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Author: Shellko, Kirk

Pedai

“Bonds”, “Fetters”

Kirk A. Shellko

BodenlosTwenty

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## Foreword

Pedai is meant to be disturbing. It is violent and sometimes dispiriting. Not an ordinary narrative, it possesses aspects of ordinary narration. Pedai's narrative presents itself as an absurdity, locked in conflict with moments of joy and pleasure. Pedai stands with the others in the series of the Other and One as a phenomenological narration filled with peril and comfort, meant to disquiet, but mostly its best description is perhaps noir philosophy. Our lives are difficult and filled with suffering, even for the most fortunate of us. We are replete with errant thought and lacunae, as are our bonds.

Kirk Shellko

My home is the marsh where the iron rail meets heaven and the soot-seeped sky breathes black and gray the ash of Hamilton's miasma. I am friend, adversary, companion, neighbor, co-conspirator and partner. I am a vigorous creature whose morality is organic as my life.

## Orange Hue

Mallory awoke with a start; he didn't know where he was, or who he was. Gradually, the creep of recognition seeped into his mind.

“Oh...yeah. That's right, Mallory.”

He crafted a half-roll about his bed, and saw the clock beside at the number seven and thirty.

“Time to move,” he thought.

Mallory didn't budge. He couldn't dislodge himself from his semi-fetal position. His back ached; his legs were stiff, and his head was not thus far clear, not yet alert enough to tell him that he felt no comfort. He opened his mouth, and felt his parched lips with his tongue, lifting his head—which was quite close to the ceiling of his small bedroom in his condominium—then let it fall back onto the pillow beneath. He remembered now: he was inebriated still, harddrunk. He had closed down a five o'clock bar, but he hadn't obtained what he wanted. Earlier that evening, he had meandered about the lake-side on his bicycle, watching the sun set, which gave him a restful feeling. Then he stopped by café Taedium and chatted with some friends—made some acquaintances—for a while, but the sun was no lasting comfort and his companions, while entertaining enough, only heaved burden upon him as he dragged himself about that day. He was a forty-five year old man who had lived in Chicago for seven years, the result of a failed attempt at marriage. He had moved to the Midwest, but she abandoned their plans—abandoned him—and he remained in the city. His siblings had children of their own, or had begun seemingly early the anticipated descent into oblivion. Mallory was not a depressed man, nor was he particularly excitable, but of late he was unable to shake a feeling of anxious discontent. While he had drunk-been-drunk that night, he enjoyed the mint julep that was his favorite beverage; his taste for flat mint made him the butt of many jokes that came from the regulars at The Everyday Tavern Entautha.

“You drink like a woman,” he'd heard.

“He doesn’t drink like a woman; he drinks women’s drinks.”

“He knows what I mean.”

Mallory chuckled goodnature-like, and the patrons laughed while his drink tasted not minty, but like paste. Mallory thought that his less-than-contentment with the night’s festivities had something to do with a minor altercation in which he had found himself earlier that day. He rode his bicycle everywhere, even to the bars on Thursdays and Fridays, and he had found himself waiting for a regular, whom he knew only slightly, to affix his bicycle to a bike-rack just outside The Everyday Tavern Entautha. Mallory had been frustrated that day, and he was aggravated all the more because he was unable to determine why he felt as he did. He supposed that he had possessed an angry mien, and when the man had at last affixed his cycle to the blackmetal arch firm-held in the cement, he discovered Mallory staring hard at it. The man walked a few feet; turned back.

“What’s goin’ on?” the man said in a banana-bread-beer aggravated tone.

Mallory turned to him, confused at his irritation.

“I’m trying to decide if my bike will fit.”

The man hurriedly walked over to his bicycle and moved its back end a bit to the right.

“Good enough?”

But when Mallory rolled his cycle toward the metal-black arch, the man smashed the palm of his hand into Mallory’s face and shoved him onto the ground. He then arose from his crouched position and indifferently sauntered into The Everyday Tavern Entautha. Bewildered and shaking, Mallory arose and locked his cycle to the blackmetal arch. He was pensive for a moment, wondering if he ought to enter. In the end, he sat at his regular station.

Surprisingly, the night was pleasant; as others had been during his time in Midwest glad-hand land. He darted with Amity, his long-time confidant who had listened to his salt-teased rumblings concerning the death of his marriage plan—the ruin of hope—a destruction which lasted so long as it took Mallory to drink his fiancé out of his mind. She had found herself an urban lawyer who became an explosion of handy-cash, just ready. Amity listened to him repeatedly over the course of months and when at last she grew so tired of hearing how he claimed to be celibate for his love,

“Pathetic...you’re pathetic.”

“??”

“No, really Mal, just stop it with this shit. She’s gone. Forget about it.”

He had been surprised at her reaction; she had never before tired of his pathetic ramblings. Weary and long annoyed, she refused to speak to him for three weeks. When they finally, silently, reconciled, he returned a slightly older, diminished and paler man slumping in his own frame, as if some god had robbed him of vital breath. He drank a bit less, didn’t lament over the ruin of his plans; at least he didn’t mention them. He simply darted at the bar; became angry every so often and fought, though not regularly. Amity was his competent, and consistent, dart partner. She was part of a league that regularly won.

“She is good,” thought Mallory.

Thus their bond.

Still, she wasn’t enough that night. Nothing was wrong. Mallory had a good job, regular income. He purchased a “nice place” near the lake. Friends came to his condominium periodically, and he had money in the bank, which was somewhat rare. No, nothing bothered him, at least nothing he was able to discern, yet he was unable to drive away a feeling of anxious dejection. True, he was over-worked, and he felt as if his life would go no further than it already had. He was in the process of balding his red-orange hair, which had been thick throughout his thirties and early forties, but the slow steal of demise upon his frame troubled him no more. No, some thing in the back of

his mind kept slipping upon him. It told him things, kept him from enjoying himself. It was a sinking, liquid slump of lead constantly dripping-down-along the back stem of his brain, filling the length of his spine out into his mouth; it made him nauseous and compelled him to say things.

“I need you,” he might blurt out to no-one while alone at home.

Mallory thought that possibly he still had residual feelings for his fiancé, but she was two women ago. There had been Narcissa, then Theodora who were older than she, compulsive and altogether too selfish for his taste. Them he had forgotten easily, had trouble remembering Theodora’s name. She was such a pain in the ass. No, it was her voice he heard when he said it, but that too was peculiar. Once in a great while, he saw her, walking along Michigan Avenue downtown, or at Water-Tower place. They would have a friendly conversation, almost as if they were able to retain goodwill. When he met her, an overwhelming feeling of relief flowed toward his eyes through her form and into his ears through her voice down along his vertebrae, draining the lead. He had no attachment to this woman at all. And, a week or so later,

“I love you” crept out to no one.

And then, again, there was a sinking drip of slumping lead in his mouth and on his tongue up into the back of his head, which became heavier when he drank alcohol, or even when he sipped coffee. It remained his; it didn’t come from her. Though the alcohol made it worse, he was unable to keep himself from drinking his way into numbed comfort, short-run content. Mallory was friendly enough, but he wasn’t going out of his way to greet or meet anyone. In fact, he chatted most exclusively with Amity and “Punk-boy.” Mallory didn’t know his real name; he merely recognized him as the other cigarette-seeped beerbellies knew him.

“I don’t wanna hear anything,” he had said to Amity. “I don’t want to hear anyone bitch. I don’t want to hear about anyone’s good fortune. I don’t wanna hear about nothin’.”

And that is when a man, whom no-one recognized or knew, began a conversation.



“Have you ever considered your body?”

Mallory was about to tell him he didn't care, that he disliked conversations such as his.

“Have you ever considered that your feelings, sexual preference, even your beliefs are all merely chemistry gurgling about in your body and brain? When you die, if you've left nothing behind for others, their living will continue on as if you never existed. You will return to what you recall before your birth.”

“I don't want to hear this crap right now,” said Mallory.

“Back to the abyss.”

A peculiar, sable fellow, making strange his words, he possessed deep, jet-black hair and pitchy eyes. He was clad in a soft, blackwoolen overcoat that appeared to have no buttons; it was seamless. His pants were silky cotton black; cheerlessness and severe was his manner. Doused heavily in nicotine rain, his odor was not unpleasant. He wore as well a pungent, virile cologne that mingled with the smoke and scotch that permeated his existence, was he. His skin thus appeared to seep nicotine, and he ate black and green sardines that he had purchased at a store nearby the bar.

“Hello, Friend.”

And he smiled.

## Jade Collars

A large woman dressed in a red suit, looking like a kind of uniform complete with flat golden buttons running down a long skirt that enclosed a plump and shapely body, accompanied this Newcomer who had begun a conversation with Mallory. Her hair black-and-blond streaked, she carried a bobby-pin dangling on the thick skin of her nose. The Newcomer drank scotch, Blackmark's own. His hair was long, but pinned back along his neck in a net, and the sides of his head above his ears were close-clipped. His chiseled features revealed a vigorous feminine masculinity, elongated and strong-lissome doe. He was polished, and witted-quick.

"He gave me new body," the woman slurred.

Heavy with stupor, she observed the patrons of The Everyday Tavern Entautha with aggravated suspicion; her eyebrows, youthfulthick, knitted when she looked at anyone, but when the Newcomer talked with her, she was calm and smiled—even laughed—which appeared to be rarities on a face chiseled from granite by keen discontent. The Newcomer pecked her on the cheek, and she giggled, while Mallory noticed a wilt in her eye. She seemed to him as though, smiling, she was poised to weep. She leaned forward into the bar while her eyes slowly shut, unable to push her huge frame back up. Amity wondered whether she ought to call the bouncer, but the Newcomer—his seat beside hers—leaned toward the woman in red, whispered something in her ear. He held her hand, and, his arm placed about her ample back, he soothed the liquored antagonism of the grand-sized belle. Frowned and perplexed, she arose with difficulty, and Mallory noticed that her face was comely, possessing high cheekbones and finely-wrought features—her eyes lined with deep orange-red hue. He disliked that "sort of thing." She perked herself up, she the supposed indifferent.

"Gave me a new body," she repeated.

The Newcomer ignored her while she said these things. Instead, he turned to Mallory. "She was a great deal larger."

The Newcomer laughed.

“Yeah?”

“It’s her first day out.”

The large woman busied herself by chatting up a goateed morsel of less-than-manliness who sat opposite her.

“It costs plenty of money, if you have it done properly.”

“Oh really?” mock serious Mallory replied.

“Yes it’s true. And now, Brazil is prepared for her new life.”

The large and formerly obese woman abandoned her beverage while she half-staggered through a swingdoor exit nearby. A few moments later three concerned-looking women surrounded her mass of flesh, which was lying flat and stretched out on the floor. They picked her up, or rather assisted her while she rose, and escorted her into a rest-room. Amused and at ease, the Newcomer remained in his seat. Four television sets assaulted the particular spot where Mallory and the Newcomer sat, all of which sported the same sporting event. Mallory watched the Sox game with pretense of interest. He had made a bet, and he expected that the White Sox would win. He had always enjoyed playing and watching sporting events, but while he sat beneath the urban assault of televisions upon his weary head, he had felt unusual. Sipping his mint julep, he suffered a further weight upon his anxiety. Mallory resisted an urge to walk about the bar-floor, to plead his frustration to an inebriated arbiter. He worried how such quick-panicked urges plagued him of late, his mind in a sling. His beloved game tired him with its repetition, and the ball-players presented him with less than pleasure even disinterest, but he was unable to discern the cause of his discomfort. He recognized more clearly the absurd repetition of the darters and the inebriates who spouted the same opinions in virtually the same manner, sometimes on the same day. Pool-playing college students enjoying Everyday Tavern Entautha dive-bar status sank him deeper in discontent, and his comrades-in-drink appeared more pitiful and wretched than usual, frustrated and pleasantly numb. Even Amity, who was always strong as an iron gate, seemed to Mallory to occupy the same drug-filled depression in a successful attempt to heap earth upon her woe. Mallory thought that his mind would

explode or dissolve, but he managed—barely—to keep himself together, since he considered the sensation he was experiencing and its transitory nature. It would pass soon, but before it left him his sensation would compel Mallory to think, yet again, about his fiancé, his ex-best friend, who now thought as little of him as he did of strangers. Again, there was the leaden weight upon the back of his skull, and then there was this man, the Newcomer who seemed peculiarly out of place in a tavern where few patrons stood out.

“Why is it that fat girls always whine?” asked the Newcomer.

Mallory wanted to hear no more. He looked the opposite direction.

“They appear to be incapable of remaining quiet,” he continued.

The Newcomer lit a cigarette, took a swig from his scotch, winced at his drink for some reason. He motioned toward Brazil who had at that moment returned afresh from her quest for make-up and chat.

“The morning is greeted with a whine, perhaps a whimper. Breakfast is sad and lost, even their favorite morning candy becomes tasteless.”

Having just then sat down, the former obese Brazil flashed her eyes sad upon him, a quick glance. She was a whimper, as she remained the former obese woman, yet she gathered shards of dignity and suppressed her sob the better to deprive the Newcomer of the morsel of her psyche he needed to gnaw. She loved him brother-like for what he had done.

“The afternoon witnesses the only moment of the day that may beget hope, and so she is at least quiet during that time, but that period lasts only an hour or so.”

Noticing that Mallory was paying no attention, the Newcomer ceased his monologue. He walked quick-confidence outside the tavern into an awaiting auto, disappearing within.

“Why do you let him speak to you like that?” asked Mallory.

“You’ve no idea what you’re talking about,” Brazil

garbled.

The swingdoor opened the tavern for two leashless dogs. The first, an excited but seemingly nervous brazen-skinned canine, wandered into the tavern four or five steps, then anxiously looked back toward the door. The dog halted sharp, leaning precariously its head toward a woman who was reaching her hand out so that the animal might smell. He pulled back at first, then performed a kind of tap dance as his bronze form awaited master commands. He bowed his head tranquil while other patrons offered pats and hands that might give longed-for affection. The animal glanced back at the door, again and again, awaiting the advent of a companion. His nervous attention abated when another familiar form of canine trotted through the gate followed by the clad-black Newcomer. The brazen canine lifted his head and confidently joined the other dog at his side, both directing their master as a pair of confident, well-trained horses might lead an ancient hero into the theater of war—or perhaps a victory procession. The second of the two canines was larger, not by much, but noticeably more powerful and seemingly dominant. Both were hairless, except for a patch of short and rough fur on the head and face. Their ears folded over themselves, semi-flop, and their heads were alert, always glancing back at the Newcomer who appeared to direct them with nods and movements of his hands. These hounds stood straight while they moved cautiously round the well-worn bar. All attention paid was theirs to command as they entered, and most patrons seemed delighted at the prospect of tapping the chiseled and hairless bodies of perfectly brazed and black dogs. The Newcomer held two shiny, black-leather leashes in his right hand, smiling broadly while he walked slow-procession back to his seat. The former obese woman beamed while she spoke softly to the familiar two, brazed and black, who in turn returned a grinned

dogsmile to her with their eyes.

“Hi babies.”

The one brazen she offered a broken pretzel-morsel, the other moved closer

to the Newcomer. The Brazen took, and chewed slightly, the bit of hardened bread, then spat most of it onto the grubby floor of the tavern where he continued to lick up then crunch on the fragments. The sharp outline of the dogs' frames gave the animals a stone-chiseled dignity, their durable features and their lean, healthy bodies hairless beauty manifest. The snout of the black Xolo possessed a graceful decline that glided proportionately along an alert, elegant face completed by bright-brown eyes eager to act, and desirous to please the beloved master. A thin yet powerful neck held their dignity aloft, and gave hourglass the shape between the heads and muscular, well-exercised frames of these canines. Two of the ladies, who had helped the former obese woman become ambulatory, arrived with pats and supple words for the friendly, brazen animal while the black dog silent-lingered alongside the Newcomer.

"Better get those dogs out of here," Mallory mentioned.

The former obese woman and one of her newfound friends ignored him consciously.

"Amity's out back right now, but when she gets back..."

He didn't finish his sentence for emphasis, and the interested patrons, fellow inebriates and college students disregarded him while the Newcomer drained another glass of scotch. The canines continued to glance tensely back to the Newcomer, seemingly uncertain what would come from him next, and unmoving they continued their bright dogsmile, which in turn charmed more inebriates. Once in a while the Newcomer would move his head slightly or flip his hand, and one or both dogs would turn to him, lick his hand in order to receive a kind of blessing or a concealed morsel from him. They were, in turn, adjuncts of a god who led Others. Mallory noticed that around their necks hung jade collars; the calm anxiety with which they greeted the Newcomer and his hefty womanfriend was evident. Mallory decided that he hated this man.

The Newcomer cup-clapped his hands, and both animals came to attention. He treated the bronze with red-meat jerky and clicked his fingers, then motioned a half-circle around and along the length of space between the former obese girl and himself. Charcoal Xolo perked his head up and jerked

forward, wondering if he had interpreted his master correctly and, overcast, the Other nodded. The dog began its journey down the length of the bar toward the end of the space that occupied the dimlit-haze, liquor-scent and inebriates. Eyes and heads turned to gather in the obedient canine who trotted the length of the establishment, dogsmling all the while. When the midsized animal came to a halt, it sat while its will waited, eyes fixed upon the Newcomer. He paused, until he knew that the patrons and the dog were attending him; he motioned to the animal and having lifted its head as high as it was able,

“AAAaaaaaahhhhhhhhhooooowwoooowooowowowwoooooo.”

And then silence draped its sodden form over the patrons until,

“AAAaaaaaahhhhhhhhhooooowwoooowooowowowwoooooo” once again.

Laughter, surprise and merriment appeared and abounded, with the usual exception of too inebriated patrons, or distracted enjoyers, fixed upon playing-card video-screens. Again, and this time much louder, was the silence. One inebriate mischievously clapped his hands and in mimicry did the tavern erupt in roaring applause, shouts and curses intermingled. The Newcomer smiled while he toasted, mockingly, with his formerly obese friend who beamed with delight at the beam that delightedly fed nourishment to her famished psyche.

“Who the fuck let this dog in here?!” shouted a woman who was walking quickstep to the bar proper.

She led a worried-looking Xoloitzcuintli by the green of his neckband. Mallory nodded to the Newcomer, and Amity furiously addressed him.

“I don’t know who the hell you think you are, but get out of my bar, and take your fucking dog with you!”

“Dogs,” corrected Mallory.

He pointed grinnedly to the brazen canine sitting beside the formerly obese

woman. Amity angrily took in the second Xoloitzcuintli, then at Mallory.

“You saw all this going on?”

Mallory blankly.

“And your lazy ass sat there doin’ nothin’.”

Amity tended to the Newcomer again.

“I don’t want no Health Department comin’ in here, and takin’ away my liquor license. Go!”

She pointed.

“You mean you don’t want any Health...”

Amity glared at him about to speak. He smiled.

“These dogs benefit your tavern...”

The Newcomer looked toward his formerly obese friend, Brazil, for support.

“...like business partners.”

A laugh arose within him, interrupted his revel.

“If I could have a dog in my bar, I’d have a dog in my bar.

You see any dogs in here when you came in? Go, buddy, and don’t come back with no god-dam dogs.”

After he had finished his scotch, the Newcomer, serene and calm, leashed the brazen and the charcoal-black who were both excited to return back comfortable-with-him the joy, their jade collars beaming canine affection.

“Anyone who would like to come with us, me my tail-waggers and my formerly obese friend, is welcome to a night out...on me.”



And with that he and his three companions waved and walked out of The Everyday Tavern Entautha, attracting more than a few inebriates. The departing crowd was large enough that more than a few moments passed before they had all exited. Amity and Mallory found themselves alone with their closest associates who regularly drank with them, and the noise and commotion of the place appeared to have departed. Mallory had spent the remainder of his evening drinking his sweetmints, and listening to the aggrieved grunts of Amity when another customer arrived and asked why the place seemed dead. He had been mildly satisfied with his night out, but now he need awaken to being Mallory once more.

## Winnowing the Hues

“What is this penchant you have for dive-bars?” Brazil asked.

“Drunken indolence is the Midwestern way, no?” the

Newcomer asked his formerly obese friend as they slid

into his waiting sedan.

“No.”

Brazil waited for affect.

“And why have we picked up another group of tiresome drunks?”

The two headed to the Newcomer’s home with yet another group of inebriates where, his formerly obese friend realized, they would feast and entertain strangers until the last person fell drunk down there before and for them on the plush-carpeted floor, was forcibly removed from there from them because of aggravated inebriation, or until they simply departed in order to return wherever home might come to be. The Newcomer and Brazil had become sudden friends when she met him at one of her art exhibits entitled “Hard Bronze Organics” and another entitled “The Authentic Ideal of the Human Creature.” The exhibit had depicted bronze statuary in caring, intimate, and sometimes joyous situations, but the hard material and the coarse skin of the figures gave the impression of distorted bestiality. The Newcomer had enjoyed the exhibit enormously, and Brazil was the artist drunk with his interest in art that was she. At that time, she had been a rotund woman who was able only to move about with a cane or sometimes an electric chair, so massive was her frame. She had left her home when she was young, ran away only to return a few months later. Her family was large and able, the sort of upper-middle-class gathering of homotheria that was entirely certain of their correctness in the scheme of the emerging universe.

They attended church regularly and lived in an area of Illinois that was known for its evangelical bent. The strictures of their community were rigid

and exacting to the point of stifling whatever spontaneity or creativity might have the misfortune of arising there. Brazil had been a willful kind, one whose free spirit was unable to conform to the guidelines of Wheaton. She did attempt to act as her parents and siblings wished, but her especially spirited nature and the particularly incapacitating role in the community given to her provided a volatile mixture of social forces. She had encountered the delightful escapism of alcohol as early as thirteen, then a slender homotherion. As she progressed from one form of inebriant to another, her form gathered more and more mass. Her particular delight was liquor and sweet cornsyrup-juice cranberry and blackberry. Her upbringing compelled her to passive acceptance of the dominion of an other over her, but occasionally her temper burst out in white-hot conflagration, seemingly ex nihilo. The source of her volatility was simply hidden, unrevealed by this extraordinarily visual and sensual lady. While coming of age, she continued to defy her parent. Her father had departed the responsibility of family life during her tenth year of living, leaving an embittered mother to care for Brazil and her four siblings. Her mother knew precisely how and why things are as they are, one who strangely encountered difficulty taming her troublesome daughter. The two argued often and because Brazil would not conform completely to her mother's wishes; she received ineffective discipline. At first, there were admonitions gentle and seemingly loving. She was not to consort with boys whose character was questionable, but Brazil continued to chat with her friends who happened to be male. Most often, her associations with them were innocent enough, but there were a few who might have corrupted her with their bad habits; she had already taken up drinking and it was impossible that such sin arise in her family. Later, there were more stern admonitions of similar character. She was not to consort with boys whose questionable character interfered with her successful deliverance from all things risky and potent in the world. If she should do so, her rights would be revoked.

Brazil was careful about this warning initially, since she wanted all her privileges to remain, like Others do. Still, she was unable to keep herself from the occasional drink, and her new friends offered her the drink of comfort that did not arise in a family growing increasingly impatient with her insolence. She provided a poor example to the other children; it was imperative that she provide a good one, somehow or other. Brazil's drinking

continued and escalated and continued to escalate and she found herself “grounded.” She would be unable to leave her room and she was limited to the reading of her bible only. Her art supplies unavailable, Brazil languished there incarcerated until she decided upon an escape plan. Her mother checked on her regularly and so only an hour had passed when her adolescent escape became obvious.

“I knew she would cause more trouble,” commented her older sister.

Brazil was, being merely thirteen years old at the time, unable to remain outside her family’s home for long, and she found herself returning to a house filled with activity and words—none of which were directed at her. Having enjoyed the respite from the love that entered her life in the form of discipline, she ate leftovers and found her way back to her room. It was not long before her mother arrived.

“You are a little demon, aren’t you?” her mother commented more than asked.

Brazil intended a reply, but before she was able to say a word she had found herself flat on the floor of her room. She did not, at first, recognize what had happened, but as she came to sensibility, she felt a repeated thumping atop her head and around her body. She recognized that Rage had arrived, but she held firm to her decision and her dignity and all the more did Rage visit her. She continued to do as she pleased and laughed when able, yet more did Rage pummel and flail against her, beating blue her white skin and tearing hair from her head. She continued her drinking and fell mostly silent to her family, all of whom supported her mother while suffering her loving hands. Further complicating matters, Brazil was declared unteachable by more than one of her instructors in high school. That she developed such a reputation only convinced her family all the more that further love was in order. They were, they knew, saving her from damnation and peccant living. She turned further to drink and once

when she was seventeen, she found all of her belongings placed outside the family house with a note attached:

“You are welcome to

stay elsewhere.”

Unable to conform to the rigid demands, Brazil continued her attempt to live within the directives of the family, and she remained there as she had been. Often she found herself, bound by necessity, living and spending holidays at the home of a friend, one of those male friends whose influence had been evil. Birthdays were ignored by her mother and so her siblings as well, and she many times celebrated her birth elsewhere. As she continued to imbibe, she continued to gain weight, her habit making her more contemptible still. Her mother continued the love until at last Brazil became an adult.

At times she lived in airports and youth hostels and at other times she slept with men she met, let them put her up, volatile and angry homotheria. When she reached the obese state, there were no longer any men interested in sleeping with, or caring for, her. Scared and almost to the point of breaking, she met a community of artists who took her in and helped her find her way in the labyrinthine city where her aesthetic flourished. Her fear lasted a few years, she believing that her mother would find her. Brazil lived in many different places; refused to make her life conventional. The artist companions who had been her support slowly became tired of her continuing indulgence and she gradually wore out the good will that had kept her safe and sheltered, well-fed. She had become too large to move herself about easily, and her physical state burdened her associations further. She had ninety days to vacate her apartment because the landlord had sold the building to a developer. She thought “What is the worst that can happen?”

And, of course, perhaps the worst that might have happened was that she would be driven onto the street and her art and life would be endangered or deleted from the earth. It was at that time that the Newcomer met a Brazil who meandered about in her chair, absurdly inebriated. He seemed poisonous to her in the beginning, but some element of his personality kept her there with him, she for him. Seemingly, he needed her as much as she might need him. So she thought. Now, safe and sheltered as well as intermittently inebriated, she and he continued their search for someone, Brazil did not understand who, whom her dominant friend appeared to need—someone the Newcomer had met years ago.

The two stopped their driver at a tawny building in the middle of downtown

Chicago. Two taxi-buses halted behind them, and animated and spry by wine their passengers emerged. Brazil had a vision of a large and pleasant, wine-blushed and androgynous, man leading them into the penthouse of her friend. She thought that she might enbrazen her vision in a few days; she stopped in order to sketch her idea and jot down a few explanatory notes in case the image ran away from her. Such lingering over a garbage can, near a lavatory, or perhaps in mid stride crossing the street were regular occurrences for her, she being alongside her as art. Her dear companion had managed to gather a host of varied inebriates into his home on this occasion. As usual, many were crashers or veteran

drunkards who were unable to let pass an opportunity to consume large amounts of alcohol gratis, and her friend did not disappoint them. If they had a delicate palette, able to choose for themselves any desired kind of grape, they would have enjoyed the supply of wines that were part of the Newcomer's life. Most imbibers situated themselves in his comfortable abode with graceless crudeness, signifying their rabidity. Some lay down on the delicate white carpet, and others placed their feet on tables, or draped their legs over arms of chairs as they popped open the best wine Chicago offered. Others were curious about the intentions and habits of a man such as him who had brought outsiders into his home. They were the few with whom the Newcomer chatted. He talked with a graduate student from the University of Chicago and an undergraduate philosophy major. He met a quite drunken accountant who was part of a network of employees of a real estate project that the Newcomer himself owned.

"I have oversight for an entire division of the Parkwood Project. I can tell you their expenditures, assets and the amount of money they take in... everything."

"Are you able to manipulate any of it?" the Newcomer inquired.

"You mean can I hide it? Or can I skim some of it?"

"I do."

The accountant hesitated.

“There are ways,” the man made clever.

The Newcomer picked up a slip of note-paper and quickly marked down the man’s name, thanked him for coming, and suggested that they might meet another time. He chatted with the graduate student, a quick-witted law student, and he briefly held conversation with the undergraduate philosophy student who seemed to believe that everyone and everything thought by everyone in the room was influenced by the German Idealist Immanuel Kant.

The night’s harvest had not been as fruitful as the Newcomer had hoped. Besides those with whom he had already engaged, the other inebriates in his home were either too intoxicated to talk intelligently, or they possessed only the ability to complain about their own inner circle of friends and associates. One woman became engaged in a heated argument with an intimate about how he had behaved at Paul and Amity’s barbecue a month prior. Apparently, he had brought wine to the gathering, but his hosts had never opened the bottle. He first asked for, then demanded, the return of the wine. It was his after all.

“He does that all the time,” the woman said to no-one. “He hosts a party, asks you to bring alcohol, doesn’t open it, and then keeps it for himself. I hate that cheap bastard.”

“Don’t swear. You know I don’t it when you swear,” said

her cheap friend.

Her associate continued to insist he had not brought the alcohol to the gathering in order to drink it, but to be sociable and to contribute to the merriment. She insisted that he was selfish, and the heated conversation rapidly escalated into a wildly gesticulated debate about the man’s character. Once or twice the woman fell over, and recovered herself only with difficulty, slowly, from the floor of the Newcomer’s penthouse. The two at last decided to cease talking with one another, at least for the night, and the man skulked silently in the front room with the mutual bottle of wine that he now refused to share, while the woman meandered about searching for more

revelry. Uninterested in chatting with these inebriates, the Newcomer watched their irritated interaction with amused detachment. When the two ceased talking with, and so berating, one another, he in turn lost interest in them altogether. Most of the other revelers interacted in similar ways, brandishing insignificant and petty chat, seeming to the Newcomer to be teary-eyed children. The evening wore on slowly for the Newcomer and Brazil. The two retiring to one of the master rooms, he sat on a reclining chair and she lay her form atop the satinsweet sofa.

“What are we doing with these people?” asked Brazil defiantly. “Why do you insist on bringing strangers into your home?”

“...,” he began to reply

“You know, one day one of them will steal something, or hurt themselves, and you will be stuck with a lawsuit or worse, and they hardly ever give you anything in return for your hospitality. You gather together a host of bums and oddities when you have connections to far better social circles,” she interrupted.

“Do you believe that I am stupid?”

“I think this is stupid.” She pointed towards the closed door.

“I bring them here, and I chat with the ones that appear interesting or in some way compatible with one of my interests. When I see that they have little or nothing to add, they go. When they show that they have some value, I find ways to contact them again.”

Brazil tossed her head back slightly in semi-objection, then she arose and walked toward the wall, which was constructed of windows such that one was able to watch practically the entire city alight and stirring. She brushed off her dress, and straightened her hair in the window-mirror.



“You’re weeding out the masses for potential friends.”

“Tonight’s crop is admittedly meager.”

“Fraternizing randomly with degenerates is asinine.”

Thus their bond.

## Yellow Ochre

Leon Ochrowskovich was unable to find a proper tailor. His shirts were untidy, since he had dismissed his personal servant, and now he was wearing the last of his proper-white, crisp formal shirts; he did not know what to do. He regularly smiled at each passing pedestrian, and there were times when the smile returned to him in kind and others when a grin beamed deep return, but more often he received no reaction at all. He had rented a comfortable and respectable apartment near Water Tower, and he often strolled along Michigan avenue when he was not working in order to absorb all of the well-dressed homotheria who in turn possessed clean and sociable smiles, at least as far as he understood their reactions. Leon was not overly concerned about his appearance, though he was unable to emerge from his apartment until he achieved the proper configuration. He had a reputation to maintain. As he strolled along Michigan during his lunch-time recess, he fussed with his cuff-links and he made certain his tie was wedged close to his neck.

“There mustn’t be a gap between tie and neck,” he more felt to himself than thought.

Leon had shaved three times each morning in order to achieve the correct smoothness of chin, one that demonstrated he was a citizen in excellent health, possessed of status and a man of responsibility. Leon was simply careful and friendly, unconcerned with appearances.

“It certainly is a joy to see you.”

He heard himself say it.

“That’s what he will say to me.”

Leon felt an authentic connection between himself and his coworkers. He wanted very much to please his superior, and to delight all of those around him in the office. In fact, if Leon were able, he would embrace the whole peoples of the earth.

“I’d tell them that everything will be fine, just fine. And I’d reassure them

that all of their disagreements are mere wind and smoke. Yes, wind and smoke, that's all they are."

He pulled the ends of his crispwhite shirt out from within his coat. Leon became a delighted man when the tips of his shirts extended outside of his coat, providing an aesthetic contrast that demonstrated his tact and suavity, but these minutiae were no concern to him really. Not really. When he stopped at a traffic light in order to wait for the green man to permit his crossing, he instinctively removed a comb from his coat pocket, upper left-hand corner, and ensured that his thick, tawny hair behaved as it ought, even in rough and ungainly wind. He knew what motion to make of his hand, and he knew just how to sculpt his hair with his palms in order to achieve the perfect aesthetic, even lacking a looking-glass. He had practiced such a maneuver many times before the mirror in order to make this, his second primary aesthetic gesture, instinctual. Heavyset and robust, Leon the gregarious body was well-distributed so that he seemed to be more a large man than an obese one. He was blond to an extreme, his hair a deep, dark bronze. Not the kind that turns platinum on the tips, but a brazen blond that even shone when he mixed gel into it in order to obtain a perfect extended twist. His hair was naturally wavy, but Leon liked to straighten the natural curl, just enough. Still, his hair wave was little concern to him, mere facade. His skin was pale and he regularly wore dark yellow colors, oxides and tawny browns. His overcoat was rust colored with black lapels. He combined his crispwhite shirts with corduroy-yellow pants and golden sports jackets so that if one should see him contentedly meandering about the city, one would perceive the gilded approach of a great mass of fulvous gregariousness.

"How are you today?"

"Let me get that for you."

And even his nod beseemed buttered xanthus. Leon was tall, which was fortunate since his burden of flesh accompanied him wherever he went. He cut not an arrogant, nor an imposing, figure. He entered, as always, his office with a smile and an inside joke for every person in the office.

"Don't say anything, but...", he would say to practically everyone such that if only every person in the office should compare notes, they would find a

secret meeting in every encounter with everyone. Thus-like did Leon produce inside jokes with all members of the staff, and accordingly did he win the trust of all around him. And, in general, everyone with whom he worked liked him, enjoyed his jocular and his intimacy. He was to them almost comical in demeanor, but it was as if all of the staff might say “Yes, he’s silly, but that’s Leon.” And then they would smile.

“Felina the Great.”

“Hi Leon,” Felina returned, lengthening both words.

Glad to see him, she was unable to hold back a grin, though she had seen him just thirteen hours earlier. Felina and Leon had been together at the same company almost a decade. They were practically the only two remaining employees from the early days. Initially, they were part of a software company that developed virus protection programs only, which was Leon’s specialty. Now, the company had been appropriated by a multi-national conglomerate that imposed its will upon everyone and everything. The merger was quick, and forceful. The owners had been given the least time possible to decide, while a veiled threat dangled over them. In the end, though they had promised that they would continue to own and run the company, they chose to sell. No dry eyes were present during the company “farewell” gathering. Leon had been especially obliging that night, toasting his superiors and reminiscing with entertaining anecdotes. Leon was, in fact, better at charming others than he was at writing cutting edge viral software, though his prowess at writing software was no paltry ability. He was a natural, sunny disposition that hardly anyone was able to resist, and Leon possessed a unique, unusual even for Leon, relationship with Felina. He had saved her job once when someone in the office had been charging online purchases to a company account. Since the company was a software company, almost anyone was able to trace from what computer station the purchases were made, perhaps a not-so-intelligent mistake. The trail led quickly, and without doubt, to Felina’s station, but Leon intervened. He claimed that he had made the purchases, foolishly thinking that he would simply replace the funds that had been depleted. His excuse was that he had financial difficulties, but that he wanted to purchase some pleasant baubles for his fiancé: the items were obviously feminine accoutrements that amuse

felines. Unbelievably, Leon was able to talk his then supervisor into not merely retaining Felina, but even retaining Leon himself. He replaced the pilfered funds with money that Felina gave him, and the furor of the “internet thief” dissipated, was replaced later by the larger threat of layoffs and pay cuts. Not convinced that he was the culprit, some disliked, or distrusted, Felina from that point onward, since they liked Leon so much, but those employees drifted away—finding new employment, moving to another state or going back to school. Now the only two employees from that period were Felina and Leon, and the incident was barely recalled by both. Why Leon had acted in such a manner baffled Felina for some time. She suspected that he had an ulterior motive for assisting her, perhaps he wanted a more personal relationship, but Leon was simply the Leon that everyone knew and enjoyed. He wanted no conflict, and he was willing to make personal sacrifices in order to maintain peace. He genuinely made joy and harmony present to those who were around and for him. In fact, that he had saved someone who would not have saved him, that he had successfully preserved the dignity of all, with the possible exception of himself, only endeared him the more to Felina and to others, a present-permanent joy. When a new employee laughed at Leon’s manner

“You had better watch what you say,” Felina declared.

And as the office attrition turned the two of them further toward one another in camaraderie, the more unified they became, the more loved became the tawny lion of a man.

“Hey, Cassius.”

“Leon.”

“Good morning, Chara.”

Leon continued his greetings, always, as he sauntered into the large, open and common office area. His cubicle was three rows down along the metal dividers that separated each employee, just barely, from one another. He was discontented at first, since his area was located far and away from the others. He lacked communication and connection, which he so desperately craved, but he soon used the disadvantage toward his general purpose. He would

greet everyone in the office as he walked toward his distant cubicle, and he might spend three or four minutes—sometimes more—with each one, chatting up or discussing anything that might interest the present person. During the first few and the last two hours of the day, he always found an excuse to meander back and forth, obtaining the drinking water that he had suggested be placed at the front of the office, finding a pencil, making photocopies. Leon had made the suggestion to place the water cooler at the front of the office-area ostensibly in order to give access to all employees at the beginning of the day. If someone wanted water, they were able to obtain it when they first arrived. Leon claimed less time would be wasted. A non-sequitur, he knew. Leon found himself near the cooler regularly, and when the water needed changing, he always assisted Felina by changing the container himself. He regularly volunteered to perform menial tasks, like computer maintenance at each station. He was assigned the task of remotely disposing deleted items and defragmentation and the like, but for some reason Leon was unable to use remote access when he needed to defragment someone's computer. He deemed it necessary to go to each employee's cubicle personally in order to tend to their computer needs. Everyone in the office knew how to perform the maintenance, but Leon insisted that they needed to keep a clear mind in order to perform their appointed task.

“Efficiency takes priority.”

He repeated this statement to Charles Brigade who kept his men in the most sufficient shape.

“How many points are the Giants favored?” he chatted up the Brigade, the name everyone called Charles.

“Don't know, Leon.”

Perceiving that he ought not waste the Brigade's time today, Leon scurried away toward another, currently more amicable, part of the office-common. He was also fond of Hal Joystick who wanted to create a video-game division of the company. Upper management frowned upon the idea.

“I hate to remind you that there's no guaranteed market for that stuff now,” Leon had explained to Joystick more than once. “Still, keep trying. We'll

pry some funds from the upper-ups soon enough.”

Joystick said little to Leon, but his silence was not out of the ordinary, nor was it a sign of disdain. Hal was not a very demonstrative person who had been known to defend Leon in his absence, but then almost everyone defended Leon. Strange that.

“I hear there’s been an influx of green from outside,”

Hal commented to Leon.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean someone, or some corporation, has bought

Corpu-tech.”

“Again?”

Joystick nodded. Leon scratched his head and adjusted his crispwhite shirt around his neck. He had not heard such a thing, and his sudden ignorance was a dilemma, since well-chatted office-persons were the most knowledgeable. Most informed. Everyone knows that. He frowned a moment, then he leaned closer to Hal who smiled at Leon’s surprise and consternation.

“When did this happen?” he whispered.

“I have no idea, but the Brigade is looking into it now,”

Hal whispered sarcastically.

Hal noted Leon’s ignorance and shrugged his shoulders. The situation was intolerable. Leon would not be left out of the loop on anything transpiring in Corpu-tech. He was, after all, in every loop in the office. That he should be left out was unpardonable, simply not tolerable. Leon arrived at work in perfect form every day. Nails trimmed and hair perfect, he performed his assigned tasks not merely well—no sir—but rather excellently.

“Yes, I set a new, high standard for this company. I do, and the others are

good, indeed fine and good at what they do, but Corpu-tech relies on more than mere technical skill,” Leon thought.

Leon had created what loops existed at Corpu-tech. He was the loop, and his left-outed-ness must be remedied at once. Otherwise, all would crumble. Perhaps Leon might stay away while the present crisis unfolded. They will then see just how valuable he is. No, no. Leon believed that such thoughts were unworthy of him. He would do what he could and assist where he was able.

“Well, perhaps we might get our little project started,” Leon commented to Hal in his confidential tone.

He lifted himself up from his “classified” stance. He brought about a broad smile, and then he grasped Joystick by the tops of his shoulders and shook him as if he were toying with a cat or a small dog. Had he been in another time and place, he might have given his dear comrade a kiss on both cheeks—held him tight to his chest—but the grin and shake were sufficient, and Joystick seemed to have had enough affection for the time being.

“Soon enough!” Leon claimed loudly as Hal who loved the game shook his head.

Leon finally released Joystick, and Hal threw his open palm at him and threw it again, as if warding off an affable lion. Leon laughed quietly as he departed, but a grim countenance soon became him as he moved quickly toward the Brigade. Charles remained fixated upon his computer. Knowing that look, Leon determined that the precise time to chat with the Brigade had not yet arrived. Instead, Leon sat back in his own chair, and he hurriedly put together a presentation for the software he was supposed to have been crafting. Leon was fortunate that he was talented enough in his field to finish an assignment quickly, and he was shrewd enough to refrain from giving away the quickness with which he finished projects. Perhaps he would be deemed a bit too efficient. Regardless, he had his current presentation completed in a few hours, and Leon had the good fortune enough that, as usual, the Brigade had calmed down a bit. No longer was he fixed upon his computer screen, and Charles seemed his usual, approachable self. Leon saw him laughing at something Felina was telling him.



“Good, good. I need a warm Brigade.”

Leon entered the Brigade’s office with a quiet knock and an ostensible need to discuss serious matters. He dawdled about the entrance to the main office, visibly nervous. The Brigade recognized when Leon was about to deliver some finished project, or give him some serious information, because Leon always beamed yellow joy, except at these times. Leon was easy to read.

“I have the presentation for the 6.7 series.”

“Fine, fine. Leave it.”

The Brigade nodded towards the “in” plastic tray on his desk. Leon complied while the Brigade concentrated on a file the heading of which was hidden to Leon. He attempted to read the cover, but was unable to do so. Almost at the door of the Brigade’s office, Leon became annoyed.

“I’d like to chat with you about it before you read it.”

The Brigade looked up from his paper.

“I really have no time right now, Leon, not even for  
you.”

“What’s wrong?”

The Brigade recognized that he was able to trust Leon. Besieged by fears and concerned over providing for his family and caring for his “people” at work, he had not been able to talk with anyone else as yet. The Brigade was reluctant to discuss anything with anyone until he knew certainly what he was talking about, but he knew that he was able to trust Leon. He and Leon had a unique bond that no other two employees at Corpu-tech possessed.

“Close the door.”

Leon carefully, inaudibly, closed the door of the Brigade’s office. He had been curious until now, but he was as intimate with the Brigade as he was with everyone in the office. Charles’ discretion concerned him.

“You remember that this company exchanged hands some time ago?”

“Yes.”

“Well, we haven’t heard from any new master.”

“You mean we’ve been sold again?” Leon wondered aloud.

“No, no. Corpu-tech is in the same hands that it has been for the last few years. I just can’t figure out whose. I’ve done inquiries on different companies, corporations and I can only find that I can find out nothing about who really makes decisions for us.”

“But nothing has changed significantly, right?”

“That’s the thing. We’re not exactly pulling an enormous profit. Every new project that might bring us new revenue seems to be canceled...or postponed. Money given to undertake these projects seems to disappear. The last time this kind of thing happened there was serious downsizing.”

“Oh, but you don’t know that.”

“I know this business, and I know the kind of person who runs it.”

Leon was about to interject.

“...and I know when something is about to happen,” the

Brigade finished.

“Charles, Charles. Everything will be fine, just fine. You exaggerate the consequences. We’ve been through tough times before, yes?”

Before the Brigade was able to answer...

“...of course we have. And you and I have done well, and survived well together. What with the two of us here, assisting one another, nothing bad can happen. Besides, if you look at what you’re saying logically, you have no justifiable reason to be concerned.”

“Leon, I don’t jump to conclusions.”

“No, of course you don’t. I’m just saying that there may be less reason to be concerned than you think. You work too hard.”

The Brigade paused, absorbing the information given to him. He was in a bad mood, and someone else he might tell off, but

“You might be right, but it seems as though no-one

owns this company anymore,” he said reluctantly.

“Of course I’m right. All of this concern is just wind and smoke.”

Thus their bond.

Felina was startled at the sight. Never before had anyone the nerve to bring an animal into Corpu-tech, not even Leon. Yet, while she was sitting at her desk, typing the multi-various replies to the many inquiries she received every day, a brazen dog trotted up to her. He seemed excited about something or another, and he performed a frantic tap dance for her on the tile floor as if auditioning for an absurd vaudeville act. Tick-tak, click-clack went nails on hard-floored linoleum. He was hairless, excepting a rough but comely layer

of fur on his head and odd in appearance, but a later glance demonstrated that he had a delightful kind of feral beauty. He appeared to be an eager, sociable animal. Still, what startled Felina the more was the manner of his greeting. He first approached her with wagged tale and thorough dogsmile, and she knew the rules. Felina held out her hand in order to permit the animal to sniff, and he did so. He approached cautiously, but then performed a thorough inspection of the scent on her hand. He licked her fingers once, then twice, and Felina smiled. Suddenly, the animal backed away from her, as if she had made an aggressive gesture. He growled kindly and then

“AAAAAAaaahhhhhhhhhooooowwoooowooowowowwoooooo.”

Felina did not know what to do. She shrank back a bit and carefully lifted the phone from its cradle.

“It’s alright. It’s alright. He will not harm you,” came a reassuring voice from a man whose long black mane was caught in a net in the rear, the sides of his head clipped close near the ears. He had an olivegray complexion, and Felina was unable to determine his ethnicity.

“I think he is put off by certain perfumes, and his reactions are usually delayed.”

She was silent.

“You are wearing perfume, aren’t you?”

Felina nodded to the Newcomer as she noticed another, similar, dog approach. She thought it quaint that they had matching jade collars.

## Vivid Carmine Ichor

Brazil's inspiration for the Dionysian flautist leading his band of rapture-smiths along a rural path would not become a reality any time soon; she needed to begin a project as soon as it occurred to her or the concept would burst, the image dissipate in her mind until the motivation departed and the muse refused to return—perhaps for several months. She had a vision in her head of an inebriated, longhaired leader who guided a group of malcontents, professionals, narcissists, pretenders and political aristocrats along a slender strip of forest, urban expansion and industry surrounding them on all sides. She knew a Dionysian troupe was not the most novel of themes, but its traditional nature pleased her. She envisioned modern dress for the characters and rustic, but dilapidated, accoutrements for the slender strip of forest. Brazil imagined the urban backdrop would consist of lanky, enormous buildings—edifices exuding terrible power—distorted by their own dynamism. The tops of the buildings would be larger than the bottoms, the peak of each flaring out in a shout at the blue expanse covering deep space.

“I am homotheria!”

Perhaps she would draw a backdrop, making it somewhat comic. Maybe she would use photography of some section of Chicago, rampant consumption. She was uncertain how she would complete the project, but she had ideas. Her friend, the Newcomer, had been especially fond of the aesthetic given it was done in the right way, whatever that meant.

“Strike while the iron is hot.”

She, like him, hated that imperative but it was appropriate, especially for her who writes in bronze. Brazil liked to think that her sculptures were kinetic. She would explain that most, or all, of her subjects were in action, and yet they were rigid with universal value. The particulars of each brazen avatar were absolutely unique, presenting a universal character. It was as if her art revealed the transitory in its universality. The Newcomer delighted in that idea as well, and his gladness at her expression made her grin. While she sketched the scene, beginning with the leader of the troupe, she continued to refine the concept in her head. She had not cleaned up this morning, simply

thrown her overalls overtop of her long, white night-shirt, which lay atop her new body. Brazil possessed attractive features, yet her frame remained obstinately full-figured. She thus had few, if she admitted it no, romantic prospects. She had no need to appear comely, but she might enjoy the attention of a man every so often, so Brazil was pleased with her new body, kept it in reserve. She sat in her workshop, which was situated across the hall from her bedroom, doubled as a kitchen. Her's was a moderate-sized apartment for which she paid nothing. Brazil concentrated on her art while she kept the Newcomer distracted, which consumed more energy than she at first expected. She held her caffeinated, super-cornsyruped global coffee beverage in her hand as she sketched the figures who followed the Dionysian leader. She was unable to configure the body of one of the political nobles to her satisfaction because she demanded of herself the ideal posturing—one that, while immobile, represented vibrant and radically particular, living movement. The final result of her efforts was usually remarkable, but her ideal art consumed much time and considerable revision. The Dionysian figure was easy; she had his image in her mind from the beginning, but how to represent a political figure in an intoxicated, dynamic, yet novel, manner escaped her. Merely dressing them in a flag or a non-descript outfit, even a tattered suit, would not suffice. Brazil arose and found some of the gourmet flatbread she enjoyed so much, walked around a bit in order to summon this particular muse. Her cell-phone bleeped, and she picked it up, observed its cover observing the caller. She read the screen and a frown blighted her presently glad face. She waited and chose to ignore the call, but Brazil realized she was unable to postpone the conversation long. She went to the refrigerator and removed two slices of pumpernickel bread and some cheese, making a dry sandwich. Ordinarily, she would simply turn on her torch and work with the metal itself, and such an effort would bring about an inspiration somehow, but now, though she was surrounded by scraps of bronze, she was unable to gather them up. Brazil grew angry at the figure on her sheet of paper. Sandwich in hand, she erased the torso of the politician, tried again to produce the ideal posture, but dissatisfaction abided. Should she be able to mould the figure in metal, she would possibly form the politician to her pleasure, but instead she continued with her drawing until a snarl twisted her features once again.

“Piece of shit!”

Brazil wrinkled the drawing that had the perfect posture of the Dionysian figure up into a ball and threw it onto the floor. Her head hurt, and she wanted to lie down for a moment or two, to finish her sandwich, and so she dozed off for a moment on her couch in the front room. Awakened by her cat, Bluebeard Jack, who stood on her chest, she arose and held her head in her hands one moment. Her thoughts were still hazy from the night prior. She walked steadily towards the crumpled ball of paper on the floor. Brazil reluctantly unrolled it, and she flattened the edges out as much as possible. She then placed it atop a light-box, and she sketched the Dionysian figure onto fresh paper that lay on top of the old, which took some time because of the wrinkles beneath. She wove her fingers together a moment and drew fresh her breath. She centered herself, attempted to will a calm into her, and after an interval she was successful; she had learned the art of relaxation after aggravation from her time with her family. Her face having carved a smile-charm, she began again to sketch the figure of the politician. She bent back his head and sketched the body of the figure as straight as she was able without it seeming rigid, or lifeless. His posture was coming to her satisfaction as her cell-phone beeped once more. Brazil glanced at the screen on the back of the phone, read the number. She sighed, and then answered.

“Yes, mother.”

Brazil heard the words, but they didn’t register.

“I did, mother.”

She rolled her eyes while the drawing came to life, satisfied.

“Mother, I have to go. I need to see a friend...”

Brazil paused in mid-expression.

“No, not that kind, mother.”

She paused again, listened inattentively.

“Mother...”

Another break.

“No mother, he doesn’t...”

Brazil placed the phone on her draw-board without turning on the speaker, as she continued to sketch her ideal character. Her political male was coming to life nicely, she thought. She could hear her mother indecipherably chatting with the aether. She picked up the phone once more, as if she had never put it aside.

“...won’t be able to find...” she heard.

Brazil then tapped the phone, call ended. She smiled to herself while she continued to sketch the political male, which was fast becoming what pleased her most about her new project. The phone beeped once more and she glanced at the identification screen.

“Mother of god” it read.

She beamed while she silenced it.

“That’s quite nice,” she mused.

Brazil was restless when she created, so she arose from the near perfect, incomplete figure of the politician. She looked about, fidgeted with some magazines that lay around her kitchen. She slid downstairs to her mailbox, nothing. She paused momentarily to look outside of her apartment: a soggy, but otherwise comfortable breath of earth she drew in, smiled inward. In the vestibule, she heard her phone inside her apartment and again she grinned, mostly to herself. Brazil knew that “Mother of god” would not let it ring for very long, two beeps at most.

“Bleep”

“Bleep”

Brazil enjoyed maternal torment these days, a fitting circumstance. She casually began to scale the stairs as she thought again about her politician.



“Bleep”

Brazil stopped where she was, and a mad dread distorted her comely face. She listened again, mostly in order to reassure herself.

“Bleep”

The tone seemed insistent, not what had become of her mother’s pleading. Suddenly, she burst into a fast-pace, a mad visage upon her, her features contorting into deep concern. She was unable to move quickly in comparison to more able bodies, and so her flight upwards lasted much longer than she wished. She attempted even to scale two stairs at once, while she moved as quickly as possible, and accordingly she slipped mid-stair and fell on her newly-shaped frame, her surgical wound aching.

“Bleep,” once again.

Brazil lifted her head after she heard the final tone. She knitted her brow, and was determined to arrive upstairs quickly. She arose with rapid dignity, and she continued her frenzied gait-visage fearful until she reached her door, which she shoved open forcibly, the phone on the counter in her kitchen-studio. She dashed, or what passed for Brazil’s dash, from her front door to the kitchen. The phone screen, on which the identity of her caller was displayed, read “X.”

“Shit!”

Hastily, Brazil tapped the call sector. What seemed like an eternity arose between the pressing of the key on her cell-pad and the recognition of a ringtone. Four, five and six times the phone alerted its owner to her plea for entry to his oikos. She paced back and forth down her front hall. When finally the phone ceased ringing, there was a brief silence at the other end of the line.

“Is the morning whine completed yet?”

“Fuck you.”

“I love you too. Is the morning whining a thing of the past?”

“I don’t need this shit.” Brazil was relieved and annoyed.

“I don’t need it myself.”

“What do you want?”

“Come downtown. I want you to see my latest acquisition. I purchased a grab-bag of naughts. Simply amazing specimens.”

Brazil knew what he meant.

“What is he doing calling anyone a ‘naught,’” she thought.

She was not certain why she believed that this cohort was worth the time and effort required, but something about him retained her interest and intimacy. He had, yes it was true, supported her now for a few years, and her art would, conceivably, have suffered without his assistance. She had nowhere to turn when he paid for her survival; she had driven even her intimates from Chicago away.

Still, another intangible quality engrossed and repulsed her. Well-versed in art, architecture and culture in general, conversations with him were stimulating, even inspiring at times, and at the same time he retained a feral spirit. Himself the solipsist, he believed everyone suffered such isolation. While behaving badly in a charming manner, he gave freely of his own, an essence that drained others. His was a physically fine, beautiful presence curiously pointed. A platinum vest made of barbs. Brazil never knew what would transpire next, nor did she have any reason to believe that his support would continue indefinitely. He was as though he might vanish from existence altogether one day without leaving the slightest trace—besides the carnage—that he had ever breathed. Brazil thought the vitality and unpredictability drew her to him, but she remained uncertain, as he was. Then

again, she thought perhaps she was wrong. Any attempt, however long, to determine precisely why she remained at his side ended in more confusion, yet she better recognized the dim outlines of the man. Ordinarily, she was able to keep up with the best of the inebriates and the squanderers, but her friend was in a different category altogether. He drank scotch regularly, unless he was “winnowing the naughts” as he called it. And though one might develop a tolerance, his ability to process alcohol continued to astound her, since he was able to imbibe until early morning and then arise fresh at whatever time was required.

“I’m working on a new project right now.”

“Dionysus in urbana?”

“Yeah.”

“Your work can wait. I need company for an errand.”

“I thought you said you wanted me to see your ‘grab-bag.’”

“Well, of course I want you to see them; they are a pure treat, but I need to fly out to Orlando in order to pick up a part for the Talbot-Lago. There is someone who has an engine part or two that I need.”

“I’m staying here,” Brazil made this statement firmly.

“Be here in twenty minutes. I’ll text you directions.”

At that point, Brazil’s phone went silent. She observed that the call had ended. There was no contract that the two of them had signed, each party free to do as they pleased. In fact, each attended gatherings alone, or enjoyed the company of others, but mostly they were a unit, sort of combined social entity togetherpresent with each other as one. Brazil had, at first, believed in a more serious, lasting and romantic relationship, but her expectations were quickly dowsed by the cold, wet realization that her friend was able to pluck fresh nubile fruits from the urban tree almost at will. He was well-off, and that alone presented him with many opportunities, but he was attractive as well, though in a peculiar way. Brazil noticed that the Newcomer was seeking

something else and, obviously, mercenary women were no replacement for genuine affection, but there existed another longing within him. He had explained to her that he continued to winnow through heaps of others in order to unearth something, though he was never clear about what it was. Brazil wasn't certain what he sought, but he seemed to spend a great amount of time and money actively pursuing perhaps an illusion. He had taken her to New York many times and they traveled to Greece, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands, and she discovered that he was looking for something or someone. As long as she had known him, he had not found it. He remained vibrant, his appearance quite vigorous. He was in his mid-twenties, appeared younger, but anyone was able to tell easily that he was experienced over and afar from his age. Brazil sat once again at her work, and she continued to sketch the figure of the politician, which had pleased her a moment ago. As she attempted to draw, the figure would not emerge as it had prior. She remained pleased at what she had already drawn, but every new attempt brought frustration, a net at the back of her mind tangling her imagination. She pushed it away with music and another sandwich, but it merely entangled those distractions with its fine, soft ropes and with its refined insistence. Brazil drew some details around the troupe of Dionysiacs in order to stimulate her creativity, but again the net. She continued to glance at her clock, which read that seven minutes had departed. She ceased her drawing, and stared blankly at a corner of her studio.

“Shit.”

Brazil dressed herself in a quick, desultory fashion, and quick-walked out her apartment entrance. A moment later, she returned and grabbed a carry-on bag, filled it with clothes for a few days trip, then she ran out the front door once more. She found a cab quickly, and she used the credit-card he had supplied in order to compel the driver to speed to the downtown area. She arrived at the Water-Tower area, and at first in her nervousness Brazil was unable to find the correct building. This company was a recent acquisition, about three years ago. Her friend hadn't yet found time to pay a visit. Brazil found her way to the eighth floor where he had directed her to come. She entered the front area where no-one was about. There appeared to be no-one at all in the office. Perhaps the employees were at lunch, but that did not make sense because someone ought to be present at all times.

“Isn’t that standard practice?”

Brazil didn’t know; gladly ignorant of its protocol, if one may call it that, she had not been a part of business culture at any time in her life. She looked over the front desk, and noticed no way to summon anyone. She called out, but no answer returned. Brazil began to suspect that she was in the wrong place; she was about to depart when a familiar face appeared. A black, tap-dancing canine pranced around the corner, a broad dogsmile returned her outstretched hand with a lick and “Strumph,” spake the dog. Clearly, he was pleased to see her. Just then a door in the rear of the office-space opened and Brazil heard muffled questions and comments mingled with nervous laughs, puerile murmurs. She noted her friend with the long hair and olive-grey skin. He wore a cotton black suit with soft, light white pin-stripes down its length. He had placed his jacket on the back of a chair and his long, slender musculature pressed the limits of his long-sleeved, silken-white shirt. He wore an earring in one ear, and his shoes were a light-brown tan with flat, snub-toes. He emerged from the meeting-room where he had recently introduced himself. Still, he remained distant from Brazil, though both acknowledged the other’s existence with a glance.

“Can I help you?” A woman stood behind Brazil. She was short, somewhat chubby, dressed in polyester, which only made her colorless appearance drabber.

“I’m waiting for someone.”

The Newcomer, motioned her to come towards him, and Brazil quickly complied. He was still chatting with one of the employees of Corpu-tech.

“...no plans to downsize.”

He was talking with a stocky African-American man of about forty who was ostensibly more comfortable in a Brigade than in a computer company. The other fifty employees were eager to get away from their meeting, and they hastily dispersed back into their cubicles. Somewhat irritated at the persistence of the stout fellow, Brazil’s comrade, The Newcomer repeatedly attempted to remove himself from the man’s presence, but was drawn back by yet another concern gone unheeded.

“Charles, make a list of your concerns, and present them to me early next week. Keep in mind that I will, in all probability, assign you the task of tending to them.”

“You said that, but we need...”

The Newcomer raised his hands in the air in an attempt to mute his employee.

“...and I said that I will determine what you will receive.”

He took Brazil by the shoulder, and the two made a rapid drawback toward the largest office in the space, the only genuine office on the floor besides the Brigade’s possessing a proper door and a fragment of privacy. The Newcomer dropped his suit-jacket onto the floor, and then he reclined in a chair behind a great marble desk. The office was equipped with a large-screen monitor on the wall facing the guests, and there was a coffee table with a computerized top. Brazil sat in one of the deep-oxide colored chairs in the corner of the office. The Newcomer motioned to the two dogs to sit near the corner of the room beside him, they quickly curled up beside one another. He

patted both on the tops of their heads, sat again in his chair and

“That Brigade guy is almost out of a job,” he began.

“Give the man a break. How long has it been you’ve owned the company without bothering with it?”

“Three years.”

Brazil raised her brows.

“I’m a busy man.”

“No, you’re not.”

She turned her head toward the crass “painting” that soiled his wall, but continued to talk as she scrutinized it.

“And you wonder why this guy grabs you the first chance he gets when you introduce yourself? Come on.”

“First, that thing...”

He motioned his hand toward the “painting.”

“...is not my doing. Second, I see the morning whine is not yet complete. Would you enjoy an afternoon treat to settle your grumbling spirit?”

“Fuck you.”

“Oh wait, I almost forgot. I have a treat for you before we’re off to Orlando.”

“This isn’t like the group of wretches you invited home the other night, is it?”

“That was a meager crop, admittedly.”

“Fucking moronic.”

The Newcomer tapped his computer, and a video screen appeared on his monitor. Felina sat at her desk as she turned toward him.

“Yes, sir.”

“Felina is it?”

“Yes.”

“Felina, tell Leon to bring us some chocolate ice cream from the refrigerator. I want to have a chat with him as well. Tell him I want to see the plans for the Up series.”

“I don’t need anything to eat. You know I am not sup

posed to go back to that,” Brazil interjected.

“We will just have another body-job done, yes? You must witness this guy in person.”

Brazil shook her head and sighed audibly. After about ten minutes, a large figure with wavy blond hair knocked quietly on the office door. His head bobbed back and forth from behind the hazy window on the door to the equally hazy window on the wall of the office. One was able to see immediately that he was anxious from the manner with which he fidgeted with his tie, and how he placed and replaced the spoon in the big dish of ice cream he held in his hand. Brazil and the Newcomer observed him fiddling about — he ran a comb through his hair in what seemed a regular maneuver — and they both glanced at each other, smiling.

“Come,” the Newcomer said amusedly.

When Leon entered, he presented the two of them with his broad smile. He was dressed in yellow-brown corduroy and he sported a brown shirt with a sand-colored tie. His appearance was dapper in a way, though the colors he wore made him appear larger than he was. He fumbled with the door for a moment, and then he placed the bowl of cream on the large black desk as though offering a sacrifice to a god who might grant him some material good in return. He laughed while he fidgeted, and the Newcomer permitted his anxiety to grow for moments. Leon swayed his torso back and forth as he turned his gaze from Brazil, then back to the Newcomer and again.

“This...”

The Newcomer pointed to Brazil.

“This is one of my pupae, Brazil.”

Brazil nodded eyelid-closing boredom toward Leon. She slipped the Newcomer a death-glance; he smiled in response.

“Well, it certainly is a joy to greet you.” Leon said.



He stood before the chair directly in front of the Newcomer's desk. The Newcomer frowned, and Leon glanced back and forth again, a seeming effort to determine whether his maneuver was acceptable or not. Leon arose again and pulled the edges of his shirt tight up to his wrists. Again, he glanced back at Brazil while the Newcomer attempted, unsuccessfully, to make her laugh with a mischievous grin.

"We have been eager to meet our new leader, and any friend of his is welcome, welcome indeed."

Leon laughed goodnature. He walked over to Brazil, grasped her hand and shook it while the ice cream melted on the edge of the desk. He turned again, ignorant, towards the Newcomer, and he wiped the palms of his hands along his thighs. The scoops that had been perfectly crafted, a perfect chocolate pyramid, went unattended. Leon observed them for a moment, wondering if his efforts at perfect balance and quantity would remain unheeded.

"There were some who were nervous..."

Leon turned back and forth from Brazil to the Newcomer again, since given the dimensions of the room, it was impossible to talk with both of them from one comfortable position. Yet he moved, as always, with discerning poise.

"...yes Nervous about what might happen. Job security and good wages and all that."

Leon emphasized the beginning letter of each issue.

"But, I reassured them. I said to them that all they fear

is mere wind and smoke."

As Leon spoke, he clapped his hands together as if washing them, and he wrung them dry repetitively. Again, he beamed—now more at ease because of the lack of reaction to his words. Having taken the silence as an opening, he was pleased to be there with two new companions, and so he decided that he might relax.

“May I?”

He pointed to one of the chairs.

“By all means sit, Leon.”

The Newcomer flashed a glance at Brazil who repressed her grin. She was angry at his attempt to make her laugh. Leon then placed his massive form in the chair, tawny gladness all the way. He pulled the retractable footstool from under the chair, and then, deciding that he was not comfortable taking ease in front of these two, he retracted it again, then leaned forward in the chair.

“Leon, How long have you been with Corpu-tech?”

Leon leaped upon the question, as though upon prey.

“Oh, I believe I’ve been here around ten years or so.

Practically since the beginning.”

He wrung his hands, and at that time Leon decided to concentrate his attention on the Newcomer. He wanted the good faith of Brazil, but the Newcomer, he was the most important one. He would see, He would see.

“Isaac Faustus was the original owner, and then Hector

Uranus, I believe. I was assistant to them both, yes I

was. Fine gentlemen they were...”

“Leon...”

“... and a fine company you have here as well. I don’t

know of a bad apple in the cart, if you know what I

mean. No sir, no dead wood floating in this stream.

Good people. Good people.”

Leon's tone became louder as he spoke, gradually, but perceptibly.

“Leon, if I were to tell you that I wanted to make some changes around here, would you be able to keep it to yourself?”

Leon hesitated, but only a moment. His head shook, trembled a bit — he frowned — and then he arose from his chair. He walked around the desk where the Newcomer sat, placed his hand on the shoulder of the Newcomer who initially shrunk from his touch.

“I am your servant.”

Leon said these words in an unusual manner. One wasn't able to determine whether he was being witty or wily. He appeared ridiculous, and one was able to see clearly that his words were only partially true. Still, he maintained the amusement of his hosts.

“You will find that I am the most trustworthy sort. I'm a part of this operation in a big way, big way that is. I keep the wheels greased, and I hope to continue what I believe, perceive in fact, is a tradition. I like to think of myself as that tradition that is. What I mean to say...”

“That's fine, Leon. Just fine,” the Newcomer hinted with his tone that the interview was complete.

“Well, I do have work to do. I do intend to say, that is I'll say it. No, I'll not hold it back. I'll say that it certainly is a joy to meet you, at last. It has been a fine meeting, a fine greeting, yes?”

The Newcomer nodded.

“Remember that all you need is everything I can do.

Any problems that we have here at Corpu-tech are mere  
wind and smoke, yes, I’ll say it, mere wind and smoke,  
and I don’t hold anything back, no nothing held  
back...”

Leon approached the door with each passing word while he noted, for future reference, that neither party had touched or acknowledged the ice cream that he brought with him. He clasped his hands together in a ball, held them close to his breast. He even bowed a bit as he departed. He opened the door without losing eye contact, back and forth, with both parties. When the door was open wide he ceased his exit and directed his massive, ochre frame behind the large desk next to the Newcomer who moved slightly away from the impending, imposing gregariousness. He grasped, more like seized, the hand of the Newcomer, while he grabbed his shoulder.

“I know we will make a great team. I like you already. I  
feel a certain bond with you. I know it seems trite and I  
know that it may appear disingenuous, but I assure you  
that you will find the best friend, the truest compatriot,  
in me.”

And then Leon performed a gilded departure of his great mass of fulvous conviviality. There were a few moments of silence as Brazil took the ice cream from the desk, ate a mouthful, and then she threw the remainder in the trash can. The two sat exchanging knitted brows, and a smile emerged between them.

“So,...ah...tell me...” Brazil began. “...what the fuck was

that?”

Somewhere emerged giggles and laughter at the expense of the warmest of men. The trip to Orlando went quickly for the Newcomer, but for Brazil it seemed an eternity. At first, the two had reviewed the visit of the tawny man moment by moment, as if they were wondering in incredulity at a film that they had taken.

“And what is this ‘wind and smoke’ business?”

After they had shared a mutual disdain of Leon’s comity, the Newcomer turned to his friend, Brazil. She knew that it was coming, didn’t know what form precisely it would take today, but soon.... He grasped her hand as Leon had done to him, pulled on her shoulder, and he taunted her while he mocked Leon.

“You two might make a cute couple.”

“Fuck you.”

“No, seriously...”

He emphasized the “S” in seriously.

“...opposites attract. He is friendly and, while annoying, he’s also somehow charismatic. And you...well...”

“Fuck you one more time.”

“...you’re naturally pointed, and almost always irritable.”

“I wonder why.”

“And he might be able to improve your diction and vocabulary. You have such a foul mouth.”

“One more time...”

Some silence intervened in their conversations while the Newcomer read and

Brazil sketched. He was perusing a parts-list for his Talbot-Lago, but he became bored, so he asked the flight attendant what kind of alcohol was available, all of it unsuitable. The two exchanged glances, Brazil attempted to avert her eyes in time, but he noticed her notice him. The attendant arrived with scotch. The Newcomer quickly downed the drink, winced, asked for another. Brazil shook her head back and forth when he gazed her way. He paused for a moment, and then he stared fixedly upon the floor. He looked back at her again, then smiled. He turned his head toward hers, staring at her eyes until hers stared back. He waited until her attention returned to her work, and then he obtained her stare once more. Brazil was again visibly annoyed enough to put down her sketch and observe him. Having obtained this state of affairs, the Newcomer turned his head toward Brazil, just enough that she realized he was still attending to her, but then returned his gaze to the back of the seat in front of him. He placed his chin in his hand and leaned his head forward a bit, as if he were in deep concentration. He creased his forehead and blackened eyebrows slightly, then moreso. He then turned his head slightly towards Brazil once more, still concentrating on the seat before him. She continued to watch him as he concentrated.

“What are you doing?”

The Newcomer placed his forefingers on his temples, concentrated again more forcefully as if directing something.

“Did you get it?” he said.

“What are you talking about?”

“Did you get the message?”

Brazil merely looked at him placidly.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, and I don’t care.” She returned to her work.

He feigned incredulity while he leaned back, surprised and indignant.

“You mean you didn’t receive my thought?”

Brazil sighed, and the Newcomer was unable to suppress a grin.

“...but isn’t that the way women communicate?”

Again she sighed.

“How much longer is this plane ride?” she asked no-one.

“You believe others are able to read your mind, so shouldn’t you be able to read the minds of others?”

“Fuck you.”

“If I read your mind correctly, I’m a hero.”

She waved him off, looking out the window.

“And, if I read your mind incorrectly, I’m a villain.”

Brazil was disgusted, and the Newcomer smiled, and then he laughed to himself. Amused, he napped pleasant for the remainder of the flight. The man who owned the part for the Newcomer’s Talbot-Lago lived in a ranch-style house with a small “grandmother” positioned three hundred yards behind it. The property was old and dilapidated, and when the Newcomer questioned the small, scruffy, taciturn man about the engine parts that he possessed, he received little by way of answer. The man did indeed have a few rare parts from a 1938 automobile that were original. They had been part of the hand-crafted machine that the Newcomer owned. He recognized them immediately, but the Orlandan understood that he was contending with a man of means, and he held out for more money than the parts were worth. The two men haggled back and forth, irritating Brazil, until at last the Newcomer decided to return home without them. Brazil was especially annoyed that she had been taken away from her art in order to witness in silence the absurd and time-consuming non-purchase of car parts that her friend was able to afford easily. There was no principle involved in denying the diminutive Floridian the measly sixty extra dollars he desired. Brazil pointed out this absurdity to

an unresponsive Newcomer as they sat in their plane, returning home. She was even more annoyed when, two days later, he contacted the “little thief” from Florida and paid for the parts with a debit-card. The little man sent them to Chicago through the mail. Her entire day, and inspiration, had been squandered.

“You are an inconsiderate jackass. I hate you.”

Thus their bond.

Crimson Mars in a yellow Robe

The property on which it stood was immense. A vast stretch of mown lawn broadened and gave way to patches of sycamore trees and manicured bushes. An elongated black strip of asphalt directed the chosen to their destination. On their way to the weekly ritual, the flock might see one of the two lakes complete with ducks and what few fish were able to survive a highly monitored, regularly pecked, piece of earth. The view was soothing: grassland and a few trees, a stray deer once in a while who promptly vanished once the groundskeepers were alerted to its presence. Still, the view was mostly mere grass and scattered trees with few small, unpopulated, even sterile, ponds. There were no rustic creatures watching from the distance the long serpentine pitch that guided the shiny vehicles to an enormous lake of asphalt where they stopped and then the autos stood in formation, waiting for the return of their owners when they would again cross the pleasantly barren serpentine path. All habitation for the living beings in the vicinity had been transformed to suit the vehicles that suited their masters, homotheria. The reception area of the first building was able to entertain six hundred attendees easily. It had sheltered more than that number when it held fundraisers who gave for the spread of the word, good news. Today, the first building is filled with the smell of pastries and coffee, tea with milk and sugar, fat with chocolate and cornsyrup candied drink. Everything must taste sugary for these worshipers, even their sermons. The day is Sunday, and as the number eleven approaches, the guests filter gradually into the largest building on the four-hundred acre property, a high-roofed cathedral. Together with the pool, the strip-mall, investments and the three taverns co-owned by the minister, the properties of Foedimmanis Fundamentalist are worth approximately fifty million dollars. The interior of the worship-space is plain, few stained-glass



windows set high and distant from the attendees, individual synthetic-rubber chairs for each believer—so that each may have his or her own like relationship with the almighty-and a huge, plain altar where stand two candles atop kindlywhite marble and more than a few golden crosses shine brilliant. The placement of space and brilliant objects enhance the cathedral where thousands of believers gather, set in a semi-circle around not so much the altar, but the podium where the reverend Jackdaw delivers his dulcious lectures and divine imperatives to comfortable members who have lived largely contented, unexciting, but sated lives. They learned the skill of obedience over decades of pleasant submission.

“As we gather today, it is proper to speak of friendship. Not friendship of the kind that is common...but the kind that is divine.”

The reverend Jackdaw begins.

“People today see the world in terms that are familiar: their occupation, their automobile, their computer entertainment center. And we ought to enjoy these things, my friends, we now need them.”

The reverend pauses as he smiles at his audience.

“...but what good are they without the presence of Christ? Is your wide-screen television divine? Does your Porsche deliver you rapture in the world? Why no, it doesn't. But you know these things already, friends. You know deep in your heart that there is no presence like Christ, no saving presence like Jesus.”

The reverend Jackdaw smiled once more.

“No other can save you from the world, save you from the devil, save you from yourself. You know, I had a friend once. He was the finest man who ever lived. He had a wife who was kind and sociable and he had three children: a little boy and two older girls. He had a fine career in law, and he lived in a house that provided more room than he needed. Now, you might suppose that I'm gonna tell you that he drank, or that he was an adulterer, that he used co-caine or some other drugs. But I'm not gonna lie to ya, my friends. I can't lie to ya. I have to tell ya that he did none of those things. He

was kind and generous. He gave to charity, and he loved his dog.”

The reverend Jackdaw couldn’t help but pause here in order to permit the chuckles and knowing smiles to subside.

“...Yes, he did. He loved that dog and treated it well. David, I think was its name. And it lived some whole eleven years, it did. Fine animal. He loved that dog and treated it well. He doted over his children, provided for them good and proper. He went to little league. I believe he was a coach and he and his wife had a good relationship, good Christian relationship. Yes, my friends, he did everything good and proper. You might suppose I’m gonna tell ya that he had no friends. But I’m not. No sir, that man had as many friends as a man could want. He had all this and all that and all this that and that and the other...”

The reverend Jackdaw paused.

“...and the man was miserable. He didn’t know it, didn’t know why, what happened or wherefore...”

The reverend Jackdaw here bowed his head down.

“...but he was miserable. He was a good citizen, my friends. He knew what was happening around him, he was informed about the what and whereabouts of his children...he was. But that was not enough, my friends, and you know what I’m gonna tell ya. You know what was missing from that man’s life because you know yourselves what you have in your lives. That man was missing Jesus. It didn’t matter that he had comfort and security. It didn’t matter that he had a loving wife, the three kids, the career, the good citizenship. His dog couldn’t even help him.”

Again, the reverend Jackdaw paused.

“It didn’t even matter that he had an intimate group of friends, my loving family. No, that didn’t matter at all. Because he didn’t make Christ a part of that friendship. He didn’t allow Christ to come into his home and give him the presence that is the only presence of true friendship. My friend was not a Christian, and I could see how unhappy he was, how he could easily have

taken Christ as the center of his life...and been his friend. For that friendship in Christ connects you to the Holy Spirit. And, the spirit breathes life into you; it gives you what is essential to begin friendships with others. I gotta tell you, friends, that unless you bring Christ into your life, no friend can call you his brother and that is what true friendship is all about. Now, I'm not gonna lecture you anymore about it because you know what I'm tellin' you. You sit before me as a flock that has heard the word of the only shepherd. You've heard the word of Jesus and I want you to go out into the wide world today and spread th word of friendship with Christ everywhere you can. And when you bring an other into the fold, you will have bonded with him in friendship with Christ, the only savior. Cause you know that no law can bond you with god

unless it's connected to Jesus."

And with these words again the reverend Jackdaw stopped. He met his eyes with all of those of the audience he was able and he beheld mostly nodding heads. Then, the reverend Jackdaw began again.

"There is one more matter I'd like to take up with you today, friends. A troubling matter. As you know, our good friend in Christ, Mr. Adder Dareios, has blessed our community with his friendship. He has given to our humble gathering until it hurt, my brothers, until it hurt. But he has not only given this church the funding it needs to spread the friendship of Christ to the world, he has given his own presence. There are some who believe that Mr. Adder Dareios has tried to use this community, tried to damage our communal bond. And so, I ask who has fooled you who think that Mr. Dareios has taken anything from our church? Who is it who has fooled you into

believing that his generosity is anything less than friendship in Christ? You remember the man who had everthing he wanted, everthing he needed? You remember that he needed friendship in Christ and that is all he needed, friends. His life was wretched not because he didn't follow the law, not because he didn't love his childern, but because he didn't have friendship with Christ. Mr. Dareios provides us with the right tools we need to go out into the world and spread his friendship, everywhere on earth. So, don't be fooled into thinking that accepting his generosity will bar you from the

kingdom of heaven. No, be assured that when you accept assistance from a friend in Christ-Jesus you are helped along the path to Christ. No word, career, law of purity or friend can do anything for you until Christ's presence is a part of it. Do not permit our flock to be led astray by false accusations and bright, fiery words. Stay only with Christ, and let his work in the world do its thing."

The reverend Jackdaw there ceased his short sermon and began the praise of Christ in song. Church services continued until the number twelve. These services customarily begin at the number ten and the reverend Jackdaw is a stickler about punctuality. Still, a few years ago the time of the service was changed, the reverend surprisingly having insisted that the alteration occur. It is difficult to determine how and why changes transpire in such a large congregation as Foedimmanis Fundamentalist, since most members have little or no access to the upper hierarchy. Any complaints from even prominent members of the congregation go unheeded, but the service now begins at the number eleven.

Adder Dareios was born wealthy, guaranteed a comfortable life, and he attended excellent schools, though his marks were mediocre. He never excelled at intellectual matters, but pressure from his family compelled him to perform some act, some display of superiority and Adder the fighter, proved, and determined to continue the proof of, his merit. He realized early that he had acumen for business. Not the kind of business that one learns in school where the concepts flitter annoyingly about one's head and a good ethic becomes a barrier, but the kind of business that "makes the world go round." If one tends to a simple rule, one will be successful. Give as little as possible, take as much as good reputation permits. This simple maxim Adder Dareios adhered to as others adhere to the golden rule. It was a mode of conduct seeped into his scruple, had bled abyss into his psyche. While other children were making fun on the playground, the little Adder was calculating. He had noted that while outside of the school grounds, almost all children had continual access to gum and sweet-drops, yet inside the school grounds almost no child possessed them. He purchased himself massive amounts of the most popular flavors of sweet-drops, watermelon, and the same of "Toxic Rubber-Trouble" bubble-gum, the most popular sweet-chew. He had sat himself near the end of the slide where many of the more popular children

ended their enjoyment, and he gave out a few sticks of chewing gum initially. When others returned, and asked for some chew, he said that he had run low, that he was unable to give them up without compensation. When his contemporaries asked how much, he charged them ten times the price he had paid, but he was cleverer still. The price was barely noticeable since he sold one piece at a time. One would think that after a time Adder's contemporaries would learn the scam, themselves bring gum and sweets, but Adder knew enough about them. Idleness and ignorance would compel the majority of them to forget a supply of treats, and that desire would compel them to pay dearly for the luxury of a sweet chew during recess. Adder Dareios noted that when comfortable, most human beings question little and want change even less. When a larger, older and more powerful boy confronted Adder, demanding snacks gratis, he complied, but he made an agreement with the would-be assailant. Adder promised the boy free treats, if he would keep other thieves and attackers away. Thus began Adder's first commercial endeavor, and he was only to become more successful as he continued his schooling, earning average marks at best. When he attended high school, he was "dealing" with janitors and some of the faculty. He might have access to supplies that had vanished from the school warehouse, or he might be able to correct, at enormous profit, a computer problem that plagued the staff ever since one of his friends shot a virus through the school network. Adder became the master of delivering others from difficulties, and providing them with scarce goods, if scarce only temporarily. He had a knack for recognizing needs and fulfilling them at precisely the right moment in order to profit most, spend the least. Yet, he had no need for more money for himself or for his family. Immediately after high school, Adder possessed enough assets to become a money broker. His father refused to assist him in his business venture because Adder was supposed to "make it on his own." Dareios researched the usury laws of his state and locale, and maintained an upright,online profile and so his University experience was lively and lucrative. His father easily afforded tuition, and Adder would be able to lay claim to an excellent education, though his actual training was not given in the halls of that university. There, in Boston, he met many students who were in desperate need of funding, but who were unable to obtain requisite sums in the time allotted. Some were brilliant students who simply cared little for finances, and others were fresh out of options when one of Adder's associates introduced Dareios to their state of desperation. Possessed of a mild quietude

that aided his endeavor, he chatted with a new “client” and in a friendly manner he was able to reassure them. Few rivals existed and few criticized his success. Adder knew the concept of largesse and how to apply it when needed. His fraternity, for example, gave him charge of its finances, and once he had completed his stint as an undergraduate, the GHT treasury was triple what it once had been. They had underwritten more than twenty gatherings, some of which included the university president. But here Adder Dareios was not without his detractors. In his undergraduate junior year, he was accused of violating usury law in Massachusetts. The authorities proved nothing, but Adder received important insight into the politics of money-lending and its accompanying perils. He completed his education with two masters’ degrees, one in finance and another in Christian studies. He continued the expansion of his enterprises and formed Dareios Inc., which expanded his usury practices to real estate and bonds, but Adder continued the money-lending practice, since it was not only lucrative financially, but politically. He had acquired many associates during his years in Boston, and some few of those who continued to owe him money began careers in politics. One of his “clients” became governor with Dareios Inc. financial backing. It had been one of Adder Dareios’ more risky investments, but the return, as usual, was far greater than the initial investment. Adder appropriated the Washington crowd in pieces, and there he and his partners expanded their associations. It was then that Adder learned of a blistering Jackdaw who at that time had only begun his rise as a divine leader. Five years later, Dareios Inc. had financed the flowering of the flock with the purchase, and protracted lease, of realty specifically designed for massive social gatherings. Most of the real estate was owned by Adder Dareios, and Adder’s social connections as a permanent part of Washington politics attracted a steady flow of insiders to the church, whether to visit or to become a member. Now, Adder was forty-five years old and he moved about a bit more slowly than he had. He was unable to awaken himself at his usual 6:30 am. In fact, he enjoyed a regular sleep schedule.

“Long morning stretch,” he used to tell his third wife was its name, and she enjoyed the relaxation, tolerated the infidelities, ignored the absence of authentic affection and attended the tiresome social gatherings with the requisite face.

Adder Dareios was content, but he had asked the reverend Jackdaw to alter

the time of his sermon in order to give him and his wife that extra hour within which the long morning stretch might be had. The reverend Jackdaw agreed to the change directly, though with some reservation, and the praise of Jesus began a bit later in the morning.

“Gives me a chance to polish the sermon,” the holy man explained to his flock.

The reverend Jackdaw regularly proclaimed the virtues of Dareios Inc., and there were pamphlets readily available at all the exits to the cathedral, explaining the low interest loan of large amounts of money procurable for a church-member or friend. Adder Dareios explained that the more powerful the church members, the more powerful the church itself, and the reverend Jackdaw agreed.

Thus their bond.

## Iron Brown industrial Camaraderie

Mallory delighted in his work. He enjoyed tinkering and fixing things, not that he was especially creative. He had purchased several clocks, an old desk and a wooden wheel with the intention of refurnishing them, but he never quite found the time or the appropriate moment to do so. It was a point of contention between Mallory and his fiancé, one which was the catalyst for finally rupturing their union. Still, he enjoyed constructing things out of other things, and when he and the crew had completed their task, he was able to observe objectively, to some degree, what he had completed. The finished product gave him satisfaction and some pride, and he enjoyed that much of his livelihood. He had begun as an apprentice to “Blown” whose nickname stemmed from his surname Blownowski.

“I’m Blown,” he had introduced himself.

Mallory thought it peculiar that a man would accept and even cooperate with a pejorative nickname, but there it was. Almost every crewmember called him “Blown,” and as time passed, the name took on a more dignified tone until it seemed natural to name the man absurdly. The other men in the crew were similar to Blown, possessing stocky builds, abusive senses of humor and pot bellies gathered unknowingly from beer and cornsyrup. Many of the younger men constantly smelled of inexpensive liquor, as if they drank alcohol on site, but one sensed that the liquid permeated their body, seeped into their existence to a profound level, as if their essence were liquored. Mallory wasn’t particularly fond of Blown, even at the beginning of their association, but he disliked his mentor less than he was averted to the other members of the crew. He had almost no tolerance for their chat, or their crude behavior, though he disliked pretense intensely. One of the younger crew members played practical jokes, which almost always elicited howls of laughter from the rest of the group, but his were not goodnatured jibes or easygoing teasings. He had told a new crewmember that it was permissible to enjoy a smoke-break at a time when the supervisor was particularly annoyed at too many breaks. The new employee was fired on the spot. A reprimand was expected, or, even better, an amusing public scolding would have sufficed, but no-one laughed when the young man sulked off the site. Still, the next day the crew found the incident humorous.



“I hated that guy,” said the man who had gotten him fired, though he had smiled to his face, joked with him.

Mallory disliked juvenile behavior of this kind, and he tolerated it only as much as he deemed absolutely necessary. He laughed at the jokes played upon him and those played upon hapless others, but the crew observed correctly that he did not believe in their humor with the same spirit they possessed. Mallory was annoyed when young men, around the age of seventeen or even younger, would arrive in order to learn the trade. One of them would be put to work cleaning up after the men, or he might be employed as gopher.

“Go-for”

These youths regularly learned little or nothing, and that was bad enough, but Mallory’s least favorite trick was the clever “left-handed screwdriver” deception. One member of the crew would tell the apprentice to ask another member for a left-handed screwdriver. Each successive member would say they didn’t have one, or that they lent it to someone else, directing him to the next accomplice. The victim meandered about the site, from crewmember to crewmember, asking for a non-existent tool, until they realized the ruse, or until someone told him outright that he had been duped. Some new crew members wandered about for hours or even days before they realized what was happening. Blown had even attempted the ruse on a middle-aged Mallory, but when asked to retrieve a left-handed hammer,

“Incredibly stupid,” Mallory had replied.

Perhaps his remark created a distance between him and his coworkers from the beginning, but Mallory cared nothing for them at the time. He was engaged to a future lawyer and would soon no longer need the monetarily rewarding, but at times wearisome, profession. He realized only later, when his fiancé sabotaged and tore apart their union from within, that he needed to remain occupied thusly for several years—perhaps his lifetime. As a result of his lack of interest in jolly-making of this kind, Mallory was not a qualified crewmember equipped with a certification of adolescent assholity. He sat with them, and he joked with them in order to prevent a social assault on his person and reputation, which he had seen performed on more than one

outcast crewmember. He laughed communally when one of them dripped paint-thinner on another's sandwich, the two men coming to fisticuffs. At times, he even socialized with one or two of them, but he never trusted them, never shared personal information or concerns. Having arrived in Chicago, he thought he would obtain a degree or find an office position somewhere, work his way up. And, once his wife began practicing, he would have had the leisure to return to school, or to select a lucrative position carefully. Mallory never imagined that he would become a plasterer whose main responsibility was to finish up with a coat of paint and to clean up a construction site after the job had been completed. The work was satisfying and admirable in a way and his remuneration was adequate, ample even, since he had relatively few needs, but he remained unsatisfied with his occupation and with the social context within which he labored. The crew to which he belonged was obligated to don red safety vests that were almost the ugliest articles of clothing ever produced. He detested wearing them, but their company believed firmly that each crew member ought to be not only safe, but recognizable. The vests were distinctive, and they did perform a worthwhile function. Equipped with a personal tracking sensor, they kept the employees visible under any circumstances, so that any supervisor or company executive would be able to determine what they were doing, when, and how they acted on the site. That the vests were the most inexpensive solution to a safety concern, that they permitted the company to claim it had satisfied safety regulations were fringe benefits.

"Mal, they need you on two," Blown said to him.

"They finished?"

"No, they're startin' up. What do you think?"

Mallory quietly gathered together his tools: paint bucket, hooks, and toolbox.

"Any word on Laggard?"

"His mother says he's doin' fine. Should be back already."

"He was hurt pretty bad."

“That little pussy should be back at work.”

Blown waited for Mallory to respond, but he said nothing.

“If I find out he’s playin’, you know, sittin’ out for no reason, I’ll break his fuckin’ head for ‘im. I play too, but this is too much. I got this for him.”

Blown shook a ratchet back and forth vigorously, smiling. Blown was, of course, joking, but Mallory smelled a bit of rum, and he quickened the pace of his tool-gathering. Regretting his own question, he wanted desperately to depart before he heard any more of Blown’s comments.

“I hate that shit.”

Blown had explained his prejudice early. He told Mallory that he did not enjoy the company of educated persons. He disliked their hauteur, though Blown did not possess the words to explain it adequately. Blown knew that they possessed nothing except pretense. He gleefully explained to Mallory how he once created an altercation between himself and one of those. The man had wandered into a bar where an inebriated Blownowski was sinking three quarters at a time into a pinball machine. The man had been friendly toward the drunken construction worker, but Blown pretended as though he heard something he disliked.

“What did you say?” Blown asked.

“Nothing.”

“No, I heard somethin’,” he continued.

“No, really, I said nothing.”

“Oh, I see. You callin’ me a liar.”

The man moved away from Blown to the other side of the bar. There Blown followed and waited until he went outside in order to smoke a cigarette. Blown followed and hit the stranger in the face.

“Beat some sense into one of ‘em that day,” Blown laughed.

Mallory thought how lately Blown changed since he became a supervisor. Blown's old friends and acquaintances were coming to be fewer and fewer, but he didn't appear to care. Blown took a tone of apathetic superiority towards his former friends and colleagues much like successful academics take to adjuncts and to others in inferior disciplines. In fact, much like others to every other. He had even explained to Mallory that he cared nothing at all for anyone but his family, and Mallory ruminated that the earth would implode before Blown cared about anyone with whom he worked, or practically any other.

Thus their bond.

## Furthering the Pursuit of Unity

One of his bar-time acquaintances had told Mallory in detail legends of penthouses and parties that ended only when the guests passed out, or departed at daylight. The alcohol gratis, the space open and indulgent. Mallory remembered the Newcomer and he wanted to see for himself how the he entertained his guests. He had heard that this odd man invited some of the guests for future visits, had entertained them with a live blues-band, and at times important personages from the Chicago community attended. Mallory thought that he might be able to network his way into the world that he had originally coveted. He attended every affordable bar, beerhouse and tavern that he knew at least once. He attempted, five months long, to find Brazil and her friend in order to talk with them again. Perhaps he may find a new occupation with new connections, may leave his old job for something more lucrative. At the very least, he should be able to entertain himself, seeing what there is in a Newcomer's world. Mallory had not been able to locate the Newcomer whose initial visit to The Everyday Tavern Entautha had apparently been his final one. Apparently, Amity's reaction to the dogs had not made the Newcomer feel welcome. In fact, Mallory had chatted with Amity about it.

"I see dogs in taverns all the time."

"Bullshit."

"No, really. No-one says nothin'. Nothing happens. I've seen it."

"Why do you want to see that guy again? You didn't like him when he was here."

"Just curious is all."

"You want to go to one of those all-nighters Brandy and Mead told you about."

"I want to see for myself."