to get from there to here."

"From where to here?"

"Fuck you. That's from where."

I kick the bed again.

He says, "What?"

"How long, Brian?"

"How long what?"

"You and Marian."

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean?"

I kick the bed. He sits up and puts his hands over his face and begins to laugh miserably.

"We used to talk more or less. That's all."

"Don't contradict me."

"We used to exchange, all right, a confidence now and then. We were close that way but it didn't last long."

"I'm smoking a cigar and drinking a brandy. Don't contradict me."

He looks at me. I don't have a cigar and I'm drinking vodka.

"I mean now? Is this the time we want to discuss the matter?"

Here? Can't we think about finding a more suitable?"

"She told me everything."

He looks away.

"I'm prepared to be very open about this but I think we need to reconsider the timing," he says.

I lean over, the plate in my left hand, and I cuff him with the right. I throw a right, openhanded because we're being open about this, hitting him with the heel of the

hand on the side of the head—a token blow that improves my mood. It is even better than eating. It is better than the meat, the fish, the eggs, the fish eggs and the vodka. I feel good about it. I think we both feel better. Once he adjusts to the knowledge that he has just been hit, he looks at me again. I know what he sees when he looks at me. Someone bigger than he is, readier to act, sitting between him and the door. This is the message that hums in the air. Not the words, the personal histories, the moral advantage or disadvantage, whatever maneuvers of bluff and counterbluff might ornament the moment. It's the force of the body. It's which body crushes the other. Not that he has anything, really, to worry about. But maybe he does.

"When you say she told you everything."

"She told me everything. We talked for a long time. The talk we had lasted a couple of days, on and off. She said a lot. She told me everything. Then I got in the company car and went to the airport and there you were." He grins at me.

"Fucking women. Can't trust them for shit."

I hit him with the flat of my hand across an ear. His head jerks impressively. It is not a hard blow. It is a token blow and the head-jerk is overdone.

"Watch what you say about her, Brian."

He lowers his eyes, looking for a fetch of sympathy. Here he is, hungry, thirsty, jetlagged, unkempt, being held prisoner, sort of, cuffed around in a basement cell.

But I don't think he has serious reason to worry.

"She told you about the heroin?"

"She told me everything."

"Only once, I swear. Scared the shit out of me."

He reaches over and takes some food out of my plate and begins to eat it. I watch

him. He keeps his head down, reaching into my plate, eating and reaching, and I

let him do it.

"I'm sorry, Nick. Kill me. I want you to. But I have to tell you it didn't last long.

And I have to tell you I was not always—how do I want to put this if I don't want

to get hit again?"

"She told me."

"I was not always willing."

I watch him eat.

"I'm the one who was reluctant and I'm the one who was scared you'd find out.

And when you didn't find out, she told you."

He reaches and eats, head down. I let him go to the sink and splash water on his

face. Bomb or no bomb, he says, that's a boring bunch of people out there. We

head back to the room with the food. The guests are spread through several areas,

drinking coffee or tea or brandy, some of them, or holding  
dessert plates up to  
their chins, those who are standing.

We feel a ground motion, a rumble underfoot. There is a guncot-  
ton thud, some faroff  
shift or heave that is also a local sensation, a hollow body sound.

Someone

says, "Da" or "Ja." Then people begin to head for the exit, one  
by one, leaning

under the low portals, room to room, trying not to be overeager,  
a chain of rustling

sighs, and we gather outside the complex and look toward  
ground zero although

there is nothing to see, really, but the sweep of the Kazakh plain.

We stand and look for some time, a few of us speaking briefly,  
soft-voiced, and

there is a sense of anticipation left dangling in the wind.

No ascending cloudmass, of course, or rolling waves of sound.

Maybe some dust

rises from the site and maybe it is only afternoon haze and  
several people point

and comment briefly and there is a flatness in the group, an  
unspoken dejection,

and after a while we go back inside.

We spend the night in the city of Semipalatinsk drinking warm  
beer and eating

horsemeat pate and in the morning, instead of flying back to  
Moscow first thing,

Viktor Maltsev decides we ought to see something.

He takes us to a place he calls the Museum of Misshapens. It is  
part of the Medical

Institute and I note how Brian begins to shy away, to fall back a bit even before we enter the museum proper, a long low room of display cases filled with fetuses.

Viktor is a man who evidently likes to deepen the texture of an experience. The fetuses, some of them, are preserved in Heinz pickle jars. There is the two-headed specimen. There is the single head that is twice the size of the body. There is the normal head that is located in the wrong place, perched on the right shoulder.

We look into the jars in silence. We go slowly from one display case to the next

because the occasion seems to demand a solemn pace and we say nothing and look

only at the jars and never at the walls or windows or each other.

Then Viktor says

something but not about the jars. He talks about the years of testing. We look into

the jars and listen to Viktor and move slowly from one display to the next. Five

hundred nuclear explosions at the test site, which is southwest of the city, and

even when they stopped testing in the atmosphere, the mine shafts they dug for

underground detonations were not deep enough to preclude the venting of

dangerous levels of radiation.

He looks at me when he says this.

Then there is the cyclops. The eye centered, the ears below the chin, the mouth completely missing. Brian is also missing. We find him outside, standing by the taxi and looking through factory smoke at the low mountains that run across the steppe. But we don't take the taxi to our hotel to pick up our luggage and go to the airport. Viktor gives directions to a radiation clinic on the outskirts of the city and we drive out there in a mood of some disgruntlement (Brian and I) even if we are unresisting, too stilled by the pickle jars to make an open complaint. He is taking us, basically, downwind. Not that the clinic was downwind of the testing in the years of frequent detonations. The clinic was probably not even here at the time. No, it is the people who were downwind, the villagers who are patients now, and their children and grandchildren, and Viktor takes us inside and we're not in a museum this time. Viktor has been here four times, he says. He says this in a way that's hard to read. Every time he has gone to the Polygon he has also come here. This is a man who is trying to merchandise nuclear explosions— using safer methods, no doubt—and he comes here to challenge himself perhaps, to prove to himself he is not blind to

the consequences. It is the victims who are blind. It is the boy with skin where his eyes ought to be, a bolus of spongy flesh, oddly like a mushroom cap, springing from each brow. It is the bald-headed children standing along a wall in their underwear, waiting to be examined. It is the man with the growth beneath his chin, a thing with a life of its own, embryonic and pulsing. It is the dwarf girl who wears a T-shirt advertising a Gay and Lesbian Festival in Hamburg, Germany, bottom edge dragging on the floor. It is the cheerful cretin who walks the halls with his arms folded. It is the woman with features intact but only half a face somehow, everything fitted into a tilted arc that floats above her shoulders like the crescent moon. She is wearing a T-shirt like the dwarf's and Viktor says this is the result of an importing ploy gone awry. A local businessman bought ten thousand T-shirts without knowing they were leftovers from a gay celebration in Europe. Very crazy thing, Viktor says, bringing these shirts into a place where Islam is stronger every day. But this is part of the same surreal, isn't it, that started on the forty-second floor of that Moscow tower.

The clinic has disfigurations, leukemias, thyroid cancers, immune systems that do not function. The doctors know Viktor and let us wander here and there. He talks to patients and nurses. He says there are unknown diseases here. And words that are also unknown, or used to be. For many years the word radiation was banned. You could not say this word in the hospitals around the test site. Doctors said this word only at home, to their wives or husbands or friends, and maybe not even there. And the villagers did not say this word because they didn't know it existed. Some of the rooms have rugs on the walls. Old men wear skullcaps, sitting motionless in shabby halls. We stand in the cafeteria doorway watching a group of young people eat lunch. Their hair, nails and teeth have fallen out and they are here to be studied. I look around for Brian. "Sickness everywhere around. And I tell you something," Viktor says. "They are blaming us. They are saying this is calculation. The Kazakhs believe this." "Blaming who?" "The Russians. They are saying we tried to murder the whole population. Red Army did not always evacuate villages before a test. People see the flash and then

a great cloud climbing the sky. They don't know what this is.  
Red Army exploded  
hydrogen bomb, very big yield, you know, and they left behind a  
hundred  
villagers to see what effect on people."  
"Do you believe this?"  
"I believe everything."  
"Do you believe it was intentional?"  
"Believe everything. Everything is true. Every time they did a  
test, hundreds of  
towns and villages exposed to radiation. Ministry of Health says,  
Okay we raise  
limit again. When limit is passed, Okay we raise again."  
Viktor is talking mostly to himself, I gather. But he is also  
talking to me. These  
faces and bodies have enormous power. I begin to feel  
something drain out of me.  
Some old opposition, a capacity to resist. I look around for  
Brian. But Brian does  
not want to see toothless people eating lunch. He is outside  
somewhere.  
We walk the halls, Viktor and I.  
He says, "Once they imagine the bomb, write down equations,  
they see it's  
possible to build, they build, they test in the American desert,  
they drop on the  
Japanese, but once they imagine in the beginning, it makes  
everything true," he  
says. "Nothing you can believe is not coming true."  
I begin to see him as a very improbable man, lean and dark with  
the gray dyed out

of his hair and a seeming need to look half gangsterish in that long slick coat. At a glance he belongs to these wild privatized times, to the marathon of danced-out plots. The get-rich-quick plot. The plot of members-only and crush-the-weak. Raw capital spewing out. The extortion-and-murder plot. But there are ironies and hesitations in Viktor's address to the moment. Too many years of slowly growing skepticism. He is in a fix, I think.

He says, 'An interesting thing. There is a woman in Ukraine who says she is second Christ. She is going to be crucified by followers and then rise from the dead. Very serious person. Fifteen thousand followers. You can believe this?

Educated people, look very normal. I don't know After communism, this?"

"After Chernobyl maybe."

"I don't know," he says.

He didn't know and neither did I. We walked out into a patchy courtyard that opened at the far end onto the great wide plain running treeless to the mountains.

Children played a game in the dirt, six boys and girls with missing arms, left arms

in every case, knotted below the elbow. The eyeless boy was also here, squatted

on his haunches, facing the players as if in careful observation of their efforts.

Copper-skinned, wearing clothes that were probably Chinese-made, a hole above the welt in each shoe, his big toes poking, a fourteen-year-old, according to Viktor, who looked to be nine or ten, but unretarded, his head slightly oversized, face and forehead marked by tumors, and the spongy caps over the place where his eyes should have been.

The kids are playing follow the leader. A boy falls down, gets up. They all fall down, get up.

Something about the juxtaposition deepened the moment, faces against the landscape, the enormous openness, the breadth of sheepland and divided sky that contains everything outside us, unbearably. I watched the boy in his bundled squat, arms folded above his knees. All the banned words, the secrets kept in whitewashed vaults, the half-forgotten plots—they're all out here now, seeping invisibly into the land and air, into the marrowed folds of the bone.

He crouched under the great split sky, ears set low and his head sloped. The sky was divided, split diagonally, a flat blue, a soft slatey blue, like the head of a crested jay, and a yellow that wasn't even yellow, an enormous heartbreak yellow

sweeping to the east, a smoky goldshot stain, and the kids with  
the knotted arms  
fell down in a row.

Most of our longings go unfulfilled. This is the word's wistful  
implication—a

desire for something lost or fled or otherwise out of reach.

In Phoenix now, with the years blowing by, I take a drive  
sometimes out past the  
regimented typeface on the map and down through the streets  
named for Indian  
tribes and past the roofing supply and sandblasting and the  
condom outlet, painted  
now in ice-cream flavors, and finally I see the impressive open-  
steel truss of the  
waste facility down off Lower Buckeye Road, with grackles  
sparking across the  
landfill and the planes in a long line coming out of the hazy  
mountains to drop into  
approach patterns.

Marian and I are closer now, more intimate than we've ever  
been. The serrate  
edges have dulled away. We go to Tucson to see our daughter  
and granddaughter.

We redecorate our house, building new bookshelves all the time,  
buying new

carpets to set on top of the old ones, and we walk along the  
drainage canal in the  
twilight and tell each other stories of the past.

In the bronze tower I stand by the window and look at the hills  
and ridges and it's

a hundred and ten degrees out on the street and I always wear a suit even if I'm only here to check the mail and I listen to the microtonal hum of the systems and feel a quiet kind of power because I've done it and come out okay, done it and won, gone in weak and come out strong, and I do my imitation gangster for the elevator guy.

We separate our household waste according to the guidelines. We rinse out the used cans and empty bottles and put them in their respective bins. We do tin versus aluminum. We use a paper bag for the paper bags, pressing the smaller bags flat and fitting them into the large bag that we've set aside for the purpose. We bundle the newspapers but do not tie them in twine.

The long ghosts are walking the halls. When my mother died I felt expanded, slowly, durably over time. I felt suffused with her truth, spread through, as with water, color or light. I thought she'd entered the deepest place I could provide, the animating entity, the thing, if anything, that will survive my own last breath, and she makes me larger, she amplifies my sense of what it is to be human. She is part of me now, total and consoling. And it is not a sadness to acknowledge that she

had to die before I could know her fully It is only a statement of the power of what comes after.

They are trading garbage in the commodity pits in Chicago.

They are making

synthetic feces in Dallas. *You* can sell your testicles to a firm in Russia that will

give you four thousand dollars and then remove the items surgically and mash

them up and extract the vital substances and market the resulting syrupy stuff as

rejuvenating beauty cream, for a profit that is awesome.

We take the TV set out of the cool room at the back of the house, Lainie's old

room, our daughter, which is my mother's old room now, the room with the

humidifier and the resilvered mirror and the good hard healthy bed, and we build

bookshelves there. % At Waste Containment I've become a sort of executive

emeritus. I go to the office now and then but mostly travel and speak. I visit

colleges and research facilities, where I'm introduced as a waste analyst. I talk to

them about the vacated military bases being converted to landfill use, about the

bunker system under a mountain in Nevada that will or will not accommodate

thousands of steel canisters of radioactive waste for ten thousand years. Then we

eat lunch. The waste may or may not explode, seventy thousand tons of spent fuel,  
and I fly to London and Zurich to attend conferences in the rain and sleet.

I rearrange books on the old shelves and match and mix for the new shelves and

then I stand there looking. I stand in the living room and look.

Or I walk through

the house and look at the things we own and feel the odd mortality that clings to

every object. The finer and rarer the object, the more lonely it makes me feel, and

I don't know how to account for this.

Marian midfifties is lean and tanned and not so edgy now, it's clear, and a little

more measured in her approach to the moment. The moment, suddenly, no longer

matters. We take drives in the desert and sometimes I tell her things she didn't

know, or knew at an unlearned level, the way you know you're sleepy or sad.

When I come across his name on a document it always makes me pause, it gives

me pause, the name in jumpy type on some stamped document, James Nicholas

Costanza, the raised stamp that marks a thing official, the document in the dusty

bottom drawer, the sense of slight confusion until I realize who he is.

I drive out there sometimes and see grackles sparking across the landfill, down

past the Indian tribe streets, and sometimes I take our  
granddaughter along when  
she is here on a visit and we see the sage gray truss of the waste  
facility and the  
planes in their landing patterns and the showy desert plants  
spilling over the pastel  
walls above the parking area.

I fly to Zurich and Lisbon to exchange ideas and make proposals  
and it is the kind  
of desperate crisis, the intractability of waste, that doesn't really  
seem to be taking  
place except in the conference reports and the newspapers. It is  
not otherwise  
touchable somehow, for all the menacing heft and breadth of the  
material, the  
actual pulsing thing.

Everybody is everywhere at once. Jeff likes to say this, our son,  
who still lives at  
home and still says things with the smirky sort of shyness he has  
brought with him  
out of adolescence, a quality that turns nearly everything he says  
into a lubricious  
hint about some secret he is keeping.

They are making synthetic feces in Dallas. They have perfected  
a form of  
simulated human waste in order to test diapers and other  
protective garments. The  
compound comes in a dry mix made of starches, fibers, resins,  
gelatins and  
polyvinyls. *You* add water for desired consistency. The color is  
usually brown.

*Nostra aetate*, as the popes like to say. In our time.  
He went out to get a pack of cigarettes and never came back. He  
smoked Lucky  
Strikes. He smoked the brand where they said, Light up a  
Lucky—it's light-up  
time. Be happy—go Lucky. That was another thing they said.  
Jeff has jobs on and off, waits on tables in a food court  
somewhere, and spends  
tremendous amounts of time with his computer. He visits a  
website devoted to  
miracles. There are many reports, he tells us, of people flocking  
to uranium mines  
in order to cure themselves. They come from Europe, Canada  
and Australia, on  
crutches and in wheelchairs, and they sit in tunnels under  
rangeland in Montana,  
where the radon emissions are many hundreds of times higher  
than the federal  
safety level. They are trying to cure themselves of arthritis,  
diabetes, blindness and  
cancer. There are reports that crippled dogs have risen and  
walked. Jeff tells us  
this and smirks shyly, either because he thinks it's funny or  
because he thinks it's  
funny and believes it.  
We have bookshelves built in the cool room at the back of the  
house, my mother's  
old room, and you know how time slips by when you are doing  
books, arranging  
and rearranging, the way time goes by untouched, matching and  
mixing

inventively, and then you stand in the room and look.  
I'll tell you what I long for, the days of disarray, when I didn't  
give a damn or a  
fuck or a farthing.  
Matt came out for the funeral, he flew out the night before with  
two of his kids and  
then broke down at the gravesite and they saw this and were  
astonished. They  
were shocked to see this because they thought of him as a father,  
not a son, and  
they looked away and then sneaked a glance and then looked  
away again when he  
fell against me and wept, and they saw me put an arm around  
him and had to  
adjust to this, the shock of seeing him as a brother and a son.  
I still respond to that thing you feel in an office, wearing a crisp  
suit and sensing  
the linked grids lap around you. It is all about the enfolding  
drone of the  
computers and fax machines. It is about the cell phones slotted  
in the desk  
chargers, the voice mail and e-mail—a sense of order and  
command reinforced by  
the office itself and the bronze tower that encases the office and  
by all the contact  
points that shimmer in the air somewhere.  
We remove the wax paper from cereal boxes before we put the  
boxes out for  
collection. The streets are dark and empty. We do clear glass  
versus colored glass

and it is remarkable really how quiet it is, a Stillness that feels old and settled,  
with landmark status, the yard waste, the paper bags pressed flat,  
the hour after  
sunset when a pause obtains in the world and you forget for a second where you are.

They sit on wooden benches in the mines and breathe radon air and soak their feet  
in deadly radon water and they pray and chant and sing soaring hymns or maybe  
just ordinary songs, dinky sing-alongs, the kind of songs that people have always  
sung, doing things in groups.

When we go for long drives—we go for long drives out past the retirement  
compounds and onto the long straight interstate where kestrels sit spaced on the  
power lines and sometimes I apply suntan lotion to my arms and face and there's a  
smell of beach, a sense of heat and beach, the haze of slick stuff across the hair on  
my forearm and the way the tube pops and sucks when it goes empty—I get  
reminded of something way back when.

No one talks about the Texas Highway Killer anymore. You never hear the name.

The name used to be in the air, always on the verge of being spoken, of reentering  
the broadcast band and causing a brief excitation along the lined highways, but the

shootings have evidently ended and the name is gone now. But sometimes I think of him and wonder if he is still out there, driving and looking, not done with this thing at all but only waiting.

When I tell her things she listens with a high clear alertness, so vigilant and still,

and she seems to know what I'm going to say before I say it. I tell her about the

time I spent in correction and why they put me there and she seems to know it, at

some level, already. She looks at me as if I were seventeen. She sees me at

seventeen. We take long walks along the drainage canal. All the hints and

intimations, all the things she spied in me at the beginning of our time

together—come to some completion now. If not for me, then for her. Because I

don't know what happened, do I?

We bundle the newspapers but do not tie them in twine, which is always the

temptation.

He enters seventeen characters and then *dot com miraculum*.

And the miracles

come scrolling down. At dinner one night he tells us about a miracle in the Bronx.

Jeff is shy about the Bronx, shy and guilty. He thinks it is part of the American

gulag, a place so distant from his experience that those who've emerged can't

possibly be willing to spend a moment in a room with someone like him. But here we are at the table, sharing a meal, and he tells us about a miracle that took place earlier in the decade and is still a matter of some debate, at least on the web, the net. A young girl was the victim of a terrible < crime. Body found in a vacant lot amid dense debris. Identified and buried. The girl memorialized on a graffiti wall nearby. And then the miracle of the images and the subsequent crush of people and the belief and disbelief. Mostly belief, it seems. We ask him questions but he is tentative with this kind of material. He is shy. He feels he doesn't have the credentials to relate a tale of such intensity, all that suffering and faith and openness of emotion, transpiring in the Bronx. I tell him what better place for the study of wonders. It is a hundred and eight degrees out on the street, a hundred and ten, a hundred and twelve, and I go to the airport and fly to Lisbon and Madrid, or I stand in the living room and look at the books. Jeff is a lurker. He visits sites but does not post. He gathers the waves and rays. He adds components and functions and sits before a spreading mass of compatible

hardware. The real miracle is the web, the net, where everybody is everywhere at

once, and he is there among them, unseen.

The intimacies we've come to share, the belated exchange of childhoods and other

ferocious times, and something else, a firm grip of another kind, a different

direction, not back but forward—the grasp of objects that bind us to some

betokening. I think I sense Marian missing in the objects on the walls and shelves.

There is something somber about the things we've collected and own, the

household effects, there is something about the word itself, *effects*, the lacquered

chest in the alcove, that breathes a kind of sadness—the wall hangings and

artifacts and valuables—and I feel a loneliness, a loss, all the greater and stranger

when the object is relatively rare and it's the hour after sunset in a stillness that

feels unceasing.

We walk along the drainage canal past tree trunks limed white—white against the

sun.

The earth opened up and he stepped inside. I think it felt that way not only to us

but to Jimmy as well. I think he went under. I don't think he wanted a fresh start or

a new life or even an escape. I think he wanted to go under. He lived day-to-day

and step-to-step and did not wonder what would become of us or how she would manage or how tall we grew or how smart we became. I don't think he spent a minute thinking about these things. I think he just went under. The failure it brought down on us does not diminish. This is how I came across the baseball, rearranging books on the shelves. I look at it and squeeze it hard and put it back on the shelf, wedged between a slanted book and a straight-up book, an expensive and beautiful object that I keep half hidden, maybe because I tend to forget why I bought it. Sometimes I know exactly why I bought it and other times I don't, a beautiful thing smudged green near the Spalding trademark and bronzed with nearly half a century of earth and sweat and chemical change, and I put it back and forget it until next time. They said, L.S./M.ET—Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco. Lucky Strike, in quotes, they said—"It's toasted." The planes come sparking out of the mountains to the south, glinting in the haze as they approach in a long line to make their landings, and I see the open-steel truss of the waste facility at the end of the road. I park beneath terraced gardens that send bougainvillea spilling over the pastel walls. My granddaughter is with me,

Sunny, she is nearly six now, and inside the vast recycling shed we stand on a catwalk and watch the operations in progress. The tin, the paper, the plastics, the styrofoam. It all flies down the conveyor belts, four hundred tons a day, assembly lines of garbage, sorted, compressed and baled, transformed in the end to squareedged units, products again, wire-bound and smartly stacked and ready to be marketed. Sunny loves this place and so do the other kids who come with their parents or teachers to stand on the catwalk and visit the exhibits. Brightness streams from skylights down to the floor of the shed, falling on the tall machines with a numinous glow. Maybe we feel a reverence for waste, for the redemptive qualities of the things we use and discard. Look how they come back to us, alight with a kind of brave aging. The windows yield a strong broad desert and enormous sky. The landfill across the road is closed now, jammed to capacity, but gas keeps rising from the great earthen berm, methane, and it produces a wavering across the land and sky that deepens the aura of sacred work. It is like a fable in the writhing air of some ghost civilization, a shimmer of desert ruin. The kids love the

machines, the balers and hoppers and long conveyors, and the  
parents look out the  
windows through the methane mist and the planes come out of  
the mountains and  
align for their approach and the trucks are arrayed in two  
columns outside the  
shed, bringing in the unsorted slop, the gut squalor of our lives,  
and taking the  
baled and bound units out into the world again, the chunky  
product blocks,  
pristine, newsprint for newsprint, tin for tin, and we all feel  
better when we leave.

I drink aged grappa and listen to jazz. I do the books on the new  
shelves and stand  
in the living room and look at the carpets and wall hangings and  
I know the ghosts  
are walking the halls. But not these halls and not this house.  
They're all back there  
in those railroad rooms at the narrow end of the night and I stand  
helpless in this  
desert place looking at the books.

I long for the days of disorder. I want them back, the days when  
I was alive on the  
earth, rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real. I was  
dumb-muscled and  
angry and real. This is what I long for, the breach of peace, the  
days of disarray  
when I walked real streets and did things slap-bang and felt  
angry and ready all the  
time, a danger to others and a distant mystery to myself.

Her name is Esmeralda. She lives wild in the inner ghetto, a slice of the South Bronx called the Wall—a girl who forages in empty lots for discarded clothes, plucks spoiled fruit from garbage bags behind bodegas, who is sometimes seen running through the trees and weeds, a shadow on the rubble walls of demolished structures, unstumbling, a tactful runner with the sweet and easy stride of some creature of sylvan myth.

The nuns have been trying to find her. Sister Grace, the younger of the two, determined to track and catch the girl and get her to a relief agency or to their convent in the middle Bronx, somewhere safe—examine her, feed her properly, get her enrolled in school. Sister Edgar, seeing a radiant grace in the girl, a reprieve from the Wall's endless distress, even a source of personal hope, a goad to the old rugged faith. All heaven trembles when a soul swings in the wind— save her from danger, bring her to candles and ashes and palms, to belief in the mystical body. The nuns deliver food to people living in the Wall and nearby, the asthmatic children and sickle-cell adults, the cases of AIDS and the cocaine babies, and every day, twice a day, three or four times a day, they drive their van past the

memorial wall. This is the six-story flank of a squatters' tenement on which graffiti writers spray-paint an angel every time a local child dies of illness or mistreatment.

Grade talks and drives and yells out the window at dogs doing doody in the street.

She wears a skirt and a windbreaker, she carries a can of Chemical Mace. Old spindle-shanked Edgar sits next to her and feels the aura of the streets and thinks herself back into another century. She is cinctured and veiled and would not know how to dress otherwise and would not be here at all if the children were healthy and the dogs middle-class.

Grade says, "Sometimes I wonder."

"What do you wonder?"

"Never mind, Sister. Forget it."

"*You* wonder if we make a difference. *You can't* understand how the last decade of the century looks worse than the first in some respects. Looks like another century in another country."

"I'm a positive person," Grade says.

Edgar has a high-frequency laugh that travels through time and space, a sort of cackle frankly, shrill and dank—she thinks the dogs can probably hear it.

"I know there's a laborious procedure you have to follow," she says, "in order to

attain a positive state of mind. It's a wonder you have strength left over to steer the car."

This pisses Gracie off and she rails a bit, respectfully, as the van approaches the salvage operation of Ismael Murioz.

A mass of junked cars, a pack jam, cars smash-heaped and jack-knifed, seventy or eighty cars, shamefaced. The nuns look instinctively for a sign of Esmeralda, who probably spends her nights sleeping in one of these cars. Then they park the van and enter the derelict tenement, climbing three flights of crumbling stairs to Ismael's headquarters.

Edgar expects him to look wan and drawn, visibly fragile. She thinks he has AIDS. It is a thing she senses. She senses dire things. She stands at a distance, studying him. An affable sort of human shambles in a tropical shirt and slapdash beard—he's in a lively mood today because he has managed to rig a system in the building that produces enough power to run a TV set.

"Sisters, look," he says.

They see a little kid, Juano, seated on a stationary bike pedaling frantically. The bike is linked to a World War II generator that Ismael got cheap at an armory liquidation. The generator is throbbing in the basement and there are cables

running from the unit up to the TV set and there is a wheezing  
drive belt

connecting the TV set to the bicycle. When the kid fast-pedals  
the bike, the

generator ekes out a flow of electricity to the television set—a  
brave beat-up

model that two of the other kids dug out of the garbage pits,  
where it was layered

in the geological age of leisure-time appliances.

Gracie is delighted and sits with the graffiti crew, eight or nine  
kids, watching the

stock market channel.

Ismael says, "What do you think? I did okay? This is just a start-  
up. I got things

I'm planning big-time."

Edgar disapproves of course. This is her mission, to disapprove.

One of the stern

mercies of the Wall, a place unlinked to the usual services, is  
that TV has not been

available. Now here it is, suddenly. You touch a button and all  
the things

concealed from you for centuries come flying into the remotest  
room. It's an

epidemic of seeing. No conceivable recess goes unscanned. In  
the uterus, under

the ocean, to the lost halls of the human brain. And if you can  
see it, you can catch

it. There's a pathogenic element in a passing glance.

Ismael says, "I'm planning to go on-line real soon, Sisters.

Advertise my junk cars.

Go, like, global. Scrap metal for these trodden countries looking to build a military."

On the screen an image flicks and jumps. It is a man's discoid head, a fellow in a white shirt with blue collar, or blue shirt with white collar—there is a fairly frequent color shift. He is talking about the big board composite while numbers and letters flow in two bands across the bottom of the screen, a blue band and a white band, and the crew sits watching and the kid on the bike is bent and pedaling, a furious pumping boy, and the names and prices flow in two different directions with active issues blinking.

Ismael says, "Some people have a personal god, okay. I'm looking to get a personal computer. What's the difference, right?"

Ismael likes to tease the nuns. Edgar watches him carefully. She admires the graffiti wall, the angels arrayed row after row, blue for boys, pink for girls, but she is wary of the man who runs the project and she tries to understand the disappointment she feels, seeing Ismael in good spirits and evidently healthy.

Does Sister want him to be deathly ill? Does she think he ought to be punished for being homosexual?

Everybody's watching TV except for her. She's watching Ismael.  
No pallor or  
weight loss or lesions or other visible symptoms. The only thing  
he shows is a  
snaggle smile from out of his history of dental neglect.  
Why does she want to see him suffer? Isn't he one of the  
affirmative forces in the  
Wall, earning money with his salvage business, using it more or  
less altruistically,  
teaching his crew of stray kids, abandoned some of them,  
pregnant one or two,  
runaways, throwaways—giving them a sense of responsibility  
and self-worth?  
And doesn't he help the nuns feed the hungry?  
She studies him for marks, for early signs of incapacity. Then  
she steals a look out  
the window, hoping to glimpse the elusive girl. Sister has seen  
her a number of  
times from this window, almost always running. Run is what she  
does. It is her  
beauty and her safety both, her melodious hope, a thing of  
special merit, a  
cleansing, the fleet leaf-fall of something godly blowing through  
the world.  
Two of the charismatics come in to watch TV These are people  
from the top floor,  
operating the only church in the Wall, a congregation of  
pentecostals seeking to  
receive the gift of the Spirit, laying on hands, shouting out  
words,

prophesying—the whole rocking socking package that makes Edgar want to run and hide.

Of course they look at her a little sideways too.

Ismael appoints four members of the crew to go with the nuns and distribute food

in the area. But the crew is rooted right now. They urge Juano to pedal faster

because this is the only way to change channels and they want to watch cartoons

or movies, something with visuals better than a head.

They're saying, "Go, man, fasta, fasta."

The bicycle boy bends and pumps and the picture wavers briefly but then springs

back to the round announcer's face and the moving lines of prices. Ismael stands

there laughing. He loves the language of buying and selling and the sight of those

clustered sets of letters that represent enormous corporate entities with their jets

and stretches and tanker fleets. He starts pulling kids off the cushionless sofa and

stone-slinging them toward the door while the other kids and the jivey

charismatics keep urging Juano on.

They're saying, "Fasta, fasta, you the man."

The boy cranks and strains, bouncing on the seat, but the numbers keep flowing

across the screen. Electronics slightly up, transports down, industrials more or less

unchanged.

Three weeks later Edgar sits in the van and watches her partner emerge from the red brick convent—rolling gait, short legs and squarish body. Gracie's face is averted as she edges around the front of the vehicle and opens the door on the driver's side.

She gets in and grips the wheel, looking straight ahead.

"I got a call from the precinct near the Wall."

Then she reaches for the door and shuts it. She grips the wheel again.

"Somebody raped Esmeralda and threw her off a roof."

She starts the engine.

"I'm sitting here thinking, Who do I kill?"

She looks at Edgar briefly, then puts the van in gear.

"Because this is the only question I can ask myself without giving in to despair."

They drive south through local streets, the tenement brick smoked mellow in morning light. Did Edgar know this would happen? Lately, yes, a knowing in her bones. She feels the weather of Grade's rage and pain. In recent days she'd

approached the girl, Gracie had, and talked to her from a distance, and thrown a

bag of food and clothing into the pokeweed where Esmeralda stood. They ride all

the way in silence with the older nun mind-reciting questions and answers from

the Baltimore Catechism. The strength of these exercises, which are a form of

perdurable prayer, rests in the voices that accompany hers,  
children responding  
through the decades, syllable-crisp, a panpipe reply that is the  
lucid music of her  
life. Question and answer. What deeper dialogue might right  
minds devise? She  
reaches her hand across to Grade's on the wheel and keeps it  
there for a digital tick  
on the dashboard clock. Who made us? God made us. Those  
clear-eyed faces so  
believing. Who is God? God is the Supreme Being who made all  
things. She feels  
tired in her arms. Her arms are heavy and dead and she gets all  
the way to Lesson  
12 when the projects appear at the rim of the sky, upper  
windows white with  
sunplay against the broad dark face of beaten stone.  
When Gracie finally speaks she says, "It's still there."  
"What's still there?"  
"That knocking in the engine. Hear it? Hear it?"  
"I don't hear a thing."  
"Ku-ku. Ku-ku."  
Then she drives the van down past the projects toward the  
painted wall.  
When they get there the angel is already sprayed in place. A  
winged figure in a  
pink sweatshirt and pink and aqua pants and a pair of white Nike  
Air Jordans with  
the logo prominent—she was a running girl so they gave her  
running shoes. And

little Juano still dangles from a rope, winched down from the roof by the old handpowered hoist the crew uses to grapple cars onto the deck of their flatbed truck.

Ismael and others bend over the ledge attempting to shout correct spellings down to him as he drifts to and from the wall, leaning in to spray the interlaced letters

that mark the great gone era of wildstyle graffiti.

The nuns stand outside the van watching the kid finish the last scanted word and

then see him yanked skyward in the cutting wind.

Esmeralda Lopez

12 year Petected in Heven

When they get to the third floor Ismael is smoking a cigar, arms folded on his

chest. Gracie paces the room. She doesn't seem to know where to begin, how to

address the nameless thing that someone has done to this child they'd so hoped to

save. She paces, she clenches her fists. They hear the gassy moan of a city bus

some blocks away.

"Ismael. *You* have to find out who this guy is that did this thing."

"You think I'm running here? El Lay Pee Dee?"

"*You* have contacts in the neighborhood that no one else has."

"What neighborhood? The neighborhood's over there. This here's the Wall. It's all

I can do to get these kids so they spell a word correct when they spray their paint.

When I was writing we did subway cars in the dark without a letter misspell."

"Who cares about spelling?" Gracie says.

Edgar used to care but not today and maybe never again. She feels weak and lost.

The great Terror gone, the great thrown shadow dismantled—the launched object

in the sky named for a Greek goddess on a bell krater in 500 B.C. All terror is

local now. Some noise on the pavement very near, the stammer of casual rounds

from a passing car, someone who carries off your child. Ancient fears revived,

they will steal my child, they will come into my house when I'm asleep and cut out

my heart because they have a dialogue with Satan.

She says a desperate prayer.

Pour forth we beseech thee, O Lord, thy grace into our hearts.

Ten years' indulgence, a blockbuster number, if the prayer is recited at dawn, noon

and eventide, or as soon thereafter as possible.

One of the girls is pedaling the bike, Willie for short, and she calls out to them,

*hey, here, look*, and they gather at the TV set and stand astonished. There is a news

report of the murder, their murder, and it is freaking network coverage,

CNN—tragic life and death of homeless child. The crew is stunned to see footage

of the Wall, two and a half seconds of film that shows the building they're in, the

facade of spray-painted angels, the overgrown lots with their bat  
caverns and owl  
roosts. They gawk and buzz, charged with a kind of second  
sight, the things they  
know so well seen inside out, made new and nationwide. They  
stand there  
smeared in other people's seeing. Then the anchorwoman comes  
on. They tell  
Willamette to pedal faster man because the picture is beginning  
to fade and the  
anchorwoman's electric red hair is color-running from her head  
in a luminous ring,  
which makes her all the more amazing, and she describes their  
lives to them in a  
bell-tone virgin voice, a woman so striking of feature she makes  
the news her own,  
and Willie pedals for all she's worth and they urge her firmly on.  
Sister does not watch. She sees nothing for the rest of that day  
and the day after  
and the two or three weeks after that. She sees the human heart  
exposed like a  
pig's muscle on a slab. That's the only thing she sees. She  
believes she is falling  
into crisis, beginning to think it is possible that all creation is a  
spurt of blank  
matter that chances to make an emerald planet here, a dead star  
there, with random  
waste between. The serenity of immense design is missing from  
her life,  
authorship and moral form, and when Gracie and the crew take  
food into the

projects Edgar waits in the van, she is the nun in the van, and  
when Gracie maces  
a rat at the curbstone Edgar does not blink.  
It is not a question of disbelief. There is another kind of belief, a  
second force,  
insecure, untrusting, a faith that is spring-fed by the things we  
fear in the night,  
and she thinks she is succumbing.

*Keystroke 1*

She sleeps on the roof when it's not too cold and this is where he  
sees her, on the  
roof of a boarded four-story building with fire escape intact.  
He's up there  
wandering, thinking his thoughts, a man who drifts in and out of  
the Wall, a sidler  
type, doesn't like to be looked at, and when you enter a name-  
search the screen  
reads *Searching*. He comes across the sleeping girl and feels a  
familiar anger  
rising and knows he will need to do something to make her pay  
He's on her like  
that. She tries to fight but does not cry out. He beats her with the  
end of his fist,  
sending ham-merblows to the head. Struggle bitch get hit. He  
wants to turn her  
over on her face and put it up inside her. She fights and whisper-  
cries in a voice  
that makes him angrier, like who the fuck she think she is, and  
the screen reads  
*Searching*. Either way he's gonna hit her, she struggle or not,  
and he looks away

when he does it, sidle-type. No eye contact, cunt. Last woman  
he looked at was his  
mother. After he does it, driving it in and spilling it out, he hits  
her one last time,  
hard, whore, and drags her up on the ledge and leans her over  
and lets her go. *You*  
dead, bitch. Then he goes back to thinking his nighttime  
thoughts. Screen reads  
*Searching.*

Then the stories begin, word passing block to block, moving  
through churches and  
superettes, maybe garbled slightly, mistranslated here and there,  
but not deeply  
distorted—it is clear enough that people are talking about the  
same uncanny  
occurrence. And some of them go and look and tell others,  
stirring the hope that  
grows when things surpass their limits.

They gather after dusk at a windy place between bridge  
approaches, seven or eight  
people drawn by the word of one or two, then thirty people  
drawn by the seven,  
then a tight silent crowd that grows bigger but no less respectful,  
two hundred  
people wedged onto a traffic island in the bottommost Bronx  
where the  
expressway arches down from the terminal market and the train  
yards stretch  
toward the narrows, all that old industrial muscle with its fretful  
desolation—the

ramps that shoot tall weeds and the waste burner coughing toxic fumes and the old  
railroad bridge spanning the Harlem River, an openwork tower at either end,  
maybe swaying slightly in persistent wind.  
They come and park their cars if they have cars, six or seven to a car, parking  
tilted on a high shoulder or in the factory side streets, and they wedge themselves  
onto the concrete island between the expressway and the pocked boulevard,  
feeling the wind come chilling in and gazing above the wash of standard rip-roar  
traffic to a billboard floating in the gloom—an advertising sign scaffolded high  
above the river-bank and meant to attract the doped-over glances of commuters on  
the trains that run incessantly down from the northern suburbs into the thick of  
Manhattan money and glut.  
Edgar sits across from Gracie in the refectory She eats her food without tasting it  
because she decided years ago that taste is not the point. The point is to clean the  
plate.  
Grade says, "No, please, you *can't*."  
"Just to see."  
"No, no, no, no."  
"I want to see for myself."  
"This is tabloid. This is the worst kind of tabloid superstition. It's horrible. A

complete, what is it? A complete abdication, you know? Be sensible. Don't abdicate your good sense."

"It could be her they're seeing."

"*You* know what this is? It's the nightly news. It's the local news at eleven with all the grotesque items neatly spaced to keep you watching the whole half hour."

"I think I have to go," Edgar says.

"This is something for poor people to confront and judge and understand and we have to see it in that framework. The poor need visions, okay?"

"I believe you are patronizing the people you love," Edgar says softly.

"That's not fair."

"You say the poor. But who else would saints appear to? Do saints and angels appear to bank presidents? Eat your carrots."

"It's the nightly news. It's gross exploitation of a child's horrible murder."

"But who is exploiting? No one's exploiting," Edgar says.

"People go there to weep, to believe."

"It's how the news becomes so powerful it doesn't need TV or newspapers. It exists in people's perceptions. It's something they invent, strong enough to seem real. It's the news without the media."

Edgar eats her bread.

"I'm older than the Pope. I never thought I would live long enough to be older than

a pope and I think I need to see this thing."

"Pictures lie," Grade says.

"I think I need to be there."

"Don't pray to pictures, pray to saints."

"I think I need to go."

"But you can't. It's crazy. Don't go, Sister."

But Edgar goes. She puts on her latex gloves and winter cape and heads for the

door, planning to take the bus and subway, and Gracie can't let her go alone. She

rushes out to the van, wearing her retainer for spacy teeth, a thing she never wears

in public, and they drive down past the Wall and into dark and empty streets and

the van stalls out, doing a murmurous swoon, and they walk the last eleven blocks

with Gracie carrying Mace and a cellular phone.

A madder orange moon hangs over the city.

People in the glare of passing cars, hundreds clustered on the island, their own cars

parked cockeyed and biaswise, dangerously near the speeding traffic. The nuns

dash across the boulevard and squeeze onto the island and people make room for

them, pressed bodies part to let them stand at ease.

They follow the crowd's stoked gaze. They stand and look. The billboard is

unevenly lighted, dim in spots, several bulbs blown and unreplaced, but the

central elements are clear, a vast cascade of orange juice pouring diagonally from

top right into a goblet that is handheld at lower left—the perfectly formed hand of a female Caucasian of the middle suburbs. Distant willows and a vaguish lake view set the social locus. But it is the juice that commands the eye, thick and pulpy with a ruddled flush that matches the madder moon. And the first detailed drops splashing at the bottom of the goblet with a scatter of spindrift, each fleck embellished with the finicky rigor of some precisionist painting. What a lavishment of effort and technique, no refinement spared—the equivalent, Edgar thinks, of medieval church architecture. And the six-ounce cans of Minute Maid arrayed across the bottom of the board, a hundred identical cans so familiar in design and color and typeface that they have personality, the convivial cuteness of little orange-and-black people. Edgar doesn't know how long they're supposed to wait or exactly what is supposed to happen. Produce trucks pass in the rumbling dusk. She lets her eyes wander to the crowd. Working people, shopkeepers, maybe some drifters and squatters but not many, and then she notices a group near the front, fitted snug to the prowed shape of the island—they're the charismatics from the top floor of the tenement in

the Wall, dressed mainly in floppy white, tublike women, reedy men in dreadlocks. The crowd is patient, she is not, finding herself taut with misgiving, absorbing Grade's take on the whole business. Planes drop out of the darkness toward the airport across the water, splitting the air with throttled booms. The nuns see Ismael Murioz standing thirty yards away, surrounded by his crew—Ismael looking a little ghostly in the beams of swinging light—and Edgar presses a knowing look on Gracie. They stand and watch the billboard. They stare stupidly at the juice. After twenty minutes there is a rustle, a sort of perceptual wind, and people look north, children point north, and Edgar strains to catch what they are seeing.

*The train.*

She feels the words before she sees the object. She feels the words although no one has spoken them. This is how a crowd brings things to single consciousness. Then she sees it, an ordinary commuter train, silver and blue, ungraffitf d, moving smoothly toward the drawbridge. The headlights sweep the billboard and she hears a sound from the crowd, a gasp that shoots into sobs and moans and the cry of

some unnameable painful elation. A blurted sort of whoop, the holler of unstoppered belief. Because when the train lights hit the dimmest part of the billboard a face appears above the misty lake and it belongs to the murdered girl.

A dozen women clutch their heads, they whoop and sob, a spirit, a godsbreath passing through the crowd.

*Esmeralda.*

*Esmeralda.*

Sister is in body shock. She has seen it but so fleetingly, too fast to absorb—she

wants the girl to reappear. Women holding babies up to the sign, to the flowing

juice, let it bathe them in baptismal balsam and oil. And Gracie talking into

Edgar's face, into the jangle of voices and noise.

"Did it look like her?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"I think so," Edgar says.

"But you've never seen her up close. I've seen her up close,"

Gracie says, "and I

think it was just a trick of light. Not a person at all. Not a face but a stab of light."

When Gracie wears her retainer she speaks with a kind of fizzy lisp.

"It's just the undersheet," she says. 'A technical flaw that causes the image

underneath, the image from the papered-over ad to show through the current ad."

Is she right?

"When sufficient light shines on the current ad, it causes the image beneath to show through," she says.

Sibilants echo wetly off Grade's teeth.

But is she right? Has the news shed its dependence on the agencies that report it?

Is the news inventing itself on the eyeballs of walking talking people?

Edgar studies the billboard. What if there is no papered-over ad?

Why should there

be an ad under the orange juice ad? Surely they remove one ad before installing another.

Gracie says, "What now?"

They stand and wait. They wait only eight or nine minutes this time before another

train approaches. Edgar moves, she tries to edge and gently elbow forward, and

people make way, they see her—a nun in a veil and full habit and dark cape

followed by a sheepish helpmeet in a rummage coat and headscarf, holding aloft a portable phone.

They see her and embrace her and she lets them. Her presence is a verifying

force—a figure from a universal church with sacraments and secret bank accounts

and a fabulous art collection. All this and she elects to follow a course of poverty, chastity and obedience. They embrace her and let her pass and she is among the charismatic band, the gossellers rocking in place, when the train lamps swing their beams onto the billboard. She sees Esmeralda's face take shape under the rainbow of bounteous juice and above the little suburban lake and there is a sense of someone living in the image, an animating spirit— less than a tender second of life, less than half a second and the spot is dark again. She feels something break upon her. An angelus of clearest joy. She embraces Sister Grace. She yanks off her gloves and shakes hands, pumps hands with the great-bodied women who roll their eyes to heaven. The women do great twohanded pump shakes, fabricated words jumping out of their mouths, trance utterance—they're singing of things outside the known deliriums. Edgar thumps a man's chest with her fists. She finds Ismael and embraces him. She looks into his face and breathes the air he breathes and enfolds him in her laundered cloth. Everything feels near at hand, breaking upon her, sadness and loss and glory and an old mother's bleak pity and a force at some deep level of lament that makes her

feel inseparable from the shakers and mourners, the awestruck  
who stand in tidal  
traffic—she is nameless for a moment, lost to the details of  
personal history, a  
disembodied fact in liquid form, pouring into the crowd.

Gracie says, "I don't know."

"Of course you know. *You* know. *You* saw her."

"I don't know. It was a shadow."

"Esmeralda on the lake."

"I don't know what I saw."

"*You* know. Of course you know. *You* saw her."

They wait for two more trains. Landing lights appear in the sky  
and the planes

keep dropping toward the runway across the water, another  
flight every minute

and a half, the backwashed roars overlapping so everything is  
seamless noise and

the air has a stink of smoky fuel.

They wait for one more train.

How do things end, finally, things such as this—peter out to  
some forgotten core

of weary faithful huddled in the rain?

The next night a thousand people fill the area. They park their  
cars on the

boulevard and try to butt and pry their way onto the traffic island  
but most of them

have to stand in the slow lane of the expressway, skittish and  
watchful. A woman

is struck by a motorcycle, sent swirling into the asphalt. A boy is  
dragged a

hundred yards, it is always a hundred yards, by a car that keeps on going. Vendors move along the lines of stalled traffic selling flowers, soft drinks and live kittens.

They sell laminated images of Esmeralda printed on prayer cards. They sell pinwheels that never stop spinning.

The night after that the mother shows up, Esmeralda's lost junkie mother, and she collapses with flung arms when the girl's face appears on the billboard. They take her away in *an* ambulance that is followed by a number of TV trucks. Two men fight with tire irons, blocking traffic on a ramp. Helicopter cameras record the scene and the police trail orange caution tape through the area—the very orange of the living juice.

The next evening the sign is blank. What a hole it makes in space. People come and don't know what to say or think, where to look or what to believe. The sign is a white sheet with two lonely words, *Space Available*, followed by a phone number in tasteful type.

When the first train comes, at dusk, the lights show nothing. And what do you remember, finally, when everyone has gone home and the streets are empty of devotion and hope, swept by river wind? Is the memory thin and

bitter and does it shame you with its fundamental untruth—all  
nuance and wishful  
silhouette? Or does the power of transcendence linger, the sense  
of an event that  
violates natural forces, something holy that throbs on the hot  
horizon, the vision  
you crave because you need a sign to stand against your doubt?  
Edgar feels the pain in her joints, the old body deep in routine  
pain, pain at the  
points of articulation, prods of sharp sensation in the links  
between bones.

But she holds the image tight in her mind, the fleeting face on  
the lighted board,  
her virgin twin who is also her daughter. And she recalls the  
smell of jet fuel. This  
is the incense of her experience, the burnt cedar and gum, a  
retaining medium that  
keeps the moment whole, all the moments, the swaying soulclap  
raptures and the  
unspoken closeness, a fellowship of deep belief.

There is nothing left to do but die and this is precisely what she  
does, Sister Alma

Edgar, bride of Christ, passing peacefully in her sleep, the first  
faint snow of  
another dim winter falling softly on the unknown streets,  
flurries, crystals, shaped  
flakes, a pale slant snow disappearing as it falls.

### *Keystroke 2*

In her veil and habit she was basically a face, or a face and  
scrubbed hands. Here

in cyberspace she has shed all that steam-ironed fabric. She IS not naked exactly but she is open—exposed to every connection you can make on the world wide web.

There is no space or time out here, or in here, or wherever she is. There are only connections. Everything is connected. All human knowledge gathered and linked, hyperlinked, this site leading to that, this fact referenced to that, a keystroke, a mouse-click, a password— world without end, amen.

But she is in cyberspace, not heaven, and she feels the grip of systems. This is why she's so uneasy. There is a presence here, a thing implied, something vast and bright. She senses the paranoia of the web, the net. There's the perennial threat of virus of course. Sister knows all about contaminations and the protective measures they require. This is different—it's a glow, a lustrous rushing force that seems to flow from a billion distant net nodes.

When you decide on a whim to visit the H-bomb home page, she begins to understand. Everything in your computer, the plastic, silicon and mylar, every logical operation and processing function, the memory, the hardware, the software, the ones and zeroes, the triads inside the pixels that form the on-screen image—it

all culminates here.

First a dawnlight, a great aurora glory massing on the color monitor. Every thermonuclear bomb ever tested, all the data gathered from each shot, code name, yield, test site, Eniwetok, Lop Nor, Novaya Zemlya, the foreignness, the otherness of remote populations implied in the place names, Mururoa, Kazakhstan, Siberia, and the wreath-work of extraordinary detail, firing systems and delivery systems, equations and graphs and schematic cross sections, shot after shot summoned at a click, a hit, Bravo, Romeo, Greenhouse Dog—and Sister is basically in it.

She sees the flash, the thermal pulse. She hears the rumble building, the great gathering force rolling off the 16-bit soundboard. She stands in the flash and feels the power. She sees the spray plume. She sees the fireball climbing, the superheated sphere of burning gas that can blind a person with its beauty, its dripping christblood colors, solar golds and reds. She sees the shock wave and hears the high winds and feels the power of false faith, the faith of paranoia, and then the mushroom cloud spreads around her, the pulverized mass of radioactive debris, eight miles high, ten miles, twenty, with skirted stem and smoldng

platinum cap.

The jewels roll out of her eyes and she sees God.

No, wait, sorry. It is a Soviet bomb she sees, the largest yield in history, a device exploded above the Arctic Ocean in 1961, preserved in the computer that helped to build it, fifty-eight megatons—add the digits and you get thirteen.

Whole populations potentially skelly-boned in the massive flash— dem bones, dem bones, sing the washtub women. And Sister begins to sense the byshadows that stretch from the awe of a central event. How the intersecting systems help pull us apart, leaving us vague, drained, docile, soft in our inner discourse, willing to be shaped, to be overwhelmed—easy retreats, half beliefs. Shot after shot, bomb after bomb, and they are fusion bombs, remember, atoms forcibly combined, and even as they detonate across the screen, again and again, there is another fusion taking place. No physical contact, please, but a coupling all the same. A click, a hit and Sister joins the other Edgar. A fellow celibate and more or less kindred spirit but her biological opposite, her male half, dead these many years. Has he been waiting for this to happen? The bulldog fed, J. Edgar Hoover, the Law's debased saint, hyperlinked at last to Sister Edgar—a single

fluctuating impulse now, a piece of coded information.  
Everything is connected in the end.  
Sister and Brother. A fantasy in cyberspace and a way of seeing  
the other side and  
a settling of differences that have less to do with gender than  
with difference itself,  
all argument, all conflict programmed out.  
Is cyberspace a thing within the world or is it the other way  
around? Which  
contains the other, and how can you tell for sure?  
A word appears in the lunar milk of the data stream. You see it  
on your monitor,  
replacing the tower shots and airbursts, the detonations of high-  
yield devices set  
on barges or dangled from balloons, replacing the  
comprehensive text displays that  
accompany the bombs. A single seraphic word. You can  
examine the word with a  
click, tracing its origins, development, earliest known use, its  
passage between  
languages, and you can summon the word in Sanskrit, Greek,  
Latin and Arabic, in  
a thousand languages and dialects living and dead, and locate  
literary citations,  
and follow the word through the tunneled underworld of its  
ancestral roots.  
Fasten, fit closely, bind together.  
And you can glance out the window for a moment, distracted by  
the sound of  
small kids playing a made-up game in a neighbor's yard, some  
kind of kickball

maybe, and they speak in your voice, or piggyback races on the weedy lawn, and  
it's your voice you hear, essentially, under the glimmerglass sky, and you look at  
the things in the room, offscreen, unwebbed, the tissued grain of the deskwood  
alive in light, the thick lived tenor of things, the argument of things to be seen and  
eaten, the apple core going sepia in the lunch tray, and the dense measures of  
experience in a random glance, the monk's candle reflected in the slope of the  
phone, hours marked in Roman numerals, and the glaze of the wax, and the curl of  
the braided wick, and the chipped rim of the mug that holds your yellow pencils,  
skewed all crazy, and the plied lives of the simplest surface, the slabbed butter  
melting on the crumbled bun, and the yellow of the yellow of the pencils, and you  
try to imagine the word on the screen becoming a thing in the world, taking all its  
meanings, its sense of serenities and contentments out into the streets somehow,  
its whisper of reconciliation, a word extending itself ever outward, the tone of  
agreement or treaty, the tone of repose, the sense of mollifying silence, the tone of  
hail and farewell, a word that carries the sunlit ardor of an object deep in

drenching noon, the argument of binding touch, but it's only a  
sequence of pulses  
on a dullish screen and all it can do is make you pensive—a  
word that spreads a  
longing through the raw sprawl of the city and out across the  
dreaming bourns and  
orchards to the solitary hills.  
Peace.