

chasing tail

written by..
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Synopsis:

Chasing Tail is about a young man whom confronts the absurdity of a life spent without love. The title is an intentionally malapropos use of the colloquial term. The protagonist of the story, as a budding artist, is primarily concerned with isolating himself from the demands of the societal context in which he has grown up in order to find truth, only to realize that while he has been busying himself with developing answers to questions and problems he invents, in a perpetual mental equivalent to 'chasing his own tail', the Muse of his creative and intellectual efforts is the woman whom he breaks up with in the story's opening chapter. He discovers—perhaps too late—that this union with 'the only girl he's ever loved' epitomizes the beauty to be found in life, which he comes to understand is the ideal fuelling the passion behind his pursuits. Indeed, the opposite of this notion of Beauty—that which impinges horror upon him—is the source of the dissatisfaction he harbours when turning his aesthetic and sensitive eye upon the world.

A Bildungsroman in the tradition of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, as well as countless others, this particular depiction of the archetypical 'coming of age' story has the protagonist preoccupied with issues such as: the role Myth plays in art, including the current myth of the Modern Man; the merit and allure of escapism through abstraction in a world that can be too insistent upon itself; impassioned creativity in rebellion to a society that is growing increasingly impersonal; notions of aesthetics (Beauty: the antithesis of Horror); and of course, and most importantly, how to love and why to strive for it within the enterprising spirit of the 21st century.

The book is written in two parts. The first is called, *The Intricacy of Silence*, and here the reader finds that the protagonist, Samuel, has broken up with his fiancée, Ana. And this to his own tragic discontent, for he finds himself unable to be happy within a world filled with suffering. Samuel proceeds to isolate himself within his room, with the intention of discovering some notion of Truth, with which he can perhaps find a way to better the chaotic and dissatisfying world around him. Within his room he meditates on the memories he formed during a trip to Europe he took with Ana and two friends. Now alone for an indefinite period, he finds time to flip through the journal he kept with him during his travels, and he develops a sense of detachment from his own concept of self as he peruses his notes and narrative excerpts describing certain nights and sights and events which stood out to him particularly for their beauty and wonder. He scolds himself for the naivety behind the words he wrote during that trip, for he finds he sounds like a mere child whom is naive to the social and political plights occurring within the neighbourhood of the cities he moved through as an ignorant tourist. He begins to chastise his own ignorance, and starts wondering what he could direct his mind and his passion toward which might be of value for the common good. Isolated in his room, he quickly embraces the life of the ascetic, burning his furniture and beginning to sleep on a thin rug with nothing more than a rag for a blanket, even as the city outside his bedroom's window marches toward the depths of winter. Initially, he plunges head first into a realm of abstractions and imagination, inspired by his carefully curated collection of books spanning a broad range of ideas and subjects. Eventually, at the close of Part One, he

becomes disenchanted even from this process he is so drawn toward—as if it were a fundamental necessity of his character—for he realizes that, sooner or later, he will have to make his stand in the material world. Failing this, in all likelihood, he will become homeless, and will grow into old age without ever having felt like he could be enough for his one true love, Ana.

Part Two is entitled, *Into the World Now*, and we follow Samuel through the streets of Calgary as he interacts with a wide variety of characters, including: friends from his past; a university professor whom taught a class in meta-ethical philosophy Samuel took once upon a time; the professor's wife, whom is a psychologist; as well as Don Juan, Zarathustra and even two homeless men. Surrounded by the holiday spirit as Christmas approaches, Samuel tries desperately to reconcile the concepts of his aesthetics while coming to grips with the realities of his circumstance as the quintessential Modern Man. He has begun writing a book, which he says is meant to provide scope to his theories, but he quickly realizes that all he is doing is providing rationalizations for his fundamental lack of courage when facing the world head on. *Chasing Tail* ends when he comes to Ana seeking final judgement.

Caught up with the mastodon, finally!
But in the dirt, recorded, you won't: find me!
I've taken measures to make it so, bye bye so timely.
To indulge the thought I must be thinking,
my brain says: "try me!"
but my mind's eye says, "well, I see.
I see I see, I..."
can't forget to cap my pen. okay it's capped.
and then? well, and then and then,
you can't erase a pen.
damn.
for the folks left:
my pen... a pen, bereft
(i hope)
not a step taken that does not echo eternally
if one takes but a step; and, in childhood,
all vote
so as to encourage: thee!
No need to be actin' churlish. free
from that fate, if I write—but the cap's still on,
as I blather on, and my mind tells my brain
(if the two aren't the same):
"go ahead and perish, I will carry on.
(but blindly)."
to which my brain (my brain oh my brain)
says:
"i don't believe you" and, "don't mind me!"
the brain, just... so *physically*, taking the mind literally.
"what, are people still...?"
and who's that with the punchline? Nietzsche.

Part One – The Intricacy of Silence

1.

Footsteps echoed retreat through the hall. Samuel was silent as he listened to them fade. They were walking down the hall because he had sent them walking down the hall. Why he had done that, he wasn't quite sure. Their slow dissipation did not yet signify to Samuel the weight of his decision, and in fact when they vanished from reality they only continued to pound in his mind loud as ever. But she *had* left; hurt, of course: shock mingled with confusion mingled with loss and certainly a little anger stabbed down to her very core. She had a look in her eye—which he saw when he could muster the courage to meet her look—like she didn't know who he was anymore. And seeing all those emotions play behind her gaze, he saw that they crowded and pushed out the one he had counted on for so long: acceptance. With its disappearance it was replaced by ambiguity, which he saw as prophecy for a fate he had then bound himself to: one of undefined existence he wasn't sure he was ready for. He feared it might turn more crippling than he could have

ever fathomed. When he had informed her of that which he had arrogantly taken upon himself to conclude, on behalf of them both, she reminded him that they had promised to remain by each other forever. He had tried to elaborate to her the reasons he had for coming to his decision, but as he intoned them out loud he felt that even to himself they began sounding more and more stupid. Like he had invented a problem in his mind and was now tearing his world down to fix it. And when Ana had asked him the question that proved inevitable, all he could manage was,

“It's not you. It's me.”

Or, at least something to that effect—for he couldn't, on top of everything, form his mouth around that enormous cliché. But she got the point. And, thankfully, she understood, despite her sadness. Despite her heart having dropped with the lead-like weight of unexplained disappointment, she saw that he was wrestling with something inside. He needed time, and she was willing to give him that.

It hadn't been out of some sort of idleness that he had thought to do this. He hadn't been bored one afternoon and come up with a little something to brood over. It had been a particular incident which had set him off. It was one of those silly things that happened to everyone at least as many times in their life as they cared to remember, and it was this fact—of the event's ultimate insignificance—which stuck with him as the days in which he had to live with his choice wore on, when he was left alone, without love; without hope or surety; without all that Ana had been for him. He didn't deserve those things. Not when he refused to participate in almost everything he came across. (She was so much the opposite of him in this regard.) What good was he to her when he actively shunned

her attempts to enjoy the experience of a reality that, for whatever reason, everyone else was accepting? If he wanted to be like that, well, then, he knew, she didn't need to hear it; nobody else wanted to hear it, surely. Better for him to go off into a corner somewhere, out of range of the sound of the machines which kept churning—all he could hear—even as the voices of life's abundant energy did their best to carry their music over the whirring and grinding of the so-called real world. To succeed in finding happiness within this order of things he was sensitive to—and undoubtedly overly so—was not an option for him. Better he be unhappy. Better that his life be shaped by the dissatisfaction he saw in the faces of the people around him, which were in turn shaped by a certain—explicitly *material*—narrative, on which all Earth's sentient motion seemed to be based; for it was precisely in those unsatisfying concrete myths that Samuel found inspiration for his insistence on *fluidity*. And until he figured out how to make those myths crumble—if such a thing were possible—he could not have anything or anybody invest themselves in his support. He feared he would be a disappointment in that respect, sooner or later. . . .

Someone of such a persuasion was certainly not the person to provide stable foundation that another—a life partner—could, or should, really, plan their future around. He was too much in his own head, and to take someone with him on his quixotic voyages—which promised only the indulgent satisfaction of fantasy, and maybe a little intellectual discourse, in the end—would have them end up just as broke and beaten as he seemed destined to be as he grew into an old man. He couldn't do that to Ana. How could he be someone's foundation when he refused to pin down, well, *anything*, because of some sort of deeply rooted fear of. . . becoming static? Indeed, he became almost offended when

anyone acted toward him as if they knew him—Ana of course excluded—because he oriented himself in such a way that he fancied he didn't have a self to know. And it was precisely—or, more like vaguely—such a sort of thing as that sort of offence which inspired him to make the decision to sever all ties with the world of defined realities, and let free his own perceptions. He didn't want to be seen as, well, a *person*, with all the repercussions, any longer. That was the plan. Hopefully, in that realm of dreams in which fantasy can quickly turn into the shadowed webs of lonely nightmare, he didn't think up conviction to do something stupid. That was the caveat.

It had been on a Saturday morning, closer to lunch time, when the event underpinning his decision occurred. Samuel had been getting ready to leave the coffee shop in which he had spent the morning hours lounging on a patio chair, enjoying the pleasantly mild warmth of a day marked by all as a welcome break from the otherwise chilly month October had so far been. He was surrounded by people whom he had decided just as eagerly as he to get out to enjoy the gentle weather, which carried his own mind aloft on the delicate breeze stirring through the gestures of that fortunate and amicable crowd. Daydreams lingered in their passing, and he indulged them with company made infinitely agreeable by the circumstances. And as he had been getting up to leave, wanting then to make his way to the river, he experienced an intensely jarring pull back down to a reality filled with people jostling each other in line, servers shouting at one another to have the next hapless customer's order heard and prepared, not yet dried coffee on the floor, an employee with a mop trying her best to clean up the liquid before

someone slipped, pushing the handle around lethargic legs. In short, Samuel was pulled down to the reality of the barista, who, instead of taking the demands of her job in stride, subtly poured mirth into the cups she served to those she felt caused her the slightest unnecessary disruption. Maybe she did it because she was bored. Maybe she did it because she was not imaginative enough to see the beauty which still lingered tacitly in the scene before her, which Samuel had been indulging in. Maybe she was hungover. It didn't matter. What mattered to Samuel was that upon asking her favour, he had been met with a rebuttal which to him in that moment did nothing less than still the idyllic currents his morning had so far sent him adrift upon. And it wasn't entirely her fault, either.

Maybe the fault was more his. Probably so, in fact, for she had no way of knowing how sensitive the idealist before her was; and he should be steely, as life demands.

Nevertheless, it was this altercation—and most would be hard pressed even to call it that—that had inspired in him the notion that the world for so many reasons was something he wanted to get away from. In fact it wasn't even a matter of want. It's not like it hadn't been coming: if it wasn't this happenstance occurrence it would have been another to give him excuse to let the storm which had been brewing inside him reach the shore of his world, cut loose; in short, he *needed* to do it. Yes, he was sensitive; as an artist is. In every moment he saw a thousand preceding it, and in each person he saw a complex and unique manifestation of one corner of the world or another. In every dour outlook turned toward him, despite his intention to be as good-humoured toward things as possible, he took personal offence, for it reminded him that the world had taken one more open and excited and innocent child, and shaped them somehow negatively; and he was reminded

how he couldn't, in such a world, accept his own happiness, when he might instead do something in some way to spread something of perhaps a long term goodness to those around him. Maybe it was narcissism, but he thought he might have a thing or two to say of worth if people gave him their ear for a moment. But in his experience, if people have even a moment to spare for a stranger, it is literally only that, and then they are off again on their business of things. And Samuel wasn't nearly so quick enough to satisfy them as they wished in such a fleeting instant.

So, that Saturday morning, as he proceeded to walk dejectedly to the river, his zeal doffed recklessly, he made up his mind that he needed to step away from something he obviously didn't take as seriously as he should. Or, if one looked at it another way, he took it way too seriously. Whichever way it happened to be, he had not the least desire to participate in that which had given rise to such ill temper he so often came across, and just one too many times. And he had thought: how can I fade away completely, in order to do maybe what I've been led to, in this moment, when I care so deeply for people whom without knowing what they're doing tether me to a reality I want no part of? Of course, he was thinking of Ana, and there was only one answer to his question, and it would forever torment him. And thus is why he was now listening to the footsteps carry away the only girl he had ever been in love with. A miracle, the life raft to his storm, gone away from him one step at a time.

'I'm left alone.' he thought. He had been standing when she left; he had asked if she would let him embrace her once more, and she had agreed, and they stood there in each others arms for a long time. He remained standing long after she closed the door

behind her. Slowly, as if moving through water, he looked out the window of his room, at the world, now miles away. It soon proved too intense. He turned from the thicket of trees just outside his ground floor view to assay his living arrangements, as if to assuage his affronted gaze of the thin October fog which had descended upon his mind as much as on the innocuous setting outside. His furniture stared back at him, curious about what he had done; wondering if it could be enough for him, now when it was all he had.

'This room is where I feel safe.' Samuel moved away from the wall which held the one window in his quarters, across the floor to sink his form into one of the two chairs that were of his belonging: a chaise recliner of a dark, heavy wood, with upholstery of fine gold and cream and red colouring, the threads woven into the style of Mediterranean pageantry. The upholstery matched the rug which lay over top most of his room's hardwood flooring.

'This room is where I am comfortable.' He paused. The footsteps were still resounding in his memory, and in spite of himself Samuel held on tight. 'And here I will remain, though I wish more than anything to follow the path tread by those footsteps, now gone. . . but I don't know where they've turned.' His breathing quickened as the reality of his decision struck him anew as an endless wave; his chest was a turbulence of choppy waters. He reminded himself, perhaps in an attempt to master the current: 'This room should not be a trap for anyone but me.' And indeed he felt trapped by it, because he saw that most everyone else seemed to be getting on fine, where he could not. He had the image of a street, one from an old western flick—a main street—and he was looking upon it as if from out a barroom window, and the street was made so dry by that year's

draught that the wind no longer kicked up dust; it was dust. Across the street, a man had been walking up and down the rickety wood boards in front of yet another saloon (perhaps it was) for most of the afternoon. The man was clearly lost in his own world. As he paced, his hands waved above his head, and his mouth was moving furiously as he muttered to himself. He even had a notepad, which remained, for most of this time, in the back pocket of his dust-covered jeans, which became dustier even minute to minute just for his being outside, and he would tear the notepad from out his pocket every so often, unclip the pen clasped to the journal's spiral spine, and scrawl a sentence or two. . . And Samuel then watched, as the sun was setting down west of that long avenue, the man get stabbed, as he ran into and nearly bowled over a man then walking out of the swinging doors of the saloon—the wrong man to strike in that absent-minded fashion, as it so happened. With that knife, the killer was forcing the man to participate in his reality, or else get out. And since the killer's was a reality of the flesh, so it meant death to anyone whom did not accept his challenge. Samuel was left to wondering where exactly the man was, the moment he died? At the tip of his mind's tongue were words which came to him habitually, repeated in paraphrase so often the general notion of them had likely physically imprinted upon his brain somewhere, probably able to be revealed by an EEG scan if he cared to confirm his suspicion, and he allowed the mantra to run its course through him:

'It's you against the world, and it is the world's purview to outlast you. The world, the world. It knows what it's doing, because it's been doing it for thousands of years. Millions. And you, you don't know what you're doing.' And then aloud, this time:

“Nobody does.” His voice fell abruptly in the emptiness around him. The silence that met his words hung, heavy. It seemed that, no matter where his days took him, Samuel's thoughts always returned to this notion, now to him almost a proverb as of late. Samuel didn't think the world to be malicious. Just indifferent. But the most discouraging obstacle he had found anyone may come across in their efforts spent within the world, was indifference. It takes every ounce of strength to continue pushing forward without recognition.

Recognition was not what Samuel was after, however. Quite the contrary, in fact. The world of material substance as he understood it to be was defined by the relations between things which were of affect. Upon this idea, he determined his wish to be for a personal existence fundamentally *immaterial*.

'I wish to fade away, to leave not a trace of my ever having been here.'

—unlike the footsteps, their echos lingering—

'because the chaos around me is without definition—as it should be. And thus as I should be. I wish to be forgotten, yet how do I do that when the world demands of me explanation of my purpose and elaboration of my intent every time someone asks for my opinion of something? And it's no matter how seemingly inconsequential that something is, it always proves too invasive. One needs to have a sense of self to participate in the day to day motion of existence. A sense of ego. But I am fundamentally amorphous. I simply cannot define myself as anything. I cannot give explanation to others for my being in front of them. This is why I stay in my room. There is no one here demanding me to be, well, a *person*. And it is here, unfortunately, in some respect, where I spend endless

hours occupying myself with imagined constructs, finding so many answers to questions I make up. As the world passes me by.' Then, resolutely—for he had no choice—he finished: 'Good.'

By such constructs he was referring to, for example, the fact that he watched television re-runs. Sometimes for days on end. Or the fact also that he liked to dwindle away the hours of the day reading, something he felt conflicted in doing: though books allowed him to escape into situations where ambiguity is cast aside and every character, event, and idea is of defined import for one reason or another, he felt as if these writers could not provide for him any answers. Their words were not reality. Or, at least, not his own reality. At best he could learn from books about some aspect of life as seen through other eyes. But what good was that when he didn't even understand the world through his own? What good was it when he hadn't bothered to dedicate the time to figuring out exactly. . . not *who*, but *what* or *how* he was? And, if he had chosen instead to remain locked within the inertia of things as he saw them through his study's window, when would he ever have a chance to do that? (Despite this, often fuelled by futility, he read nonetheless voraciously.) One could find other evidence of what he often worked on to let his mind roam sketched onto the scraps of paper littered around his study's floor, or crammed into his desk drawers: doodled machinations of natures of a nautical sort, which he fantasized, as he drew them, piloting to the very depths of the oceans, or the far reaches of space. With these creations Samuel swept aside concern for their physical possibility: they were crafted only for flights of whimsy. However, in the years he had taken up this practice, he had saved three which he thought, given a little tinkering and

double-checking of properties, could be realistically engineered, and successful in their purpose. Overall, Samuel felt at peace most in a world of his own imagination. And, as he saw it, this was the primary source of his pervasive indecision regarding his circumstance: he would pay for his lack of certain investment in his physical future. He had sacrificed much to achieve the capacity to indulge this position of undefined purpose he had earnestly sought, and yet he knew that sooner rather than later he would need to stamp himself upon the Earth, and declare the object of his aims. Failing that. . . well. . . he didn't want to think about it. With Ana walking out that door, he had let go of the last thing tethering him to the planet—he was now out there floating in space. She had been perhaps the only part of his life that had given him a sense of belonging, or claim, to the reality everyone shared. He had torn himself from the world, and violently so, so that he could see more clearly. He didn't know if this was for better or worse. His mind was as everyone's is: a cloud's silhouette, ambiguous and infinitely resistant toward attempts at determination. But he had made a stand, in his own unique way, to understand what lay behind its nature.

2.

Samuel had made his room comfortable enough. It was simple—here he lacked imagination—and once assembled it appeared more of a study than a living space. There was an oversized but not ostentatious desk of dark wood, exceedingly sturdy in the

support it provided to piles of books, and Samuel's elbows. In fact, almost everything in the room was cut from matured, dense wood given a dark, earthy brown finish: the wall panelling, the book shelves, the stiff chair behind the desk and the slightly less austere chaise, grounded, on the opposite side of the room—the one with the matching upholstery, which was the one Samuel slept in. And—such was Samuel's way—he planted as many seeds as trees were cut down to make his nook, as if even to leave a footprint behind on a hike were too much a definition of his physical existence. A small fire stove stood opposite the window, of blackened cast-iron, which Samuel made use of on winter nights. Behind his desk, his selection of reading material was spilling off shelves that reached the ceiling, and the spillage was rising off the floor. His collection was, admittedly, of a relatively less economical degree as was the space of the room, and very carefully curated. His interests, as reflected in the titles assembled, spanned a broad range, though he only took a few subjects to full depth. He reserved one shelf for his own notebooks, for his doodles and scribbles and hasty ideas scrawled out and often left unexplained, so that upon review they appeared cryptic even to himself; he entertained the belief that his act of writing them down secured their trace on his future musings.

Now utterly alone, as he knew he should be, remaining stretched out in defeat along the recliner, he couldn't help but picture the last look on Ana's face before she turned to walk out the door. She remained before his eyes for a long time, her face morphing into every single expression he had ever seen her make, as if he hoped the movement of his memory would bring her to life before him: how she looked when he woke up beside her, when her eyes were as open as a raccoon's curious gaze as she met

his sleepy countenance, her smile wide, and his smile wide, happy as they were to wake up beside each other once more; how she looked when she was lost in thought, when her eyes seemed to see a thousand miles away and her mouth narrowed, her lips formed almost into a pout; how she looked when she was upset or hurt, when her eyes took on the entire tragedy of life; and how her eyes danced when she was feeling mischievous. Her eyes, her eyes. How he could get lost in them, as he was now. Almost as if his subconscious wanted to distract him, Samuel was muttering under his breath, slowly, some part of his brain concentrating as he allowed himself time to find the right words, even as his attention was given only to her image—to her skin, which glowed, and her smile, which words did no justice. In a soft caw, his voice trembled out one of those sentiments he would be inclined to write down, if he had a pen in hand:

“Let's see: I fell in love with a certain city, and in another, I fell in love with a night. I fell in love with a girl, and in love's apotheosis, I couldn't feel right. Now I'm left with memories, and t'is good if they fade away. Because I was not meant to have them, for my happiness I will pay.” The girl—or woman, rather, for she was entirely that and ideally so, as she challenged Samuel to be a man—was of course the primary subject in his dismal soliloquy. But the mere mention of her, even if indirectly then, was too difficult. He was a mess. When he heard those words come back to him, bouncing off the walls, the sing-song rhymes did little to stop his throat from drying up. What he did then was grow cold in wonder at his detached, and frighteningly perspicacious, analysis.

He knew full well what he had done. He sent her away explicitly for the purpose of experiencing the pain of losing her—why should he have had love when there was so

much pain and suffering everywhere else? He had been living in a fantasy. He was right to acknowledge that this meant he had used her—played with her emotions, despite how much care they deserved to be handled with, so as to achieve his own melancholy. Thus self-disgust was added to Samuel's self-inflicted misery. And he needed both, in his warped view of things. He rationalized that, for her, the quick short shock of their severance now was better than the prolonged torture she would have undoubtedly gone through as he indulged his destruction of ego some other way. Yes, destruction of ego. For she had been that for him. For her to stay, he would have dragged her down, inevitably, and he had wanted to save her from that. She deserved someone who would give himself to her completely. For a time *he* had done that, and happily, to be sure, but where he was in his mind now that was no longer possible. He simply would not fold; he would not have his future with Ana dictated by something external to them, as the world so insisted to do to every other precariously happy couple. So many relationships had been ended for precisely the same reason; he had just been preemptive, it seemed. He was suffering now, in his view, for all the unhappiness experienced by lovers the world over. So grand was his heart's intent! In addition to this, he had so bluntly removed love from his days so as to free himself of the world, so as to properly analyze it, without having vested interest in the outcomes of his investigations—his thought, and a correct one on the face of it, was: how much more vested could one become than to have their mind filled with the happy hopefulness for a future spent with their soul mate? Perhaps it was simply arrogance, but Samuel thought he could come into contact with some aspect of truth if he oriented himself in such a way so as to hear it, or feel it run through him. The

happiness he had felt when with Ana made him care for nothing else in those moments, and when he was away from her he berated himself for having let slip the meditative state he felt he should remain in. Samuel thought he had no right to happiness when so much of the world was inexplicably horrific. He felt he couldn't live with himself if he didn't do his part to find answers.

With regards to his love, briefly, stemming from his current need to be of an undefined state, Samuel was a ghost, and he turned Ana away because he couldn't fathom how somebody could live with a ghost.

3.

As for the city he fell in love with, though it could easily have been any other and all of them sprung from this corner of the planet or another, no doubt, so it happened to be Vienna—a city which gave to Samuel the first experience he had had of a culture outside of the spirit in which he was raised, over and across the pond:

Before his plane finally touched down on tarmac after a thirteen hour flight from Canada, he was perhaps a tad overly enthused, by his seat mates' judgement, when he realized they were passing over the mountains of Greenland. Samuel had never flown internationally before, and he had been excited even to board the aircraft, which was so large—he happily acknowledged—that it had that middle column of seating he had

known existed thanks only to movies, having only ever previously been on one plane, which in comparison had been more like a bike with training wheels: a shuttle taking him for a forty minute hop from Edmonton to Calgary; a flight so short the plane began its descent before reaching cruising altitude. In that plane, there had been no grand separation of classes, as there was in the jumbo jet, and, in contrast, he felt almost a sense of giddiness when he surveyed the much lauded first class seating, with the recliners and retractable desks and TV screens twice the size of all others, passing them as he moved to the very back of the plane where his ticket had him. Where people were, relatively speaking, spilling over one another. The lady beside Samuel had commented that she had never seen a flight so busy, and so disorganized. To Samuel it didn't matter. He didn't mind the loud four year old in the row just in front of him, who was persistent in his yearning to turn around to make faces, despite his mother's halfhearted protests. He was simply too excited for his voyage over the Atlantic that, despite the aghast looks cast in his direction by a passenger—who was all the way on the other side of that middle column of seats—he broke the darkness which had eventually descended within the cabin by raising the shutter on his window to steal quick peeks at the planet passing below, letting in a glowing flood of white light reflected off fluffy clouds; peeks which he made even more frequently as he felt sure they were culminating their approach to Europe. . .

he didn't want to miss catching a glimpse of the continent's coast! Before the pilot announced their descent, his neighbours exited the row to use the toilet, and he took advantage of that moment to do the same—*oh!* he had been holding in urine for the last five hours, while his row's companions dozed: the aisle leading to his release was *miles*

away from him as he sat in the window seat. . . the seat he had specifically requested—his mistake, from lack of travel experience.

Samuel had not achieved even a wink of shuteye during the entire trip, which had been extended to nineteen hours total—what with the layover between connecting flights—and yet when he exited the plane and took his first steps upon the landmass on which humanity had defined its written histories, into Vienna's airport, he was bursting to get by everyone to begin soaking it all in. Alas, he was stuck behind lackadaisical travellers too weary or too used to the process to share in his excitement as they shuffled down the hall leading into the arrival terminal. He was quick to find the two people he was to meet: Dorian, who was Ana's cousin, and Shogo, who was one of Dorian's longest lasting friends, and whom Samuel had met only once. Ana's flight was arriving later in the evening, and she was going to meet them at the hotel. In the meantime, Dorian and Shogo had already gotten their luggage, and Samuel had brought his on the plane, so they left the airport without delay, hopping into one of the cabs waiting in line. . .

There was a fifteen minute drive between the airport and the heart of the city where there wasn't much to see but pasture, highway, and factories. When they got into Vienna Dorian pointed out church steeples with an enthusiasm Samuel didn't yet understand. The towers could be seen rising up above all other buildings as their cab passed along the city's main canal, its brick walls covered in graffiti art which, even from the street, looked a promising portal for the imagination. Dorian and Shogo were both obsessively enamoured with drawing and painting and anything of the sort, and Shogo even made his living as a tattoo artist, and they too were both inclined to look with favour

upon the kilometres' stretch of urban commentary. From the back seat of the cab, Samuel watched as ferries for day trips drifted along, filled with people wearing happy faces waving to those on shore. He stuck his head out the cab's window and waved back. The cabbie barked at him in a thick accent to *'be careful'*. . . Samuel sat back abruptly. He *tried* to remain still—to let the city wash over him. He noticed how many locals were travelling by bicycle, and that none were wearing silly spandex, which was a fact Samuel met with pleasure: such a manifest difference was something which was apt to set his mind astir; he figured such little things as that were somehow indicative of a culture. (what he concluded was that while Canadians took to biking as an event in itself—and that event was exercise, generally—Europeans just incorporated it into their daily lives! *There was no need to get dressed up for such a commonplace*). He was fascinated by how the cabbie zipped through the narrow and busy streets with such a deft hand, and such practised timing. It was, perhaps, maybe a little premature for him to pick up on—given that he didn't know at all where their destination might be—but Samuel thought the cabbie seemed to be going in circles to take the twinkle eyed travellers to their hotel. He felt sure the cabbie was taking a detour for extra cash, and his suspicion was confirmed when the driver, upon unloading their luggage from the trunk, offered to take them back to the airport on a return trip at the end of their week in the city, somehow quoting a cost fifteen euro less than that which they were doling out to his outstretched hand. It was an offer they accepted, of course.

All the movement of that first night passed Samuel in a blur, as it had in the cab, and he wasn't yet picking up on the atmosphere of one of Europe's most opulent centres.

He just wasn't yet able to let the situation's foreign reality wash over him. Culture shock. The three friends explored the area immediately around their hotel, hopping from cafe to bar to cafe again. A clientele of Viennese and tourists flowed through each place, speaking all the languages of the world, and Samuel watched them rapt with attention as he, Dorian, and Shogo played cards over round after round of beer. He was growing enamoured by the simple things he noticed and that his friends pointed out that were glaring in their contrast to what he knew. Though he didn't smoke, he liked the fact that people could enjoy a cigarette after their meal. It lent to every pub and restaurant a certain casualness that he proceeded to identify seemed to lay behind every gesture that gave definition to the city—like that so-called butterfly effect would have one envision it, which was how Samuel perceived it to be. It seemed like nobody was in a rush. Like everybody was enjoying being exactly where they found themselves. People remained longer after their meals, never growing tired of their company. Samuel noticed that the music was never too obtrusive over conversation. Dorian wasn't much of a beer drinker, but even he joined Shogo and Samuel in the rounds of beer they ordered; beer which was German and straightforward: smooth and well crafted, nothing added beyond the four traditional ingredients of hops, water, yeast, and malt, and yet complexity existed in the misleading simplicity of the effervescent recipes. None from that trio was shy in asking for their glasses to be refilled as they sampled all that was on the menu. It was by the time the third and fourth day came around that Samuel had come to deciding he didn't want to leave. The city unfolding before him was like a dreamland: around every corner was something else that was found dancing upon the horizon of his expectation, giddily toeing

and sometimes outright jumping the line defining the limit of his perception. For example, he and Ana had spent an afternoon laying in the shade of a tree, thus protected from the sun, listening to a man playing the saxophone across a canal which was, for the moment, dry as the heat of the day, and after about an hour or so, when they were leaving and passing the musician, Ana had been prepared to throw some coins into the case she assumed would be before him, in thanks for providing such a backdrop to their afternoon in the shade; it surprised them both to see he did not have his instrument's case open in front him—the guy just wanted to play his saxophone, out there in the serenity of the park: putting music to his spirit, his efforts considerate toward that end alone. Such was how the city seemed to pulse with creativity, which was its real binding and support, rather than mortar. Unfortunately, it was on the fifth day that they were scheduled to leave, heading now to Berlin—a new adventure and thus a welcome circumstance, nonetheless.

What he found most interesting were the people of Europe: surrounded as they were by a cultural history rich in artistic movement, they seemed to Samuel much more in touch with the human narrative lacking in the North American tome, which, in contrast, had only the aspirations defined by economy embedded within the opening chapter of its storyline, and to that beginning the invisible hand remained loyal in its bent to define the wealth of the nation with sterile prose. Europeans seemed acutely aware of the highs and lows of the conscious spirit, for they had an inherited wisdom behind their movement, passed down from history rife with as many successes as losses; nobody was putting on a show, or defining their action as if the concept of identity was a marketing

campaign. What's more—and this was something Samuel hadn't expected to find merit in—but he found himself enjoying the fact that everyone everywhere was piled on top of each other: in the streets, in apartments, and in public spaces, and no one seemed embittered by these circumstances. Instead there was a spirit of community he had never before experienced so explicitly—here people actually used public spaces for boisterous recreation, gathering along the canal to play drinking games, or sitting around picnic tables in parks long after the sun had set, playing cards and smoking and moving from table to table, a sort of party formed, where the music was provided in the murmur of voices. Teenagers were spray painting over top old graffiti along the canal, their hands guided in the night by lamp light they had brought for the purpose. Everywhere there was such an active energy buzzing, at every hour, and cameras were flashing and filming everything. Because no one wanted to forget. And if such things thus described seem, overall, not so big a deal, well, all Samuel would be able to admit when prompted for further elaboration was that it just *felt* different, and that was that. The lens of despair through which he ordinarily took in the movements of the world seemed to have its strap loosened in Europe. Nothing tinted his perceptions toward hues of frustration, as so often happened in his hometown. . . Maybe it was just the novelty of the place, and the fact that he didn't understand the language and customs so well as he did in Canada. Maybe maybe . . . and quite possibly, in all fairness. People were people, after all. But all the subtle intricacy belaying every human action is guided by a cultural heritage, or narrative (to how far a point could be debated, indeed). . . regardless, maybe he just liked Europe's underlying story, just a smidgen more.

Such is how Samuel found it to be in the small sampling he made of European cities on a trip fortuitous to the point of baffling in his hindsight. He concluded without a doubt in his mind that one day he would return, to remain permanently. He would set himself upon the task of learning German, in order to acquiesce harmoniously. Samuel found in Vienna, in particular and of course, that the architecture practically forced one to ponder grand ideas. Roman and Greek gods were immortalized almost at every street corner, for example—classically Western ideas, to be sure, but to think anything new one must begin from a point of reference; Vienna remains a hub of modern creativity specifically because embedded within it is a stolid declaration of ideas of a particular motif. He enjoyed the Hapsberg Theatre especially (and he had enjoyed hearing about the odd and enigmatic history of that eccentric family), standing directly opposite the majesty captured by the eternal craftsmanship of city hall. . . a comprehensive mixture of classical simplicity and Gothic intricacy. He enjoyed the theatre particularly because along its roof were many great writers' heads cut into concrete effigies as if their contributions warranted such centre stage in the city's experience.

All this aside, now when Samuel thinks of his short and turbulent travels in Europe he is left almost queasy. He thinks of them often, for their impressions upon his mind were such that, returned to Canada, he was often moved to recall even the simplest of events that occurred during that month and a half which passed less than half a year ago; such events which transported him back through time, and across the ocean, his mind so moved by the slightest action taken in his present: the stirring of coffee on a patio, or an infrequent cobblestone street. Even a street vendor. And yet his memories are

marred as he wonders what the hell he was doing on the other side of the world? He asks himself what right did he have to sample a culture he was outside of, like it was there to satisfy his consumption? He happily soaked in all the regal glamour Vienna offered, as well as the ever present and almost unsettling electricity lying behind Berlin, and the other worldly, postcard idyl that was Amsterdam, altogether sidestepping the political and social struggles that were undoubtedly going on; indeed, in Amsterdam in particular he knew there to be some international commotion afoot even while he was there. The caravan of four of which he was a member went to the Berlin wall and admired the graffiti, yes, and much of it was politically inspired, and triumphant. But it now stands, for many, simply as 'something to see' while in Berlin. So it was advertised in the pamphlets one picked up at the airport. Samuel felt he hadn't given any one city the time it needed. He had been a tourist, through and through. He saw everything and understood nothing. He had been fundamentally disconnected from the history confronting him. In Europe he had been entirely the opposite of a ghost; his movements had been defined and magnified for all the wrong reasons. He hated thinking about it. . . about standing out in such an unaesthetic manner. Thankfully, they hadn't gone to the Red Light district in Amsterdam.

Around him now, the people of his country seemed not as much in touch with who they were: not with their communities, nor with their humanness. The North American continent had been conceived of as a land of opportunity. It was all business; within its very foundation existed a competition-based drive belaying all action. Perhaps it was just a contrast he made which didn't have to be made, but Samuel felt that in the city he

actually knew—the one he lived in—people presented themselves with detachment to the world, laden underneath superficial constructions like haircuts and jewelry and clothes, as if trying to appear ready for mass acquiescence, and eventually, consumption. Balzac noted the same thing in France almost two hundred years ago. He called such people, *creatures of fashion*. Both eras had experienced a similar adolescent spirit, bridging the two disparate cultures separated by time, but now nonetheless running parallel, as it often happens. When identity is uncertain, as it is in adolescence, the market price on image is at a premium.

'So I *am* the man of my time, after all.' he thought, a tad self-condemning, a tad sardonic, in his sentiment. 'But what does knowing that do for me. . . ?'

He got up from his chaise to throw more wood into the stove, for the fire was burning low and had been for a while. He had a freshly chopped stack from this morning, which he had piled high and wide to ready himself for the long winter nights he was set to experience. As he opened the heavy door, swinging on stiff hinges, to reveal the dying flame, the image flashed before him of a thousand men and women past and present throwing wood into their stove just as he was, outsiders the lot of them just as he was, preparing themselves for the cold settling in around them, just as he was.

During the second to last week of their trip, Samuel and Ana left Amsterdam on a bus headed for Bratislava, where they were to meet her father: it was to be the first time the two men met, that very night upon their arrival, and though the night previously alluded to in Samuel's soliloquy—the one he had fallen in love with—was spent in that

old and oft-ignored city, it had not been upon that first, surely. He and Ana spent the days with her father, his wife, and their daughter, whose spirit and curiosity were implacable, while the nights were their own, and the one which stands out most in Samuel's memory he wrote about the very next morning in a travel journal he had carried everywhere. He went to the shelf filled with his notebooks, and riffled through them until he found the one he sought. It had a clear, hard plastic cover, which he had chosen specifically so that it would stand up to the wear and tear of his travels. The black spine wound through at least a hundred pages, all filled. Some with words, others with drawings. He took it back to the chaise, and opened it. On the night in question, coincidentally, he had been overcome with fear that he had lost the journal, along with his book bag. Everything he had seen which he felt was worth recording was written in the journal; it was his digital camera, for he didn't have one of those, for he hated being in pictures, and one would need only but a moment to guess why. He had also written extensive notes in the margins of the two books he had brought with him from home. *Perhaps!*, he had thought hopefully, he had left the bag on the cobblestones outside the pub they had visited last that night!; a pub set along a steep alley leading up to the city castle; the pub at which he and Ana, like everyone else faced with the otherwise small and stuffy space inside, opted to make themselves comfortable directly on the stoops of the buildings lining that narrow side street's incline. As such he had taken off his pack, keeping it behind him, and he thought maybe there was where it still lay. He had gone to search for it the moment he had discovered its absence, only an hour or two before dawn, but he couldn't find the bag where he had supposed it would be, and he spent the morning brooding over its loss until

the hour came upon which the bar reopened. Happily, and not out of step with his night thus far, he went back to discover that the bartender had found his precious documentations, and had stowed it behind the bar.

The day was hot, as every day in Bratislava had been, and he parted from Ana shortly after—he told her he wanted to write, and she was supposed to meet her brother and his girlfriend for lunch. He returned to that same street leading to the pub, and his hike took him past it, up the cobblestone slope winding its way to the castle's back entrance, the street laid down so haphazardly the hands that did it seemed to have been moving almost with nonchalance. Sitting on the castle ledge, which gave way to a view of the Danube passing under the Novy-most bridge, he meditated upon his happiness; upon his trip so far, which, in another week, would be coming to an end. Above the bridge, and at its centre, was the rotating restaurant that lit up the river's historic waters, like a UFO at night. Freshly triumphant from recovering his dear items, he opened his notepad (as he now did absent mindedly in his study) and wrote thus:

If I were to say that the green of the trees' leaves was shimmering like so many emerald stones, and the sounds of the native birds calling to each other was as if to them the morning newly arrived was the apotheosis of celebration of their existence, would you then hate me entirely if I were to admit to the scowl creasing my features, to the dour look in my eyes and to the discontent I'm feeling in the very pit of my stomach? If your answer is not a resolute affirmative, but is, at least, a genuine concern regarding such a juxtaposition, then I would delightedly extend my hand for yours and humbly beg your forgiveness, for I too am not one to skulk in dark corners when the music of the day is at

full pitch and all creatures are taking part in the dance of life. How wonderful it would be if I could step to and tap out my own rhythm to contribute to the chaotic yet melodious symphony. But, alas, today I cannot. I really can't. The heart that makes its presence known through passion of movement would not be behind my own on this most cornucopic day of energetic penance. This is because. . . well . . . I'd rather not say, so as not to bring you down to what I feel. Sad things do happen despite the beauty and majesty of the world. Why that is, I'm not entirely sure. Surely some of the sad things that happen need not occur at all. Mine, however, did. I am now sad simply because I loved as much as it was in my capacity to at a time I knew it to be misplaced and ultimately transient. Sad things do occur in this world, because we know of the goodness it holds, and we wish for it to last. Otherwise, in a world without goodness, no one would bother thinking about loss, as I do now. And though the key to a healthy mind is to not dwell too long on sadness, for a time I must, so that I may never forget the beauty and passion I experienced; so I may stoke the kindling of hope and reignite the fire in my chest and once more become ready to love and live again. I've seen too much of the world not to have hope. It was a night I fell in love with. Last night in fact. It was a night spent on narrow cobblestone streets, where soft white and orange light delicately touched upon bright eyes and open smiles, and philosophies were shared over drinks and under a black strip of the starry night sky beset in the midst of the alleyway buildings. I wish I had laid just one of the sheltering stones of the buildings around, so as to indirectly contribute to such communion, for the apartments and shops which lined the alley were old and undoubtedly witnesses to many days and nights as rich as the one just passed. What else

could a person hope to leave behind, but a brick in an alley such as that, in this life?

“Fuck.” he muttered when he finished reading. “What a child I am. . . Such happiness can only be born from naivety, surely.” . . . although, what is it to live in the moment but to let lead the caprices of one's emotion? And isn't such untempered emotion the most naive—nay, the most purely innocent—beacon for beauty? What a thing to do, to remark upon 'what a child' one is upon reading something so raw, written by one's own hand! He was tearing himself away from an experience of beauty with such judgement as that. In that passage were the feelings of loss he now experienced for Ana. And that is needless to say. Why did he feel inclined to look upon such a passage, which led to the innermost of his heart, with disregard, waving his hand dismissively to that flight of unfiltered coalescence with a bit of the world he—he what? Didn't think himself fit to enjoy? So it was.

He had been honest

—but the truth's much larger than him—

Samuel wanted to capture it entire;

he wanted to align himself perfectly,

with a perfect moment.

And to be aware of the arrival of such a moment,

one must be. . .

silent

And one must have their eyes and ears and hearts and minds open.

—Such openness Samuel felt trepidation toward, in a world filled with such

disorder that people felt the need to close themselves off; shut themselves down to the confusing commotion of conflicting. . . projections?

4.

Despite his idealism, Samuel strode to his computer to play music so as to fill the silence into which he had placed himself. He brought his notebook with him; he was curious to see what else lay forgotten in the pages. Soon, with a few mouse clicks, the keys of a piano played out through his speakers and soothed the heaviness such silence inspired; silence was fine in small doses, but too much was perhaps uncomfortable for anyone, and with a pained conscience it was especially so for Samuel. Perhaps that was why the world is kept so noisy: it curbs an inclination toward reflection, and thus confrontation with that which is not known, which so much outweighs what one hopes they're sure of. This, at least, was why Samuel felt so heavy, in silence. So too in Vienna Samuel had noticed a similar heaviness descend upon him when he went to visit that imperial city's churches; when he had surmised that what he was feeling, not so far from being the concentration of an omniscient deity within the hallowed walls, was the contrived reverence of the excellence one is confronted with under vaulted ceilings so tall they culminated at least thirty metres above one's marvelling eyes. They were too far

away for such details to be appreciated, yet one could tell the brushes touched to those high concave stones traced figures of the utmost delicate contours. Closer to the ground, the effigies of historic sages were set in stone, with piercing gazes ready to confront everyone whom walked in front of them. Those eyes, even if only inorganic facsimile, communicated a lifetime dedication to uncovering truth; they forced unsuspecting tourists into a reverential silence they were not at all used to. A silence which detaches one from the noise of the world, replaced instead by questions. Replaced by a need to accept ignorance in the face of saints whom, one knew implicitly, felt so much at ease within silence. It was a challenge for all whom entered to strive for the same. And Samuel, like most everyone challenged thus, melted, feeling totally inadequate for the task. The elaborate design of the churches' structure seemed crafted to declare this intricacy of silence. An intricate void teeming with answers explaining the very nature of the eternal.

Samuel and Ana had been laying on their backs in the grass of Freud Park, staring up at the not-quite-twin towers of the church to be found there ('not quite', for one was black, from weathering, and the other white, from restoration, though the couple fancied the contrast represented good and evil), when their conversation worked its way toward this notion of silence. He knew the little paragraph he scribbled down to remember their musings lay in his notebook, somewhere after a lame drawing in which he had tried to capture an alleyway ladder. He had intended to capture the depth of the rungs receding up and away from him as he looked on from below, as well as the interplay of crisscrossing shadows. He did not have as practised a hand as the attempt might have warranted, and the result was not how he had envisioned, to say the least. He flipped through the journal,

trying to find that mess of a scene nonetheless worth capturing. In the header there were no dates lending aid to his perusal. As he turned the pages, his eyes landed on a word there, a phrase here, and he felt himself travelling back in time, one word at a time. He found the right passage. He wasn't sure what continued to prompt him to investigate these sentiments of his last summer, but he obliged, now that he had started. Sitting alone in his study, faced now with endless time that was his own, he had no real reason to refuse his inclinations. He began reading:

I feel as if churches and mosques and temples remain the most complex and beautiful structures human hands have created, because each craftsman behind every elaborate detail in the architecture was holding themselves to a certain ineffable notion of eternal sublimity their religious inclination made them sensitive to appreciate. By their contribution, they sought to communicate with the laws of the universe, which they felt on a primitive level. They called this God, or their Creator, but we all mean to say the same thing. Thus, structures of worship were built not from the personal desire of an architect or wealthy benefactor, like so many monuments humans have erected, but from a desire to actualize a sublime reverence for something incontestable—something outside of any and every individual, and thus outside of petty human desire or ego—which everyone whom contributed to the whole yearned to encapsulate in their efforts. Such is why an almost divine spirit lays behind every lattice and every statue's expression and all of the painted brush strokes, and why the churches I've been to seem not to have even been made by human hands. On the contrary, it's like they have existed always, having risen from the ground like mountains made from a tectonic friction between matter and

force. These temples in Vienna—and I'm sure it's the same all over the world—were erected out of respect for a Truth we all feel, which can explain our existence if we pay it proper reverence.

He took a pen from out of the desk drawer to his left, and wrote a title in the margin above: *A Religious Aesthetic*. “It's overwhelming—” he began to say. But he paused then. His pen in hand, he looked up from the words he had written four months ago, to gaze steadily across the room, his desk chair positioned directly opposite the door. He was grappling with an image he had suddenly of himself: that of a hermit driven to muttering; driven to spinning webs around his person which only served to reinforce his isolation. His brow was furrowed. A few minutes passed. “Fuck it. I *will* talk to myself then. I will bask in the silence, and perhaps my voice, proven too feeble against so formidable a presence at first, will grow in strength, so that I may not be afraid to call out into nothing, into the unknown, for fear of what may answer. This silence weighs heavily on my conscience. On my inexperience. In my naive and youthful—*modernity*—I lack reverence for that which I know I should revere. Silence reminds me of it. So what if I am not ready for that? I accept the challenge.”

The two speakers positioned on either corner of his desk continued to let dance the interweaving pattern of a particular instrument's solo notes. The composer was making a game of his subject. Teasing the piano's form. It enticed Samuel to forget about his heaviness. The pianist's innocence behind the keys pattering struck Samuel as lion cubs wrestling in tall grass, learning the movements of their paws and claws, and the strength of their limbs. He shut it off, closing the laptop screen with force. He stood and

began to pace the length of his room. His haven, so called. The repetition of his oscillating direction brought him in memory to a train station outside of Bratislava, where he had been doing the same. He welcomed the memory—he set his mind then to welcome everything it might throw at him, from now on. Truth be told he kind of liked the striking vividness of his memories made in Europe. He didn't have many strong ones from his life; just little glimpses here and there. The days he spent in Europe, on the other hand, he could recall down to tiny details, and, oddly enough, they seemed to intensify as the months passed. The dry heat of the day was something he was now so used to, in the middle of summer, that it did not deter him from giving movement to his anticipation as he waited for the train to arrive. He was taking it only one stop, to the main station in the heart of the city. Samuel was one of two people waiting on the platform thus. The second was his girlfriend. As he paced up and down beside the tracks, Ana lay on a bench in the shade. The sun was unforgiving. He stopped pacing his study, halted in his recollection. . . the sun streaming through his window was now a winter sun: he couldn't feel its heat. He had paused because the thought of her having been always within his reach on that day in Bratislava paralysed his being. In her love he had glimpsed infinity, too. *But the world doesn't run on love*, he reminded himself. 'That was as much a part of the fantasy I now cling to.' He felt his stomach tie into knots, and with a groan which reverberated to all corners of his study he swayed to his chaise, needing to lay down once more. He drew deep breaths and closed his eyes. The fantasy was not quite done with him.

The platform was deserted. They were on the outer boundary of the city, and

nothing much was on either side of the four sets of train tracks except dried yellow grass. As he had just done in his study, he quit pacing the train's platform and went to lay down on a bench. He found escape from the blazing summer heat under the protruding roof of the terminal's ticket office, for he knew he should limit his exposure to the sun, of course. He stretched himself out on that bench, perfectly relaxed and comfortable with his anonymity in the unfamiliar city whose native tongue he did not speak. Ana lay silent beside him. He wouldn't be surprised if she were sleeping, taking advantage of the momentary pause in their day—that was something he and she had learned to do on the trip, for their schedule had been nothing less than erratic. Samuel looked at his ticket, then his watch: nine minutes until the train was due.

And such as memories are, with that vision of the railroad car-tow before him, Samuel was taken aboard another train of thought, jumping a week forward in the trip's timeline, as he remained comfortably nestled into his chaise recliner, his brow furrowed once again—its natural inclination. He now found himself arriving at Vienna's airport on the lime green shuttle called, simply, CAT—for City Airport Train, to be sure. He had arrived at the airport to board that flight he was dreading: the one taking him home. Or so it was intended to be the date of his departure. . . he missed his plane, and after the fact, once the scramble to rebook his ticket was over, his mother accused Samuel of having missed his flight on purpose. She figured he intended to delay his return. Even she, so far across the planet as she was, was well aware of how the trip had changed him. His memory retraced a step or two to bring his mind back to that last night in Europe. The one before his departure, which had set in motion his eventual mistiming with that

scheduled for the airplane's take off. It was a Friday, and he was spending it in Vienna, with Ana. The night, he remembered well, had begun with a slow start. Thoreau had said it was a point of narcissism in the character of a man whom would endeavour to write when not having lived and Samuel hadn't seen much of the world but with all respect he needed to have lived only that one night for a lifetime and he could have died happily at its end. It seemed as if the world had opened up to Ana and Samuel under those Viennese lights, suggestions for their steps unfolding before them, as if planned. The destiny of his life's convictions seemed to have been written that night—whatever that might entail:

Earlier that week they had come across a late night party hosted by a dance company called Impuls, which, unbeknownst to them, had been hosting daily shows and workshops across the city throughout the month of July, and the nights gave way to dance free for all whom might have been so fortunate so as to have stumbled upon them, as Ana and Samuel had, on their last Tuesday spent together in Europe. Underneath flashing lights were guests of a spontaneous assortment: professional and costumed dancers, locals, tourists; all swaying to music pounding which both Samuel and Ana were pleased to recognize as being the rhythms unique to Nicolas Jaar—a producer, born in New York. The party was, to Samuel's enthusiasm, taking place in the Hapsberg Theatre. The reality of the matter, however, was that, having been out all day already, they were not prepared for the night promised and open to them, if only they remained. Or, at least, Samuel wasn't. Thus after finding out from an event coordinator that the Impuls festival was lasting through to the end of the month, they agreed to come back on Friday. Their plan was based on the assumption that the continuation of the festival also meant that the late

night festivities would also recur. And indeed such an assumption was given strength when, every night after that initial serendipitous introduction, they found the area in and around the theatre pulsing, late late into the night. They were excited to party away their last hours together, prepared to remain awake right through to the following morning, when Samuel was to catch his plane back to Canada, and Ana was to return to her father's house in Bratislava for another week.

When they showed up to that night of dance, the anticipation of which already had rhythms of excitement dictating the perambulations of their day (thoughts in their mind that would make Dionysus proud), it was, however, to be disappointed by the discovery that there was no such party going on. Instead they found on the steps of the Hapsberg Theatre many other people with spirits downcast, their night fallen through as well, it seemed—and maybe for some of them it was their last night in the city too. Ana and Samuel walked away dejected, their last night now uncertain, and perhaps almost certainly to be proven uneventful. They wandered around the VolksGaarten, haplessly in the direction of the palace. There was a club within the garden grounds they had heard about from a server, who had been recommending to them options for nighttime entertainment, the first time they had passed through the city. This was their rough destination. Yes, they soon did hear music as the palace came into sight, as they had been encouraged to expect. They found the club alright, but the crowd seemed much older, and the energy was low. And the music playing was of the top forty variety. It was strike two for their night's wishes.

Samuel and Ana found a bench opposite the club's entrance, and watched with

long faces the people crowding and bumping into each other. Ana said that she was feeling sick anyways, and that perhaps they should call it a night and just get some rest before their respective travels the next day. Samuel agreed, with the caveat that he was going to try to find out if a good deejay might by chance be scheduled to perform later in the night. He walked purposefully across the narrow parking lot to the club's entrance. Ana watched from the bench behind him. Her hopes in his returning with a promising answer were only halfhearted. Three people were coming out of the club just then: locals, whose names, he would later find out, were Catty, Lukas, and Mat, and he asked them point blank,

“Where's the party?”

“Well it's not in there.” the girl replied in perfect, though German-laden, English, nodding her head backward.

“Oh.” Samuel said, crestfallen. “I kind of figured. It looks boring.”

“We're here only to have some drinks. The real party is happening about seven blocks away. *Impuls* is putting on a dance that's going to be pretty rad.” Catty continued. Samuel's eyes lit up. *Impuls*. So it hadn't been so far removed from their itchy feet.

“Really?” he exclaimed, with a candid joy. The three strangers, appearing to be feeling already a little heady, did not seem dissatisfied by his ingenuousness—and Lukas, matching Samuel's enthusiasm, perhaps more than a little.

“Yea!” Lukas said. “Come with us! We're going to get a cab right now.” Samuel did not hesitate to accept the invitation so unexpectedly extended to him.

“I just have to go get my girlfriend.” he said. He pointed to where Ana was sitting

on the bench.

“Well go get her then! We'll wait.” Lukas said. Samuel heard them joking behind him. They appeared excited for the night ahead, and it was an excitement Samuel was quick to pick up on. He jogged over to Ana, his smile wide, and in a rush he explained what little he knew about what was going on. Her reaction was the same as his.

“Really?” she asked. Sceptical even. Samuel grabbed her hand and pulled her up off the bench.

“Yea. Come on, they're waiting for us.”

As they were standing on the street attempting to hail a cab, Samuel was anxious to find out how far the concert was. Vienna, he knew, was a big place: cab fare added up quickly, and he and Ana had little money on that last day of their trip. They had held out hope that their night would be relatively cheap, given how the Impuls events, on the other nights that week, had been free.

“Maybe we could walk?” Samuel suggested to the group. The three looked at him as if flummoxed. . . as if he had suggested they somersault their way to the event, shaking their heads slowly. Samuel pulled Lukas aside. “See, the thing is, me and my girlfriend don't have much money. It's our last night in Vienna, and, well. . . maybe we could meet you guys at the club. If you tell me the address?” Lukas stood back to look at Samuel; his expression was so genuinely affable Samuel was taken aback by the stranger's candour.

“Don't worry about it. The cab's on me.” he said. The group of five ended up needing two; two which arrived in synch, one behind the other, and the drive proved not to be that long at all. The plan, as they went to wait in the ticket line, was that Catty and

Mat, both students, could each get one guest in for free upon paying full price for their own entrance, and so Ana and Samuel paired off, and Samuel went to stand in line with Catty. When they reached the front, the doorman and Catty began talking, fast and in low German tones. They kept it up for five minutes at least, and Catty kept gesturing to him. Despite the language barrier, Samuel had no problems understanding that she was aggravated. On the other side of the room and in the other line, Samuel watched as Mat and Ana moved passed their respective doorman with little difficulty, and he watched the two of them disappear out of sight up a grand staircase ascending away from the entry foyer—he started wondering if the problem was specifically with him. If so, he was at a loss to figure out why that might be. He attempted to look as casual and fun loving as a guy whom just came to party might look, for the doorman's benefit. The doorman, however, took little interest in him. And then Catty took Samuel by the arm and pulled him forward, and they were through: granted admission into the building, which, as far as Samuel could guess, had once been a sort of grand museum. Perhaps now re-purposed as a ballroom. Whatever it was, it was old and elegant. The staircase in the entrance hall was concrete, with wide steps underneath red carpet. Chandeliers hung from the coffered ceiling, and like everything else in Vienna, the walls were pillared, and touched with white stone and plaster molds of filagree, and faces. Samuel never could come up with an explanation for the carved faces peering down from every window frame and ceiling and doorway, of lions and jesters and gargoyles. But he fancied that if the human population were wiped out and all that remained standing were these buildings, aliens happening upon the planet would be able to derive the full gamut of emotions which had inter-

played under the red sun: in the city's brick and stone was the entire narrative of humanity.

“What was that about?” he asked.

“Well, students weren't allowed a guest after all.” Catty replied.

“What? So how much was admission?” She hadn't asked him for money.

“Thirty euro.” she said skeptically.

“For one ticket?” he asked.

“Yup.” Abrupt. He didn't know what to say. Besides a few euro extra, all the money he had left to his name he needed to use to get to the airport the next morning. He resolved to at least buy Catty a drink, the only thanks he could return, in gratuity. They walked on in silence, up the entryway stairs, through a hall lined with panes of glass framed in metal wiring of a Gothic cut. The windows looked down upon a courtyard, which had been transformed into the party's smoke pit, already full with people. The hall was long and led them into a wing under construction that had another three hallways branching off from it, set to lead whosoever rose to meet the challenge of their apparent labyrinthine elegance further into the building's disorienting blueprint. Metal framework was exposed, and sheets of plastic hung down from the ceiling, protecting what of the building's original structure the renovators were hoping to retain. The music was getting steadily louder, and they descended the steps of a tucked away staircase down into the main ballroom, where the party was to be found steadily underway. Samuel was confronted then by an orgy of flashing lights, swaying limbs, and music so loud his bones were set to vibrating. Smoke hung in the air above the crowd, and a strobe refracted off of

it, and off of bracelets and earrings, in chaotic staccato. There were hundreds of faces, but because of the room's high, vaulted ceiling, the floor didn't seem crowded at all. From that vaulted ceiling, hanging from its apex, was yet another chandelier, looming over the entire room with grandiose metalwork, and attached to it, hanging underneath, was a disco ball. Behind the crowd there was a bar. White lights set under liquor bottles cast shadows against brick. The whole room was a chamber of dancing light and darkness, removing everyone from a realm of distinct perception. As they made their way through the crowd, when Samuel's gaze happened to land on someone and their eyes met, he found himself back in an environment he had grown fond of over the years. Here, there were no eyes staring at him. They were taking him in.

It was at the bar that Samuel and Catty regrouped with Mat, Ana, and Lukas. A drink was dropped into Samuel's hand. There was no mention of the ticket fiasco, though it was weighing on Samuel's thoughts—he pulled Ana aside later to mention it to her, and she was shocked. She said that Mat had told her nothing of it. In fact she had assumed the plan had worked quite smoothly, given how quickly they had moved passed the doorman. Before Samuel could reply, the deejay on the stage had come round from behind his turntables and was addressing the crowd, mic in hand. The music continued, but the volume was lowered in the speakers crowding the stage. But only slightly. Lukas appeared at Samuel's side.

“Where's Catty and Mat?” Samuel asked. Lukas shrugged.

“How is Vienna doing tonight?” the deejay asked. The crowd lifted up their hands as one, individuals' mouths already coarse from yelling. “I feel so blessed to be standing

up here in front of all you beautiful people.” Ana was dancing beside Samuel; he joined her as the deejay's words tuned in and out, over and under the music. Lukas stood beside them, nodding his head. He was not at all used to the energy of the rave, one could see, as Ana and Samuel were.

“You're not dancing.” Samuel stopped to observe.

“I only know the two-step.” Lukas shouted back. His look was almost plaintive.

“Well throw that in there then!” Samuel said. He was of the opinion that one could do whatever they wanted in such an explorative, and therefore silly, place. *The only requisite was to feel the rhythm.* So Samuel told Lukas, who seemed a little encouraged by these words. He began to mimic those around him, though he wasn't quite able to pick a movement comfortable for his limbs to acclimate to, for everyone was doing something different, moving in their own peculiar ways as they became reacquainted with that most primitive of languages. Samuel, in such unbounded settings as this, felt himself grow unbounded, too. Nothing was off limits, as long as one remained aware that everyone had their own comfort zone, and respected that. Amidst the free interplay of the energy in the air and the material bodies around was an opportunity to explore such zones, as everyone began to believe that there was no separation between the two. Lukas was doing his best, allowing his limbs to move a little more freely. But he still hadn't started two-stepping! Samuel caught his attention, and in the din pounding on their ear drums he tried his best to recall the week in junior high gym class when he had been taught the two step. He asked Lukas to start him off, hoping his muscles might remember. Ana joined them. And thus Lukas forgot the crowd, enthusiastically able to perform something so familiar. And

as they danced, the deejay had not ceased speaking out, now and then. Eventually he worked himself into a sort of ranting fervour, right there in front of everybody, and everyone was unsure how to take this intrusion of words into an atmosphere which had been weaved between them with hands joining as bodies spun one another and dipped and turned and there was no need to speak, and yet the guy started talking about the errors people were making in their daily lives, and about how society was so ill-managed. On and on the deejay went, until the crowd had stopped completely, unable to tune his voice out. Lukas, Ana, and Samuel stopped as well, listening. It didn't appear as if the rant was exactly spontaneous; it seemed as more of an act he was performing: his words travelled through the mic's wiring and were recorded onto his computer, and another producer was mixing the words' echoes into the music, as the deejay spun his monologue. Up there on the stage, they watched as he started pacing, working himself up. He was becoming more and more angry, it seemed, as he continued; he was practically shouting into the mic. Samuel saw that Lukas, whom had been explicit in his dislike, or simple ignorance, of dance music (and implicit with the suggestion that he was only there to be with Catty, whom was not beside him to save his ill humour at that very moment), was dumbfounded by what was taking place in front of him. As a professional, he was a practising lawyer—a vocation Samuel found most everyone in Vienna was called to, as most everyone he came across announced with disinterest that they were practising law, or studying to practice it—and this was far and away removed from the polo shirts and golf circuits he was used to, as he said.

“You didn't think you'd be getting lectured tonight I bet.” Samuel said. Lukas

shook his head. "One should know when to pick their moments."

"I agree completely." Lukas said. Inside, Samuel was thinking how *cool* it was: this was a true European show, no question. Besides. . . when was the right moment for such things, anyways? It was nothing like what he had experienced in Canada. Even at the festivals he had gone to back home, tempered by nothing, the spirit free, the deejays weren't so confident in their approach.

Finally, the rant seemed to be coming round to a conclusion:

"In times as difficult and uncertain as these, we must remember the potential music has to elevate our consciousness. . ." and with that the volume was cranked back up and a new song dropped, working off those evanescent sentiments which naturally struck one as maybe more than a little trite when so spoken in barbaric tongues. The deejay placed the mic at his feet, then hopped back behind his computer. He proceeded to scratch the hell out of his vinyl, looping the words '*potential music has to elevate. . . elevate. . . elevate . . .*' as the drums built up to a climax. Ana and Samuel started dancing, familiar with the energy unfolding. Lukas spent only a few minutes beside them in an awkward shuffle before announcing he was going to the smoke pit to find the others, and they waved goodbye. Ana looked at Samuel with mischief in her eye, and she put her head down to rummage through her purse. When she found what she was looking for, she got Samuel to look with a pointed downward glance. She was holding a baggie containing a few MDMA capsules. Samuel had forgotten that they had those left over from a party in Berlin. They swallowed the pills then, sharing the rest of Ana's drink to wash the bitter taste of chemicals away. It was just passed midnight, and the party was

only getting started. More people were arriving, filling the room, though the space of the chamber seemed to take on an endless capacity, as if ceding to the boundary-less spirit of the night.

A few songs finished and Ana decided that she also wanted to go to the smoke pit, leaving Samuel alone. The drug had by then taken effect, and he was perfectly fine to continue dancing in the middle of the crowd by himself. He didn't notice what exactly the music was, though he acknowledged it to be fairly straightforward; he just continued to move with the beat, feeling its reverberations as if he were underwater, far away as waves were kicked up from the speakers, transmitting steady undulations through the viscous medium. Samuel's tongue was still carrying the bitter taste of the M. The crowd was packed close now, and his nose was full of sweat, and sex, as people indulged in their bodies so close. He found it was a struggle to open his eyelids. The floor was moving under his feet, vibrating with the steps of hundreds of people. So he kept his eyes closed, and just listened. The deejay was starting to really do his thing, setting the whole room into a trance as people were joined together by the rhythm, the palpitations like a heartbeat. The bass from the oversized speakers provided a pulse that sped through invisible but oh so real arteries, feeding life into the dance floor, and everyone was moving in an unconsciously primal effort to accept, merge, and potentially control the energy that crackled in every inch of space under the lights. That was the challenge that was silently extended to all those whom had entered the building. It was in moments like this, when Samuel lost himself, that he felt most alive. He wasn't exactly losing himself, though. He was just losing that part which had reacted with disfavour to his journal entry,

the one describing that other night he didn't want to end. The part of himself that would have him torn away from beauty.

He saw Mat's head, tall as ever, poking up over the crowd. He was standing by the wall, watching the intoxicating scene play out. His movements keeping with the pace of the music were small but exploratory. Samuel found him to be much quieter than Lukas. He had long hair and bushy eyebrows and a skinny face. Like Samuel's, really. Maybe it was a marker of their shared central European heritage. He also was a lawyer—or, studying to be one. Samuel went over to him.

“What's up!” he said. Mat looked at him, his smile wry.

“Hey.” he replied.

“What do you think of this?” Samuel asked.

“It's interesting.” he said. His accent was heavier than Catty's or Lukas'.

“Do you come to shows like this a lot?”

“Not really.” he paused. “Sometimes I guess. You?”

“Kind of. But in Canada they're not at all like this.”

“What do you mean?” They stood shoulder to shoulder, shouting to each other.

“Well, for one thing, we don't have buildings like this where I live. And if we did, we certainly wouldn't have parties in them. It makes me wonder what else this room has seen!”

“Cool.” Mat said. Ana found her way back to them. Mat glanced at her.

“Where's Catty and Lukas?” he asked quickly.

“Smoke pit.” she answered. Mat said he was going to see them, and walked away

with rapid footsteps, dodging people who were materializing out of the crowd. He would pass them, maybe brush shoulders, and they would dissolve back into the mass in the instant the strobe flashed off, then on, and they were gone. Samuel and Ana turned to face each other. They knew what the other was thinking. It was all over their faces, and they burst out laughing.

“This is so-o-o-o-o awesome!” they said, almost in unison.

“That girl, what's her name?” Ana asked.

“Catty.”

“Right. She's really cool.”

“Oh yea? I haven't seen her around much.”

“Her and Lukas have been outside most of the time. I think there's something between them.” Samuel smiled.

“Do you now? What makes you suspect such a thing?”

“It's obvious from the way he looks at her. And she told me she knows. She said she thinks he's going to tell her tonight. She said she couldn't think of why else he would come to a place like this. Cause he doesn't enjoy the music.”

“I noticed that.” Samuel said.

“In fact,” Ana said, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “I think there's a love triangle between all three of them. Mat likes Catty too.”

“You've really spun a yarn with that one.” Samuel said. She looked at him incredulously.

“Didn't you see how quickly he ran off when I told him her and Lukas were

together?”

“They're his friends.” Samuel said. Ana rolled her eyes.

They made their way to the front of the crowd, settling in in front of a speaker as tall as Samuel, and Samuel wasn't short. There was a ledge off to the side of the stage, and Samuel jumped up onto it, and pulled Ana up too, and they danced up there, their heads over the crowd. Everyone was lost within their own bubble, yet everyone breathed as one, in a steady inhalation and exhalation set to pace by the beat of the music. Samuel grabbed Ana's hand and twirled her, and dipped her, and kissed her. Time did not exist. Only their muscles eventually begging for rest had them stopping. They sat down on the stage for a break, and that's when some guy jumped up onto the ledge and began shaking his butt in Samuel's face. Samuel looked at Ana, his face contorted way passed perplexity. She started laughing, though she tried to hide it: with one hand over her mouth she wasn't hiding it well. Thirty seconds went by before the stranger stopped what he was doing to turn around. He too had on a big smile, his, a little gap-toothed, underneath eyes that seemed perpetually enthralled, which were underneath short and tight, coarse curls of dyed blonde hair. It had been a long thirty seconds, and by the time the stranger bent down between Samuel and Ana to say hello, Samuel was laughing too, at how bizarre it was. They said hi back, and he held out his hand.

“My name is Mamu.” he said.

“Moomoo?” Samuel repeated.

“No, Mamu!” he said. Ana introduced herself, taking his hand, and then Samuel did the same. Then Mamu hopped down from the ledge back into the crowd, waving

goodbye over his shoulder.

“I still don't know what his name is.” Samuel said.

“M-A-M-O-O.” Ana said. “I think.”

“That was weird.” Samuel said.

“It was funny.”

Samuel saw that Lukas, Catty, and Mat were back on the dance floor, and he suggested they go over to them. Ana agreed. Catty, her form petite, carried herself with a lithe grace, and she was moving well with the music. She seemed at ease with the crowd's spontaneous, and perplexing, antics. Lukas was beside her, doing his awkward shuffle. Mat was dancing a little more openly than the last time Samuel had seen him. He seemed to be trying to get Catty to join him, ever so subtly—perhaps as a lawyer does.

Everybody was excited to see everybody, and Ana and Catty hugged to welcome each other over and above the sound so loud there could have been none at all, so loud it was holding its own sort of intricacy, held between the superficial repetition of the beat, like that space between words spoken. Lukas and Samuel looked at each other, shrugged, and then hugged to mimic the girls' enthusiasm. They formed a tight circle at first, and then Samuel and Ana kind of paired off to do their own thing, while Lukas, Mat, and Catty were doing their best to look comfortable as they jostled around in the uncertainty of their menage a trois. Samuel announced he was going to the bar to take a break, and it was there he saw Mamu once again—his blonde head was a beacon under the flashing white light. His was a relatively familiar face, so Samuel went over to say hello.

“Where are you from?” Mamu asked.

“Canada.” Samuel said.

“Wow! Canada!” Mamu exclaimed. “I’ve always wanted to go to Canada!”

“Really?” Samuel asked.

“Definitely! There’s Montreal, and the mountains—oh, I hear Canada has beautiful nature!”

“It does.” Samuel agreed, nodding. That was certainly true. “What about you? Have you lived in Vienna long?”

“My whole life.” Mamu said.

“See, and I envy you. Vienna is awesome!” Mamu nodded.

“Yup, it’s my favourite city.”

“No kidding.” Samuel said. Mamu pointed to Samuel’s arm, and asked to see his tattoo closer. Samuel showed him. Mamu shook his head.

“I don’t like it.” Samuel laughed.

“Oh well.” He asked, “Do you have any?”

“I do, but not any place I can show you here.” Mamu replied. There was a playfulness in his eye.

“Well that’s okay then.” Samuel said, a little sheepish. It was Mamu’s turn to laugh. “Here, I have another one.” Mamu read the words.

“See, that one I like.” They swapped travel stories, such a topic that tourists and locals often refer back to when casting around for small talk. Mamu seemed excited to hear of Samuel’s impressions of Berlin. Given the setting of their conversation, Samuel asked if Mamu had heard of a club called Berghain.

“Of course! Did you get in?” Mamu asked. The obvious question, for it was well known that the bouncers were free to bar access from anyone and everyone on any given night. Samuel said they had. Mamu crooned and clapped his hands. Samuel began saying how it was unlike anything he had ever experienced when Mamu cut him off.

“Oh I know sweetie. I know.” he said, a smile on his lips. Samuel laughed.

“I guess words aren't needed for that place.” he said. From the look Mamu gave him, then, Samuel got the notion that Mamu knew much more about Berghain than he had learned, and likely more than he cared to. They chatted a bit more, and then Samuel was struck with a desire for fresh air, for he had been inside all night, and this he told Mamu.

“Run along child.” Mamu said, shooing Samuel away with a wave of his hands. Walking through the fractals of dark matter arisen between the individuals of the crowd, Samuel couldn't see Ana, or the others. He went to the smoke pit alone, and he wasn't exactly surprised to see three familiar faces beckoning him over. It seemed that Ana had disappeared on them. There was a tree in the middle of the courtyard, maybe an ash, with branches that reached out to touch the bricks of the building's exterior. Samuel fancied that the tree must be bursting to be free, surrounded by all that concrete. He likened it to one of those lizards that doesn't grow any bigger than the dimensions of its terrarium allows. Samuel found himself squeezed in from all sides. One could hardly move for want of space surrounded by the confluent flux of people taking a break from the . . . dance.

“You guys are always out here.” Samuel observed. They nodded. “I guess you

don't like the music much, huh?" he asked Lukas.

"I'm more of a country and rock man myself. Do you know Bryan Adams?" Lukas asked. Catty turned her dark eyes up to him. She was smirking.

"Of course. Summer of '69 is one of my guilty pleasures." Samuel said. Lukas' eyes lit up.

"I got my first real six string, bought it at the five and dime!" he belted out: his best attempt at an American drawl. He looked expectantly at Samuel.

"Played it until my fingers bled. It was the summer of sixty-nine!" Samuel crowed. Lukas' eyes got still wider, and as the two looked at each other, in a moment they knew they would stand there and sing the whole song. And they did, getting through the first verse easily, pausing now and again to search for the right words to get through the second and third. Catty and Mat appeared not to know whether to enjoy the show or leave the two fools alone. When they were done, Samuel looked at his watch.

"Wow! It's almost five!"

"The show should be finishing soon then." Catty said.

"I've got to go back inside and dance the last songs with Ana!" Samuel said.

"Go ahead. We're going to stay out here." Catty replied. Before turning to go back into the building, Samuel paused.

"I just want to say, if we don't see you guys again before we leave, thanks for inviting us here. The night has been so fun!" Lukas nodded his agreement. Mat smiled, a cigarette between his fingers.

"No problem. You're awesome." Catty said, as if it were a matter of fact. "You

both are. Tell Ana I said goodbye.”

“I will.” Samuel assured her.

“And don't worry about the whole ticket thing. We're happy to have given you two a special last night here. Just remember to pay it forward someday, when you can.” she added.

He hugged each of them in turn, and then darted quickly back to the party. He found Ana dancing. The crowd had thinned considerably. He saw Mamu by the wall beside the bar with his own friends. He ran up behind Ana, whom had her eyes closed, and squeezed her tight, his hands around her waist.

“Hey!” he said.

“Hey! I was looking for you. I want to read you something.” Ana said, turning to him.

“What?” Samuel asked.

“A poem I just wrote in the smoke pit. You want to hear it?”

“Sure.” She began reading from her phone, and he leaned in close as the music and the dance continued to whirl around them, and when she spoke the other noise seemed to fade as he lost himself in the words.

“I am the sound of the river

I am the leaves that fall in vain

I am the wind that bequeaths them

When they travel in lost domains

I am the smoke of a cigarette

That talks of a time long ago
When life was simple and beautiful
And now it's the ash that remains
I have lost the horizon of virtue
When I attach myself to my pain
For the sun is our only provider
And what stays is the blood in my veins”

She looked up at him, curious and nervous, and then the music came back as well.
Samuel hugged her. Then he kissed her. Ana smiled.

“Thanks.” she said.

“You should call it, 'Lost Innocence'.” Samuel said.

“No, no: '*Remembered* Innocence'. You're always such the pessimist.” she added,
lightly pushing his shoulder. His eyes widened. Mamu was still by the wall.

“Hey! Can I show this to Mamu?” he asked.

“What?”

“Mamu! Mamu!” he said. He liked saying the name.

“Sure, I guess.” It seemed to Samuel as if the night was fast coming to a close,
and with it his trip, and so he was doing everything at twice his normal speed, at least,
trying to fit in every last second before it was over. He took the phone from Ana's hand
and rushed over to where Mamu was standing with another guy. They were in each
others' arms, talking low. Samuel tapped him on the shoulder.

“Mamu! Here, read this!” he said, and he placed Ana's phone into Mamu's

surprised grasp. He squinted at the screen, and, seeing it was a poem, he began to read. His lips moved silently. When he finished, he gave the kind of reaction Samuel had come to expect from Mamu: his shoulders sort of slumped and his eyes flashed for a moment upward, and he drawled,

“Oh my god!”

“It's good right?” Samuel exclaimed. “Ana just wrote it in the courtyard.”

“It sings to my heart.” Mamu said.

“Anyways,” Samuel continued, “this is our last night in Vienna. So I just wanted to say goodbye and that it was nice to meet you.” Mamu took a scrap bit of paper from his pocket, and borrowed a pen from his boyfriend.

“This is my full name. Look me up on Facebook.”

“I don't have Facebook.” Samuel said. Then, excitedly, he remembered, “But Ana does!” He took the paper. Before he left Mamu quickly reached out and pinched Samuel's butt.

“Bye cutie.” Mamu said. Samuel rushed back to Ana, and gave her back her phone. The two danced until the last song ended and the lights came on, and that moment arrived whereupon people reemerge from the trance of the night which had descended upon them like a spell. With the lights on, they remembered they were human. Samuel hadn't been paying attention to the last song much beyond knowing it had been a slow one, and he was surprised when Ana asked him a month or two later if he remembered it. He said no. But she did; her memories of that night are probably more richly detailed than his own general impressions. What he had to hold on to in his mind was that they

had held each other close, swaying, their bodies tired but their hearts pounding strong as ever. It was not long after that night that he proposed to her, and she had said yes.

With force Samuel ripped himself from the memory, arriving back in his study, his gaze cast up to the ceiling as he lay back in the finely threaded chaise.

'I can't go on like this.' he thought. The memory seemed as if it were of another world. Another life. Somebody else's life. He stood up from the chaise on unsteady feet, looking around his study as if he didn't recognize it. As if he were a stranger in his own home. It seemed like the unreality of the memory was transferring into his present. As he walked toward his desk he felt the same resistance to his movement he had noticed earlier that morning when Ana had left; the feeling of moving underwater, his limbs dragging in the wake of a fluid which wasn't there, which nevertheless played with the images of the world in front of him, refracting them, so that the objects he thought were right in front of him, when he reached out, weren't really there at all. His journal lay open on his desk. It seemed to him as if he had made up all his memories—they couldn't have actually happened as he recalled. He couldn't have been so happy. He flipped the journal to the very first page. On it he had drawn another of his spaceships, this one flying over a blue ocean; he had drawn it when he was on the plane. He took up the pen which he had lain on the desk, and at the top of the front page he wrote, 'The Happiness Under Our Feet'. His stomach was twisting itself into knots as he stood bent over the desk. He was thankful that his trip was written down. Parts of it at least. If it did just stay in his head it *would* be like it never happened. He was horrified that he had departed from the person whom could confirm those words; his memories—their memories. He gripped the pen

tighter. He felt anger rising. Anger at himself. Underneath the title he had given to the journal, he wrote,

'Love is the perverse notion we hold wherein we hope to convince someone that the twisted reality of lies we've constructed for ourselves is true.' And he thought, 'And if that is true then we're all fucked.' He let the pen drop from his hand, as the tears dropped down his cheeks. It wasn't clear what would happen to him, now that he didn't even have love to hold on to.

“Fucking 'Summer of 69’” he intoned bitterly.

5.

He walks into a shadowed hall, leading somewhere more a cellar than a house, with more than a little trepidation tinting his senses, for he knows not what place he's stumbled into. And yet he forges ahead, cautious, and necessarily so. Or, so because his perceptions are dull and unrealized and thus his paying attention to them is futile; listening to his incomplete impressions might lead him astray. He knows he feels nervous chiefly because it is farther from surety that he moves with each step. He knows implicitly that whatever plans he might have clamped onto to guide him in his expedition are now sodden as a map lost overboard to sea. He had had no plan to be confronted by a

cave such as this. A cavernous abyss such as this, the shadows within seeming to shift before him with each foot he lets fall, causing any point of solidity he might otherwise apprehend, or find purchase to, to sway and shrink away before his discernment. He notes also with no censure of his initial apprehension that there has been no echoing of his steps, which seems peculiar for a chamber such as this. Indeed no sound has stirred that he has noticed, as if the reverberations inspired by his motion were meeting the same shadows his eyes were being drawn into, hypnotized. Or as if there existed nothing at all around him of material resonance. He was floating in a vacuum, and his senses were carried on to infinity, with no promise of reward.

Samuel awoke panting. He was drenched in sweat. He quickly shot up from the chaise and ran to the window, opening it to let in fresh air. He felt nauseated. He hung his head out of the windowsill, heaving, happy he didn't have a screen on the frame. It was the darkest of night outside. The moon was almost directly above him, and its glow shone icily off the frozen ground and hoar-frosted trees. His lungs took in cool oxygen, and he slowly recovered from that feeling of vertigo. Looking around, he almost felt like quitting his room to roam the still streets—if it were to be any time that he would desire to go out into the world, it would be now. But it seemed too cold to bother. He turned away to put wood into his stove, sending the flame a-crackling. Besides, he thought, he couldn't go out: he had to study. That's what he had isolated himself for, after all.

He went to his desk and sat down. *What* did he have to study? He didn't know. He just felt that there was a lot a person should know about the world. Whenever he *studied*,

most of what he took in went out just as easily. All that remained was a general impression of the movement behind the words: a symbolism. A hazy structure that he wished to define. He couldn't be bothered to remember the details of what he read. Or, more like, they just naturally did not make a strong enough impression on him for him to remember them later. Fiction he remembered a little easier, like what happened in specific scenes and whatnot—stuff that the author wasn't attempting to simply explain, but capture. And of course his own memories stood out clear as well. The notion behind those two facts of his memory were intertwined, their link a key: a person needed to *experience* an idea for themselves. That's what made narrative so powerful; and, of course, that's what made the experiences of the so-called real world so powerfully dominant in peoples' minds. That's why myths had the power to define people. And, as far as myth was concerned, it had lost its powers of transcendence. The myths of the day were stuff of concrete out of which skyscrapers and streets were built. Grand narrative of the mythical variety—the culturally revealing variety—was losing its transcendence because individuals of the twenty-first century—authors included—were strictly educated in what was real, and what wasn't, and thus were losing touch with the power of their imagination. Authors were convoluting their imaginative attempts by trying to appeal to everyone's empirical sensibilities. The common stories of the day were being grounded in that very same world of empiricism, confirming its reality—the reality everyone thought they should achieve success in. The reality everyone was trying to escape from. T.S. Eliot said as much in his essay, *Religion and Literature*. Samuel thought the reason narratives had lost their epic impact was because authors, in writing down their experiences, no

longer referred back to myths which defined their heritage. Authors were no longer testing the great fictional characters of the past against their own time, to see what still rung true, as say, the ancient Greeks did. Maybe it happened in comics, nowadays, but it needed to be a mainstream thing. Why shouldn't it be? Archetypical characters there aren't; just individuals with particular problems. And that's a problem, because an archetype can be objectively evaluated in the landscape of literature with the scope of reflection—whereas individuals are not more than a unique influx of circumstance that does not move beyond a particular sphere of experience. Myth employed dynamically by a variety of authors subjects recurring characters to an evolution which ultimately represents all facets of humanity as no isolated character of today's literary canon ever will. In a network wherein authors swap and share their characters and situations, individual writers can pick and choose from what has already been created and tested, based on what works for them—as individuals whom acknowledge they are not islands unto themselves. In an artistic environment wherein authors share constructs, their unique perspectives would ultimately have greater impact, for the reader would be able to step back to look at the literary and artistic tapestry of their time, and appreciate a continuity in the design, for it would be weaved with a common thread. If such turned out to be the case, certain colours or patterns would be shown to be more dominant, or repetitive. The success of art should be defined by cultural or topical discovery as revealed by such diaphanous fibres. Artists should not be forced to define the image of their individuality to create a fan base. The artists don't matter, in the end. Most of the more modern works of literature which have struck a deeper chord with their audience—that is, moving

beyond readers' appreciation for their being well written—are those works that still make reference to myth, pagan or not. Books like Joyce's *Ulysses*, or Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, or William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, or Shelley's *Frankenstein*, or Goethe's *Faust*—treated also recently, and significantly, by Mann—to name just a few. Not since Milton wrote his *Paradise Lost* has any fiction author spoken so confidently, assuming his voice would resonate through centuries. Milton spoke thus, because he knew the power of the mythical references he employed. And certain other authors of note must not be forgotten in this just because they created their own fantastical universes. For, in explicitly forgoing the constraints of physical reality, they become just as important: in letting free their imaginations and looking inward they were led, in the end, to those same archetypes: Blake, Lovecraft, Marquez; again, to name only a few. And thus William Burroughs was on to something when he was talking about how artists should feel free to cut up and steal others' work, if it works. Einstein said the key to creativity was in knowing how to hide one's sources. T.S. Eliot said the difference between a master and an apprentice poet was that the former stole, while the latter merely imitated. It's time the artists of the present day create new, shared myth to distil the movements of the current epoch, which is in much need of being defined.

“But first,” Samuel said into the silence, “we need artists whom are comfortable to speak even in ignorance, by letting free their imagination, and trusting it. So as to see only what resonates with others. And then move forward, slowly inching toward a truth about their time. And, I feel confident in the presumption that they will find that the more honest they are with themselves, the more their words and paintings and music will

resonate with others. In a world filled with confusion, if they find their words, though ignorant, nevertheless affect others due to their honesty, these artists will grow confident that they can affect change in the instability they see around them. Art will be seen by everybody as a *necessary* tool in attempts to provide coherence, and artists will be well encouraged in their hope that they are shining at least a small light in the tenebrous search for truth.” By this point Samuel had gotten up from his chair and was leaning on his desk; leaning forward as if lecturing an audience, though only his study stood before him, empty. “Art is not for show!” he shouted, triumphant.

And then he had an image of himself, standing there in his study, in the position he was in as if a professor, and he became embarrassed. He quickly slumped back into his chair, letting fall his head into his arms folded upon the desk, and he did not pick himself back up until the feeling passed over him. He was wont to fits of passion like the rest of those who were shoots grown out from soil of the sensitive lot. And he was afraid of it, of his passion. Passion comes from a place of yearning, and Samuel didn't know what to do with it. How to channel it. The problem, as he saw it, was that *he* was behind his words: his face, slackened and tired; his eyes, alternating between being disappointed, or dissatisfied, and enthralled; his body, skinny from too long a period of disuse; his clothing frumpy (as Ana had said). He didn't want his face to be behind his ideas. He didn't want others trying to figure out where he was coming from when he spoke. He wanted people to weigh his words only against others that had been spoken; against other ideas which had been aired. He wanted this because, as Che Guevara knew, it was an idea that really mattered, not the man. But in a world where others were unsure of themselves,

they grew suspicious of someone whom spoke with confidence. In a world where everyone is trying to stand out, Samuel feared that others may perhaps try to knock down those whom do, a peg or two, reminding them that he or she was not anything more than anyone else, that they were all human and ignorant. Samuel knew of his all too human quandary all too well, but still he wanted his ideas to be heard, and considered. But maybe not by people, exactly.

“What am I after?” Samuel asked aloud. He spoke out to the room. He peered out his window from his desk chair. Passed the cluster of trees directly in front of his view there was a small field, and beyond that was the T-shaped intersection leading into the suburbs. Suburbia. . . domestication. A different world entirely from his own. Yet just as strange, he imagined. To the right of his view the Rockies' snow-capped tips could be seen, driven in jagged points to the sky. He was on the outskirts of Calgary, and where the few rows of houses ended, the plains began. A quaint view, where life seemed simple, and he could pretend as much. And so quiet was it now, at night. Whether or not that simplicity, or dullness rather, was to the detriment of his neighbourhood's inhabitants, was a matter of question.

He awoke just before sunrise: not because of an alarm clock ringing at his bedside, but from habit. He turned to look at Ana, his wife, still sleeping; she would be able to sleep in for another hour at least, depending on how early the baby woke up and started making known her hunger, or need to be changed. Samuel kissed Ana's cheek, and then gently extricated himself from the sheets and blankets so as not to disturb her. He silently got dressed for the day's work ahead, splashed cold water on his face a few times,

and then left their bedroom, leaving the door open as Ana requested. In the kitchen he paused to grab an apple and make a sandwich for lunch before heading out the front door, his boots slipped on and the laces left untied, for the moment, as Samuel climbed into his pick up. He was eating the apple deliberately, tonguing it around his mouth so that he crunched down on it with all his teeth—he read somewhere that the apple juice was good for their health, and so he swished it around thoroughly. On his way to the job site, the sky had cleared up from the storm which had threatened to break the night before, but never did, and the sun was now starting to rise and the sky was a light blue blended with white streaks of cloud. He stopped at Tim Hortons to grab a large coffee; he opted for the drive-through, as he did every morning. He was heading to work as a carpenter—or something like that. He had worked his way through the apprenticeship program to become a journeyman, and his site's foreman was particularly pleased with Samuel's skill and work ethic—the kid, according to the foreman, was a natural craftsman. Samuel approached each project as if he actually felt the evolution of the building's elements coming together before him, and when little problems came up here and there, as they always do with such things, he seemed to. . . just know, what was needed; as if he asked the soil directly, and asked the wood, and the cement and the electricity, meditating upon their peculiar method of communication, unable to explain to the rest of the crew the reasons behind his decisions. Needless to say, his approach was offbeat, and it hadn't won him any favours throughout his short career; but when he happened to find a foreman whom appreciated his results nonetheless, well, that foreman had found himself a man whom would be his loyal number two for as long as the contracts kept coming in. There

was no question that Samuel would take over the company one day. There was one thing only which coloured the favour Samuel cast upon his vocation, and that was the fact that Samuel figured humans were at their most honest when engaged in artisan pursuits. In his view, what he had come to know in his brief existence was that humans thrived when they create stuff with their hands; thriving through and through. It was also a never-ending perk that, in such jobs, there was no need for politics: the purpose of such occupation was to provide for some human necessity: shelter, farming, electricity; the goal being to take the planet's raw materials and form them into something useful, or even remarkable and beautiful, and a person either did that well, or not so well—there was no fudging the results in the art of a craft. Perfect. . . no, not perfect. . . just honest. Ana's friends, or Samuel's acquaintances, would, every so often, at a dinner party or some such similar occasion, cite their belief that he was perhaps a bit more bookish than the usual labourer and could use his brains to make more money elsewhere—and if the party was held at Ana and Samuel's house, such an acquaintance would wave his hand toward Samuel's bookshelf. Samuel would reply with a list of those qualities he felt present in his pursuit; and, with his tongue planted firmly in his cheek, as any party demands, where the flow of things urges everyone to avoid unnecessary parentheticals, he would point out that even the oldest cultures would have a craftsman for their creator.

So the days would pass straightforward enough, and with much regularity, which as a young man Samuel had always assumed would make life dull, but he came home to a newborn baby and a wife; he came home to a house filled with love. And as the years passed, Ana worked as a high school teacher, inching toward an opportunity for

professorship, and Samuel would slowly accept more responsibility in his position as his boss grew older and took a back seat. They would keep expenses low: Samuel would drive an older, used pick up so he didn't have monthly payments; their house's size would be modest; instead of vacations they would go on family camping trips during long weekends, and go hiking through the mountains, and rock climbing too. Samuel and Ana would put a few hundred dollars into a compounded savings account every month, and they would teach their children about how the best things in life were free. And when their kids went off to college, Samuel and Ana might travel a little more, as they had always wanted, as they eased into old age. And when they were really old, when they had grandkids playing on the lawn under the summer sun and their children were in the living room playing cards over long island iced teas, with their husbands and wives, having just finished cleaning the barbeque, Samuel and Ana would be sitting in their porch's loveseat, that Samuel had made, holding each others' hand which they could, if pressed, recreate in their mind's eye down to every wrinkle, even though years of use had made that eye feeble when turned toward other things; their hands fitting so well, now with skin like old parchment, and to hold each other in that way was to give youth back to one another, as that touch informed upon a lifetime, and with the lightest caress they would be brought back to the very first days they met. And they would smile upon their memories, on that porch loveseat.

Samuel hoped, as he stared out his study's window at the brick bungalows and aluminium panelled two stories, all the windows darkened in the middle of the night, that such was how life was in the neighbourhood before him. Such is one way Samuel's own

life could play out. Oh, in a scenario like that the details didn't really matter so much. The only thing that mattered was that he was with Ana. . . though those acquaintances, aforementioned, might get to him, after a while. He had to admit that. When they came into his house, they would bring the world with them, and the world would tell him that his and Ana's story was only adequate, when a person, if they really buckle down and focus, can otherwise have it all. The love, yes; but also the money and everything which comes with it, and perhaps the social impact too, for such success reaffirms the story handed off to the younger generation. Perhaps even, if one amasses enough, they could give money over to this or that charity in benefit of a cause of one sort or another, and such a person would be really hard-pressed to find someone whom maintained they lived a life without purpose, or meaning. Certainly, if Samuel had enough money, he would tackle the education system, in which he himself did not have much luck. Yes, if Samuel ever gained a position of influence, he entertained good intentions—even great intentions, some might say. He could easily give himself over to a cause. Alas, dreams—even further removed from reality than ideas.

And what about that young man of the generation of absentee fathers? The young man of the generation raised by single moms working two and plus jobs, barely making ends meet. Maybe such a young man moved more often than the kids with happy and loving—or at least functioning—parents. As such that meant the young man was always the new kid every couple years, which meant he never learned how to create lasting friendships. He's part of that generation of punk and rap music. He's got a chip on his shoulder, because he sees how the system can bleed an individual dry, tiring them out

until they've got nothing left to give—that's his mother: in debt, no credit to her name, because she had to do what she could to raise her kids. In high school, the kid starts to see how he has two choices in front of him: continue education, invest time and money into the machine, and lose out to the zeitgeist—ie, graduate from college, take the first job so as to start paying back loans, put a deposit on some property, and then run through life in a series of ups and downs in an attempt to keep up with the. . . or. . . well, maybe there was only one option given to such a young man. Rappers, born of the same generation as he, found their music thriving in the beginning decades of the twenty-first century because they were giving voice to this struggle to define what it took to be a man, not having father figures to guide them—and they found, in their compensation, that one has to take what one wants, for nothing is given for free. The young man certainly saw first hand how someone somewhere he didn't know took what they wanted from his mother. There were mechanisms benefiting from the inertia of her economy, and from her suffering, and people behind those mechanisms, benefiting. Nevertheless, the young man sees that within the system there seems to be an opening growing, in the new millenium, as those like him try to figure out how to circumvent what they saw their parents trapped within—not much of an opening, but enough of one, so that anyone could be given a shot. And that's all the young man needs, and he throws himself to the task of preparing himself to take his, sacrificing all else. And he hits his target, and he finds himself on the other side. . . doors have opened up before him to reveal a world running parallel to and just above the one he knew as a kid. The world of those whom made it: comprised of the same types of the same types of people as were found in every circumstance of life's ebb

and flow—the minds behind industry, the artists, the intellectuals, the politicians, the showmen—except here the young man finds them all to be masters of their respective class; exalted to a tier where excellence is fashionable, not downgraded. He floats through the world of haute cuisine and tailored clothes and penthouse suites, his eyes open as saucers and his intentions suddenly avaricious: he wants all he didn't have growing up. Those of the master class eye him, this newcomer, skeptically. They see he has a bit of cache, thanks to his hard won talent in. . . whatever. Surrounded by all this luxury, he attempts to retain the modesty of his humble roots, as well as the ideal he holds himself to in his craft. After a period in which he accustoms himself to his gilded surroundings, he takes a deep breath and puts his head down, ready to prove to himself that he deserves his new privilege. His blue collar work ethic leads to him writing a successful novel—say he's a writer—which garners him acclaim from the best critics and reaffirms the faith held by his fans, whom were just as wary of how he might handle his new name as he was, while the masters had been prepared to shrug him off at the slightest sign of plebeian spirit. With his most recent and successful book comes a pay cheque which will have him living comfortably from then on. He buys his mother a condo—or a house, if she wants, but she'll say it's a lot of space for one person—and he tells her she doesn't have to work another day in her life again, because he's made it. An agent, who only represents those of that highest tier, steps forward to introduce herself, out from the world, as if she had always been there waiting, saying she would like to represent him. She tells the young, naive, new *it* writer that he needs someone who knows the business to help him out with his newly acquired name. He accepts, and he tours the world to

promote his book. He stays in hotels for free and is treated to meals in the finest restaurants, and—so the cliché goes—he drinks, and maybe says yes a few too many times to other substances made quite available, his nights passing in spirals like kaleidoscopes as he tries to forget his clout during lone hours when he has time to nip at those same questions he never stopped chasing, despite the accolades and privileged comfort with which the material world has bestowed upon him; and when those hours passed in reflection reflect back his queries, so the fog of alcohol fumes in which he hides to distort his image proves dense enough, and he instead casts a glance about for a pretty girl, his distraction, for it is only the female he really cares to understand, for reasons maybe Carl Jung might put forth a word or two to speculate. Yet the liquor muddles such an exchange, of which the goal was never meant to be realized so long as his sober concerns remained directed toward successes distilled from—as others might call it—more pragmatic cogitation. And so, as he smiles in a few pictures, and periodically appears on TV interviews, and continues to put out the material that had won him his life—maybe pumping it out, depending on the quantity versus quality stipulations of his contract—he continues to live a high roller sort of existence. He even manages to buy both a refined condo in the city, and a retreat in the mountains, just like he always wanted. Soon enough, the young man isn't so young anymore, however his name is well established and in fact he's considered one of the greatest writers of his generation. Easing back from full time writing, he decides to put the fortune he's amassed over his career into something he's always dreamt of: seeking out innovative young minds whom have not been given grants for research that looks promising though it is perhaps not

ready to be commercially entertained by those who normally fund such things. He works closely with those of a more scientific and philosophic bent, intending nothing else but to use his money to give the brightest minds a chance to shine as they might not get to otherwise, when the nature of their vocation and the unconcern they harbour for the political game has them churned around within the system's murky currents. The young man, now middle-aged and relaxed, has become an investor of ideas, and his choice of investment is based on one unwavering goal: his endeavour to find the horizon of consciousness. He and his team would create constructs which tested the limits of perception, to see if the world of ideas, and the world of material things, could be merged so far as to be indistinguishable. He wanted to see if one really could shape the world as they wished for it to be. There would be no barriers in a cosmos of infinite universes, and, hopefully, he could lead others to see that desire buds only in soil most arid to nature. Such was what he believed.

Such would be his legacy as he arrives at old age. And, looking back on his life he would see, just as he predicted, that nobody really knew who the fuck he was, because he still didn't, certainly. He would be left as a name on a Wikipedia page, the biography of his life and the intent behind his ideas able to be changed and edited by anyone. On the internet would be a few pictures of him, smiling at the camera, looking serious into it, his eyes piercing, or distracted and caught looking out of the frame at something unseen. What was he looking at? So someone might wonder. He was looking at everything. In his life he had seen all that could be seen. He had even attempted to move beyond such certain images, his mind's reach lightly grazing something ineffable he wished to more

fully entertain. But nobody would know that. Or care to know. All that mattered was what he had done—the stuff that could be pointed to, its effect empirically documented, for good or bad. It is inevitable that something would get lost in the translation; that no one would quite know what was behind those eyes in those pictures on Google. He wouldn't much care about that—such was just the way of things. He wanted to remain as a ghost, anyways. Let the figure in the picture remain ambiguous. Let the world use him as it wishes, contorting him into a caricature, or an example to be studied, of what not to do, or whatever. Let his being, if ever he had one, fade away as a phantom figment—as his successes were weighed upon an impersonal scale of value, such is what he had been set up to be, in the end, and indirectly. A ghost in the machine. Such was the destiny of everyone who met the demands of modern ambition. . . ?

Samuel stood up from his chair once again, this time quitting his desk. He moved around it to stand in the middle of his room. He was *restless*. He could live a thousand lifetimes that night, if he so chose to sit and contemplate such things. But then he would open his eyes, and see that he had not moved an inch from the first life to the last. Which really wouldn't bother him, and in fact he ordinarily marvelled at the phenomenon which allowed him to do just that, except for the little voice in the back of his mind assuring him that it was a waste of time—the super ego, as Freud would call it. Samuel would call it something else, but it was all the same in the end. He stood there, and in slow motion he leaned farther and farther forward until he tipped completely, falling to the floor. Only, he arrested his fall and prevented impact with his palms, which thudded against the rug, held out shoulder width apart. There he proceeded to perform push ups. Something he

hadn't done in a while. He went up, then down, repeating that program until he couldn't go up anymore—it took him less time to get tired than he remembered it taking him a few years ago. Then he did jumping jacks. Then a combination of the two wherein he did a jumping jack, dropped down to do a push up, then back up. Then he held himself in a push up position, and moved his legs, running on the spot. He did that until his legs turned to jelly. Then he stood up and took a deep breath, but only for a moment before starting the process over. He did this circuit five times more, and then he collapsed on the rug, unable to hold himself up. And he lay there, staring at the white spackled ceiling until the stars stopped dancing in front of his eyes and the blood stopped pounding and rushing through his ears. He remembered from his days spent involved in high school sports that the marker of cardiovascular fitness wasn't how long a person could last, per se, but how quickly they recovered. It surprised him just how long it took before he felt able to move again. But he did not move. He remained still, laying face upward, only his rug separating him from the hardwood, made cold by the late October chill—his window had remained open throughout the rest of the night, when he had left his room behind for the allure of fantasy. Whatever fire he had last made in the stove had died long ago, the coals left neglected. The sun was just starting to make its morning climb; or the planet was just continuing its spin. As he lay on the floor he could feel the temperature of the room decreasing: a wind was picking up, colliding with the top pane of the window, rattling it in its frame. He breathed slow and deep: in through his nose, out his mouth. His heart rate was back to normal by now, but his limbs still felt like lead. He started to get a little annoyed at himself, in that moment he had to recollect, over how out of shape he

had become—he had always been a physically active child. He had played soccer after elementary school, and interim sports during recess. And he kept that up through his teenage years. He had even lifted weights, and when he needed more challenge beyond the straightforward barbell and bench routine he had gone so far as to get a couple large tractor tires to flip up and down the alleyway behind his house. One bigger which he, at first, could only flip maybe five times in a row, and a smaller one intended for endurance. Not stopping there, he had made a pull sled out of an old car tire and some plywood, and he had ran with it dragging behind him, large stones loaded within its circular rubber wall. He had first started lifting weights because he had played football, but as his interest in that faded he still kept up with the exercise. It was a way to channel his energy to more productive ends; he turned it inward. He did this because it was a way to keep himself grounded. He enjoyed the discipline. When he exercised he pushed himself always to the point that he felt he might vomit. He even blacked out a few times after racking a heavy weight. He preferred to know his limits. Nowadays his routine had more of a mental focus, which he felt opened him up to more diverse avenues, and with that shift he had left physical exercise to the wayside. However, in his training, he had learned also about the strength of his will. He kept that. Though these new avenues opened up to him required a more subtle approach, that will was the same. . . wasn't it? Indeed, perhaps the will which drove him now stemmed from an altogether different facet of his being.

Laying there, on the rug, he clenched his hand into a fist and threw it against the floor. He didn't like the rug, he then decided. He pulled himself up off the ground, turning around to peer down at it, his eyes running to its red and gold and cream edges. The hardwood

barely peaked out from under the rug before the floorboard rose up to contain its charge.

'This has to go.' Samuel thought to himself. He didn't quite know why the rug had struck him so suddenly unfavourable, but if he were to continue to make a point of accepting whatever came into his mind, then he couldn't stop here. He had to learn to trust his gut, and the rug was now looming under him as something grotesque.

As the rug was underneath that formidable wooden desk, Samuel set about inching the heavy obstruction backward, moving it against the bookshelf. However, before he had completed his task he stopped, realizing that even if he pushed his desk against any of the walls of his room its dimension was such that all four of its legs would remain on the rug: the edge of its top surface extended beyond the parameter traced by the legs by a little more than the width between the rug and wall.

“Why the hell is this desk so big?” Samuel wondered out loud. He paused to evaluate the situation. As he saw it he had two options. One was that, given as he was getting rid of the carpet anyway, he could use the box cutter he kept in the top drawer of his desk to cut around the desk's four legs, enabling him to remove all of the rug except the rectangle which would remain underneath—perhaps he would come to be grateful for the warmth of the rug on his feet shielding him from the cold flooring as he worked late into nights. The second option was to get rid of the desk first. Thinking of this second route, it suddenly struck Samuel that the desk really was altogether too excessive for the room, and he did indeed resolve to get rid of it. He emptied the drawers of all the paper, the pens, with and without ink, a stapler, a few brain teasers, pencils, more papers, which were all scraps that had words and figures on them he couldn't remember putting there.

There was also in the right side cabinet of his desk a shoebox which held much importance to Samuel. It contained a few nostalgic artifacts of his life, among other things. He put it on the shelf with his notebooks. The rest was junk, he thought, and most of it went into the stove. He took out the drawers one by one, stacking them in the middle of the room. There were four of them, plus the cabinet door Samuel had pulled from its hinges, which were surprisingly flimsy relative to the desk's solid weight. He needed to break the drawers down so that he could throw them into the stove with the trash he had removed. But how? His eyes cast around his room as his mind wandered around for an idea, and his gaze landed upon a bat he had been given as a gift; years ago, maybe when he was six or seven. When he had played a single season of baseball to find out he didn't much care for the game.

'It might work.' Samuel thought.

Holding the bat in hand he eyed the drawers' geometry. There was only one approach which seemed slightly more effective than the others. He lifted the first drawer off the top of the makeshift tower and placed it singly on the ground so that its bottom was directly on the floor. Then he stepped his foot into it so as to hold in place and he began whacking at the first side's corner. One, two, three, four strikes, and the wood splintered, separated from the rest of the boarded parameter enough so that he could yank it free. Each side came off easier than the last for want of support, and he tossed the pieces one by one in front of the stove. He then paused to prep a fire before subjecting the remaining drawers to his demolition. The coating of varnish on the drawer's front end piece encouraged the flame to catch quickly. When he was done with the drawers he took

a moment to pick up the splinters that had launched across the room as he had whacked away. And then he turned his sights on the desk. It was looming, and leering at him—asking him if he really thought himself up to the task. He couldn't fathom how it had been brought into the room in the first place. He accepted the challenge and engaged it methodically, stress testing the spots he thought might be less sturdy, cracking the solid boards here and there so that their support grew weaker. It took a long time; which was fine, because it gave the stove a chance to burn the product of his efforts. The room was made hot by the combination of the flame and his activity. The window, which he had closed to keep the wind from howling in, had developed a film of condensation he couldn't see through, caught in a limbo state between the chill outside and the heat he was generating within.

The sun had disappeared behind the mountains by the time Samuel was done. He tossed the bat down on the floor and it landed on the rug with a thud. His stomach grumbled. It had been gnawing at his ribs all afternoon, but he had not wanted to stop until he had finished—and he still wasn't finished, so he continued to ignore his stomach's protests. The relatively small stove could not keep up with the rate Samuel had been breaking off pieces of the desk, and the pile had grown. He had stacked the wood off the rug, so that when he had finished with the desk he could roll it up, which he proceeded to do, stopping only a moment to take in hand the box cutter from the bookshelf. He cut out a rectangle, big enough for his body. About the size of a small mattress. He took the mat out from the middle so as not to disrupt the pattern emerging from the centre of the design, which would have proved very irritating upon prolonged

exposure, he thought. The rest of the rug thus rolled, he stood it on its end and then wrapped it in a bear hug to manage lifting it a few centimetres off the ground, and he carried his contrived nuisance to the corner, leaning it against the wall. The corner adjacent to the door, and then the window. He turned around to survey what he had accomplished. The room with the desk gone seemed smaller. But the hardwood was showing in its full capacity. The flickering light of the fire reflected off the boards, which had remained untouched under the rug's protection. A plant, tall and its leaves long and thin, stood in the corner next to the bookshelf. Samuel would spare the plant, of course—he liked having a plant or two inside and nearby, to bring a freshness to the stagnation inherent to indoor air. There was one last thing he had to take care of before he could take a break and maybe eat something however, and that was the dismantlement of the chaise. For a moment he thought he might leave it for the next day but he quickly brushed the notion aside: he preferred to get this tedious chore over and done with. The recliner was made of the same sturdy quality as the desk, so it didn't promise to yield easily to his barrage. But Samuel was by then relatively practised, if a little weary, and he spot his points of attack like a general surveying his enemy. He made short work of it, relatively speaking, and put the broken off legs and curving arm and head rest beside the rest of the destroyed furniture. Cushions too—everything would go into the fire, which remained crackling merrily in contrast to the man in the room whom had grown obstreperous in his exhaustion and determination.

Finally, Samuel sat down on the floorboards, a bowl filled with granola, raisins, and seeds in his hand—he had a lot of granola, stocked up for his self-imposed exile. He

felt he had moved toward cleaning himself up, like the taxi driver had done in that Scorsese movie.

“That's what Raskolnikov forgot to do.” Samuel said into the silence. He had thought this before—it had always stood out to him. “He remained dirty like everything else he saw, and it drove him mad.”

One's environment reflects their mind state.

Or it was probably vice versa.

Samuel munched away on the dry cereal steadily.

6.

He awoke with his muscles aching down to his bones; partly from the work of the day before, and partly because the only thing separating his supine form from the wooden floorboards was the bit of rug he had cut out and saved for the purpose. His blanket was folded neatly at the foot of the rug. Folding it was the first thing he had done upon waking, after stretching the stiffness out of his ligaments as much as he could. At first he could barely push his hands below his knees, but after he jogged on the spot he was able to grab his toes, which satisfied him, and he stopped his efforts. Then he made another bowl of granola, for he had awakened with his stomach cramped and gurgling. Steadily he had placed more furniture into the stove as he woke through the night, and the last of it

was burning behind him. Now Samuel was to be found with his laptop in front of him, disassembled, all the parts columned neatly, the little screws in rows organized by size, and in groups organized by how he had removed them from each drive, and from the fan and the various circuit boards. As he remembered reading in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, that one character with the apple cheeks had informed Yossarian that the key to successful tinkering was to keep a list of the pieces. So that's what Samuel did, and his computer had been successfully dismantled to its component parts in a well organized fashion. He had been staring at the pieces for the past thirty minutes, proud of his work. He eventually moved to reassembling them, referring back to the list he had made, which had each piece ordered in the reverse procession of how he had removed the layers of circuitry.

The temperature was significantly higher than it had been the day before, and Samuel had opened the window just a crack to let in some fresh air, to get rid of the dampness which had collected from the combination of yesterday's efforts and the continuous fire. He enjoyed that gentle bite coming in from under the glass pane as he slowly reassembled the computer. He took his time, weighing every piece in his hand, every wire and every chip and every tiny screw. He held each piece close to his eye, turning it over. With each circuit he reconnected and every drive he secured, he thought of what he had come to know about his computer since stripping it down to a bunch of disconnected, inanimate parts. And onto these parts he projected an image of his computer as it was fully functional, with not a screw loose.

“There is a certain way all you little bits come together to perform optimally, in

synchronicity, isn't there?" he said. Sure, a screw could be taken out and the rest of it would be just fine. Even the fan could be removed with little problem, if he adjusted his use a bit. But there was only one way it was meant to be: the manufacturer had intent. Samuel admired the simplicity of the machine, the fact that it could be taken apart and put back together without a glitch. He admired that one could swap hardware to boost processor speed, or increase memory, or heighten the graphics output, and yet the computer would not change, as far as its intended purpose. It adapted to the user's needs, the user's demands, and because of this, it grows with the user like in organic symbiosis.

“And so it causes the user to grow, for it reveals glimpses of what might be able to be achieved. And it all is made to happen thanks to these little bits of metal and plastic, which let pulses of electricity pass from chip to chip. On, and off, they go. . .”

When he finished putting the computer back together, he opened the laptop's screen, turning it to face him. And that's when Samuel noticed that the little camera at the top seemed to be looking at him. Piercing into him. Like a cyclops' eye. He couldn't look away: it was taunting him. Hypnotizing him. After several long minutes passed, he attempted to speak to pull himself out of his trance.

“You're just our play thing.” he muttered to it. “Don't look at me like that. You're under *our* control.” The eye continued to stare deep into Samuel's own, silent. He felt like it was penetrating his thoughts, and that it was winking at him. He snapped the screen shut and with a swift kick sent the thing sliding across the hardtop floor. Far from giving him a sense of meditative relief, upon finishing, as was his intention with the exercise, Samuel suddenly felt like all control had been wrenched from him—what he had done to

his room: stripping it bare, cleaning out the junk, in an attempt to clear his thoughts, was an exercise in futility. In every object he saw himself reflected back at him, and in the emptiness of the room that reflection was cast back from all sides by the walls. There was nothing left to distract himself from himself. He filled the room. He was the room. And the room, like the laptop, was laughing at him. Winking at him. It had been laughing at him while he had been busy with the bat, whacking away at the wood. And now the fire had devoured all of that, which is to say that not even its crackling existed. Samuel might as well have been lost in space. He was spinning and tumbling into nothingness.

But this is what he had wanted, wasn't it? He had meant to get rid of distraction, and of all those silly material comforts: the pleasantly warm and earthen colours he had adorned his study with. He had done this in order to prepare himself to feel some notion of truth—that's what he had said. And yet, right now, sitting on the cold floor with the fire out, the open window letting in a mild wind, he was feeling very small to the task he had set himself. A particularly frigid gust then came in through the window. He got up and closed it.

When he sat down again, in the same spot, he had his blanket wrapped around him, and a collection of Honore de Balzac's short stories in his hand. He needed to ease himself into this, he figured. He flipped the book's pages to that second story, which was his particular favourite within the collection. *Another Study of Womankind*. He liked that the setting was so simple; that the whole story was just a conversation held after a dinner, in which the artists, and politicians, and nobles—the real *who's who* of the Parisian scene at the time—swapped stories as they dive into the bottomless mysteries of the fairer sex.

He allowed himself to get lost in that effortlessly suggestive scene as if he were reading the words for the first time. And so the conversation unfolded in the pages, moving to its highs and lows, as those of Paris' more notably astute and sensitive patrons are allowed to tell their stories without interruption. The conversation unfolds without structure. Forget structure! In such a setting as Balzac captures form becomes inextricably linked with content, neither able to be substituted or else the spell is broken. The conversation is emotion, passion, resonance, and, of course, wit, coming together; in short, such an open rapport is a true work of art, indescribable except in the experience of it.

But it crumbles, this scene, like paint on dried canvas. And why? Because the conversation never happened—how could it? It was a fantasy written by a romantic whom 'preferred to create society instead of participate in it', in so many words. A civilized dinner? Better nothing is said at all, for, except for idle banter, the narrative of a night such as that is indulgent so far as it is so long and so complacently entertained; of course, that was the point, but how far should an artist stretch reality to suit one's personal aesthetics? How nice it would be if all the characters around a table were on the same page, but as it happens life is better depicted with grunts and agitated fingers drumming than a flourish of the raconteur's wrist, or a tittering. And why is that? Because most won't stand such a facade of civility, and honesty is born out in life rarely through such eloquence. That late night after dinner discussion: the most candidly bourgeois conception if ever there was one! In conversation it is not the words which matter anyway, and so one would do better to save one's breath. Around the table upon which ideas are served, better not a sound is uttered, for then truly all would be on the same

page. Conversation which elicits the most truth is passed in silence, for wisdom need not be put to words, and those at the table who are not so wise will not walk away being so no matter how long they sit listening to something which cannot be brought to life over dessert—it must be experienced. And so what of the role art plays, when a single person is given the floor to say their peace? Balzac said, let us take pleasure in the journey. But the journey is only given value if the destination proves worthwhile (oh and that must not be held as without exception, of course—and so Balzac proves it). That is the gamble one takes with an artist. And with the floor given over to her so, if her efforts prove honest and well composed, nothing else upon the subject need be said. A new topic need be suggested, for the old has vanished as it had hitherto existed after the artist has coloured it so. What more is there to say about the art of the journey? Not more than Balzac has captured already. So in silence the regard given to that thought ends, though with a last word, and only a few, as to the study of womankind, of whom if a man cannot gain knowledge, at least let him have wisdom; for the French writer did not quite leave it to satisfaction, and there is always a final word—and it is best left implicit, as point of fact. As for the subject of this study, which is too a woman, it seems to be this which lingers: if one is able to satisfy the woman of their desire to such depth as such a wild and clever and passionate creature wishes and yearns for, one is doing alright.

“But this is beside the point, I think.” Samuel said out loud to his room. Balzac's story was left turned to its final page, the book splayed across Samuel's knee; his notebook was balanced in the crook of his arm, and his pen was in hand, its tip gently depressed upon Samuel's lower lip, as he stared down at what he had written. “Because I

haven't quite figured out how to get there. And a conclusion without a proof is only a truism. . . I myself am not yet convinced.”

7.

Though Samuel wavered from his convictions in a fretful beginning, it didn't take him long to become comfortable with his newly Spartan existence: when he awoke, he did a routine bout of calisthenics, and then took the morning to study whatever it was he felt stood out to him in that moment he turned his attention to his bookshelf. In the afternoon he would sit on his rug, cross legged, his eyes closed, and he would let his mind wander. To nowhere in particular, just free. Free of all constraints. Without distraction, he retained that same feeling of floating in space, untethered by anything, as he had felt that morning after stripping his room bare. Except now, over the weeks, he had come to welcome it. And he wasn't drifting into nothingness anymore; now he was able to change his course and his speed at will as he enjoyed the immensity of his imagination. He marvelled at the juxtaposition between total silence, and the music nonetheless within it, stirring up in energetic whirlpools, which he heard if only he got close enough to listen. He felt like he could bend space at will, fold it over itself to bring stars, millions of light years away, to the touch of his fingertips, in an instant. Behind his eyelids shapes of numberless dimensions bloomed and spun and crisscrossed around and

over and through each other. Colour exploded before him as these forms collided, scattering around and collecting to emerge as hazy figures and silhouettes of vague objects given familiarity not by their shape, but by their movements and interactions with each other. Narratives without words or direction unfolded from these movements, and time ceased to mean anything as entire solar systems evolved to give birth to life which danced and married and died and cried before him, leaving behind towers and castles and statues of infinite elaboration, eulogies echoing above them before they too finally faded, and a silence lingered. An endless black. Nothing, nothing, and yet the black warped around something. It bent in on itself, a vacuum being made in the shifting void and the void resisted this vacuum because there can't just be nothing and from this dense nothingness sprung energy, in protest—a wedding congregation in which the vows cascade from the mouths of the husband and wife to be, weaving around the other listening, weaving between them, the bride in a flowing gown that sweeps its ethereal and glowing white around the cathedral built only to celebrate their union, the groom with a doffed top hat he insisted on wearing, now husband and wife smiling at each other, their hands clasped tight as they run down the aisle, the scene zoomed in on those hands, everything else fades, the room, the pews and the people filling them; nothing exists but those two hands, held to each other, interlocked, gleaming bands on the ring fingers. Lightning strikes and he felt thunder shake his room; shake the planet. That vast blackness was now all around him as he sunk into the womb, suffused with unimaginable intensity like the electric storm around Venus and around this planet before this planet came to be Earth. And just a spark is needed to set in motion what was only a matter of

an infinite timeline; defibrillators bring back the lapsed heart which wants nothing more than to keep pumping, even though it has barely started beating, and the baby cries, and the mother cries, that sound shattering her world. No words are needed for them to understand one another completely. Eyes open, irises dilate around blackness, and inside them the lightning flashes continue, silently now.

A general sends his soldiers running and the ground shakes under their footsteps like it shook when the thunder roared, paint put on their faces during ritual, preparing them for war; and electricity flows through their hearts in a time before words when gods of thunder and oceans and suns and mountains clashed like titans. And the planet shakes too when the General takes a step, for he cannot restrain himself from the fight. Armies charged at armies, each side bent on shedding one another's blood for a chance to see their families safe; war drums and horns and shouts and clashes of metal reverberate throughout the entire cosmos, and each sword plunged into the heart of another is like a black hole ripping open and sucking existence into it, warping space irreversibly. And when it's over night has fallen and there is much dancing, singing, chest beating; fire shimmers, shadows dance, voices echo over tree tops in celebration as much as in warning to others that there is something which will be protected in the midst of the trees that night. The throats of the defeated are slit, for they refuse slavery. Blood seeps into the ground, the blood of men, of antelope, of lions, of dinosaurs, of mothers and fathers and children and siblings of every species that exists and has ever existed, flowing rivers cascading in waterfalls of red, roaring thunderous down, down, down, down, pooled and rising up, and up, and up in the veins weaving through the universe. A steady pulse,

booming across all that exists.

And in the evening he wrote. Just scribbles, nothing definite. Sketches of ideas. Papers he often crumpled and threw into the stove. He chewed on his pencil, wearing the ends down to the lead. He taped sheets he thought of worth to the wall, sorting them by atmospheres and emotion and ideas, tracing lines from paper to paper, cutting sentences out and taping them under different paragraphs, different questions. He did this until the wall was filled, and then he went to the next one. Soon he was surrounded by words. Concepts. Instead of the blank walls staring back at him like pits of nothingness, he felt as if they had ceased in their solidity. He felt like he could now pass through them with a flick of his pen. He stood in the middle of the room, turning slowly to survey what he had done.

“It's a curious thing, putting words to feelings. I'm left wondering what the point is? Isn't it the point that I'm having these feelings at all? Why understand them through arcane symbolism? To speak is to take part in the world's canon. To write words down is to offer oneself to scrutiny. By whom? I'm not sure. Maybe it's more appropriate to ask, 'by what?', and in that answer, one is led back to the point of asking the question, anyways.” Samuel hadn't spoken in days. His voice sounded strange to him.

The nights passed long enough, but it was the days which really took their time, for Samuel was left puzzling out the foreign motion of the day he saw out his window, now that he found himself so removed from it and able to look at it from such a reference point, and his resolute attempts to try to figure out this dance of life before him caused

each minute to slow to a crawl, as if a racing mind warped space-time relative to a still one, like light, if it were conscious, would experience the universe. And then when Samuel jogged himself out of his reverie he realized that, on the contrary, much time had passed indeed, and he found himself propelled far into the future—days even—in the blink of an eye, as he reflected back in confusion upon where exactly his mind had just taken him. . . and for how long? Time had no meaning within his room's four walls. Moments seemed to melt into one another, and memories of days just recently gone by became part of a blur composed of all the memories of his life entire, and details were mismatched within fleeting images and rearranged along the time-line of his existence. All this like dreams, really, which too he found to be almost indistinguishable from his waking hours. He was left wondering what exactly within this confusion he could hold onto for support and surety—of some semblance of continuity? He came up with nothing. He came up with the idea that he should just allow the world and his thoughts to merge before his perceptions as one, and not be bothered with which was what exactly. Doing so he was able to recognize something very important within him, something from which he otherwise might be more detached, or unable to appreciate: the whims of his psychology which, in facing the onslaught of convoluted imagery, at least had preferences for which images exactly to focus on, and explore. Discovering this Samuel was made almost into a backseat passenger as these tenebrous inclinations of his took reign of the wheel, and he looked out the window with a journalist's appraisal, never ceasing to scribble away in his notebook. He was at his most free, right now, it seemed. In no way would he have been able to get this far into his own. . . whatever it was. . . while continuing to participate in

the world. . . *out there*. Out his window, that is. Wherever he was getting himself to, he knew it to be a place more pure and revelatory than any place he might find while concerning himself with. . . strife of the everyday sort. And if at times he did not manage, precisely, to document his travels, he did indeed feel sure that the influence of his experiencing them would forever remain tacitly behind his thoughts and actions for the rest of his days. And so he held on tight to his capricious spirit, which, as he realized upon reading back to himself the notes he had written, was not so capricious as he had supposed it to be, at first.

And the days wore on; and the hours and the minutes and the seconds ceased to really account for his motion through space—there was just night and day, two distinct aspects of the world's movement which also began blurring into each other as Samuel adopted very irregular sleeping patterns, sometimes staying awake for days on end, otherwise not rising from his thin mat on the floor for what must also have been several of the Earth's axial revolutions. Dreams he had of Ana. Thoughts too, he had of Ana. Oh he thought of many things in the time he was trapped within his mind, but he always managed to pull her image from out the murky depths of his muddled musings, as if with her his unconscious was providing him answer to his torment. So he knew it to be, and that did little to steel his nerve, for he was faced so relentlessly with the reality of his choice to urge her away from his side. How long ago had that been? Weeks, now? A month?

Soon enough Samuel's nights spent sleeping on the thin rug over top a freezing floor caught up with him, and he came down with a cold. It didn't help that he had burned

all his wood weeks ago, and refused to get anymore. He still kept the window open. It was almost like he was inviting pneumonia into his room. He sat on his rug, cross-legged, and let the wind stir a torrent around him, the air now frigid as the Earth continued its regression from the Sun. Snow had even crept over his windowsill, creating a layer of frost that was inching down the wall toward the floor. The icy lifelessness outside his study made Samuel feel as if there were no atmospheric barrier between the Earth's surface and the space the planet whirled endlessly through. Most of the universe was cold. Four percent matter, not all of it so fortunately close to a heat source. . . probably north of ninety-nine percent, total. Endless, practically speaking. What he was experiencing now wasn't even the tip of an iceberg in a bottomless ocean. He might as well roll out a towel and throw on some shades under an umbrella in comparison. And Samuel welcomed the elemental force of the planet's nature. He wore only a long sleeved shirt, and nothing under it. He was reminding himself of Earth's power. He was reminding himself about his smallness when faced with the black universe. His body was shaking, his limbs doing their best to keep warm. With his fever his skin was at times clammy, otherwise bone dry. His cough, as the days went by, grew deeper; coarser. By now he was eating only once a day. A few handfuls of his granola and seed mix. His breath spilled out in front of him as clouds of vapour. He had always preferred the taste of cold air. He listened to the wind whistling above the silence of the night. Everything was still outside. He stilled himself. He sat motionless for hours at a time. Days, even. Listening to his heart beat, which was slow and forceful, and the wind. This is what he had envisioned for himself upon embarking on his journey. The cold did not deter his

resolve to delve deeper. In fact, more than anything else, it probably encouraged him most. In his stillness and the stillness around he felt like he could feel the planet's orbit, its spin upon its axis. Or at least he imagined it, which brought it close to him. He knew it was spinning, and with that knowledge he was taking part. In the deep darkness of the early morning hours, Samuel pictured a fire blazing before him. He saw the orange and yellow flames licking upward, jumping toward the oxygen. He watched little embers of burnt carbon hold the heat within their tiny cores, flung into the night, landing on the floor around him, landing on him. He felt the heat of the blaze lashing at his face, at the soles of his feet. He held his hands, palms out, up to the fire. He basked in its warmth. The wood crackled. He felt his organs awaken, begin working a little harder with the heat's encouragement. And then he kicked out with his foot, sending a burning log rolling across the room. Its forward progress was stopped at the door. He did it again, sending wood and sparks scattering. The breeze let in through the open window fanned the flame, which started licking up toward the ceiling, scaling the walls. The fire quickly devoured his books. Soon the room was thick with black smoke and the smell of polish burning—the polish on the finished floorboards and wood panelled walls. His room was burning down around him, the flame, hitherto comforting, now spreading its destruction. He wondered how long he could last.

When dawn broke across the sky in purple and yellow streaks Samuel was reading, his back against the wall opposite the window. He had shut the pane, and the ice on the sill crunched under its weight, refusing to let it seal completely. He had his blanket

wrapped around his shoulders. His fever was up, and he wiped his forehead of sweat occasionally, with the end of his sleeve. The crisp flick of the pages turning was exaggerated with a snap of his wrist. He quite enjoyed the simple sound. He paused at a break in the lecture to look out the window. Day was fast approaching, and the sky was taking on an ethereal glow; the sky of winter. With the book he was reading he was taking a short break from a story he had begun writing, which was more than a little archetypical. But Samuel liked the message behind it just the same. He was fine with re-appropriating myths, after all. A notebook lay open beside him, and a pen rested on its pages, its tip precisely at the end of the word on which he had finished. The top of the pen was skewed toward the left margin. It was a black pen with a gold clip and a gold tip and end. It had a good weight. Samuel had begun to really absorb little things like that; little details which defined one particular moment from the next. The story was of a monkish sort of person whom walked the Earth in his days. He crossed the widest valleys, and he climbed the tallest mountains. He swam in rivers, and descended into caves. Along the coast he waded out far enough to let massive waves send him reeling back to shore; he collided with each wave, standing up to it as best he could, for it had travelled thousands of kilometres to wash over him, and he planted his feet to meet the force as all the planet crashed down upon him. In the ocean he felt in touch with the secrets which lay sunken on its floor—the history of the world. And then the traveller dried out under desert suns. When he came across villages, he made sure to bring gifts from his adventures: medicinal herbs, spices, sea shells, stones, figurines. After feasting around a fire, the villagers encouraged him to tell of his adventures well into the night, and he obliged, trying his

best to overcome the differences in spoken language with sweeping gestures and exaggerated facial expressions. All would listen to him with hushed enthusiasm. He met their requests, because he wished for them to share their own tales with him. To these his attention was devout. When finished, music would begin and dance would begin, and the traveller, as their celebrated guest of honour, took centre stage in these moonlit festivities. A few days would pass and then the monk would bid himself an exit and continue on his way. Little did he know that he would soon find himself confronted by vast golden hills of sand sprawled out in every direction as far as his eyes could see and that, after a time he could no longer keep track of, he would grow exhausted by the unrelenting heat of the sun on his back, reflected back up at him by the compact particles of rock, making his agony twofold. His feet grew heavier with each step. His woes he cried out in exhaustion, but all that came out of his parched, cracked lips was a croak. The sands around him were no longer just that. They were the unforgiving void running without boundary around him: a dying spark of life. The monk keeps his head down, clothing wrapped around his head to shield his skin from the harsh rays. He focuses on taking a single step. Then another. The sand splashes with each fall of his foot. He feels he will fall soon. His vision starts to waver in and out of blackness, all he has seen for days is the blinding yellow of nothing, his eyes are shutting down in protest. He wasn't meant to see all that. With a final sigh, he collapses. There is a ringing in his ears. It soon fades, and he too is left as nothing.

He opens his eyes. Darkness meets them, but it is just the darkness of night. With a groan, he pushes himself off his stomach and rolls over so that he lay staring up at the

sky. Stars by the trillions dance in front of his weak perception. His spit is thick, and dry, and a gust of wind kicks sand up around him and some falls into his mouth. He chokes. He coughs and coughs, and with what little strength he has left in his limbs he picks himself up onto his hands and knees. He spits out the sand that was stuck in the back of his throat, gagging him. He wipes his mouth. He manages to lift his head up to gaze forward, hoping maybe he might see something of a salvation from his torment, and what he sees makes him weep. His energy renewed in a burst, he runs toward the pond and jumps in the water. He gulps in as much as he is able to swallow as fast as he is able to swallow it and that is slowly, at first, as his throat's muscles groan in protest, but he keeps going until his belly cramps. He climbs out of the pond and throws himself down on the grass beside it, laughing. He runs his palms over the soft green stems, rejoicing in their caress. As he stares up at the night sky, now intelligible to his hydrated senses, a slurry of images runs in front of him. Memories of his travels: the mountains, the valleys, the clouds, and the people. Oh, the people! All so full of blood! So loud, so excited, so full of life! And he was full of life too. He had trudged through the arid yellow void, and found his way back to life. That oasis was Earth, and the desert looming around him was the unforgiving depths of space. More than all, he reflected on the stirrings of passion he had felt within him as he experienced the lowest plains and highest peaks defining the planet so. He reflected on how he had never been led astray by his passion. By his pure and individuated will. He had seen all the world had to offer, and because of that, he had seen all of himself. He lay there beside the pond, and his happy, wet lips formed the words, 'All I know is of this Earth.'

8.

It had now been a month that he has remained in his room—or, at least a month, for he had no way of knowing exactly how long it had been since his isolation had begun except for the fact that outside his window the only view of the world he had, had gone from the colourless gloom of late autumn, when all the leaves had fallen and the plants had all withered under an unrelenting frostiness in the air, to a winter scene insistent in its reign, defining the movement of all life under its blanket of snow. He was up night and day, sleeping little, for the biting chill of the season wouldn't allow him to stay comfortable, and his cold plugged his sinuses when he laid down too long. All he knew was that what little sleep he did get was filled so much with dreams that when he got up he felt like he had not ceased thinking, and hadn't gotten a single moment of rest. Oh, he never stopped thinking. Not from the moment Ana shut the door. He had thought himself to his grave, and back again. He thought about how the world was likely passing him by, though the quiet, stalwart houses lining the suburban street outside said different. They said, on the other hand, that he should just make his mind up already, because otherwise he might as well be a potted plant on the windowsill, propped up as he was by his hands and elbows, gazing passively outward. Where was he anyway? Some sort of limbo. In between realities. Nowhere, really, hovering on the edge of a world. Disconnected.

“What am I after?” he shouted—he was way passed the point of feeling embarrassed to talk to himself. *What is he after?*, because this existence wasn't sustainable. Yes, he could forfeit the world and try to set himself up in a similar situation long term. Maybe he could build a cabin in the mountains somewhere. Maybe next to a lake. He could spend his days like Thoreau did. But even Thoreau left the forest often enough. That's a funny study though—Thoreau, Dillard, Wordsworth, Emerson, and all those writers. They had in common a peace with nature, and a reverence for it. They were enraptured by it. It seems as if one can't help but feel at peace in nature. Cities are just too complex. People start thinking differently when they're surrounded by all those buildings and cars and concrete. And they start feeling differently. Like the city is moving forward with their self possession, taking it, sweeping it away as it insists on grinding on with or without anyone, even those notable individuals whom for some reason choose to say no to it. And it just didn't seem right. . . he was probably right to assume that it didn't seem right for a lot of people. That was something he wasn't making up. That was something Samuel felt deep in his bones, and a feeling that strong couldn't be wrong. Sure, a city could give someone a life otherwise unfathomable, if they gave themselves over to it. But that's what it took: a giving of oneself over to it. Every thought, every word, was evaluated based off the parameters defined by the city. What car one drove, what house to buy, where to work, where to eat, what to eat, was determined by what role a person existed in. To a large degree, anyways. And then one went fishing on long weekends to get back in touch with themselves. Was that so bad, if one weren't so dramatic as Samuel? It could be worse. It could be better. And that's how things were. Right? But. . . ideas are

material, for they too have affect. Ideas change peoples' lives everyday. Samuel felt sure of it. The only problem was that other things—economics, politics . . . such things which flaunt themselves as concretely pertinent, tear people away from the ideas which could lift them up. Not everyone could run away from things, as Samuel had. But what if they *did* all do that? What was stopping them? Family? But children were the ones wanting to run free, and it was the parents, the ones with the final say, who were saying no. Jobs? Jobs everyone hates. Food; electricity? Obtain some seeds and candles, or even solar panels, nowadays. Why had everyone decided to play along in self-negating mediocrity? Why was the order unimpeachable? Why was this myth defining the world, as if imagination no longer existed? Why why why why why. Why why why. There were answers to those whys; but Samuel had spent too much time on those answers. Everybody has. Nobody wants to hear it. And that fact, that everyone knew the cause of their plights and the method of relief, but no one did anything, was both hilarious and tragic—the tragic comedy of life, as it was referred to a million times already.

Samuel didn't know if he was fully acquainted with silence. He did feel as if his perception of himself had realigned maybe a little bit for the better, though. He had wiped clean the lens that had been in front of his vision, his world view, and he thought he was seeing things a little more straightforward. A little more clearly. He had come into contact with such a sort of unblemished perception in Europe, too—there he had had no expectation of experiences tainting his sight: not in such an unfamiliar place; there he hadn't known what to expect. Where he was now though, he figured he had a pretty good handle on things. Such was what he had written on his walls. But he still hadn't been able

to point his finger to anything he had wrote down and said, 'yes, this is what I should focus on.' In a way, he felt helpless. He had been at it for a month, with nothing to show for his efforts but a little scribbling and a lot of blacked out passages. He didn't deserve a pat on the back because he had managed to clear his mind, and document a few thoughts. He was getting annoyed with his constant thinking, like it was a bad habit he couldn't drop.

“I should set my sights on figuring out how to stop trying to figure things out. I need to think my way out of thinking!” he said sardonically, as he lightly hit his head against the corner of the window frame. Once, twice, three times in frustration. He was only jesting with the action, he didn't think the corner he was slowly backing himself into was so inescapable that he should instead be hitting his head on the wall a little harder. But still, he was fed up with his process. How was he supposed to get himself out of all the problems around him? These problems made by humans, getting by in their wicked ways. Success is defined by the system, and those whom have succeeded only confirm the status quo. So the world doesn't run on love; well, what does it run on? Inertia. Apathy. Self interest? No, people don't know themselves. . . Oh, why bother? Here he has come to separate himself from the world, and all he thinks about now is the world! But there's no story happening in this room; no action or drama. Just him. Just him, and, well, books. The writers, men and women, just as lost as he; and mostly dead, now. And they distract him, and he thanks them for it. Cause man oh man is life dull inside his room. Oh, it had been interesting at first, perhaps a little. For its novelty. But now he needed something to sink his teeth into. He was holding conversations with history when he

wrote in the margins of his books, but why and for what when his own historicity was forsaken; which is to say, when he does not participate in the making of it? Need the thinker be dissatisfied? If so, with what? The inadequacy of his knowledge? Or perhaps the feeling of not yet having produced something of some sort of value to some division of the world's attention? And if there is no need for such dissatisfaction, what then? Is the thinker nothing more than a computer absorbing data and spitting it out in a way that realigns with itself? What is it to twist something, as an artist does when he or she takes the image of a face and exaggerates the emotion behind it, as Picasso did? Is it just that he reverted the complex into something more simple—more intuitive? So what of complexity then? Why are our brains so complex, relatively, and yet we yearn for simplicity? So the artist sees something without all that gunk that is real life in the way, and perhaps even captures it, and then another person is led to see without that gunk, perhaps, and then continues on, and like a windshield on a highway, their vision soon becomes gunky again. No no no: no need for that. Most things have been figured out, what with the current understanding of the evolution of information systems and whatnot; the human species has thought itself into an apathetic hole, as Samuel had. But still he was filled with passion; with yearning. Knowledge: the enemy of passion? That is, knowledge entire (for of course knowledge of injustice inspires action). Which is to say, if one knows the rules by which the game is played, so the excitement of ignorant experimentation vanishes. Which is to say, it may be time for a new game. It's like: chess didn't always exist. . . someone made it up. And we've come a long way from board games—what could we do *now*? With our imagination, that is. The artist shouldn't be

made to point out the problems of the world. The artist. . . art, at its most pure, should be an encouragement for others to lend their own voice to the chorus of the world's experience. Creation should be a shared process, not an isolated one. The artist yearns to be able to do just that, but what they see around them is so messed up to their sensitive spirits that they become disheartened, or at best—and this is something that is besides the point of their true calling—they are filled with a passion to wake people up so that things can be changed for the better, and once they are—once the boundaries and the gunk and the lenses have been cleared away, the world will become a boundless expanse of universes contained within every individual conscious being, and that being will have the time and the freedom to do what comes so natural to human hands: create something inspired from the depths of their souls, to share it with the world, a smile on their face, and, well, maybe their feet a little pigeon-toed, and their eyes a little shy, and their anxious hands clasped tightly behind their back, nervous as they wonder how their efforts will be taken by others. And yet the only criteria others will hold them to is honesty! For, in being honest with themselves, they can do no wrong as they let song spill from their mouth, and blueprints of ships and planes they aspire to make assemble under their hands, and music move their feet! Ah!, and here others would always tell Samuel he was a pessimist; look at him now!

9.

The sun was high above a few wisps of cloud, the sky a deep blue. Blue bird, snowboarders called it: the perfect winter day to spend on slopes. Maybe in some respects. Samuel preferred overcast days. Not because they were gloomy and he was gloomy, he just liked that colours stood out better against a grey backdrop. The weather was warmer than it had been in days—a week at least. A chinook was passing through, must be. Calgary was known for those. Warm air from the coast brought over the mountains and down into the plains: a relief from winter which happened more frequently and less, depending on the particular year. This winter seemed colder than those most recent in Samuel's memory, but then again he hadn't ever faced a winter so unguarded. The sun was strong enough that the ice on his windowsill was dripping, as was the snow off the tree branches. The sound of water was everywhere in the field. A wetness, like he were standing along the coast of Antarctica, and the breeze was sending a chilled ocean mist washing over him. Maybe not the best for his cold, but he didn't mind. In fact he figured his cold might be passing. Before long Samuel realized that he had substituted in his life one set of distractions for another. He realized he wasn't getting anywhere, or solving anything. He realized that he was avoiding his own weaknesses; he was avoiding dealing with those barriers of the world he often came up against, and hadn't managed to circumvent, much less break down. But he pushed these thoughts away. Angrily even. When he thought about what it might be like to go outside, to leave his room, and see people, he felt as if it would be like he had been gone for decades, only

to come back to find everything just the same. He was scared of finding the world as he left it, with the same problems which had driven him away; for it had too much inertia to stop now. Samuel wanted to turn away from this thought, and run. He wanted to run and run, until his heart was thumping at thrice its speed and his limbs were crying out in agony and he became too tired to think anything coherent. But there was nowhere to run to. That was the truth of it. Samuel turned to his bookshelf. Hundreds of titles. Hundreds of worlds bound in paperback and cardboard and even a few in leather, ready to stand up to time, and soft cloth, pleasant to the touch. There were universes defined by Hilbert vectors leading to infinity, if one found oneself led so far. There were described paradigms of Euclidean geometry, linear and rational, satisfying to read to sharpen a certain tool set and yet ultimately myopic. . . nature is not so bounded, and bends the topological manifolds of space as needed. And there is Newton's *Principia*, wherein he bothers to write down all of his proofs, and then at the end says, 'I hope you didn't waste time reading all of that', as if his conclusions were obvious and he only submitted to the academics of his day to show that his ideas stood up to their defined parameters of truth. There was Plato's realm of dialectic and his excellent crafting of characters, which deserves accolades for its literary merit alone; and there was Spinoza's rigorous communion with the infinite. Diderot said one's story is already written, and Borges proceeded to show just how much one could count on that from one life to the next, as if such a thing as an eternal recurrence were shared by all men and women. Beckett, that slippery sage, insisted that we do not go quietly into that good night. And Poe! Trying to reconcile the irrational with a rational mind! How much darkness *that* turns out to bring,

ha! And so many other books Samuel was wont to get lost in. In fact he thought he might. He *thought* he might, as he stood in the middle of his study, considering his collection. As if such a choice was open to consideration! He *wanted* to do it; again, he *needed* to do it. Such is what he had locked himself in his room for. He wished to get lost in a world of fiction, and a world of ideas. If one accepted *that* world, well, who is to say such a choice was a wrong one? Certainly, both the world contained within the four corners of his shelving unit, and the world outside his window, both succeeded in their perpetuation because they were self-referential—self confirming? Such is how meaning is derived, after all, as Hofstadter illustrated in a work of compositional genius (though it finished a little fluffy). The world of art is held up by patrons whom insist the time they spend on it is worth something. That it is important. So it is with the common citizen. One can't assume that the world in which they have invested themselves in is best. Only best for them. One must do whatever one feels most alive doing. Most free and unbounded. One in which they are most rewarded for their efforts. Woody Allen once put the line, “If you're a writer, then declare yourself the best writer!” into Hemingway's mouth. Samuel didn't know if Hemingway actually said those words, but the actor playing him delivered the sentiment with such force that Samuel felt inspired all the same. What Samuel needed, then, was a medium to channel his strengths through. His passion through. His ideas through. His energetic will through. So many people were dissatisfied because their innate spirit had never been given a satisfying outlet. Fortunate are the few who are able to do what they choose, and know they are doing what they choose! That last bit is important, for, in this world, with so many suggestions of desire bombarding one every

day as they walk down the street, one is never quite sure if the choice one makes is the right one. Such is why a person needs to learn to trust their gut—their instincts! Screw what anyone else might say! Live and let live. Imagine this place if everyone was so wrapped up in mastering their passion, not extending a care in the world for whether it were right or not! (and passion is rarely, if ever, misleading). . . Politicians and economists are worried there's not enough energy in the world to sustain the species, yet Samuel wished he could worry whether or not the planet could sustain the energy of humans! Of consciousness unbridled! Let loose! And with such thoughts in mind he felt so much energy surging through him he didn't know what to do with himself! Right then, in his room, life had burst out of him in a field that was reaching the eight corners of his cubic study, and his study proved too small. There was a density in the air. An electrical pressure was building.

“What should I do with it?” he cried out. The books in front of him became mere objects. Pages and pages of simple material. Interesting how the pages did nothing of affect, though. They weren't holding the ideas printed on their pages. The ideas were holding the pages, using them for their explicit purpose. Samuel wanted to run through the streets, yelling! He wanted to jump and skip and twirl and climb on top of cars and launch himself over fences and jump off of the roofs of the suburban houses littered all around his habitat. He wanted to find every dog trapped within a fenced backyard and let them free, and run with them! He wanted people to join him! And when people asked what the hell he was doing he would yell back, 'Absolutely nothing!' There wasn't any point to it, he just wanted to do it. He had no plan. He was just allowing the inchoate

winds of the universe to take him where they may. Educating him. Because he knew nothing, but wanted to feel everything! He wanted to dive down as far as he could into the deep blue sea. He wanted to fall from a plane flying as high as it could reach in the deep blue sky, and see the world in full panorama, swaying gently in a parachute (if someone would be so kind as to take him up in their plane). He wanted to sleep out in the rain in muddy ditches, and on sun soaked beaches. He wanted to experience!

As he stood in his room the thought occurred to him that much of that wasn't feasible. That the world wasn't set up to work that way. That sooner or later someone would grab a hold of his arm and shout, 'Hey you can't be in here!', or, 'You're not allowed to climb that!'. Shout it right into Samuel's face. There were rules, after all. One couldn't scale a church, for example. There was a certain respect that need be paid to it. And so the world was full of unwritten moors like that. Codes of conduct that would have one ostracized if one were to break them. Mysterious rules: enticing in their secrecy. Rules that reveal histories—the histories humans are made from. Many such rules cannot be directly pointed to, or spoken of. One cannot bypass the boundaries of places guarded by these secrets so naively. And those whom are initiates of these secrets, since they can't be spoken of directly, communicate with gestures, and rites. Samuel enjoyed the fancy that there were certain orders among humans whom held themselves to an esoteric code, a code written behind the movement of the planet's history, and if ever he got to the bottom of things, well, he wouldn't be the first; in fact he would just be a tourist, as he had been in Europe. He didn't want to tread on any toes. He just wanted to build up his own world, let people in if they asked, and ask to join a few others, if they'd let him. The

world needn't be so serious, with rites and whatnot. Everyone should be more open. Everyone should frolic in their own naivety as they search for the truth, or their own truth. And when they find it they should be willing to divulge it. Not hoard it, for reasons of ego or power or whatever.

“I don't know what the fuck I'm talking about.” Samuel said aloud. His energy had dissipated. He felt confined again. And yet he hadn't even moved from the spot: not from the moment he felt that electric surge to now. It had all happened in his god damn head. He wanted to seek out those mysteries. That's what people do in life. They figure things out, reveal the truth in things and when that excitement inspired by the unknown dissipates, they start to see the world as bland. As monotonous. But what Samuel found most captivating was the stories of how people got to figuring out their own worlds. He wanted people to invite him on their journey. He wanted to just vibe to their beat, for a while. That's what the world is made up of. Beats. Rhythms. The world should be more rhythmical. It should be built on a sharing of everyone's unique perspective. But everyone should try to communicate their perspective as best they possibly can, because it's better when they do, for themselves that is, because when they endeavour to communicate effectively they can't help but learn just as much in the process. Even in such a world as that there are certain, unwritten rules. One must be honest, for one. And accepting, for two. And there is a certain, let's say, aesthetic propriety in approach with this or that medium. One must be aware of their medium. But that's about it. And if there is a truth out there, it will be revealed when it is evident that everyone, on their naive and passion-fuelled journey, has arrived in the same place. And with that truth, it is only a matter of

accepting it, so as to take part in it. Still, the journeys are the most interesting. A person must be willing to put themselves on the line to express their journey, and in the first place they have to be willing to put themselves on the line to *make* that journey. On both accounts, or both steps of the process, they have to feel comfortable in offering themselves up to judgement. By whom? No, no, remember now: *by what*.

Time remembers those who have taken that journey in their lives, implicitly or explicitly so; history remembers them, and their influence from decades and centuries ago continues to influence the present. All have an aspect of truth to share, and posterity recognizes the importance of those whom have, in the mastery of their medium, offered themselves up to be learned from, or studied. Because such journeys of passion reveal the energy pushing this universe onward. Whether that offering takes the form of an equation, a poem, a building, a boat, or regardless of whether it is a talent in basketball or ice road trucking. Whatever it is, one must be uncompromising in their ideals. One must listen to their own instincts. One should be unreasonable, as Bernard Shaw said. History is put to motion by revolutions in perspective, championed by courageous individuals. Well, then, what is it that matters, in the end?

Samuel paced up his room, toward the window, then down his room, toward the stove, and then back just far enough to stand in his study's centre, upon which he turned to his right by ninety degrees, and strode to his bookshelf, turned, and marched to his door. Then back to the centre, and ninety degrees left, and stepped to the window. He repeated this configuration much, and then reversed it, and then changed his loci from the window, stove, bookshelf, and door, to the four corners of his room, two of which stood

bare, one of which cradled the rolled up rug, its bottom—the thatched, plain side—facing out, its beautiful design curled and facing inward, into itself, and the last of his four corners, in which his plant stood, flourishing as ever, for Samuel had quite a green thumb. Or quite *the* green thumb, rather, perhaps, that one word pivoting the sentiment from a colloquialism to a literal declaration if one did not know any better. But one had to know the colloquialism in the first place to spot the difference, and such a one would then cede that the point of the matter was concluded all the same, if put a little strangely. And so it was no real matter at all, though it would stick out, like the thumb was approaching a sort of gangrene. . . like it was sore! . . . *Ah tsk ah tsk ah, twiddling these sore thumbs of mine*, thought he. The take away was that Samuel's efforts spent thus were leading nowhere. He plodded and schemed and dreamt up many things he might do, but all his designs seemed to run up against a wall; the panelled wall of his study. He could meditate himself into oblivion, and the snow outside would thaw and the grass would turn green and birds would once more start whistling their spring melodies. . . and?. . . and what? That's what would happen. No more, no less. The world: a-turnin'. If anybody became privy to what Samuel had been getting himself up to—maybe peaking in through his window, if they could find it—they might just think they found themselves before some sort of captive: bags under his eyes, probably emaciated, the walls of his cell like ones found in a sanitarium, furious scribbles upon pages taped upon pages upon the wall so that less than a square inch of the wood underneath could be seen. Such a person would probably shuffle off in a hurry. 'That's passion on these walls, damn it!' Samuel would think. . . oh, if he called such words out it would probably cause the person to start running, so raspy

his voice must be from so long a period of disuse—and so bizarre the sentiment itself!

Imagining such a moment, Samuel couldn't decide if he would find himself bursting out laughing, or weeping. However the moment so happens to strike him, one zooms out away from his window, up and up into the sky, like one of those melodious spring birds, their wings outstretched as they float on the draft lifting beneath their feathers and it was like summer had decided to come early as the bird flew, its gaze panning the city left and right, and maybe swooping down, and up, through a low cloud, the condensation slides off the bird's coat easily and water droplets burst forward as the bird exits the cloud's other side, continuing to glide effortlessly with its sails open to the wind, and soon enough it has flown to another corner of the city—any corner—and swoops lower and lower, and as it approaches the ground the draft grows weaker and its wings start fluttering as it moves around the trees of another neighbourhood—any neighbourhood—and lands upon a branch outside one house of a couple dozen. There's a woman shouting, and then a man shouting, and then the man exits the house, and the door slammed shut behind him scares the bird, and it flies away. If it had chosen to land on the branch of the tree across the street, it would catch the tail end of a woman coming to orgasm, her ecstasy heard through the open bedroom window. Who's to say whether such violence would scare the bird off just the same as the slammed door. But the bird hasn't flown anywhere. It's right on Samuel's shoulder, pecking at his head—a tiny bird, but persistent. Gentle pecks that gradually grow a bit harder, and then a bit harder, and bit more harder, and harder. To move is to accept defeat. To not move is to invite, well, an uncertain outcome, as a drop of blood splashes on the floor. What to do, what to do. On the one

hand, Samuel is meditating. . . a practice in Buddhism; and don't the Buddhists teach to accept suffering? The world is suffering, because the world demands ego, and the Buddhists preach that there is no 'I'. Samuel, and perhaps for different reasons, has been led to do the same. (the bird's eyes are unblinking, and it does not cease its motion) On the other hand, blood is running down Samuel's cheek, soaking into his shirt: the cut, small at first on the side of his head now, opening into a gash; but maybe the bird will stop on its own? (it does not: it does not know what it is doing, of course) Curious, the bird must have passed a certain barrier, for now Samuel does not feel the action of its sharp beak; only indirectly does he know that the bird is still continuing, for the blood he sees on the floor, which he regards as if it were the blood of someone else, and the incessant pounding he hears, as if the sound were behind his ears.

He snatched at it, in the end. The bird jumped from his shoulder, flapping its wings furiously. He shooed it away. "Out, out!" he said. It flew around to all the corners of the room before finding escape out the opened window; but it remained on the sill. It stared at him. He stared back. Its beak and its breast were bathed maroon. He debated whether he would, with a wave of his hands, have it take off completely, so he could shut the window closed behind it. He let wash over him the notion that he wanted to do to it much more than that, in fact, as he eyed it, for, if he let the bird, it would dive into his room and be back at his skull in a moment, now that it had got a taste for him. However, now that the bird was far removed from him and both it and he had had a moment to recant, Samuel found himself wondering if or if not such an action on his part would be *just*. In that moment Samuel *was* to be found laughing.

10.

By the middle of December Samuel was feeling ill again. His fever was back, and with it, nausea. He had been in his room now for a month and a half, give or take a week. He hadn't been able to move much for the last two nights, and this night was no different. He kept nodding off and dreaming of hiking up a mountain, and when he got to the top he was looking for someone, but couldn't find them. He had been climbing for what felt like days, and though he was on the peak surrounded by the view of an endless horizon he had sought, it spanning all around him and curving with the Earth, so that the sky above looked to him as if he were within a giant fishbowl, staring as a fish might, at a sort of existence it couldn't quite comprehend, he didn't pause to look for a second. He needed to find that person, whoever they were. He always awoke in frustration. This is when the sickness crept back up. It didn't take him long to figure out who he must be looking for. Anastasia. His love. Why had he thrown her away? Why had he hurt her so abruptly and coldly? So he could sit in his room and conjure worlds? At the end of this path he would die in old age with a lonely heart, he knew. And that would be that. It was lonely speaking only to the history written in his books. Even if he wanted to speak to his contemporaries, he wasn't connected with the specifics within the order of things. He couldn't comment on any who or what behind any exact tragedy playing out on the global

stage. He knew of only generalities suggested by the annals of history—so the sharpness of his brain wasn't even of use in the affairs in which it might better be employed; all he could do for anyone was wave his hands and suggest vague patterns he had noted. He really was a worthless piece of shit, as he had always suspected himself of being—and he had confirmed that when he broke Ana's heart. When he wasn't living off the labour of so many others, directly and indirectly, he was shunning everybody else with indifference. The time to 'suck it up' was long passed due. Maybe he would join the army—he had seriously considered it before, maybe five years ago. At that time he had just finished reading Cormac McCarthy and was feeling consumed by the notion that everything he saw around him was motivated by war and struggle and violence both perfidious and direct, and he had figured that some particular, and peculiar, segment of people—soldiers—*had* to be willing to sleep in the dirt, because the world was dirty; thus he had gone to his local recruiter and picked up the application and filled it out and everything. Despite how the system was set up, he figured he might be able to do some good as a soldier, when the opportunity arose. And he would learn lots. He had had a vision of himself as a career grunt, working all the way up the ladder to special forces, where his job would entail him becoming that ghost he yearned to be, moving in and out of shadows, striking only at the most crucial arteries yet containing their spill with practised hands; or he figured he might end up tucked away somewhere doing secret intelligence type stuff. One may laugh at that, but it was a path he could easily be on at this very moment. Then he would have no time at all to leave his head in the clouds. He would always have something to do. The only reason he wasn't doing this now was because the recruitment

office hadn't called him back for six months, and his mind by then was somewhere else already. An issue of timing, for better or worse. By then he had met Ana.

By then, he and Ana started talking about how they could see the world together. How she would teach, and maybe he would get a certificate to teach too, and they would go from country to country teaching English in villages, staying six months here, or a year there, until they found somewhere they both liked. Then Ana would finish her PhD, wherever they were—somewhere in Europe no doubt, for she already had citizenship—while he did whatever he might be doing. They both figured by then he would have found *something* to sink his teeth into. Not at the rate he was going now, though. He watched the moon slowly trace its path across his window from his position stretched out on the rug. It was only a sliver tonight. It was a clear sky, but the stars, of course, he couldn't see much trace of, given that he was in the city. Maybe here on the outskirts he could see a few more than one would see if they were downtown, in the midst of all the light pollution. Not as many as he saw when he closed his eyes. Not as many as could be seen from the desert.

'One day I'm going to watch a desert lightning storm.' he thought resolutely. He realized for many people such a scene was commonplace and not something to explicitly aspire toward, but, everybody has to aspire toward something. He also aspired to live in Europe. Many people on the other side of the ocean aspired to live in Canada. So what the hell, right? No matter where anyone found themselves, most wanted to be some place else. But, 'the wise man grows happiness under his feet', as the saying goes. What could he cultivate in the soil around him?

“Love seems a good place to start.” he said to the moon—just the tip of its crescent lingered in his view. So it did. Without question. For, in the end, who's opinion did he really care about, but Ana's? All he needed to be was the man she knew he could be. But what kind of man was that? She told him she liked his passion, and his kindness, and his enthusiasm for beautiful things. But then. . .

Not many days before he had come to a decision to break their relationship, they had been playacting as if they were strangers meeting by chance for the first time. He remembered the scene, which took place in a coffee shop, quite clearly: she had been wearing a purple lace headband, which held back her dark curls, which were almost black, and could be assumed to be such if one only glanced for a moment, and saw them in dim light. But out in the sun loose strands would catch the light and be revealed as chocolate brown, or even coppery. She had been wearing a casual pullover. He had come to meet her after work, and she had already made herself comfortable with a pint of beer and a book about neurology. He ordered a beer as well, because he felt he had to order something, though he didn't much want it.

The coffee shop they were in was one of those artsy ones, and he frequented it often enough, and there were new paintings on the walls which he didn't much care for. They were of some abstract shadows and silhouettes, and they didn't really go with the vibe of the room all that well, which was, otherwise and overall, very homey, with a mismatched array of long-backed chairs and throw pillows along the windowsill. And when he and Ana began this playacting, the conversation started slow. She asked him, if he didn't know her, what would be the first thing he might say if he wanted to intrigue

her? He made a joke about how he could tell she was intrigued already. But then there were a few too many pauses, on both sides of the table, and maybe an awkward stumble over a word or two, as they spoke to each other anew, as if they didn't already know each others' pasts and wants and pet causes inside and out. Samuel looked at conversation with strangers as a fencing match, where the two participants poke and prod each other in a friendly repartee. Ana saw conversations as a dance, where one need only feel the harmony in their partner's step. Samuel had said that he could see his fencing match, if it turned out interesting, move into a dance. But as they were starting from two different places, there were no smooth steps taken; no spins or twirls made in the sway of music. Just misplaced pokes on his end, and a hand held out to accept a dance—allowed to fall—on hers. And for a split second, there was a look in her eye of disappointment. Of disenchantment. She was looking at him, after the years they had known each other, as if she didn't know who was sitting across from her. And she was looking like she didn't like whoever it was. In that fleeting instant he saw in her eye everything he wanted to be and knew he wasn't. And he had gotten mad, because who the fuck was she to want him to be something he wasn't? After knowing each other for so long, she still didn't have any idea who he was? And he wondered how anyone could ever hope to be properly understood, if he and Ana couldn't even know where the other person's head was at. Those were his thoughts in that instant, and it was like their hands had been torn apart, the force of their separation sending him reeling back, and he was left unsure about whether he wanted to come back, to her, sitting there at the table, slightly tipsy from the beer, unaware, or uncaring, in that moment, of what she had just done to him.

What Samuel realized, once the anger and hurt had dissipated—and much too late—was that Ana had looked at him in that way precisely because she knew exactly who he was. It was him, in his infinite stupidity, who didn't know it. She had looked at him then as if he were a stranger, because he wasn't being who she knew him to be. He was fencing with her. He was cold. Distant. Like a stranger. Like a person who thinks they don't need anything from anyone. She had offered him her hand to dance, excitedly so, knowing him to enjoy a dance now and again. And he had practically slapped it away. Slapped away a chance to dance with the world. 'To say yes to one instant is to say yes to all of existence.' Ana had written that down once, and it came from her innermost depths. And he had said no. Like he was wont to do. It was practically his automatic response to most things. The world was disappointing to him, and he closed himself off to it before it could beat him down any more. And yet Ana had seen Samuel at his most open and enthusiastic, when he was living in the moment and grabbing the hands of everything and everyone, encouraging them to open their ears to the music and share in the dance with him. It was his failure to do that, which lay behind the disappointment in her eyes, as she sat across the table from him. And the real fact of the matter was, as the conversation continued past that moment, they ended up having a really good time pretending to not know each other, as they asked each other questions that were playing at ignorance, and exciting all the same. They happily watched each other introduce themselves, knowing what stood behind every word and expression and gesture. He had thought her adorable, once they fell into synch with each other—that's what made them so good together: though they came from opposite angles, they always met in the middle, and brought with

them a whole world the other wouldn't have considered, or at least not right away. They encouraged each other to be the most full they could be; to see the world in all the colours that were. But he said no too often, and just one too many times.

11.

Samuel's cold had taken over his body, trashing it and refusing to leave. He had no wood for his stove. He didn't bother burning what little bit of scrap paper and other waste had collected—it would only last for a few seconds. He didn't know if he was imagining his symptoms or not. They seemed to come and go, intensifying in his bouts of melancholy, only to retreat in moments of euphoria. He had been experiencing these highs and lows for the past few weeks. They mirrored his productivity. Every so often, in his more excited state, he would stay up for forty hour stretches, at least, and much longer sometimes, writing and writing in the time he had been in his room. And in times when he was not feeling at all inspired, his thoughts sunk to the darkest lows, and his fever came back. He didn't know which triggered the other. When he was able pick himself up off the rug, the blanket wrapped around him, dragging on the floor, he distracted himself by trying to piece together some coherency between the papers stuck to his walls. He would walk slowly around his room, his eyes drifting over everything. Specific words and phrases he had felt were of particular importance when writing them down were

underlined, capitalized, emboldened, circled. His attention was drawn to these first, and then his search would spiral out from those centres, to the pages around, and he would relive the moments in which each idea had come forth. On the walls was a document of his mind over the past two months, projected out onto reality. A rough impression of himself. And he unstuck select papers, and piled them beside his laptop, as he sat with his back against the wall and typed away. If he wasn't creating something of worth, at least he sought to capture something he could look back on, maybe with the understanding of hindsight. Perhaps, eventually, he would at least be thankful he had made note of lessons he had learned, and mistakes he had made, so that he may not repeat the same.

It was in his focus, as he was bent over his laptop and the keyboard was ticking and tapping away as his fingers hammered furiously down—and moved a bit more cautiously at other times; and ceased completely, often—that Samuel was jolted from his trance by a very unusual sound. It had come from his computer, and he was at a loss to explain it, until an icon flashed on the top right corner of his screen. It was Skype, and it said that Ana was online. Or, at least, it notified him that someone had signed in. And only Ana was added to his contact list, for he had installed Skype almost a year ago for the few months they had been living in separate cities, as she went to school and he followed a job opportunity, and on Skype, despite that distance, they saw each other every day. They had talked a lot, and had 'sex' a lot more—doing what they could given the circumstances. He froze, staring at the icon. His fingers hovered over the keyboard. His first thought was quite beside the point.

'I didn't know I had internet.'

But then he remembered he had payed several months in advance, so that he didn't have to worry about the bill as often—what little money he managed to have, he was good at managing it. His second thought, of course, was to call her. He clicked on the appropriate tab. As his mouse came to her name on the screen, her icon changed from green, which indicated she was available, to grey. She had signed out. . . she must have seen that he was online? His computer signed him into Skype automatically, and this had been the first time in weeks he had opened his laptop and turned it on. She was probably as surprised as he was—to come across him, even if only digitally. He clicked on her icon anyway, and her picture was enlarged on the screen.

'She saw that I was online, and she hadn't wanted for me to call her.' That was the fact of the matter, he was sure. He could think of nothing else. She didn't want to speak to him, even after all this time. Not even to say hello, even though they had parted amicably enough—he really had hurt her. And, likely, he really had lost her, even though his own feelings were not at all resolute. And of course that was how it should be. She wouldn't take him back after what he did. She *shouldn't* take him back after what he did. How could she trust him not to abuse her trust again? She had believed him wholeheartedly when he said they would spend their lives together. And then he had turned around and said no, and for reasons he hadn't fully explained to her; reasons he hadn't quite understood himself; reasons that should have been made crystal clear if they were crafted to support such a life-altering decision.

He still wanted to hear her voice though. He couldn't distract himself from such desire with his word document open before him, which was now a non-issue. He realized

then that while he had been locked in this room for almost two months, she had been out in the world, doing what she did so well. Living. He thought it possible that maybe she had struck up a friendship with some guy she met at work. At one of the tables she served. He knew guys hit on her often. What was to stop her from welcoming it, or even flirting back a little? It would get her mind off the break up—if it was even on that anymore. And then the guy would ask her out, of course, as the natural order of such things goes. Would she say yes? Had she said yes to someone already? Samuel couldn't bear the thought. He pushed them violently aside, but did not push her away. If he couldn't have her actual voice to colour the image he had of her right then in front of him, he decided the next best thing to do was to read the emails she had written to him over the years, when they had been away from each other on trips, or were in need of something to be sent to their inbox, or even just when they found themselves working late at night, and had wanted to send an email instead of a text, for a change.

He started from the bottom of the list, taking his time with each one. The digital letters were coloured with all the examples of dialogue that had occurred so naturally between them: there was simple yet layered banter in some, and philosophic debate in others. They had told jokes and sent reminders of errands and favours the other had promised to do. They had sent each other little poems they made up, and observations they had made during the days when they weren't with each other. With each email he read through, it was like that simple little action, of lifting his finger and clicking *next* with his mouse, grew a thousandfold more difficult from the last, because he knew soon there would be no more to read. And it really came to hit him, as he read through these

memories, that in the years they had known each other, he had not done anything with himself. . . In the emails it was always Ana whom was busy, while he remained stationary: she was in classes, or in the Caribbean, or away for the weekend to go to a birthday party or visit her family; all the while he had not kept a steady job, he had certainly not gone to school, or even become certified in anything which might bump him up a few dollars in wages. . . nothing. Well, that's not entirely the case. . . though he hadn't done anything materially notable, his *ideas* had certainly evolved, and he had written a few essays and short stories to document that. And they were good, according to those he showed them to. Quite good, in fact. Getting better with each effort. And, while she was in school, he had kept his promise to pay the larger portion of their rent. Little things like that he had done, sure. Basically, however, these things had him going nowhere. He was happy doing them, yes—exploring the world of ideas, that is, and developing his own thoughts, hoping one day he would be ready to do something. . . but the reality was that, in affect, materially speaking, he was a loser, for he had not progressed in a world that did not care about his *personal development*, when everyone else kept to moving, figuring such a thing as that would come sooner or later. The world wasn't waiting, though Samuel's opinion was to abhor thoughtless action. Conversely, Ana had graduated, and was working toward becoming certified to teach internationally, at this very moment; this moment when he had locked himself inside a room. If they had stayed together, at the rate he was going. . . well. . . he wouldn't be able to keep up with her. All he had to offer were dreams and ideals, and for those he was uncompromising. He only wished his ideals weren't so. . . unrealistic. Indifference! That's what it came

down to, as far as his life position was concerned. The world was indifferent to him, and he was indifferent to it. It had told him how he should do many things if he wanted a secure future with a wife and kids and a retirement, and he had told it to go fuck itself. And now he oscillated between seeing the world whizzing by without him, and seeing it crumbling down to its foundations. And in the centre of it all was Ana, and when he focused on her, everything else dissolved into unconcern. But it *didn't* dissolve, in actuality. Everything remained just where it was, carrying on as always.

When he got through the emails, he turned to the shelf holding his notebooks and pulled out the shoebox—he figured he might as well keep the melancholia going. Inside the shoebox, among other things, like his passport and other legal documents, were letters from Ana. When he read over them, though they were mostly silly little narratives she waxed and spun during those months they had been in different cities, he could feel the sheer happiness behind the words. The enthusiasm she had had to write to him, displayed in her little doodles and remarks here and there about what she was doing, and how she wished she were doing it with him, 'because he made everything better'. When he had finished reading through them all, he leaned against the wall, his feet stretched out in front of him and tears were heavy in his eyes. Those were painful words he had read; portals to a reality he knew he couldn't have. Not ever again. Now he just had the words. Words—one of his obsessions. What could they do? How did they define human consciousness? Define the world? What rhythms of mind are betrayed in the simple act of writing? And thus, what rhythms of the universe (for human minds have emerged from the universe, and thus they contained traces of its secrets)? What doors to an existent

cosmic heritage could be unlocked with the rigour of semiotics? All these questions. . . and he couldn't help thinking then,

“We're fools! All of us who would look up at the sky measuring the movements of stars to see what we may find hidden behind, rather than participate in the emergent moment of the *beauty* in those movements happening *right now*. We miss what's right in front of us.”

He wiped his eyes. He looked around at his room, strewn in papers that were covered in meaningless scribbles. His laptop remained open, and on the screen his own words glared up at him. He shut it. For a moment he felt the impulse to leap to his feet to tear down every single sheet of paper he had tacked onto the wall, throw it all in the stove, and light it up. Such would be the logical conclusion to his sentiment just passed. He rose to his feet, but for some reason he refrained from destroying the evidence of his exile. He couldn't bring himself to do what he knew he should—what the aesthetics of the situation called for. He couldn't do it because, if he didn't have something to show for the progress of his thoughts, then his ideas really would be immaterial, in the sense that they would have no affect. And for some perverse reason, he had made up his mind to thrust the pages filled with his words under the noses of as many people willing to sniff at them—oh please have it be *one* person, at least! One person whom can confirm or deny once and for all whether he really was crazy, and that his ideas are of no use to anybody, and that he should just join in with the simple and necessary demands of society or else forever feel himself to be a worthless sack of piss and bile. He needed that, for he saw how ideas could affect millions of people and how if one idea changes even a single

person's life for the better it was worth sharing; Samuel just didn't know if his ideas were of value, and yet how else could he contribute? He had nothing else to offer; desperately he hoped he could be enough. It was driving him fucking crazy! And right then, standing there in his room surrounded by the efforts of his exile, he came to realize that he had had enough of being trapped in his mind. There were no answers to be found there. He had looked, and looked hard. But the merit of something is only determined by its relational impact upon other things. External things. He wanted *out*. He had meant to stay in longer, of course, but what he was doing was silly; or, it was made silly because he felt right then that he knew everything he now needed to in order to *act*. He needed to put himself to the test. He needed to prove to himself that he was enough. Enough for the world, sure, but more importantly, enough for Ana. He needed her back. She was the only one whom could save him from himself. She was the only one who could put his mind right, so that he might be of use to something; for, when he was alone. . . well, he didn't have a very high opinion of himself. If he continued on much longer so isolated, then he really might do something stupid. She had confidence in him, for some reason. He wanted to get out into the world now. He ran to the door, his hand shooting in front of him to turn the knob.

“Better grab a coat.” he said. Yes, grab a coat. It was now time to take part in the world like a normal person, if he could—he'd at least try. And normal people wear coats when the temperature is below freezing and they have a fever. Maybe, this time, he could see the world from out behind the gunky lens he had managed to remove in his absence from it. He didn't want to look at the world that way. He wanted to look at it, and say yes! He leaped across the room to where his coat hung on a hook off the wall; it was behind

the rolled rug. He went to the door. He turned around to take one last look at the place. . .

The window was open, slightly, and a breeze ran through the room in a gentle whirl, rustling the pages it weaved through as it drifted around the wall. Otherwise it was motionless. Stripped bare except for the walls, covered in those scribbles. He had ransacked the place. He had cleared it of all things which stood only to complicate matters. Creature comforts. Accumulated from his travels and meanderings, when he had picked up this or that little trinket or piece of furniture that he deemed better suited for him than other little things in a market where one must buy at least a few items of projected and determined value, as a way of life; slowly he had been defining himself, in a material way, with his rug and his chaise and his bold wood desk. And when he removed himself from the world, so he had removed that need to define himself with externals. He had undressed his room of its ornaments, which were, at times, almost decadent—that is, when aligned with who he thought himself to be, as a single human being, which meant a whole hell of a lot of nothing, really, to the march of time. The room was now made severe, in comparison. Austere. . . no. . . just clear. He resolved to keep it that way, even as he walked passed so many shiny, glittering things upon leaving his room. Such glitter was not gold. What was of worth was in his heart. It was in his passion.

He opened the door and turned to leave, and he came face to face with Ana. He. . . he stopped, cold. His coat he still clutched left his hand and was let fall onto the floor. Ana!. . . she was wearing the same clothes she had on when she left: a white collared shirt under black suspenders holding up her matching skirt. Ana!. . . she was smiling. . .

smiling! So wonderfully smiling! At him! He wanted to leap to her and take her in his arms. Oh he wanted to touch her so! Hitherto and including the moment this urgent desire spread from his heart to his limbs Samuel remained rooted to the spot—he forgot himself. When he did finally move—and indeed it was in actuality quite quickly that he did, though to him that moment in which he first looked upon her lasted the sort of eternity he would be happy to live forever and again—a little movement: a twitching forward of his leg, was all it was. And in that instant, to Samuel's tragic discontent, as that little twitch propelled him to regain consciousness of the figure he cut now, after having been in hiding in his room for so long, he saw behind her smile and her eyes the world as he wanted it to be, but knew it wasn't—he wanted the fantasy provided by love, which has one so readily believe themselves to be fulfilled. . . which would have him feeling fulfilled. Yes, he wanted to accept the world she saw for him, and saw for them both, where forgiveness made heal the batterings of a cruel reality—and if only in the lover's own body and mind, it is enough. But he couldn't. He couldn't because it would make it as if enough to merely deal with such a reality. He needed to do more than that—he could not participate in something he found so terrible, and filled with such suffering, even while he himself was happy in love. What drove him into his room came rushing back into his mind, as his legs turned to jello. He fell to his knees.

“What did I do to deserve such a reward as this?” he whispered. He could not believe that she had been waiting for him all this time, and that she still had on a smile as she greeted him. And yet he wanted to tell her to run away. He hid his face from her gaze in his hands. He supposed he looked terrible. He felt ashamed. He had not grown at all

since she last saw him, and he feared she could see that.

“That's the wrong question. You should be asking yourself why you don't just accept it?”

His mind reviewed that fateful day which had initially sent him into his room, when he had realized the reality everyone shared wasn't going anywhere, regardless of his idealism. He thought of how he wasn't going to be able to live up to the demands he had set for himself, and how he didn't want to even consider meeting the demands of such an ill world, even if that meant being with Ana—it couldn't happen like that. He didn't reply to her. He continued to sink into himself, there on the ground. Finally, after several moments, he took his hands away from his face, and when he looked up, he saw that his love was not there.

Part Two – Into the World Now

Twilight in the depths of Calgary winters lasts for only a moment as the planet approaches the winter solstice of its northern hemisphere; faster is such a city located close to the Arctic Circle drawn away from the heat of the Sun's attention. Now the morning was still, the rush of suburban residents to begin the day on a proper footing had dissipated as most diffused to their place of work or school, or toward other commitments which would have them drawn into the city. The snow crunched under Samuel's stride, as it had been allowed to thaw the previous day, or the previous two or three days—Samuel hadn't made note—as the weather was mild, only to develop a layer of ice when encountering the inevitable chill of the winter's night. Samuel walked along the sidewalk, his pace made rapid and he turned his gaze furtively from left to right; on his left he encountered an open field leading to the countryside prairies and, on his right, the very contra, for there the distance of his vision was sequestered as it came up against walls of aluminium panelling and fencing protecting domestic yards he sensed were still, as all else he came across this morning thus far was, though he couldn't see over the wood barricades to confirm this. Samuel quickened his pace even more, for he found upon appraising the stolid and unflinchingly arresting reality before him not ever to be sent to rout that he wanted nothing more than to scurry back to his room and remain in the comfort of its fluidity, to which he had grown more than a little accustomed in the two months passed. So it seemed, in his absence, as if Samuel had crippled his ability to journey the world, and this he had sensed even upon his very first step out of doors. Such

was why he so forcefully urged himself to step more and more lively: he would never strengthen his atrophied limbs if he refused to use them. To reassert his being into the world was not a conceptual problem, but a physical one, to the dismay of his deteriorated ligaments. His mind's re-acquaintance with their movement was beleaguered, at best, toward their resolute persistence. For the moment hesitation made peculiar his gait.

The day was overcast, which caused the snow to stand out brightly and made the flashing blurs of colour in the form of passing cars and people, more pronounced as Samuel ventured forth from the outer frontier of the city's reach; ploddingly he extricated himself from the older and more modest version of the suburban habitat in which he had remained for a time seemingly made longer for the fact that it had been an uninterrupted interval. The greyness of the clouds' shadowed and overlapping forms set his spirits alight, to some degree allowing him to better coalesce with that which was then confronting him. And though he did not entertain the fanciful notion that such a backdrop as this was one which he was fated to find, upon the day of his return, he did appreciate that such a serendipitous occurrence of his most favoured weather contributed positively to his enthusiasm, which was otherwise questionable, or wavering. Samuel tried ever so earnestly to seize upon an optimistic take regarding his return, the cultivation of which was provided by the overwhelmingly raw materials his senses encountered, which he knew could prove just as fertile ground for the production of weeds, marring the field of his vision, as they could flowers, colouring the meadow of his thoughts, if he succumbed to even a momentary lapse in his hopeful vigilance.

Having reached Richmond Road, Samuel crossed its intersection with intention to

head east, toward downtown. An irritated driver leaned heavily on his car horn, and he unwittingly became one of the dimensions competing as much for the resources nurturing the disposition with which Samuel felt welcomed back as were the clouds and the pleasantly warm breeze and the overall delight which struck him when he regarded the world's open space. Elements of beauty were competing with certain. . . ugly, aspects, of the city around him. Aspects he was not able to ignore as he gathered evidence which would, in the final analysis, have him falling in or out of favour with the circumstance of being back out in this well-oiled machine of a city dug into the prairie plains with purpose and precision. Yes, it was a tricky experiment. A slippery slope. A tentative subject, owing to his sensitivity to external things which had become very much the opposite of dull in the months he had spent alone. Of course, it had been the unfortunately happenstance occurrence of a moment in which ugliness had won out which had initially driven Samuel into his room in the first place, like persistent signs of a plague to which he was particularly susceptible, insisting he be quarantined. Overall, the last two months had been cathartic as far as they had allowed a break from this certain. . . pollutant, which so often hid in plain sight, and at times even coloured the world like aerated chemicals from smoke stacks, which shifted the waves of the sun's rays to unnatural, and misleadingly tantalizing, hues of purple and pink. He had been allowed to regain his breath. Samuel felt fresh, rested, and strong. In his room, as he tried to parse his discontent by way of meditation upon that which he found most captivating—which was, to be sure, the experience of beauty as could be found even in the most unlikely of places—Samuel had begun to develop a certain. . . philosophy, of sorts. An

artist's philosophy, he might cede to calling it—provisionally, and if only to aid its acceptance—based on a notion of aesthetics he discovered seemed to ring clear through each word he wrote on the pages and pages he had tacked to his walls. He wanted to get to the bottom of the whats, whys, and hows laying behind such experience that only the beautiful things of this world could provide. So plentiful were these things, Samuel knew; and so tenacious. It was with these tentative ideas he entered the world, hoping he might be able to refine his intuitive notions and, with attempts made wary owing to his complete and utter lack of confidence in his voice and nerve, chisel this metaphysic it seemed he had been fated to develop, sooner or later.

Walking east down Richmond led Samuel to 26th Avenue, which took him downtown as he wished. He aspired to only one thing. . . one thing which he figured would be the ritualistic act most appropriate to welcome him back into the world: he wanted to sit in a cafe and drink a cup of coffee. And not just any coffee, but precisely an americano: full-bodied and smooth and, though served black, even a little creamy—qualities instilled in a mug served as only one coffee shop in town could serve it, and as he had grown to prefer it, if the choice were his. And the choice, on this day, *was* his, and though he had begun his day's trek on the outskirts of the city, far away removed from the particular shop he held in mind, it did not take much for him to rationalize that there was no need to compromise upon his return from a sort of self exile. Thus it was off to downtown Samuel marched. And it wasn't so bad, being out in the world. He was, however, feeling at least a little concerned for that inevitable moment upon which he

would have to come into contact with *people*. Sure, he was fine now, walking on the sidewalk by himself, and yet soon enough he would be caught up in the daily bustle which was so alarmingly fast-paced, and somehow always urgent. He had caught sight and sound of this bustle as it whizzed by him on Richmond Road, and he found himself grow heavy with a wariness he knew was inspired by the knowledge that soon enough he would be submerged within such currents, as when someone pushes an unsuspecting and thus ill-prepared fellow into a pool. Although. . . it was true that Samuel was marching forward toward the pool's edge of his own accord, and so for the moment he brushed his foreboding aside, opting instead to continue trying—forcibly—to admire all there was to take in, rallying his courage all the while for the inevitable plunge. As he meandered along he allowed his focus to dawdle upon anything that struck him favourably, even if only a little, in every attempt to find the situation. . . copacetic, to his sensibilities, and almost to the point of entrancing himself. Of course, this had the effect of removing his attention from the presence of the moment as he held on to certain aspects of the ever-changing scene and ignored others; however, one did not begin the sort of perceptual realignment he was undertaking in leaps and bounds, but baby steps, and one step at a time. He was stretching himself out with the moment, warming up to it, tentatively, and. . . oh, what the hell was wrong with him? Once again he was within his mind! He wasn't even giving the real world a chance to make its impression before he had started to fix an impression of his own upon *it*. Thus is what he seemed to be doing, anyway. This had the effect of making him undeniably out of sync with the motions of a reality he was trying his utmost to better appreciate, and right out of the gate. But in this respect he

couldn't help himself. Even before he had locked himself away he had found he saw the world through abstraction. He dealt with it in analysis. He was searching for the solution to an equation. Only then would he cease his rigour, and enjoy the fruit of his labour: the beauty of the moment, with all the depth and richness brought about by his understanding of it.

It was a two hour walk before Samuel found himself in front of the appropriate coffee shop, and it would be nice, he fancied, if inside they were preparing for him as much as he was trying to muster the courage to place himself before them, with their chalkboard menus and displays of cake and muffins and their self-composed smiles as they prepared to face the sort of relentless clientele only those whom have worked in customer service roles can entertain exist—they had no idea someone just outside their door was going through such pains to put on the face of the 'normal patron'. As it were, Samuel stood across from the shop on the opposite side of the street, eyeing the place wearily, his hesitation—for he was hesitating—due to him not being able to even fathom his entry. Downtown streets were full of people, walking alone, walking in couples, walking in groups that had left the office together and whom all wore a certain attire not explicitly demanded of them but nonetheless encouraged by a sort of unwritten criteria of uniform: peacoats and ties, yes. . . the team uniform of every office. Other people were walking dogs, the big ones sniffing at the crotches they passed that were level with their noses, often appearing to be walking their owners, and the little ones bouncing prettily on short legs, their tails wagging merrily. Samuel had found his vigilance needed to grow ever more as he attempted to dodge and duck around these people looking at stuff, at their

phones and at newspapers and at stoplights, and at him, for the last half hour, as he came closer and closer to the city centre. And all these people—animated with such surety behind their movement—did little to calm his sense of detachment. They were making all sorts of expressions, contorting their faces into fits of gaiety and laughter, or seriousness, or disgust, or surprise, all while their mouths flapped endlessly, to whomever they were with, or to someone tucked into their ear, and that person in turn either mirrored the expressions of the first, for encouragement or whatever, getting their eyes and noses right in front of the conversation, and their hands were in on it too, pointing and waving, precise or more fluid, as the person either was driving a point home or allowing their sentences to wander, respectively. It was a dance of life, certainly. An odd one. Or so it struck Samuel as he walked through it, his hands in his pockets, his chin down, his eyes wandering as he tried to take everything in without looking like the wallflower at the party, which is as he felt himself to be, really. It was a game he was witnessing, and he was a mere spectator standing on the sidelines. . . . He was a gawking tourist of a foreign reality, once again. And as he stood there, across the street, peering hesitantly at the doors he was gearing himself up to go through as if preparing to walk across hot coals, the people kept on coming, moving around him unceasingly like he were only one closed gate of a dam in a row of many which remained open, the water not at all deterred as it flowed around him and through these other portals. A lot of water, too. . . . a lot of people. And they all seemed to have business to attend to. A few even looked at him with something like anger as they made the necessary moves to slip by him, as if his standing there was just totally wrong for the occasion. And just what was the occasion, then? He

had been sitting and standing in one spot for so long the past two months he hadn't realized that around him the holiday season had fully descended upon the city streets. Christmas was approaching. He noticed then that lights and wreaths and all the rest of those traditional decorations were hanging from windows and streetlamps and doorways. . . But that wasn't what had everyone so agitated, surely? As far as he could recall, these people around him—and they all seemed to Samuel to be the same faces—were just as agitated on the day he had left them, still milling about on errands. He almost laughed out loud right then and there on the sidewalk by himself. . . like a crazy person. He had been so worried that the world had been passing him by as he sat alone in his room. It hadn't done just that—it had left him choking on dust. He was choking, and nobody had the time of day to help him. Or maybe a hand would emerge from the crowd and give him a good whack on the back, if only to get him to stand upright and continue moving, as he should be. Busy busy busy. Everyone around him seemed to fear spontaneous combustion they were sure would strike if they stopped for only a moment as if, in their motionlessness, they worried about transforming into a conductor for such malicious lightning sent from. . . oh, never mind then. *'You have been gone on vacation'*. . . so he could hear in his mind the accusatory comments of others if he ventured to express what he had been doing. But it hadn't been like that. . . he didn't think. *'So fortunate you are not to have any commitments'*. . . such another thing these others might add. And yet to look at him it certainly didn't appear as if Samuel had been gone on a pleasure cruise—well, so he figured, but he hadn't looked in a mirror recently. Indeed, now that he thought of it, he imagined he must look positively ragged. But, on the

other hand, *inside* he was feeling fresh! Fantastic even! Whatever might be the reason for his absence, and the reason for his inner exuberance—relative to the muddled motion of those aggravated faces around him. . . well, maybe he would just go ahead and try to make others see the positives to be found in a moment of silence, if they paused for a brief repose to inhale slowly and deeply. No, one needn't go away to a beach for a break! He himself had travelled millions of light years across cosmic magnificence directly from a southwest neighbourhood of this very city! And with that thought in mind, Samuel traipsed across the street with intention to inject a little freshness back into peoples' day, if he saw an opening for such an attempt. He might even share stories of the adventures he had had, away on vacation, if someone cared to listen as they sipped from their steaming mug.

As he walked through the coffee shop door, however, he immediately began second guessing his optimism. His intentions seemed to snuff out in an instant, as a candle might when a window opens and in sweeps a draft, changing the pressure in the room. Such a storm thus brewed was cultivated from two peculiar atmospheric systems meeting: that of his own head space, coupled with the motion of the cafe, which was disorienting to him in the utmost as it was completely alien to how he had been moving as of late. However, and unfortunately, there was no time for back-tracking: the line was moving efficiently forward, and behind him, though he had entered only a moment before, were more people, and he was just sort of swept up in the flow. He soon found himself in front of the counter and the server was staring at him expectantly, a smile on her face. He smiled, but to her it looked more of a grimace, and he muttered,

“Coffee, please.” His voice came out as a croak—practically inaudible even to himself, over the din of the shop. Every table was filled with talking and gesturing animation, the people he had been swarmed by outside had now found their way in here the same as he, never ceasing surrounding him, and people even stood *beside* the tables, for lack of chairs, though that did not hamper their caffeine-fuelled enthusiasm to be in on the conversation of their company. There certainly was not a silence to be found in this place. Just talking, talking, talking. They were all saying so much! They must have so much more things figured out than Samuel had. Was he just stupid or something? Why hadn't he caught on?

“What kind of coffee do you want?” the clerk asked him, her smile gone.

“Black.” he replied. He managed to look up from the counter, and when he did, he became entranced by the server's *eyes*. There wasn't even anything in particular about them that stood out, light brown and obsequious; it was just that he was hit right upside his head, right then—his head which hadn't had much external feedback for a notable interim—with the realization that he was staring at a *person*! A living creature, who formed thoughts and had feelings and memories and dreams and problems just as he had. Right then Samuel was thrown headfirst into an instance which put to the test the quandary he had been wrestling with during his walk: he didn't know whether to meet those eyes with horror, or swoon before their *beauty*.

“What size?” she asked. He couldn't tell if she was alarmed by his ineptitude, or if she was instead looking at him with something like humour.

“Large. Yes, definitely large.” he said to her, and as she nodded and quickly

turned around to pour his coffee he could see her shoulders heaving up and down. She was laughing? She was laughing! He smiled too: a small, crooked smile. And then he remembered, “Wait! Can I have an americano?”

When she set the coffee on the counter, he was dismayed to see that she had dripped it into a cardboard cup—he would have preferred to have had it in a mug: to stay and enjoy his coffee, and save the waste product. But then he figured it might be all for the best—he didn't know if he could stick around in the whirlpool much longer.

“That will be three-fifty.” she said.

“What? Oh, yea.” He had been under the impression, perhaps, that she would just give him that coffee and he would continue on his merry way. Samuel hurriedly scrounged around his coat's inner pocket and his hand emerged clutching his wallet. What he hadn't noticed up until just then were the people behind him who were casting annoyed glances in his direction; but when he had failed to anticipate the exchange of currency for his purchase they began to give sound to that annoyance, in the form of sighs and snorts and '*come on!*'s and hitting of things near at hand, like a leg or their forehead. When he realized this, that he was once again disrupting. . . the current, like a dam—and now here he was standing as the only gate, and closed—he was practically shaking as he withdrew his debit card and inserted it into the chip reader. The little machine asked him for a tip. He reflected on the trouble he must be causing, given the commotion that seemed to be stirring up around him, like the water was rising and frothing and spitting as it hammered on his back in effort to continue on its course, and he paid the bill as an even five. When the card reader chirped that the transaction had been

successful, he yanked his card out and shoved it into his pocket, not bothering even to put the plastic back in his wallet. Before he could grab his coffee, the next person in line was already placing an order and the server behind the counter was asking him questions, and both of their tones seemed to have a certain inflection about them, of unspoken kinship inspired by this unspoken knowing that this guy—Samuel—was in the wrong. That he was a fucking idiot, even. He hurried out of the store, feeling eyes turned upon his back, as he knew they were, and he started walking away, up the street, taking long and swift strides to carry him far away as fast as possible.

He wished to have a seat to calm his nerves. He cast his eyes about for a bench upon which, if he succeeded in relaxing, he could enjoy his troublesome beverage. There were no benches along the street he was on except the one at the bus stop nearby, and he didn't want to sit on it and once more cause disruption to the flow as a bus pulled in beside him and he . . . shrugged, expressing in so many words that he didn't want to go anywhere, and the driver rolled his eyes and slammed the door shut. No, he didn't stop walking until he was several blocks from the coffee shop, and several blocks from that street entire—which was one of the main thoroughfares for daytime traffic, pedestrian and motor alike. He found himself in the field by Loughheed House and there he was finally able to take a seat, though his mind seemed to continue on, reeling. He breathed in deeply, and out slowly, and it was some time before he felt calm enough even to take that first sip; he was feeling like it might not have been worth the effort. The coffee did taste good, however—just as smooth and rich as he had wished for it to be, and that was nice. The heat of the liquid calmed him down further, and the world was even starting to

reassemble before him into some order of sense, instead of the whirl of colours and noises it had become in the shop, like the dancing colours and shapes he saw when he closed his eyes. Except instead of the shapes colliding and spilling out to infinity, the world settled in around him in a very distinct and consistent pattern. He couldn't decide if that was more comforting, or less so. He took another sip of his coffee.

He didn't realize he was speaking out loud—muttering something about how he hadn't spilled even a drop of freshness into anybody's day. The muttering had now become a matter of habit, as he had feared it would. As he sat on the bench he heard shopping carts wheeling nearby—plural, for, with the rattling echoing off the tall buildings surrounding the field, if it were one cart it could have been a hundred. Rattling and rolling along the icy sidewalk, and he heard, also, the unmistakable. . . cackling, of the homeless.

That *cackle!* he remarked. Almost all of the homeless have that *cackle!*

If there were a reason for this fact, he couldn't quite put his finger on it. Surely there had to be one, given that they all seemed to have it—and wore it like a badge no less, as if it marked their distinction. Samuel thought that, perhaps, just maybe, it was born from an acknowledgement that society shunned them—those *bums*—and they were well aware of how the people whom had set themselves to participating in society looked down upon any so-called layabouts with displeasure—and an obvious displeasure, too. Thus the homeless grew more obstreperous. . . in defiance to such myopic condescension. They cackled away, while the *other kind*—those with fresh haircuts and shiny shoes—walked by. The *cackle* defined their separation from a certain world. . . the world that

insisted upon itself. This rancorous character that was the archetypical homeless person likely to be found on the city's streets—if but only one character were assumed, for the present—had grown from. . . little, ambiguous acts of protest, here and there—and not particularly out of bitterness, perhaps, but instead simply as a middle finger. Protests against that world which had torn them up and thrown them away, as necessary waste product of the machine (for no machine, of course, was one hundred percent efficient). Such persons who, for one reason or another, had been so far mangled they could no longer be. . . fixed and re-purposed. . . had no family to fall back on; no safety net, so often proven to be essential to those whom nevertheless take it for granted. Now, the *cackle* had become a sort of solid affirmation of their *own* culture: of the outsiders and drifters and the infirm, all of whom were proven unfit to be a cog within the order of things. No individual within this culture really thought about why, in the years they were homeless, they had adopted the cackle of defiant glee. Such things just sort of happen.

Well. . . it was one hypothesis.

Samuel stood from his bench earlier than he otherwise might, prompted by a notion he wanted to follow, and he found his way back to the sidewalk, falling into step behind the cacklers, of which there were two with only one cart between them, despite the echoes of its reverberating wire frame off the brick-walled downtown apartment buildings, sounding more like a chorus than a solo performance. But, one could suppose, their commotion was just one voice out of many in the symphony of the city's life. If one wanted to be so fanciful about such things.

It was the older of the two who pushed the cart, and this—his age—Samuel could

tell even from a distance. And from this distance of about half a block behind their progress, Samuel noted the older one's limp: his right leg was lame, and its protests, no doubt intensified by the chilled moisture suspended low upon the ground as the clouds overhead blotted out the sun irremediably, he overcame thanks in part to the support provided by the shopping cart. He stepped lively, relatively, with his left foot, and then, leaning the entirety of his weight upon the plastic crossbar, threw the whole of his body, from his shoulder to his hip, forward, so as to swing his dummy leg forward, landing upon it with the stolidity of an elephant's ponderous gait; and then a step with his left, which seemed a coiled spring in comparison, and he repeated the process, the pace of his activity made deliberate. The cart he was pushing was filled, of course, with cans and bottles, and there were garbage bags tied to its sides, no doubt containing more recyclables the duo had gathered. Maybe one bag in particular was designated for holding the old man's clothing and other belongings. The younger of the pair was carrying two garbage bags himself, their tops tied together and slung over his shoulder so that one hung off his back, and the other was in front of him. The glass bottles contained within were set to tinkling and clanging, and the aluminium and plastic crackled sharply with each foot he let fall, the frontward bag bouncing off his knee, the rear bag hitting his back, his pace adjusted to the old man's and his shoulders compressed, for the weight of the two bags was awkward as their contents shifted, and more cumbersome than one might think—something Samuel well knew, as he had often made trips to the downtown bottle depot from his apartment, when he had lived on sixth street, and his arms had been burdened under similar loads.

Samuel messed his hair up with a ruffling of his hands. It was prone to sitting flat and he wanted to look more rangy, for he had his mind set on a certain something that his look—as he assumed it to be in that moment—happened to be perfectly suited for. His hair, more than a little greasy from his lack of bathing, remained fixed when he arranged it to dart off in every direction, like his mind: frazzled, all in all. He trailed the two people whom had unwittingly become the subjects of his intrigue to the tenth avenue bottle depot. It was the depot with which he himself was familiar. He kept a distance, meandering behind their weary tread. For ten minutes they disappeared into the building, maybe fifteen, as a steady turn-around of people dropped off their empties, walking in and out the depot's sliding glass doors, unloading from the trunks of their vehicles the waste product from nights of debauchery, Samuel supposed, or sloth, perhaps: boxes of beer and pop cans and cheap wine bottles and mickeys of whiskey or rum, and an occasional two-six. Samuel was leaning against the wire fence across the street. When he saw the two that he was waiting on come out he noted that they were still walking bent over, as if they remained under the weight of those bags. The cart that the old man pushed had been relieved of those hanging off its sides, and now there was only one bag within its steel mesh basket. Samuel had a feeling he knew where the two were going next, and the confidence he held in his suspicion grew with each block they put passed their advance, still slow in their perambulation on their way to the liquor store. Samuel had closed the gap between his and their position and he was now walking only a few paces behind them as they took up passage along the narrow sidewalk. The trio crossed the intersection in turn and came upon the parking lot of the liquor store, which also gave

access to a nail salon, a Lebanese shawarma restaurant, and a convenience store. Samuel continued passed as the old man made himself comfortable on the curb and the other, with dirty blonde hair and a surprisingly boyish quality to his features, started counting out the change they had procured from the depot, the product of their day's efforts. Samuel went into the liquor store alone. He walked to the back cooler and grabbed a six pack. He had change enough stored in the breast pocket of his coat, which he saved whenever he was given it for bus fare, but he used his debit card for the purchase, standing at the counter and not really looking into the eyes of the liquor store clerk, whom he recognized, for he used to come to that particular liquor store often enough when he had lived downtown. The clerk, who had tattoos of crop circles arranged along his forearms, didn't seem to recognize Samuel, though they had often held extended conversations about the comings and goings of downtown's regulars, which was distilled in the clientele of the liquor store, whom Samuel was particularly interested in hearing about, for the stories this clerk had were of particularly colourful and unique characters. This lack of recognition, Samuel hoped, was due to the fact that he had slowly been adjusting his general manner, as well as the way he carried himself, to mimic the motions of the two he had been walking behind and observing for the past thirty minutes. This, in addition to his plain second-hand garments and generally unkempt aspect, made it certain he seemed an altogether different person from who he was even earlier that morning, when he had first begun his day's trek.

Outside, the two had begun quibbling about something, and the one standing, the younger, seemed to have his attention fixed very much upon the change still held in his

hands. Samuel walked over to them, unassuming in his intention, and he just kind of sat down next to the old man, and the two both turned their dirty, bearded faces toward him. Samuel saw that the old man had a scar set deep in the right side of his face, the same side as his gimp foot—which he held straight before him—running from his ear to the bottom of his chin. It would have appeared almost parallel to his jaw, but the line of his jaw was blurred and indistinct under the jowls grown from old age, though the set he sported were tighter—drier, maybe—than those found in the elderly whom were comfortably retired, in contrast; perhaps due to his continued activity coupled with a dearth of proper and regular nutrition. The old man's eyes were tired, foggy, and he had no wrinkles on his face except two deep creases running from his large nostrils and beset around his mouth, which seemed to be permanently angled downward. There were purple bags underneath those foggy eyes that looked to have been there for decades. The younger, blonde one, was now standing over Samuel, his form a silhouette against the clouds that marked the grey wetness of the day. Despite having much dirt caked on his face like it had made its way underneath his skin, there were still very many freckles able to be seen speckling the area just under and around his eyes, which remained something of an enigma to behold in reference to his overall manner: sceptical, and yet his open gestures were genial and trusting. The two regarded Samuel not with suspicion, but simply with looks demanding an explanation for his intrusion into their argument, the sphere of their interlude interrupted. Samuel broke off three cans from the plastic rings holding the pack together and put one in front of the old man, and held another out to the blonde one, who snatched at it wordlessly as the old man stood up with resolute strength,

and Samuel stood as well, and they walked around the corner, around the convenience store, where they proceeded to make themselves comfortable on benches set along the sidewalk there, for the moment empty. The old man was quick to sit down. His cart he positioned behind him, and he gingerly swung his right leg stiffly in front of him. The younger man remained standing even as Samuel sat down a little removed from the old man. He sat on the opposite end of the bench, not wanting to breach the old man's space. The three cans were cracked open in unison and, inconspicuously under the crooks of their arms, and almost as one, they swigged back the cheap lager. The knuckles of Samuel's hands were made white from the cold of the air and the cold of the can.

“Hey thanks buddy.” the younger one said, finally breaking the silence.

“No problem.” Samuel said, his tone non-committal. Feeling he had to give reason for his action, he made up a story about how he had come across three garbage bags filled with empties in an apartment dumpster earlier that morning and he wanted to spread the good fortune. The blonde one nodded. It was a story that sort of was his own, anyway, except his role had changed: a few months ago he had thrown out three bags of bottles in his apartment complex's dumpster and he watched as, not long after, a girl and a guy rummaging through the trash had found them. He could tell even from a distance that their demeanour had relaxed as they took seat upon the curb of the apartment's parking lot under the spring sun, their day's efforts ended early.

“I've never had that happen.” the blonde one said.

“Me either.” said the old man.

“Me either.” said Samuel. “It's my lucky day.”

“Hah! Lucky!” said the blonde one, indicating the can he was holding, his back to the street. They quickly drank their first can, and polished off the second as fast. Samuel pitched some more change from out his pocket and the younger one went into the store and soon came back with a new sixer. They were both older than Samuel, though the younger one's precise age was made indeterminate from the ageless weariness imprinted upon his slackened features. They started talking about where they'd been, and how Calgary's winter has been so cold so far this year, and how, though Calgarians have so much money, they don't tip so much. Samuel participated in the conversation in such a way that steered questions back to his company so that his story, in their eyes, grew only with an occasional nod, or murmur of agreement; though he did say how he hadn't been around people much recently, and how he had just sort of stopped working a while ago because he couldn't stand it any longer, which were both true facts on the face of it. And he certainly could relate to their bitter judgement of the cold, as he had himself fully experienced it without relief. The beer started working and aided Samuel in his progressive adoption of that sort of gravelly undercurrent in the voices of both the old man and the other, and by the time the lunch hour arrived and the streets became a little more busy with pedestrian traffic, as he and they began cracking jokes wickedly at the expense of those walking by, he had even started up the cackle which had first alerted him to their presence over by Lougheed. He was trying it on, seeing how it felt coming out from his throat, closing the rear of his mouth to produce that raspy garble. As the beer flowed, the blonde one was growing quite boisterous in his appreciation of Samuel's wit, inspired as it was as he observed the 'workadays' walking by, his discernment carrying as

much bite as the early afternoon cold upon their exposed skin. The old man had grown silent, his eyes closed, and Samuel wouldn't have been able to tell if he was sleeping or not if not for the fact that he continued to raise the beer can to his lips every so often.

A particularly frigid wind had picked up, and it soon caused Samuel and the blonde one to fall silent, and only then did the younger of the two make himself comfortable on the second bench, sitting on the other side of Samuel so that Samuel was sitting between him and the old man. In that silence Samuel felt that the younger one, far from being as shallow as his words and gestures and the cadence of his language—broken mid sentence with easy gulps of tinny beer—might have one think on the face of it, was weighing every one of Samuel's words carefully, and weighing his own. . . as if he had become unsure as to why Samuel so quickly deflected the queries he floated which were of a more personal nature. Samuel deflected because he didn't want to lie outright, as much as he could avoid it. He was holding himself back. And yet, the blonde one had observed, Samuel had been open with his money. The loose ends of Samuel's character were picked up, even if to an observer he had adopted such a way so as to mesh with his company. Samuel had wanted to appear as if homeless, but he was missing some element. . . He was taking in their stories—all they had—but he was not giving back, and it had made the blonde one weary. Samuel found he had nothing to give them beyond the beer, and a few jokes. . . or maybe there *was* something else, but he was questioning whether they would even appreciate it. He soon made his exit from their presence, humbled, or something of the like: he was left pensive, ruminating over different. . . realms of experience, and expectation.

Sartre says that a person assumes roles as they pass through their lives. Roles based on context. At work one is the employee, and at home one is the husband and father, and so it goes if one is to avoid falling into a vortex of nothingness when concerned with one's relation to the world. In contrast, Henry Miller says that we become our characters.

Samuel held out hope that the latter was true, and that the former was. . . contingent. So it was, as he emerged out of doors, that he was struck with the fact that he still didn't have any concept of his own identity. No role. And that meant he was of no *use* to anybody. He was like a tree in vacuum—and how is a tree to be regarded without oxygen and soil and sunlight to define it so?

As it so happened, Christmas Eve was eight days away. The holiday spirit was in the air. A mixture of stress and merry decoration. Trees and building canopies and windows were speckled with white lights, white and blue lights, green lights, green, red, and purple lights, all like little stars hanging over the city streets. The weather of the second morning Samuel was to be found outside was once again unseasonably and pleasantly mild as it had been only just last week. The sun was hiding behind thin but tightly arranged wisps

of cloud, but its warmth was cast down successfully nonetheless. Overall, winter was having a lot to say this year, and every morning there was a fresh dusting, and many mornings considerably more than that. At night the streets were infused with the light of street lamps, creating a warm orange cold ember glow that radiated from the ground up to and including the sky. The ice world was on fire. But that was just the backdrop.

Everywhere Samuel went, what he really saw were eyes. Tired eyes, excited eyes, sceptical eyes, stand-offish eyes. Windows to souls he was walking by on those wintry streets. He was looking to see how many were staring at him, and how many were simply taking him in, and accepting him. He found that the vast majority of people were *staring* at him, when happening to look at him at all, asking him what the hell he wanted? He didn't want anything. And as he passed these people of variously colourful dispositions, he hoped to pass unnoticed, for it was his wish to move through the city guided by the whims of his heart and the current of urban flow without ever losing his claim to anonymity which he had seized upon and held tight to in the months he remained isolated in his room.

“I am like a jazz musician: soloing when the mood hits me, taking a backseat when others feel the need to do the same, letting the harmony created in that moment define the night.” So he fancied himself—so he declared aloud as he glided along the sidewalk, for he had once and for all taken to muttering. It sort of comforted him, in a way; likelier still, it had just developed naturally during the extended time he had spent alone. And despite his desire for anonymity, Samuel had already come across faces of people he had left behind during his two month. . . sabbatical, from life, and he knew that

if he recognized *them*, then they surely could point his own countenance out as a familiar mark upon the city's mosaic. No matter how large or dense a city was it was a fact that sooner or later the same people would pass each other by in the same places, roughly—and it was sooner, for Samuel, for Calgary is not so large. Such encounters were simply a statistical matter, when city planning inevitably created loading points in the infrastructure where everyone comes to pass more often: train stations, central parks, entertainment avenues, popular restaurants, and so on. If he had the means, Samuel figured he would clear out of even the most captivating of urban delights when such a thing as that started happening—it would be on to the next one. The next city, that is. Such was the only way one's presence could remain so ephemeral, like the smoke he watched spiral out from the tops of downtown office buildings: thick upon first exiting the exhaust pipes dispensing the run off of the city's energy, but quick to dissipate into non-existence nonetheless, or at least into an existence which was not visible to the naked eye. And it was indeed this natural urban flow, the characteristic channelling of peripatetic traffic—within the downtown district particularly—that had Samuel bumping into an old friend on the stairs he was taking to descend into a pizza place on the ground floor of the downtown mall. A friend with whom he had shared much of his teenage youth. Looking into Robert's features stretched into an expression of surprise, the first thing out of his friend's mouth was,

“Samuel! You look like shit.” To which Samuel had no response, for he really was not aware of his current physical state and thus could not affirm if his friend was being honest—he could neither object indignantly nor shrug his agreement. He said hello.

“I don't mean to be so upfront, but this is catching me as a sort of shock.” Robert continued. Samuel shrugged; he felt disoriented from being addressed so directly and with such familiarity. . . He felt dissociated from the exchange, for he didn't know how to act, to be as Robert knew him to be—so far removed was he from his past self, it seemed. The thread of conversation was to be weaved by Robert's hand, if any weaving was to be done, and Robert, being Robert, took up the slack: “It must be six months at least since I saw you last! Have you been trapped on an island for as long? You look as if you've aged a decade. But never mind that: you see, I'm on my way back to work—”

“That's what I figured. Don't let me keep you.” Samuel said.

“Yes, well, the thing is, why don't you come out for dinner tonight? So we can catch up?” Robert asked. The expression upon those prominent and bold features had a way of being optimistically hopeful, while also preemptively doubtful—but doubtful in the sense that Robert was expecting others to not live up to his expectations, and hopeful in the sense of encouraging others to do so. It was just as Samuel remembered it, and this characteristic of his friend's, which was so reliable no matter how much time passed, caused Samuel to smile, even. He felt a flood of appreciation for the geniality of his friend's disposition right in that moment, though his mouth couldn't quite work well enough to communicate this. It wasn't practised any longer in such things. He wouldn't mind at all a night spent with someone, and it would be much preferable if that someone was one to whom Samuel didn't have to excuse his behaviour, if it left something to be desired—which he suspected it might.

“Even though I look like shit?” he asked.

“Well I expect you to clean up before you meet us.” Robert said. The suggestion, spoken as a demand, was typical for him who always wore a collared shirt and jacket, at the very least—Robert had once admitted to Samuel that he was particularly fond of how people treated him in such attire.

“Us?” Samuel asked. He didn't think he could last long in a crowd. Not *right then*, having only just rejoined the bustle of things. What would he talk about? What if someone asked him what he was doing with himself, and, due to his inability to simply satisfy such an enquiry, all eyes around the table belonging in the heads of people whom were engaged otherwise in idle chitchat turned to him as the questioner reacted, perhaps, with open gestures of incredulity?

“Yes, *us*. Jocelyn will be coming. We were already planning to have dinner tonight. And you should bring Ana, of course.”

“Ana and I broke up.”

“Oh,” Robert said, nodding without missing a beat. “Well that explains the unwashed clothes and beard, then.”

“Probably.” Samuel said. The two were still standing on the staircase of the restaurant's entrance; Samuel had been descending, and Robert was climbing the steps to leave, and Robert climbed a few more, arriving on Samuel's own, and then he continued up passed it, assuaging this change of eye alignment by keeping his face trained on Samuel, so that he was ascending backwards, and he stopped this action two steps above Samuel to say, from his heightened vantage,

“Well, come out with us, it will be good for you. Around eight o'clock? The usual

spot, of course. Anyways, I've got to get going back to work. See you at eight.” He was out the door before Samuel had a chance to agree or decline the offer, the fabric and silhouette of his suit impressed upon Samuel's mind. But he *was* going; this he had already decided. He finished his delayed descent into the warm glow of the restaurant's cozy warm orange lamp light. The scent was of pizza, and his vision glittered as wine glass liquids caught the soft mood of the atmosphere, speckling the back drop of dark wood table tops and beige upholstered booth cushions with tints of burgundy and shades of pear; and there was a steady chatter of all types of midday interludes, of pleasure and business alike.

Thankfully no hostess was standing upon the staircase landing to greet him from behind the maitre d' podium, for all he wanted then was to dive into the washroom and truly assess what he had grown to look like and the bathroom, he knew, was to be found under the staircase; reached by moving back from the tables, to a tucked away corner of the restaurant. He did indeed successfully dive across the short distance to his goal, ducking behind the door with no one the wiser, which he soon realized was all for the better, upon gazing at his reflection. He appeared exactly as anyone would if they too had been where he had for as long as he had: his thin beard was long, scraggly and untrimmed; his hair had reached his eyes, and when he ran his fingers through it it felt as if it hadn't been washed in two months—which it hadn't, of course, for in his break from the physical world he had neglected his physical form as well; his clothing was bland, a brown coat and throwaway pants suitable for the weather, but not much for presenting. Samuel did not need to stare at the image long, and he quickly exited the bathroom and

retraced his steps, removing himself entirely from the restaurant with which he was not at all aligned.

Finding himself in the mall, Samuel knew he was exactly where he needed to be, for he had another plan which had occurred to him as he looked upon his mirror image. . . an experiment, rather, which would require him to clean up a bit. It was peculiar: even when he didn't need to get anything, Samuel usually enjoyed the mall—unabashed consumer wonderland though it was. People, mostly alone during the day, passing each other busily in the corridors between shops, seemed more relaxed there: like no place else, in the mall they could completely transform themselves, if they so chose, using only their array of brightly coloured plastic cards to be found in their purse or wallet. In the mall Samuel felt himself to be a mannequin among mannequins: there were no people here. And to be a mannequin is bliss, for mannequins have no concerns beyond finding a place to represent, and the mall was chock-full of ready made images presented to even the most confused soul, as Samuel undoubtedly was. He felt comfortable with his lack of identity in the limbo vortex found in between stores as he did no where else; when others looked upon him in his undefined state and within the mall's polished, gleaming walls, they simply apprehended him as something not yet to be, and not far from being, as he could so easily walk in to one of the many stores and in fifteen minutes walk out a completely new person. In the mall his current state was not alarming to others, as it might be out in the real world's chaos. In the mall, everything had a nice, pleasant, comforting sheen. Nothing bad happens in a mall. Here, one can be pampered. Here, someone will be quick to confirm that it's alright to be uncertain in life. As long as one

buys something, uncertainty may be forgiven.

Samuel needed to buy something. He needed to get cleaned up. It was no wonder people had been *staring* at him the past two days he had been roaming the streets. The evening's dinner was to be at a pub on the cusp of downtown, and, not wanting to take transit to the outer south west of the city to his room, only to return within an hour or two, the only option open to Samuel was to stop in at the barber's on the top floor of the mall to begin his transformation. The top level—the fourth level—mostly devoted to the food court, was also home to the Devonian gardens, a sort of landmark amongst many downtown attractions; Samuel often whiled away afternoon hours among the ever-blooming flowers and tropic trees, in the greenhouse humidity made especially pleasant during winter months. Going to the barbershop was not exactly something Samuel wanted to do, of course, for he had all the equipment necessary for a buzz cut and shave at his house, and his hesitation was further born out of the fact that he kind of liked the disorderliness of his unkempt visage: it was a perfect reflection of how he was feeling: disgruntled and uncaring of the world's demands. His outfit was bland, like oatmeal. Devoid of personality. But, if he wanted to blend in as an anonymous ghost—and blend in for the evening's event besides—he was going about it the wrong way, for, relative to the sleek presentation Calgarians adopt, he stood out unfavourably in the crowd which could easily be pointed to as the perfect fractal image of the overall North American ideal. And Robert, in turn, as a sort of zealous supporter of this ideal, would require Samuel to have his persona a little more well to do. That had been the sentiment behind Robert's casual comment upon Samuel's dress.

Twenty-three minutes and fifteen dollars later, Samuel left the barber shop feeling as fresh as if he had walked through a car wash. His skin gleamed like he had a coat of finish on his cheeks. His head felt stubbly—the barber had taken his hair right down with a number one cut, and now he was one in a million.

As he strode away from the barber's, his eyes were drawn to a man sitting alone whom had a newspaper in front of him open upon one of the white plastic food court tables. He was doodling absently upon the pages with a black felt pen. As Samuel approached, out of the corner of his eye he saw the obscene figures the man was scrawling and the man, clad in a red leather jacket over top a flowered, cream coloured shirt, with eyes hidden behind sunglasses with a rose tint, looked up from what he was doing and eyed Samuel up and down.

“Nice haircut. Like a monkey ready to be shot into space.”

This he said quietly under his breath as Samuel passed along the polished crosswalk bridging the two sides of the mall above the third floor. Samuel, once the words penetrated his thoughts and their familiarity assimilated, was forced to pause. He turned around to apprehend the stranger again, but he found that the man had vanished. Looking around, he saw the back of the red leather jacket moving with a leisurely pace toward the opposite end of the mall: toward where the gardens were. Samuel looked after the man until his figure was lost amongst the crowd.

Samuel felt ready to quit the glitz of the mall, and he took the elevator down to the ground floor and quickly hit the outside pavement once again, out on the cobblestone sidewalk of 8th avenue. He started walking in the direction of an outlet store he knew

was near. It was there he was hoping to find an outfit more presentable. Nothing within his budget would have him out-dress Robert, of course, but he soon stepped out of the department store looking like a well composed citizen, clad in dark pants and a collared shirt. He had even managed to find a sports jacket that fit reasonably well. He carried the bundle of his old clothing under his arm, prepared to deposit it in the Salvation Army drop box he knew he would pass as he made his way to Eau Claire market, near the river and—though more than a few hours early—the general area of that pub tucked away to which Robert referred when he said, 'the usual spot, of course.'

As he walked the blocks between him and his destination he began to carry himself like he was in sync with the people whom ordinarily gave him such reason to pause to reflect upon how flummoxed he was to account for the surety of their stride: the other people milling about in suits and ties and designer sunglasses, similar to his own current fashion. As he allowed himself to be swept up in their currents of evident purpose, between the towering office buildings, he felt a sort of unreality descend upon him. Outwardly, he and they were one in the same. With a little practice, how far could he fool them? Who was fooling who out here? Who had the last laugh? Who had the most genuine laugh, in the end? Yesterday he had been a homeless person. Today his shoes were new, and shining. Little did they know that he had something of an outlaw inside him; that he was prepared by any means to jam the flow, if the opportunity arose, and stymie their motion captured as if water in the production of hydraulic energy. But, then, they could just as easily be thinking the same. Who were these people so palatable to the average person's sensibilities? Were *they* the true chameleons? What drew them to this. . .

maybe they were the epitome of the undefined state? Maybe Samuel, in contrast—in his old worn bland clothing—had been proclaiming his state quite loudly and openly, for all the world to note if they cared to cast a glance in his direction. Maybe instead, he should go about it. . . maybe the undefined state was best represented in perfect conformity with the majority. . . but that's not right: their definition is just one of acquiescence.

He was soon passing the Grand Sheraton hotel. . . he had stayed at one of those hotels before. In Banff—a couple winters ago. It had struck him, then, as a terrifying embassy capitalizing on that primitive yearning in man to find a place of warm refuge from desolate and lonely darkness. Their appeal was made almost into a science, hypnotizing in its design: a perfect fire, roaring within a cushioned cave, which even the most lost wanderer could feel welcomed to enjoy, safely taken in from the storm. But the cave is not a cave: it is an opulent hall of gold and silk and sweet smells and pleasant music and clerks with smiling, knowing faces, ready to satisfy any and every creature comfort one might desire. . . for a price. Its many-windowed, almost imperial design held sway over the Eau Claire market square, which was not so much a winter but a summertime area of recreation: the water park was of course shut down under ice, and the concrete promenade, easing the transition from downtown streets to the open fields of Prince's Island Park, was now empty except for the occasional, meandering fellow. Samuel was overcome with the sense of unreality that had begun descending upon him not more than a few blocks back. . .

He passes the hotel and walks across a bridge, over a pond, which leads him into a vast field of untouched snow—or mostly untouched: there is one pathway which has seen

the sweep of a snowplow. And as he walks along this pathway the sky closes up above him in a blanket of white winter cloud, and below him is white, and around too, as he traverses yet another bridge, this one over a simple ditch, which simply *had* to be overcome, the bridge inverting the task before a walker such as Samuel, or perhaps just giving him a choice, for he could choose to negate the intention of the bridge, on his way, and walk down into the ditch, and then back up, instead of up the bridge, and back down (for the bridge was a shallow arc). It was only a ditch, to be sure—a bridge was hardly necessary to save his troubles; not like, say, a powerful river necessitating an alternative means to overcome the otherwise irksome bother of wading across it every time one wanted to reach the other side. In the end, he went over the bridge—there was no one around to make a statement for, for he had already reached the conclusion in his mind without having to prove it to himself; alas, this must be in part his curse, as a man who wanted to make a living with his ideas. At the bottom of the ditch, as he crossed the bridge, were three children taking turns sledding down the reasonably steep slope, all zipped up to the chin in bundles of layers, with mitts and toques and boots on so that the only bit of their bodies exposed was that small slit across their eyes. They were yelling and laughing in tinkling good cheer. Nearby, a mom, to one or two or all three children—there was nothing betraying relation, covered up as their features were—urged them to take turns with the sled in a proper and polite fashion, for there was only one sled shared between the three youngsters, and all three wanted to sled down that hill indefinitely, or infinitely, as the case may be; this she did as Samuel passed them. The mom looked at Samuel, as he couldn't help but survey the scene and thus her in turn, for she was a part of

it, and she looked at him with a little glimmer in her eye which seemed to say, '*kids*'. . . and that was the end of her sentiment on the subject. Samuel wasn't sure he understood her meaning, exactly: he wasn't trying to be difficult—and by now he was already well passed the bridge, anyhow—but he couldn't decide if from her glance he should be inclined to think that kids are so excitable that they simply cannot be bothered to share? Or, perhaps, the look was intended to communicate the fact that she herself was yearning to find herself so passionately engaged by the commonplace qualities of a ditch? For, that embankment back there, behind Samuel, was not particularly noteworthy, minus the fact that someone had taken the trouble to construct a bridge over it, and thus adults such as and such as she just seem to have lost touch with that which had been inside them, in years gone by, that would otherwise have them as excited about something so simple as a ditch, as the kids now were. Ah, maybe he had misread her glance entirely, right off the bat. But then why had she seemed so confident in her expression, it being worth her trouble to reach out to him so subtly, with no inner scepticism, on her behalf, ensuring her that the gesture was a futile one? At least when made toward *him*. She should have known better. But, then, how could she? He looked the part of a self-respecting, participating citizen, now. After all.

Samuel found his way to his favourite bench in one piece, no thanks to the shovelled, or ploughed, path—though, to be fair, it had taken him some of the distance—for his bench was removed from the common walkway and accessible only by forging one's own tracks through the deep December snow. He noticed no other footprints. Apparently the bench he sought was not worth the trouble, by anyone else' standards.

Indeed, he didn't know why it was worth his own, beyond the simple fact that his choosing that bench had just become something he did when he found himself in Prince's Island—it was a good enough bench and hadn't let him down yet, basically, is what it came down to. And so he sat on it once more. It did provide a nice view of the park, which was the foreground to the looming downtown architecture belaying both an intriguing and stultifying reality, in the sense that Samuel enjoyed the idea of getting lost in a bustling urban centre while also not really finding the *cause* for its grandiosity very aesthetic. It was, and is, a blight on the Earth as seen from above, whence from below it appears impressive. When, really, the skyscrapers were made by the same kids whom had the impulse to stack coloured blocks one on top of the other, finding ways to make their multicoloured tower go higher and higher without tumbling. Why not then continue that intrigue into one's adulthood? Or, put another way, why deny such impulses? There was no sound answer to that, surely. . . Thus the hue of unreality continued to descend over his meandering thought. . . Not even the wind, causing his coat's zipper to flap slightly, was entertained strictly for what it was. For what was it, then? A movement of particles upon particles creating an endless cascade of atomic dominoes, some of which ran up against the barrier of his form, and as a result he felt the feather-light breath of their collision, and witnessed it upon his coat. Such a marvel! Was it better to seek out an understanding of the wind? or simply enjoy it as a feature of the cosmic play? People certainly busied themselves with understanding it. They even made careers out of it! Meteorologists, they're called. 'Hey Ms. Meteorologist, what's up with the weather today?' 'Oh, well, why don't I tell you!' 'Okay, shoot!' 'Well how about you tune into your

local weather network on TV (so that we can get the ratings, you see). This interest of mine doesn't come free, you must know! There's an infrastructure in place that allows me to treat my natural whims!' "Why is that Ms. Meteorologist?' 'Well, because if there wasn't, who would give me the money I need to pay back the interest I've accrued to know what I'm talking about?' 'Why didn't you just learn that stuff on your own?' 'Well I didn't want to reinvent the wheel, as they say.' 'How do you know now that you know what you should know?' 'Because they told me I do! And they seemed pretty official. . . I had to give them money and everything!' 'Oh, of course!'. End scene. People should read Plato's Crito, if nothing else. Should they? Ah! Trickster!

Behind Samuel, usually, on that bench, he could listen to the river flowing. He couldn't hear it just then, for the water must be frozen by now. Bundled up as he was, or wearing at least two more layers than he was used to beyond the single long sleeved shirt—layers which were made of thicker and warmer material too, so that he was facing the elements of nature adequately—he allowed the day to pass before him as it was gently whispering incoherently all its glorious little secrets, right into his ear. He sat back and enjoyed the sound of it. And as the hour approached that of his dinner, he picked himself up off the bench and trudged through the snow, through the path he had made earlier. . .

. . .

The pub was actually not so busy, which was not exactly as Samuel had expected to find it at such an hour. It was a popular little hole in the wall, with good performances given of all the variations of bar food one would expect from such a place. Most importantly, to Samuel, it had a good selection of beer. Wood marked the decorative

theme, of a lighter pine perhaps, though Samuel wasn't an expert, and there was a distinct lack of flat screen TVs, otherwise found in similar establishments bathing the patrons and tables with artificial pigments. Instead the lighting was softly unobtrusive. He found Robert sitting at a table in the back of the pub; way in the back, tucked around a few corners, in a section which had walls of stone instead of wood. As Samuel guessed, Robert had on an outfit as if he were planning to walk down a red carpet after dinner, or maybe catch the tail end of a late night opera. His tie was worn as casually as one could wear a tie, but otherwise his suit, like his persona, was crisp, and tailored. Robert met Samuel's own changed appearance with an approving eye. Samuel took his seat in the booth, across from Robert.

"Where's Jocelyn?" he asked. The table was directly beside a gas fireplace, and he enjoyed the setting immensely, and told Robert as much.

"Washing up for dinner." Robert said. They didn't have to wait long before she rejoined them.

"Samuel!" she said, almost gushing with enthusiasm. "How *are* you?" She had her arms held wide, expecting a hug. Samuel anticipated this, and he rose to meet her embrace. She hugged him especially tight. She was dressed no less decadent than Robert, wearing a purple dress that flowed down just below her knees—a dress, despite the temperature outside; and a white faux fur coat draped over the booth behind her. Clothing she chose to wear at Robert's behest, Samuel knew.

"Fine enough. I assume Robert told you about mine and Ana's break up." Samuel said. It was concern he saw behind her gaze, and voicing this little incident like *that*—

admitting its reality to a third party—had the declaration feeling strange passing his lips.

“Yes he did. What happened? You two were so good together!” Jocelyn said. On the stiff contours of the pub's wooden booth, she had made herself nonetheless comfortable. Or at least so she appeared, her posture gracefully poised.

“A whole lot of nonsense that probably needn't have occurred at all.” Samuel said. The subject had not only an unfamiliar taste in his mouth: it was positively rancid. He had no desire to say another word. Jocelyn understood well enough.

“Well it's good to see you.” she said, the enthusiasm she had shown in her greeting noticeably tempered.

“And with a shave!” Robert interjected. “You look light years better than this morning.”

“I hadn't looked in the mirror for a while.” Samuel said, and, wishing to lighten the mood, he adopted a more engaged animation. “I appreciate your looking out earlier!” he said to Robert, and his friend's expression broke into an encouraging smile. Robert had most likely informed Jocelyn that he didn't quite know where Samuel's head was at, given his appearance, and they both were looking at Samuel as if weighing his every gesture. He hated that.

“Well that's what friends are for!” Robert said.

“Keeping each other looking presentable?” Samuel asked. He couldn't keep his eyes from betraying his scepticism.

“Precisely.” Robert affirmed without hesitation. Samuel wanted to ask, 'for whom?', but he had not forgotten tact in his absence, and bit his tongue. Besides, he was

himself trying to adopt a certain persona. . . There was a fall in the rapport that was in desperate need of being established, for the rest of the evening to go well enough, but for several minutes the direction of the night continued to be left undetermined. Jocelyn swept her long brown curls back behind her shoulder and set her eyes on Samuel. Instead of the feeling of ambiguity he had been struck with upon looking into the eyes of the coffee shop clerk, Samuel found he was not bowled over by the attention Jocelyn gave to him then. Or, at least, not for the same reason. With the coffee attendant—a stranger—he had no unspoken connection, and with Robert and Jocelyn, in contrast, he felt comfortable at last—amongst people, that is. Jocelyn seemed about to say something, her lips parted, when their server appeared—a young girl with a black collared shirt, as per uniform, and her blonde hair tied back. She smiled routinely and asked them what drinks they would like to start with.

“First, of course—” Robert looked at Samuel and then Jocelyn, “would you like a shot, hun?” he asked her.

“Are we getting drunk this evening?” she asked, a little surprised.

“No, it's—”

“Tradition. When we come here.” Samuel finished. Robert nodded.

“No, I'm fine.” Jocelyn said. Robert nodded again, and he turned back to the server.

“It'll be two shots of Jim Beam, then.” he said. In addition, Samuel ordered a dark seasonal ale, Robert a generic lager, and Jocelyn a glass of white wine, and the server whisked away.

“I suppose we better have a look at the menu.” Robert said.

“I already know what I want. Unless they've changed things since last we were here.” Samuel said. It had been quite a few months, after all.

“Nachos to start, and then the veggie burger?” Robert asked.

“And then the veggie burger.” Samuel agreed.

“Do I know my boy or what!” Robert said, smiling broadly, looking from Jocelyn to Samuel, then back to Jocelyn, who smiled, and thus Robert did not falter.

When the food arrived, beside their respective drinks, Samuel tried only a small bite here and there; this was his first foray back into regular cuisine since his granola stint, and the nachos, covered in peppers and salsa and olives, might as well have been granola, to Samuel, for they were flavourless. Diluted by his broken heart, no doubt, as corny as that sentiment was. Robert and Jocelyn, their hearts full and strong, seemed to think quite the contrary as they helped themselves, and now that they were provided with something to do with their hands the air around the table seemed to open a little. The silence descending between the burgeoning but still stilted conversation was no longer motionless as they were able to turn their attention toward the colourful spread.

“It's nice, sharing bread with people.” Samuel said suddenly. He wished he could take that proclamation back the moment the words left his mouth. Both Robert's and Jocelyn's hands paused on the way to their mouths, and they looked at him with sidelong glances. His company took the comment in stride.

“But it's not bread we're sharing; it's corn chips.” Jocelyn said, attempting to extricate one that was particularly laden with toppings. “And a lotta cheese.” she added.

She lightly plucked free the cheese strand that was drawn from the platter to her mouth; her finger, moving in small circles, wound its way to meet the chip, the stringy cheddar wrapping around her finger. Robert and Samuel were both watching her, as if anticipating what she might do, and they found her now left stuck with both hands to her mouth, one holding the chip, the other with her finger unable to be freed from the toppings without pulling them off. She looked to Samuel and Robert as if hoping their attention was turned elsewhere. It wasn't. She had no other choice but to follow through with her plan of attack: she put the laden chip in her mouth, then her finger, and with her teeth she gently pulled off the wound up cheese. She quickly wiped her hands on the towel beside her plate, and chewed slowly, delicately.

“Very gracefully done.” Samuel observed. Robert laughed.

“And delicious too.” Jocelyn replied.

“Well worth the trouble?” Robert asked.

“Oh, it was no trouble.”

“Food with so many things to worry about is the most fun to eat, I think.” Samuel said. Jocelyn nodded, and then Robert nodded.

“Then why aren't you eating?” Robert asked, as he helped himself to more nachos.

“I don't like it.” Samuel admitted. They gave him another funny look. “Or, I'm just not used to it.”

“Well what have you been eating?” Robert asked.

“Granola. For a long time.”

“No wonder you look so thin. You look half starved.” Jocelyn said. This

observation caused more than a little indignation to rise in Samuel's throat. Such a reaction he hadn't expected from himself.

“You should have seen him earlier. What a mess! I could have sworn he had been shipwrecked on an island for years!” Robert added.

“What *have* you been doing?” Jocelyn asked, her interest piqued. For some reason Samuel felt the need to redeem himself, if only not to have Jocelyn look upon him like she then was. Like he was a wounded animal she wanted to help.

“I guess I must have just. . . dropped off the grid for a bit.” Samuel said. Robert nodded.

“Break ups will do that.” he said.

“I started wondering what the hell the point of it all is.” Samuel continued.

This did not dissuade Jocelyn's sentimental expression.

“Mhm, mhm.” Robert animated his affirmation.

“Well I'm glad we could get you to come out with us, so that you can get your mind off such things. If only for tonight.” Jocelyn said. Robert took up the slack.

“Yes, most definitely. Time to pick yourself up and dust off. Asking questions like that will get you nowhere.” he said, almost with a motion of his hand as if lecturing Samuel, his finger pointing.

“Why not?” Samuel said.

“Why not what?” Robert asked.

“Why not worry about such questions?” Samuel asked. Jocelyn, seemingly sensing where the conversation was headed, quietly extricated herself from his perusal,

busying her attention with her wine, which she began swirling in the polished glass.

“Because whys will get you nowhere! Hows and whats—*those* are the interesting questions!” Robert said. Samuel felt the urge to try pushing a little further.

“But—and excuse me—*why* close yourself off to such things? Aren't they of some relevance, at some time?” he asked. Robert looked at him as if in disbelief.

“What's your angle, here, buddy?” he asked. He had noted Jocelyn's disinterest, and he seemed a little put off himself. “It isn't a question of closing myself off. I just told you such things were of no use to concern yourself over! You're here, and that's the end of it. There's no answer better than that.” He looked to his girlfriend, who wasn't looking up from her wine. “Wouldn't you agree?” Quickly she regained herself, looking from Samuel to Robert.

“I don't mean to be rude, but this evening could be made more pleasant if we *concern* ourselves only with the present moment, no?” She began hesitantly, shyly, but when she finished her expression was satisfied and unwavering as she focused her attention once more upon the play of colour refracted through the cider tones within her glass.

“It's not rude to speak the truth!” Robert said. Samuel shrugged. “And the truth is, right now you're a million miles better off than you seemed to be this morning, my man.” he said to Samuel. “Let's enjoy now this night we can afford ourselves thanks to our industry, huh?” Samuel put a smile on.

“Cheers to that!” he said, raising his glass. “I was only asking because I'm curious, I do not want to dampen the spirits of the evening. Jocelyn?” She looked up at

him. “Will you forgive my boorish behaviour?” Both he and Robert looked at her expectantly. She gave a wry smile.

“I will cheers, but only to the fact that despite how far removed people seem to get from each other, they can always be brought together again with a clink of their glasses over a shared meal.”

“Well put.” Robert said. Glasses were lightly touched, and then all three drank indulgently. The conversation soon turned to Robert's and Samuel's shared memories of high school, and Samuel was quick to steer the questions to Jocelyn, of whose adolescent years he did not know much, as he had never seen her around parties. Another round of drinks was ordered when the waitress came through. They were nibbling at their food.

“That's because I lived in another city! Or, small town, rather.”

As the evening progressed Samuel's eyes often strayed to the empty seat beside him, across from Jocelyn. As he watched the happy couple who, even as they spoke to him in turn, communicated between themselves in a language which was nonverbal and supported by an interplay of sidelong glances, tilts of the head and gestures both over and under the table, which became even more. . . . amorous, playful. . . . as the third round of drinks was ordered. Samuel couldn't help thinking about how he and Ana had communicated in such a way—all their own—as well. He fought hard to prohibit himself from falling into a deep, silent revery right then and there at the table, and he thought that if Ana had been there, she would have allowed the lapses in his side of the conversation to pass more smoothly as she took it upon herself to remain attentive, sometimes holding his hand tightly in her lap under the table as she noticed his mind was drifting away from

the present moment, as if she were trying to keep him tethered, to some degree. He was so much more a palatable companion when she was by his side. Usually he wore a genuine smile, on such nights as this, only for her. Jocelyn was right to say such enthusiasm for shared food was to be cherished, as the meal atop the heavy wooden table brought him and her and Robert and thousands of others together as if over a fire burning out in the cold of night.

“Samuel?” Robert said.

“What?”

“I asked what are you doing for work right now? Are you still bar tending winters?”

Samuel paused. Again he was caught in the flux of the role he had chosen: he didn't want to lie, as would be necessary, in order to flesh out who he was supposed to be representing; but he didn't want to tell the truth either, for that would lead down another avenue of queries Samuel would prefer avoiding. He decided to be noncommittal.

“A little of this, a little of that. You know.” he said. Robert nodded.

“Keeping your fingers in many pots. I like it. I myself have a few deals I'm working on. It's all about establishing connections with people, you know? Dinners like these are when the actual work happens.” he said.

“Dinners like these?” Samuel said, exaggerating the amusement in his tone.

“Should I be expecting a pitch soon?”

“No! Of course not. I misspoke. I didn't mean *this* dinner; we're all friends here. You never know is what I'm saying: building relationships and maintaining them, who

knows where one might lead in the future? Never burn a bridge, or you burn up a hidden opportunity when that perfect moment comes along. Ah, now I'm rambling.” Robert drank the last of his beer. “This probably doesn't help.” he looked at Samuel, his cheeks a little flushed. “Anyways, I'm happy you're here. It was just the other day I was mentioning to Jocelyn that we hadn't seen you in months. Wasn't it Jocelyn?”

“Last week I think.” she confirmed. She looked at Samuel, and whenever she did that he felt like he was being regarded curiously, like a cat would paw at yarn, as if Jocelyn were studying his responses. For some reason she seemed especially intrigued by him this evening, and Samuel couldn't quite figure out why. He and Jocelyn had always gotten along well enough, or even a little better than that, and yet Samuel had always noticed she kept a certain distance. But it wasn't *his* character she was seeing on this night, but the role he had adopted for the occasion. He was having fun trying to act the part, putting himself in shoes like those which Robert wore, even mimicking his mannerisms and holding himself so confidently as Robert did. Maybe that's what held her interest—seeing him in this light. And he never wore a suit, as she knew him. He cleaned up well enough.

“And what luck to run into you today then!” Robert said. He had not missed the attention Jocelyn seemed to be directing toward Samuel, when she wasn't swirling her wine. “Jocelyn, I swear, I figured he must have just clawed his way back from a plane crash in the mountains.” Samuel laughed loudly.

“Something like that, then.” he said.

“Who broke it off?” Jocelyn asked. Samuel's smile was quick to disappear.

“I did.”

“You did?” Jocelyn and Robert seemed to ask the question together.

“Well I don't mean to be indelicate buddy, but then why are you so torn up?”

Robert asked.

“I didn't want to do it. I was made to.” Samuel said quietly.

“Made to?”

“Forget it.”

“No, really!”

“It's silly.”

“It sounds silly.” Jocelyn said.

“I know it. So just forget it.” There was a pause.

“Well hey, just make sure to keep that man in the mirror looking respectable, and the world will treat you just fine.” Robert said.

“You're quite the philosopher tonight.” Samuel said.

“Is that philosophy? I've just been reading a lot of business books lately. Trying to find that edge, you know? There's a lot of sound advice out there. You seem like you need it.” The server came and began clearing away their plates.

“It's true. He reads all the time.” Jocelyn said.

“Not just business books?” Samuel asked.

“*Always* business books.” Jocelyn said, glancing impishly at Robert.

“And the best, too. Written by the movers and shakers of the world.” Robert said, as if defensive. “You may think it to be a little myopic—and there's the thousand dollar

word of the night for you, from those books I read—but it's the deals made between these people that make the world go round. If we're talking business, we're talking people.”

“And if we're talking people, we're talking business.” Jocelyn parroted. “Who said that one? I forget.”

“Ah! She listens!” Robert said, looking at Samuel and nodding his head toward Jocelyn.

“Of course I listen. If I didn't we'd have nothing to talk about!” Jocelyn said. She moved lightly around the booth to Robert's side and nuzzled against him. He seemed a little perturbed by this.

“That's not true!” he said. “We talk about all sorts of things!”

“I'm only teasing.”

“People then are a means to an end?” Samuel asked, innocently enough.

“Ah, well, I wouldn't quite say it like that, of course.” Robert said. “But in order to be productive, one must. . . evaluate the value of carrying on acquaintance with someone. Life is too short to waste it on people who won't return anything worth your trouble.”

“I don't know what I bring to the table. . . *your* table, within such a dynamic.” Samuel said. Robert burst out laughing.

“Oh buddy! I don't think you'll ever be so far gone that your company won't be a pleasure in itself!” he said. He laughed loudly, and raised his beer to Samuel, who returned the gesture, but there was some sort of. . . condescension, in the sentiment, that Samuel noted. Something of a humouring, on Robert's side. A patronizing. This, coming

from a fellow high school marauder, with whom he had gotten into much mischief.

“What do you think Jocelyn?” Samuel asked her. She was still drawn close to Robert, his arm now around her. Being addressed directly, she straightened herself up, never losing the composure with which she had begun the evening, as she sipped her wine slowly, her glass—of the third—still standing untouched, even as Samuel's and Robert's were near empty once more.

“There are people who concern themselves only with what they can get from you. It's important to watch your back, and to ensure when. . . you know, things go south, I guess, that you can take care of yourself. And your family too.” Samuel nodded. Robert was getting louder. More excited, for one reason or another.

“And you, Samuel? What do you think?” he asked. Samuel was set to pause for a moment, looking at his emptied beer glass. When he looked up, there was a smile on his face.

“I think much the same. Of course.” he said.

“Then you'll be alright, my man! You'll get there.” Again the patronizing. “Maybe we can even work together one day.” he added.

“What a duo we would be!” Samuel said. When the bill came, Robert and Samuel fought over whether or not the night was on Robert's tab. Jocelyn interjected that this was unnecessary, her eyes toward Samuel.

“I invited you! Now don't be such a *'boor'* again. To use your word.” Robert said.

“Let me pay for my own meal, dammit.”

“Why?”

“Just let me. I appreciate your offer, nonetheless.”

Robert shrugged and leaned back. “Have it your way.” He crossed his arms.

“Thank you.” Samuel said. In silence they took turns with the debit machine the server brought over. Samuel noted that the exchange of debt was broken—there was nothing underlying the friendship now. He tried to remedy the situation; he did not want the night to end in such a bad place. “Look, I'm sorry about that. Where I am now, I just can't have someone pay for my meal. I hope you understand.”

“Are you hard up?” Robert asked.

“No, not exactly. I guess I just don't know what I can offer in turn.”

“Offer to me? I'm not asking for anything.” Robert said.

“To you. To the world. I just can't take anything right now until I've figured out what I can give.”

“That sounds unhealthy to me.” Robert said. “Doesn't that sound unhealthy?”

Jocelyn nodded.

“That's been your problem from day one I've known you, Sammy boy.” He leaned across the table. The alcohol was making everyone a little looser—they were all leaning into each other. “You always make things more complex. You just got to let things be, man.” As they rose to leave, Robert went through the ceremony of putting on Jocelyn's coat, and she smiled and gave him a light kiss on his cheek. Samuel was transfixed. He was staring the whole time. Jocelyn noticed.

“You need to get your girl back.” she said.

“I know.” he said. As they climbed the stairs out of the pub, Samuel felt it was

now or never to ask the question he had been desperate to ask all night; the night which had gone off so smoothly, overall. So respectably, even, like how a night shared between three upstanding, respectable people should go.

“Why do you do it Robert?” he asked as they met the chill of the late night outside.

“Do what?” he asked. His condensed breath rose up around him as he spoke.

“Why do you get up every morning, put on that tie, put on those tight shoes, tuck in your shirt, and go about acting as if you've got the world figured out?” Samuel asked. Robert laughed then. Maybe in spite of himself. It came out quite enthusiastically. Perhaps he just wanted the conversation to end so that he and Jocelyn could walk to their car and get out of the cold.

“I don't ask such questions, I told you. People have asked it too many times already, and no one has come up with an answer. I guess I do it for the same reason everyone else does. For the same reason you do. Look at yourself, you're tucked into the same clothing I am.” he said easily. “Not as nice of quality, of course.” he added, laughing again. Jocelyn laughed too.

“Hey, be nice. You look wonderful Samuel.” she said to him.

“It's okay. I don't really care. . . I only put this stuff on for this evening.”

“And we appreciate it. I tell you,” Robert continued, turning to Jocelyn. “if he had shown up to dinner looking like he did this afternoon, I don't think I would have been able to stay so long.”

“I figured as much.” Samuel said, laughing too. Everyone was laughing when

they parted ways. Laughing at different things. Samuel watched the two retreat down 8th Avenue. Jocelyn was holding tight to Robert's arm, swinging on it. She leaned in close and said something in his ear, and the two laughed some more. Samuel could hardly stand to look at them, but he continued, feeling like one does when they witness a car wreck. He felt horrified, and for many reasons.

“Ah, love. I can tell, even without having looked into your eyes, seeing only your back and how your shoulders are slumped as you gaze wistfully after the happy couple, that you have lost it. And recently.” Samuel turned around.

The man who had spoken was directly behind him, and he too gazed after Jocelyn and Robert, as if enchanted by their retreating silhouettes, merged into one against white Christmas lights weaved over top the avenue. He was a tall man, and appeared taller still for how thin he was. He wore a long black coat, its collar opening from the centre of his chest, and a scarf of a blood red warmed his neck. There was a red rose in his breast pocket, over his heart, and his shirt, seen intermittently under the scarf as the man's sweeping gestures caused it to sway, was white, and Samuel didn't have to touch the scintillating material to know it must be made of silk or some fabric one didn't ordinarily come across. Samuel's eyes, having given the man a once over, came to rest on his face, his goatee and moustache neatly shaped, with a hint of silver at the tip of his chin.

“Well spotted.” he told the man.

“You can call me Don Juan.” The man raised his arm with a flourish and bowed to Samuel. “Pleased to meet you, gentle sir.”

“Don Juan? And here I mistook you for Sherlock Holmes.” Samuel said.

“Never he, I assure you.” the man said, righting himself. He looked piercingly into Samuel's eyes, as if his question were a challenge. “And you are?”

“Samuel. How do you do?” he said, also bowing before the stranger.

“No surname, Samuel?” the man asked.

“Just Samuel. And in fact I would prefer to rid myself of even that.” he said, straightening his posture as he rose from his bow.

“You wish to have no name?”

“Yes.”

“Then how will you know who you are?” the man asked, incredulity within his words. “Come now, what would your history have to cling to if not a name to entitle the story?”

“And you? If you're going around calling yourself Don Juan, you must admit that names are fluid, fleeting. . . of no import to the person, in and of themselves.” Samuel paused thoughtfully. “Of no. . . declared import: such is how I wish to be.”

“Ah, so you have heard of me!” The man, as he said this, stood even taller, and threw his chest out, a little.

Samuel nodded. “I've heard of Don Juan.”

“So you see? My reputation precedes me precisely for my name!”

“Indeed, the name has grown attached to quite a caricature.” Samuel said. “It has certain connotations—of a womanizer.” he added. Don Juan reeled back from these words as if there were a physicality carried in their weight.

“I've been accused of such all my life. And yet, even in the autumnal years of my

life, no one who has met me has had such impressions linger. I am a lover of women as only a man can be, for it is in the mystery of their form, so foreign to mine own, where my intrigue lies. I wish for nothing more than for them to tell me of their secrets, and I promise you this: no one has listened with a more captivated loyalty than myself!" The man finished with his finger resting on Samuel's chest, looking straight into his eye, his gaze unwavering. And then the man quickly withdrew his hand and stood back, waiting for Samuel to respond.

"Their form. . . ?" was all he could utter in reply to the man's outburst, so unexpected.

"Yes, their form. It is by exploring the contours of a woman's body that she will reveal herself to you, if you touch her with passion and listen with the utmost attention with your ears as well as your lips, and your fingers, and especially your heart. I would blind myself in all ways but one, so as to understand my love through each of my senses in turn, before I would claim to understand her fully. And I have. It is this I would wish you to imagine when I describe the symphony of the woman." he said. Samuel found his voice.

"Yet you never have a woman for long, I've noticed." The man sighed then, his eyes drifting over Samuel's shoulder, as if he had been carried away.

"That is because there is no time for love. And thus there is no passion! Me? I have given my life to love—and what can be more innocent than that? I have been chastised, beaten, and driven out by many who have not lived their life the same. Time and time again this has happened, for I cannot help who I fall in love with, or when, and I

have found that sooner rather than later, something always comes between her and I. For all my love—and by love I mean to connote only my heart's most honest desire—it is true, I have no woman now by my side. This is not because I am so capricious and mine eyes so wandering, but because the world, it seems, cannot handle the purity of the fire within me for more than a brief moment. To prolong such emotion but a moment more is not possible, as love turns toward. . .” he paused and gestured around him again, “*this*.”

“I wonder if what you feel can be considered love?” Samuel asked.

“Why do you question this? I am nothing if I do not strive to be honest with myself!” The man spoke indignantly. He seemed ready to jab his finger into Samuel's chest again, but he restrained himself, the effort visible. His posture softened. “You antagonize me, you know.” he said.

“Because the women, when you leave, often don't understand why, and it is the same to say this means they don't understand you. And if that is so, then that is not love what exists between you.”

“Every woman comes to understand what I mean for her.”

“*For* her, yes. As a man. But not *to* her, and not as a person.”

“I do not see the difference.” the man said. “And if I do not speak the language of love, and if my reputation is so tattered and torn and ill-treated as you say it is, then why do women still come to me?” To this Samuel did not answer immediately. The conversation paused for several moments. “I ask you!” the man cried out.

“I'm thinking! And my answer, if you must rush me—” the man nodded, “—is that you have come to be seen as a symbol for desire. Women want you because—”

“Desire, yes! A desire to be fulfilled.”

“But that is not what I was going to say.” Samuel said.

“It is no matter, for I know it is what you mean to say.” the man said.

“Maybe.” Samuel said.

“And I have dedicated my life to understanding how to do precisely that.” the man continued. “A woman can sense these things. A woman can sense that I want nothing more than for her to feel free. As I have said before, in so many words, it is not until a woman has opened herself up to me completely. . . well, when such a thing happens, it is love. What else?” The man, once more, had a look of challenge in his eyes. Samuel was quick to respond.

“When you leave a woman's side she feels—”

“Understood, yes.”

“And you can love so many women—”

“As many as will look at me.”

“Because—”

“Because love does not know an end, if there is nothing to oppress it, my friend. I would love one woman as much as any number. In this way love is infinite.” Samuel fell silent. He had nothing more to say. His thoughts were about Ana. His thoughts were that he and this man, whoever he was, saw things much the same. The man moved forward and threw his arm around Samuel's shoulder. “I can see it was not a lack of love which drew you apart from your woman?”

“No.” Samuel said. “It is because I fear I cannot do right by her.”

“Has she said she loves you?”

“Yes. All the time.”

“Then fear not, for she knows you can. A woman does not lie about such things.”

“You really believe that? What if I fail?” Samuel asked.

“With all my heart. It is thus that I do not have a choice. Despite how the world has often treated me—and I do assure you it has, at times, done so wickedly—I have nevertheless grown into old age a confident man because I have never promised more than I could give.” The avenue on which Jocelyn and Robert had left Samuel's company had by then become near empty, as most people had gone home as the hour approached midnight and the cold ushered them into warmth. Soon Samuel bid Don Juan good night, the two men bowing to each other before parting.

Last night's dinner had left a bad taste in Samuel's mouth, and not just from the bland food. His plan, unfortunately, had gone off without a hitch: Samuel had appeared to Robert as if belonging to the sphere of his own concerns. And so easily too, when if Robert had cared enough to probe deeper he would have found Samuel's true sentiments to be so much the opposite. He had accepted Samuel's charade—aided by his artificial outlet store attire so hastily but nonetheless carefully assembled—so. . . damn easily. Or

encouraged it, anyway. And, despite Don Juan's sentiments the night before, Samuel was left feeling not as if his confidence in the matter had returned, but in fact like he was farther away from Ana than ever before. And this because once more he was struck with the unwavering truth that if it hadn't been for him, they would be together even now. *Yes!* he wanted her back, his resolution firm after the evening transpired, during which time he had been confronted so brutally with her absence in the seat next to him. She should have been there. . . though of course he had more than a little cause to believe she would never be there again. The thought of this fact made him physically ill. He felt once more as if untethered in space, the feeling like he had in his room in that first week, and the nausea inspired by the lack of gravity, which he was no longer used to for having been out within the concrete world for a few days now, rose up fast within him, stirring until it burned his throat and caused his chest to heave. He was reacting violently. . . to her utter absence, as if the as yet unhealed wound of their severance had now become infected. Here he wanted to develop his philosophy and all he could think about was how lost he felt without Ana. Why did he feel so lost? He practically felt incomplete as a person, and he was so far and away removed from any semblance of wisdom or understanding of the universe without her by his side, unable even to ascertain a silhouette of such understanding.

Samuel had been wandering the night, studiously melancholic as if it were his only province, and he had been walking as the city awoke not four hours ago. Through Calgary's streets he had been guided by his yearning to uncover what was ugly; consumed, as the night progressed, with a desire to continue the horror he had felt upon

watching Robert and Jocelyn leave him. He felt there to be truth in it somewhere, and somehow. And so he continued to march, in search of the city's dirtiest streets, which he knew he should grow to prefer—he was of no use in places of the world upon which beauty has blessed colour and vibrancy and life! The dirtiest streets? Those most sallow, down-trodden, beaten streets. Beauty is nothing if not a call to life, and thus such a thing is what Samuel wished for in his own. He knew beauty was to be found on these dirty streets wherever a human heart was found beating, for it was there that an innate appreciation for beauty lay. He wanted to inspire others to acknowledge this, perhaps. . . in little demonstrations of imagination and creativity, which sang out choruses comprised of words of possibility amidst the desolate landscape into which many had been born and grown to accept as their lot. Into which Samuel too had been born. What was ugly was that which repulsed him from this self bestowed duty of his; it was what made him feel weak and torn, his motivation extinguished by something so desperately life-negating. Is that what he had seen in the receding silhouettes of Robert and Jocelyn? To some degree, so it seemed. For what reason Samuel did not yet know; he only knew what was in his gut. It had been an instinctual, and unfavourable, reaction to the delicate pretence their laughter last night had been tinkling out to hold up; a pretence to which he had in a moment become aware of, precisely for their laughter. The laughter, so light and so easily causing their forms to dance even in the cold had been, merely, a performance; inside Samuel, even as they waved their goodbyes, something had rent the rapport established over dinner. Maybe a knowledge of his isolation from them? He was of no use to either of the two, and he was not within their family; so they said, when the chips fall and the

cards are thrown down, who's racking in the winnings, and for whom? Surely a few more nights ending as this one had would have them pulling away from Samuel, impersonally and detached, so that there were no hard feelings and things between he and they would sort of fade as if never existing, once they were convinced of what little he had to offer them, in their world. Is that, in so many words, what they had been whispering to each other once out of Samuel's presence? Could they sense his isolation, and that it was self-imposed (for they were getting along fine, and why couldn't he)? What he saw in their dance—that dance between lovers—was what he knew he had no longer. That's what *really* had him reeling back in horror. A self-repulsed recognition of the effect of his action taken two months prior.

As the city came to life with the routine of its existence, Samuel felt well equipped to discover that which was ugly around him. As it proved to be, and almost inevitable, so it seemed as if the lens he had removed in such a hard won clearing of his consciousness within his room had been removed in vain. It was once more firmly in place to taint the materials of his perceptions, and had been solidly reacquainted with the contours of his musings, only just last night. It didn't have to be a spectacular event which did it; the little things were what got to Samuel, betraying as they were of a larger significance. Or so he figured. He spent the day smiling and greeting everyone who he came into contact with. Most smiled back. Such an open and simple gesture uplifted his spirits he so desperately desired to keep from falling low down where they were oft to be found, settled, through habit. So it would appear: people can be friendly, on the face of it. Yes, on the face of it, surely. The trio last night were nothing if not friendly to one

another as the evening progressed. And right up to the very end! But how far could he take a smile, if the follow up were a question of, perhaps. . . well, how about then of one's religious beliefs? Such a thing as that shouldn't be so easily swept aside during interactions amongst strangers, as it so often happens to be. Such things should instead be most open for discussion, and especially so amongst strangers! And yet Jocelyn had closed right off when Samuel started asking such probing questions. Robert too, had become annoyed. To Samuel, these were harmless little questions! He asked them in innocence, merely naively curious of what he might find out. In a world that denied the import of ideas, what could a question reveal, anyway? Harmless? Of course, silly man! Useless, harmless—what's the difference, if one is honest? To honestly believe certain questions are useless, and that is to say, of no value, then to entertain them was perfectly harmless! What then, of value? Positive value, one means to say? Value. . . to an end? Well, so. . . that's different. At bottom, the end to which an individual strives is well-being, no? Respectability, perhaps? Success, as achieved within the scope of one's environment? Such questions as Samuel delighted in asking. . . were a hindrance to such aims! Useless, for these reasons. But what about, maybe, honesty with oneself? Could that be a priority within these others aims? Casting all else aside, if even for a moment—ceding to the value of such questions, in spite of one's circumstance? Indeed, specifically because of one's circumstance! So as not to get lost in them! So it was. . . Samuel believed it was this honesty with oneself that led to an appreciation of beauty. That's why Samuel was treating himself like trash, because honesty wasn't an easy policy, and what he found when practising this ideal he had set for himself was, well. . . a coward; and a

coward for many reasons. And until he liked what he saw when he looked in that mirror—and mirrors in all settings, too—he wouldn't be able to understand beauty in all its forms. So too, he would treat the environments in which one is prevented from being honest with themselves as trash. . . if need be.

Ah, surely Samuel was just being naive with such sentiment. Surely he would come across as invasive to a stranger with such an approach as that. But he just wanted to *learn* more: about them, about the world they live in. He tried it—asking the questions, that very morning, when he was feeling so beat down by a certain disposition. . . Robert's and Jocelyn's disposition. For the two were so successful, getting along just fine; their opinions toward such things such as the people they share the world with: cutthroat, in the end. Robert was wrong, Samuel was sure: it *was* a question of 'closing oneself off', when denying the ingenuous utterance of such questions; because, if nothing else, the answers one can derive from asking are. . . interesting. . . in the very sense that they are not one's own answers, but those born from another perspective. This world, it must be acknowledged, tends toward. . . ah, but maybe he should just. . .

Samuel closed the notebook he had bought from a dollar store he had passed earlier, when the late dawn of winter had only just given way to the full, pale light cast over the newly arrived day. He had had enough of his own perspective, and he wasn't getting anywhere. He tucked the pen with which he had been scrawling these notes behind his ear, and he asked the next person who returned his smile what faith they held amidst the world's chaos—such is how he framed it.

“My family.”

“Doing the right thing.”

“I don't have any faith.”

“None.”

“Judgement.”

“Love.”

“Evolution.”

“I have faith that the world is going to continue on spinning, whether or not we're here for the ride.”

“So for you there is no value in our existence?” Samuel asked the girl, who was filling out the crossword puzzle at the back of the day's newspaper, opting not to sit on the cold bus stop bench as she waited for transit to arrive. The sidewalk they were standing on ran parallel to a supermarket parking lot, filled with cars during the midday lunch rush.

“It's not a question of value, ultimately.” she said.

“You seem pretty certain.” Samuel said. She gave him a look.

“Is there value in this happening?” She flashed the front page at him: *Man Kills Seven, then Himself*.

“A negative value.”

“On the contrary, the world continues.” she said.

“With everyone's outlook a little colder, I would think.”

“This stuff happens all the time.”

“Good things happen too, though.”

The girl scoffed. “Are you one of those 'love conquers all' types?” Samuel shrugged.

“I'm nothing.” he said. “Until someone tells me different, I suppose.” The girl regarded him curiously.

“So what about you then?” she asked.

“What about me?”

“What do you place your faith in 'amidst the world's chaos'”? she asked.

“Aesthetics, I guess.” Samuel said.

“What do you mean?”

“I'm not sure. I'm trying to figure out why some things are beautiful to me, and other things are ugly. Only, I don't like the word 'ugly'. . . I think I like, simply, 'horrible'. This detachment of yours I don't think is particularly aesthetic, for example. No offence.”

“You don't know me.” the girl said. She didn't seem offended. She was cool.

“That's true.” Samuel said.

She pointed back to the newspaper's headline.

“Even if newspapers reported only good things, and everyone was getting along so optimistically, a freak pandemic could wipe out the human population. Earth would be the triumph of a virus which could have no feelings of pleasure or pain over what it had done.”

“Yup.” Samuel agreed, simply. There was a silence between them. He found it to be a comfortable one.

“You're weird.” she said finally.

“I'm just trying to imagine how I would live with your philosophy. It doesn't leave much room for chitchat, I don't think.” The girl laughed.

“And what of yours? Should we just go around seeking out things that appeal to our aesthetics?”

“In a way, I think. There's something to it.” he said. “To our reactions toward things we find aesthetic, and not, I mean. Anyways, I've just been asking everyone this morning what their faith was, and why.”

“Is that what you're writing about?” the girl asked. She nodded toward the notebook he was carrying in the crook of his arm.

“I guess so.” he said.

“For a class or something?”

“No, just something I want to work out for my own.”

“You're not looking to be some famous writer, are you?” she asked, almost as if she intended a slight.

“No, not at all. I do want to share my ideas though. If I can.”

She waved her hand dismissively. “That's a waste of time. The world has the ideas it wants, to run as it does.”

“I think ideas in and of themselves have merit.” he said.

“You're just preaching, at this point. Nobody has time to listen to that.”

The bus arrived. The girl got on. Samuel remained standing where he was.

“You're not taking the bus?” she asked him. He shook his head. She seemed kind of annoyed by that. As the bus pulled away Samuel observed that it was crowded and no

seats were available. The girl was forced to stand in the aisle, and she stared at him until he disappeared from her view. Samuel didn't ask anyone else their faith. He did continue to smile at everyone.

He wasn't watching where he was going as he wandered down the street, now somewhere in the south east of the city, must be, and he almost stepped out into the intersection when the orange hand told him, rather, to stop! The car he had forced to slam to a halt before noticing his mistake then lurched around the corner to finish its turn. The driver was leaning across the passenger seat to flip Samuel off, his face contorted into an expression of rage which appeared absolutely consuming as he finished his turn with his eyes on Samuel, not looking to watch what he was doing, ironically enough. The driver then proceeded to lean on his horn for half a block, as Samuel watched the bumper get smaller, as the distance between him and it increased. For some reason, Samuel couldn't help but burst out laughing as he stood there on the corner, still waiting for his right of way to cross the street. When the light finally did switch and the little walking man flashed white, Samuel continued on his way, directionless, letting the day take him where it would, and he continued on grinning, bursting out into a fit of giggles now and again, in moments when the familiarity of the avenues and streets and the schoolyards and houses he saw were overcome, and his mind flashed once more to the enraged look on the driver's face—practically spitting he was! just frothing at the mouth! And yet, somewhere around the time mid-afternoon diligence gives way to the frantic dash of evening rush hour, Samuel's laughing turned to heaving, and it caused him to double over. Not because of rush hour, no. . . though he couldn't quite figure out the reason for this

sudden change with which he felt overcome: a change in his understanding of the event of late morning, its comical absurdity giving way to, once more, a feeling of horror rising from the pit of his stomach and on to his throat, nullifying his attempts to breathe.

And then quite suddenly he felt he had to get away from the noise of. . . everything around him, right then: the honking, the engines revving and roaring and idling, the people—for he was near a school—yelling and whooping. He felt like it was consuming him; swallowing him up right then and there on the sidewalk, this commotion. Like the self possession he had been entertaining all day was torn from him easily and swiftly, and what he was left with was a desperate longing to regain solitude. And even if this ritual performance of the early evening hour had been enacted in silence, Samuel would still have felt the need to get away from its motion, which to him seemed just as loud as the noise thus rising from such motion. The bustle of things was once more making him anxious—that same feeling he had experienced so strongly in the coffee shop a few days ago. It might have stemmed from the fact that everything was running like clock work around him while he himself was so. . . uncertain. That was what got to him. Funny. . . before his self exile, he had had no bouts of panic attacks to speak of. Now he had had two in. . . three days, must be. For such is what he thought he must be experiencing now, though not as invasive as it had been in the shop. If he stayed much longer amidst these crowds and their commotion, however, he felt sure that it would quickly snowball to that low level once more. He made a quick and desperate turn down an alleyway, and followed it until it gave way to a residential street about a block away from the school. Here it was quieter, though not as quiet as he would prefer, and so he

turned down the street, and another alley, and proceeded to bring himself deep into. . . wherever, eventually making himself comfortable in a little nook between a garage and a fence, sitting upon the lid of a compost trough, the paint on the wood comprising its framing, peeling, and brutally weathered, almost as if rotting and it was the below zero temperature that was the only thing standing in the way of such action culminating completely. It sagged under Samuel's weight and his stability was made more than a little precarious, but the alcove in between the two structures shielded him from the elements better than anything else he had come across the last fifteen minutes, and it was there he remained. He zipped his coat up all the way to his chin, and pulled the hood of his sweater over his head.

The feeling of nausea hadn't yet subsided. He scribbled in his notebook, attempting to take his mind off it. Here and there within his scribbles ideas were starting to take shape, and even arguments began to form. What was so odd was that before he had locked himself away in his room, he hadn't written so much as a sentence out of his own volition. Now he was writing because it was what seemed most natural and easy to get his thoughts out. He couldn't play any instruments—he couldn't even whistle! He knew he couldn't do anything which would have him standing before an audience, which ruled out acting and comedy and the like. He couldn't even swim! Thus, to let his free imagination, running full tilt in an attempt to out pace the dreary world and escape its pull, like a rocket sent out beyond the planet's gravity—for his mind's products, weightless as they were, were free to travel at the speed of light, and maybe even beyond that and thus subject to no unconquerable obstacles in his traversal of time and space. He

wrote about monsters who seemed to turn up everywhere his characters went, and about a want for courage, and about princesses and heroes and warriors and thieves and rebels, from all walks of life. It was the unifying theme of these short tales of his that had set him first upon on a certain notion of beauty: all of his characters existed amidst realities that were ugly and flat and horrifying in their unending persistence, and his characters all strove to introduce a personal aesthetics which would remedy this in some way. They all had a yearning. . . a passion, even, to change the environment in which they found themselves, which for one reason only embittered all of them equally: how limited they felt within the unwavering confines of its contextual reality. It was thus that Samuel found his fiction so revealing of his own philosophies and psychology, and he began to trust his hand a little more, letting it scrawl upon the page in whatever way it wished, following only one word to the next, beginning to trust in language—the medium of his choice—to lead him somewhere brilliantly illustrative of his own particular perspective born from his peculiar life circumstance, and his experience of the world. . . in his corner of it. Now he hungered only for a perfection of metaphor and rhythm and vocabulary, as words opened doors to concepts and concepts, juxtaposed against one another, constructed paradigms of context which led, ultimately, to a broadening of his. . . *aesthetic criteria*; and if he could master this. . . art of communication, by honing in on how to communicate well both to himself and to others, he would be able to fully understand and appreciate his own perceptions, and thus free himself of bias, perhaps. He had a feeling that if he understood himself fully, so too could he understand the world fully—he had always believed it was in the recognition of his limits that he could

transcend them. Hegel had said much the same. Not that that meant much on the face of it. . . but still, it was encouraging, in a way. And he needed that.

He looked up from his notebook, and was once more confronted with an unsettling and familiar feeling: though he had been advancing at quite a steady and sometimes even rapid pace, in his ideas, the world around him had not changed even a little, and neither had his position within it, ultimately. He had once more gotten lost within his own head, and the results had proven. . . useless, as Robert had so resolutely declared. The sun had gone down and his gaze upon the pages and pages he covered with sharp and hurried inky scrawls was guided by the soft orange glow of the garage light on the other side of the alley. If it had seemed to him as if the writing he tacked and taped up onto the walls of his room had made their solidity give way and allowed him the sensation of being able to move through them with a flick of his pen, so the same flick out here in the cold and dark white glistening alleyway, which had a vehicle rolling through it in front of him on occasion, had him feeling like the vast open sky above, and the endless avenues down which he could trod, closed up around him, compressing him into a ball. Because in actuality he could not race forth toward any place he wished upon the weightlessness of his thoughts, as he fancied.

As far as his physical circumstances, Samuel wished right then to have his legs dangling off a chairlift suspended high above the snow covered slopes of any of the ski resorts to be found within the Rockies, and he wished he had a fireplace with room enough for a roaring flame to come home to after a day spent snowboarding. He wished he could take Ana to the faraway mountains of Peru as she wanted so badly to see and

hike through, as well as to the ancient isles of the Mediterranean, and even through the exotic streets of Hong Kong, if she only but pondered the idea! No amount of flicking his pen could bring any of that closer, however, and thus his sense of isolation from the world entire increased with as many flicks—this flicking being all he had done with his day. And yet, if someone had asked him, he personally would have deemed it a day well spent, as far as the obstacles he had overcome in his mind were concerned.

The nausea began to creep up once more, blighting his senses, and it caused him to want to get up and attempt to walk it off. He began ambling about, directionless as if he were a stumbling drunk. And yet he had set his mind to merging with the suffering of the world, and so he accepted the nausea as it came; encouraged it, even, reminding himself that this sickness announced and reminded him of all the ways he was a failure in the eyes of the world, and Ana, and himself. He pictured Robert, somehow leering at him—though he had never known his friend to make such an expression, in reality; he pictured himself looking in the mirror at the image which had confronted him the day before, in the washroom of that pizza place: the hollow eyes and the hollow cheeks, and the wilted, lifeless hair covering his face and head; and he pictured Ana, who he saw not so much as an image, but instead experienced as an endless wave welling up inside him as if up against a dam, and he knew if the dam broke and the wave crushed forward in an onslaught of debris and spitting froth he would be sure to drown within the torrent; and he saw the monsters of his stories leering forth from every corner he turned down. He looked up to the sky, desperate to halt the storm brewing within him: the ugly clouds of a certain truth crowding his mind, threatening downpour. He saw the moon, shining bright,

not quite full but nevertheless majestic, sitting there upon the tapestry of stars which he couldn't see, unfortunately, for being in the city, but he knew them to be there, and called them to his vision with his mind.

Please, please, he whispered desperately, attempting to will the stars to show themselves to him. Incredibly, they slowly started to wink into existence. One at a time at first, and then patches appeared and soon entire constellations emerged until the sky was filled with their twinkling light. All at once it seemed to become the sky he knew from camping trips in mountain valleys of summertime enchantment. And all this happening before his disbelieving eyes despite the city lights around him, which ordinarily laid claim to the night and blotted out the dark recesses of space—perhaps as an offensive tactic to have the citizens on whom the city counted for survival continue moving unquestioningly forward. He became disoriented by the waves of light soon to appear and dance before him, beaming down upon him from hundreds of millions of light years away, and he fell backward as if paralysed, landing gently upon the snow beside the sidewalk. He lay there, feeling his thoughts quiet, and he felt the storm clouds of his imagination recede back out to the nothingness from which they had brewed. He suddenly felt communion with the world in place of his isolation, for he was struck anew with the thought that there were things out there which, no matter how far removed one person was from the next, could bring them together. Like the moon and the night sky filled with these twinkling stars. And like the sharing of a meal, as Jocelyn said. And a warm fire, innocently built from the wood gathered by all the hands present. For a brief moment Samuel glimpsed something of beauty, and forgot his nausea.

The fourth day since Samuel found himself back outside arrived and he made his way back to the coffee shop. He decided he would give it another go. He was, after all, disguised by a fresh shave and haircut, so if the lady whom tolerated his unfortunate attempt to place an order last time was working, it was likely she wouldn't even recognize him. This was something he was very much concerned with avoiding, for if she did happen to be working this morning and if she did happen to recognize him then these efforts to which he had been extending himself to remain anonymous under guise of costume would be efforts spent in vain in the coffee shop, and this he doubted he could tolerate for as long as he wished to stay there to write and enjoy his americano, as he had not been able to before.

Samuel took a deep breath before walking through the cafe's glass door, and when he finally did enter he found the scene almost exactly as it had been the first go round, though, perhaps, a touch less busy—there was no line up this time, and yet all of the tables were having their capacity tested to varying degrees as five or six people crowded around tables meant for four, their black tops laden under coffee mugs and breakfast plates filled with pie and paninis and french toast. Set against the store's front window there was a raised bar with five or six stools placed under it. There was only one which

stood empty, and, indeed, it was the only free seat remaining in the entire shop, wedged in between the corner formed by the window and the wall opposite the service counter, along which booths too supported many more people, these ones taking advantage of wall outlets by their feet to have their laptops open in front of them. It was toward this stool Samuel focused his attention as he stood waiting to place his order. At the counter he observed, with visible relief washing over him, that a new face was smiling at him in greeting. And this time he was ready for her, armed with his plastic debit card and prepared with a customary and autonomous exchange of words so as to procure his daily sustenance without hassle. . . though—he admitted to himself, and almost in self-deprecation—that he was not exactly foraging the plains with spear in hand—whatever hassle he came up against would be relatively mild; *but*, such was how the modern man had become in his. . . expectations, and worries. The counter attendant with whom he had transacted before was nowhere to be seen, thankfully, and the present transaction was completed without a hitch occurring, and this rang true on either side of the counter. Samuel soon had his coffee in hand and made his way around the chair legs and people legs and tables to the stool which had continued to call out to him as if bobbing up and down like a buoy, declaring his potential salvation in a sea set to motion by nodding and twisting and chatting heads and hands waving to and fro, all together creating a rhythmic pitch like the amicable motions of a cruise ship kicking up waves within the water's current. To Samuel these hands waving and heads chatting still struck him as if a little less than amicable, and instead a little more surreal and thus a little like menacing, and so to the buoy he strove before he could breathe a sigh of relief and dispense with the

sensations of anxiety which had begun creeping at the base of his spine. Ah, he made it! And without a drop of coffee spilled. Now his back he turned against the cafe's crowd as if trying to forget their presence, and he sat staring out the window. Indeed, he was almost huffing and puffing as he found rest upon the stool, as if he had in reality just swam through the ocean's tidal force, simply by moving over the busy floor. This anxiety of his was not to be so easily assuaged, but he fought to keep it at bay by focusing his attention on the world outside, passing in front of him, which was, thankfully, removed from his immediate concern by a pane of glass, and thus he felt removed enough from its motion so that it too did not send him into panic.

So it was. . . sitting in coffee shops: just something people did when they had nowhere else to be, he figured. Here people were just killing time, like at a bus station: waiting for a bit of the world to pop up and beckon them somewhere interesting. Or else they were just enjoying the rest stop for its own sake and were stretching out, finally able to relax. Samuel wished he could feel calm here as the observer he had seemingly become, and this becoming owing to his inability to fully immerse himself in interactions with others—if anywhere, then a bus station surely? as he watched the world pass by, himself on pause in brief repose. But he didn't feel calm, for, as he glanced back over his shoulder, it appeared as if people had brought the world right into the shop with them. His eyes moved over those of the crowd who were in suits and talking about the binders of notes they had spread on table tops, with laptops open in front of them. He caught bits of conversation from this and that table, floating every so often over the air stirred about by so many pressure fields arising from each cluster of personalities: bits with expressive

tones indelibly attached to them, most going on about, *did you hear about this?*'s or, *so and so got*. . . 's. Going on about things which were so very demanding of their attention. . . No, no, there was no stop scheduled here! Not at this coffee shop, no sir, no ma'am, and thank you very much!. . . It was exhausting. . . How were these people not exhausted? Samuel took a sip from his coffee. . . *Oh, right*.

Again his notepad was out, and his melancholy had him prepped to begin the day's efforts: something he had started in the depths of the night just passed:

There's a violence present in most things. So it seems, anyway. So it's easy to see, happening within the order behind patterns we can't help but pick up on. A violence inherent in the very mechanism of nature. Elements collide to fuse into unstable atomic structures, and rivers are formed by molecules pounding resolutely into rock that stands otherwise steadfast to the force of time. Cells initiate their own death in the event they are infected by virus: a sacrificial suicide for the greater good of the organic body in which they are but one of billions.

During a safari a child witnessed a tigress pounce on an antelope, ensnaring the conquered prey in a slow death grip of claws and teeth fastened like vices into body and neck, and the child watched as blood seeped into fur and stained the dirt. Beneath the interlocked limbs, variously pulsating with elemental force or dwindling in vitality as opened tissues allowed life its final ebb, a pool bled into the earth and a patch of mud was allowed to exist for a few moments under the beating sun of the plains. The child, though young, understood what she was witnessing, and her own body seemed to weaken as empathy inspired a similar loss of energy in her limbs, as if the predator had sunk its teeth

into her own flesh and opened her up. And though she saw the tigress' cubs come out from the tall grass to feast on the meal provided to them by their mother, she could not forgive the desperateness of the scene; the desperate struggle animals take part in to survive, even if it comes at the price of loss in that final and ultimate moment, for another.

Samuel continued to sit with his back to everyone, looking at the grumpy grey clouds above the buildings outside, taking sips of his coffee every so often. The ending of the story would have the girl—

“Do you mind if I sit here?” someone asked him, somewhere over his shoulder. He did not turn his head, but muttered that he didn't, only he was hoping silently that such distracting conversation would not be brought even closer to his proximity as that which continued to go on around him. It was a struggle even to think straight with the variously emphasized and inflected spurts of speech rising in a persistent drone throughout the cafe. He had been staring at his notebook with his pen in hand, unmoving as he planned his angle of attack, but he couldn't sink his teeth into anything he felt viable, and he felt himself to be the girl of the story, desperate in her yearning to make sense of the world unfolding relentlessly before her naivety. As he sat there so unproductively Samuel's features slowly grew more cloudy so as to become a reflection of the world outside. He wondered why he was even at the shop in the first place, given that it was putting him in such downcast spirits as he found himself unable to write a word. He looked into his mug and saw that he was almost done his coffee, and he made up his mind to get ready to leave.

“You look sad.”

So said the someone whom had asked for the seat beside him. He turned to look at this person for the first time, surprised by such a comment. The girl had styled her dark hair up in pigtails which were made to poke through the threading of her woollen winter hat by holes cut out specifically for just that purpose, seemingly, and maybe even that very morning. The disrupted and now frayed ends of the fabric were pushed up and out by her tightly gathered hair, frozen almost in a sort of explosion of confetti. Some of these pieces were longer, and they swayed lower down around her face. The girl was smiling at him with red-sticked lips. Her hands, as red as her face, were clasped around hot tea she was now using to warm them up from the cold outside. “Or mad, or lonely, or something.” she continued on into the silence with which he had so far responded. Finally, he gave a small smile.

“A little bit of all that, I guess.” he said. He turned to look out the window once again.

“Why?” the girl asked. “Did you just get dumped? . . You look like you just got dumped! That's what it is.” She was facing the window too, but as if to mock his posture, and she was speaking to him from out the corner of her mouth as her eyes faced rigidly forward like his own.

“That might have a little something to do with it.” he said. “Or a lot.”

“Mhm, I knew it. I could tell from across the room.” she said. She pointed out exactly where she had observed this, by the counter on which the sweeteners and cream were arranged for customers to help themselves.

“You were looking at me from across the room like that?” Samuel asked.

“Not at you specifically, but for an empty seat. This one,” she patted the back rest of the chair she sat on, “was the only one free. And so I looked at you to see if you were some weirdo creep I might not want to have talk to me.” Samuel raised his eyebrows.

“And I figured you didn't look so bad.” she said.

“Well that's a relief.” Samuel said. The girl nodded.

“For both of us. Otherwise I would have had no choice but to go back outside, and it's freezing out there.”

“I can tell.” Samuel said, glancing at her.

“Oh yea? How?” she asked.

“Cause your face is as red as your coat.” he observed. “And your hands too. And your lips.”

“Well my lips would have been this way even if it were plus twenty instead of minus twenty.”

“You look like a leader of the bloods. Or a strawberry.” he said. “Or . . . something red, anyway.” The girl smiled.

“A pomegranate, actually.”

“Well alright then.”

“So why did she dump you?” she asked, turning to face him straight on, shifting so that her knees pointed toward him. Samuel's expression darkened. “I don't mean to pry.” the girl said quickly. “Forget the question, if you like.”

“I . . . 'dumped' her, actually. And it didn't just happen. It was about two months

ago now.” he said after some time. He hated having to repeat this now for the second time. It only made things more real, and made him seem farther away from her. Surprise at his response sort of spilled across her face for a brief moment.

“You should be over it by now, then? Since you were the one to do it.” the girl said.

Samuel shook his head.

“It was a mistake. I'm still not quite sure why I did it. I'm not where I had intended to be two months later. I figured I had something to do. . . but I haven't gotten anywhere.” The girl opened her mouth to speak, but Samuel continued, “And,” he added, “I don't want to talk about it, if that's alright with you.” She closed it with a snap.

“Okay then.”

The two sat in silence for a while. For the moment Samuel had been distracted from his plan to leave so soon. The girl was looking out the window. Her head, as well as her eyes, were darting this way and that so that sometimes they were pulled to different directions simultaneously, as her attention was drawn here and there. Samuel stared into his emptied cup.

“I'm gonna go.” Samuel said, standing up from his chair. He grabbed his coat from off the seat, flattened as he had sat on it, and shrugged his arms into its sleeves. “It was nice sitting by you.” he said. If only to be polite. She eyed him then somehow strangely, staring up at him from her chair as if not sure what she wanted to say, or do.

“What?” he asked. Her brow had begun to furrow, gentle creases appeared between her eyebrows. Finally she replied.

“Before you go, can I take your picture?” she asked.

“What? Why?”

“Because I like to take pictures of sad things, and look at them from time to time.”

the girl said. Before Samuel could respond she had her phone in her hand and held it out in front of her. He heard the click of the camera. There was no flash. Like it never happened. “There.” she said.

“I don't like being in pictures.” Samuel said. He was surprised to find himself almost at the point of being angry right then, and all of a sudden. Here he was, trying to float through the world as a ghost, and yet it seemed he stood out so plainly. . . and as a sad person no less, as she informed him, with as many problems as anyone else. Problems he was trying so hard to detach himself from, in order to not be tied down to a certain reality which would influence the continued development of his work. And now he was on this girl's phone forever captured in his failure as a very specific person. The sad guy. He felt physically ill at the thought. . . though, it wasn't quite the same feeling as the nausea which had been plaguing him so recently. He wanted to tell the girl to delete the picture. *Right now!*

“Why not?” the girl asked. Her brow was furrowed once more.

“It's a caricature. A pose. It's freezing the fluidity of the universe in an instant, and putting a caption to it.” he said, a bit more aggressively than perhaps he intended. The girl shook her head.

“It's an expression of your deepest self, right now in this very moment.” she said.

“It *was*. Now it's another person altogether that you have saved on your phone

from the one standing here in front of you.”

“Then what do you care what I do with him?” she asked, a bite of defensiveness behind her words.

“Good point.” he said, smiling in spite of his anger. “Just don't call it by my name. The picture I mean.”

“I don't even know your name.” she said.

“Sure you do. I'm 'that guy from the coffee shop'.”

“Well then what do I call you?” she asked.

“You can call *me* Samuel, if you must. Just don't give that picture a name. It would be one step toward attaching a memory to someone who doesn't exist. If anything, only the moment existed, and I was just a sort of. . . distiller.”

“I just want to remember that sadness exists.” she said, her voice coming out low.

“I'm not so sure. Anyways, I'm going to go.”

Samuel moved to exit the coffee shop, weaving through the material in his way. He burst out into the cold. The door opening had a gust of wind billowing forth to meet him, and he ducked his head down from the onslaught and moved directly against it, up the street to Central Memorial Park. He was surprised by his reaction and not quite able to puzzle it out. He figured it stemmed from a desire to not be seen by the world in any way other than how he would like to be seen. But what an impossible state that was! Unless he took such great pains with his appearance—which was something he was not about to do, for, ultimately, he wanted to renounce the importance of material appearances and focus on what lay behind them, in his work. . . in everyone's work. But

even a peacock's plumage is example in nature that there's a certain necessity in presentation, in all its forms, and that includes the physical. He wouldn't be able to just renounce one form in favour of another. That was a sure fire way to run up against a wall. The issue was more complex than that. . . the fact of the matter was that he had to address *every* facet of existence if he wanted to be successful, and that included the physical, did it not? So far he had lost himself into a realm of stories and imagination, because, and of course, it was these things he found most important. And existing within this realm as he had been for so long made the physical world appear so. . . malleable, or immaterial, even. This was something he enjoyed immensely. . . no, he didn't want to run up against the physical—not in his very appearance no less! *That's* where his anger was coming from. If it was sadness contorting his features, it was a sadness born from his soaking up all the inertia he sensed he had to overcome just to stay afloat, and that, in his opinion, simply wasn't a sadness worth documenting. One should try to shrug such things off; forget them, as if they never existed. . . Maybe, maybe, he thought. That girl had her own reasons, of course. She was capturing an innermost truth hidden deep within the moment, so she said. Within him. If he was so concerned with keeping himself open to things and soaking up the entire spectrum of experience existing within the world, so he must end up as a certain barometer for the world, no? Unfortunately so.

In fact, no! He *shouldn't* be the least bit concerned with the world as it was, and he would strive, right here, and right now, never to inform upon it. For to do so was to continue its influence upon him, and to cede to that was something he could not do! If he was going to take a stand, then it was to be right here and now, or else he never would.

He would, from now on, only concern himself with the world of ideas and imagination and creativity, so as to free himself from the confines of his prison! And within the realm of the physical he *was* going to be this ghost, once and for all! But how to do this? Ah, he did not appreciate that he had to turn his attention to this very implacable concern. But so he must, and unfortunately so. What to do, what to do? . . .

So it is said that from the ashes of things destroyed something new can rise up, in an eternal cycle of destruction and creation. To the contrary, it was through creation that Samuel felt he could. . . destroy, for lack of a better term, as what he does not acknowledge or give attention to atrophies, like the muscles when they do not produce work, as he focused only on what was possible, and not what already existed. Including his own body, of course: he would be very upfront with those whom might like to deduce something from his physicality that he was not at all prepared to speak in such terms. And even if his body became battered and broken and ragged and mangy, as the world tries to insist he pay it mind, he will not budge, and he will instead use his mind to soar above all this. . . spectacle, which the world has steadily grown into. He would be just one person doing this—that is, ignoring the world within his circumstance in the hope that even a little part of it might atrophy—but maybe, if he could, he would convince a few others to do the same. Who knew where it might lead? Maybe the world as it now exists will simply crumble, as Samuel had so longed for it to do, as everyone finds something else to participate in. Something that allowed for their creative consciousness to thrive, perhaps.

Samuel found his way to a public washroom, and he locked the door behind him. He looked at himself in the mirror. He did look sad. It was his eyes that gave him away.

He tried to make his face settle into another configuration, but it was no use. The world could see his flesh only, and that's what they took him for. He smashed the mirror.

5

Amidst the intertwined fields of experience that populate the planet which, as they are led to agree over certain elements of common perception, come to define reality, there is an aspect of transcendence present in the essence of consciousness, which underlies every individual person's perspective: what is chosen to be that shared denominator nevertheless equalizing the inevitable fractalization of (individual) experience is itself of dynamic potential, in the free-floating realm in which creative and passionate entities naturally tend. Dare it be said that this dynamic potential is infinite? Or does this term prove meaningless as it cannot be intelligibly quantified? Better it be said, then, that such potential is irrational? Which is to say, simply, that it cannot be defined? Is that so terrible? Why an insistence upon definition? What if this irrationality were accepted as that element of common experience, which would make the shared reality—or, the objective reality—inherently undefinable, and thus inherently dynamic, as individuals are? Why is there an insistence upon one illusion over another? Why not play around with illusion itself, so that what could be understood as 'real' in any given moment is

simply based on the present context within which one questions precisely that—the present *illusion* (if one insisted upon being so crude, at this point)? He, upon his first foray into that coffee shop such and such and so many days ago, had noted his uncertainty over whether or not, after his panic attack, when the world began to settle in front of him in a coherent and consistent pattern, he felt more comforted by the fact, or less so? There was no need to ask such a question; his panic attack had provided an answer right from the start: *he positively abhorred it.*

“Yes, I abhor it so!” Samuel exclaimed, his hands gesticulating, his voice meeting no ear but his own. He paced the sidewalk in between a bus stop terminal and a pawn shop which was closed in the early morning hour and there was a metal gate pulled down over its front window and door. From time to time he pulled out his notebook, every now and again, which was rolled up and sticking out of the back pocket of his pants, to write a sentence or two down. How he had come to be in this questionable neighbourhood, he did not recall. What few people were up at this hour—either on their way to work, or, perhaps, like Samuel, simply remaining awake from the previous day—did not so much as spare him a glance as they passed him by on the sidewalk. Seemingly they had grown used to seeing such characters in the area: such characters whom looked so worn, and hungry, and tired; their hunger and their exhaustion making them deranged. Or at least appearing as such. . . Or perhaps that was due to some drug or another? A drug which made him behave so. . . alien.

Samuel had white cloth wrapped around his right hand. Specks of dried blood dotted its thread. He had cut himself, and considerably deeply, when he struck out at the

mirror. After running the gash under water and cleaning the wound he had found use for the frays of his shirt, tearing it into strands and fastening the cloth tightly around his hand once the bleeding had subsided. He had been walking the city's streets clear through to the following morning. Dawn arrived, and it was thus that Samuel was to be found pacing. When he had looked up from the revery which had caused the night to pass unnoticed, and relatively quickly, he apprehended the dirty dismal setting upon which he had stumbled, and he declared the event a triumph—a sign from fortune, for he had found precisely the sort of run down neighbourhood he had set his intentions on existing within. And here he remained, on a block saturated with sex and pawn shops, bars, and cash advance stores. Very typical. Very sombre. An area of the city left to neglect, now a *wasteland* in comparison to those buildings and neighbourhoods of the city which were newly erected and touched with some contrived notion of prosperity. Even at the early morning hour upon which he had arrived to this avenue of such miserable economy, the area was busy; or, at least, a little more lively than most other places, for both the sex shop and the cash advance store were of the twenty four hour variety, and the bars of course were open into late late hours. There were also groups near two of the bars on opposite ends of the street, both groups huddled together for warmth, though they cleared out quite soon after the buses started running service again. Samuel wanted to be as far away removed from anything which was flourishing under the ideology which would encourage gentrification over community; and this because everything stemming from that was a mere spectacle—he wanted no part of its illusion. No, better to be here, in this. . . ghetto. Here there was no one entertaining such illusion touted to keep the world

moving forward. Here there was only drudgery. Here were people whom recognized the world for what it was, and did not play the game, but instead waded through the filthy waste product with looks of disgust and lamentable dispositions. It was here that Samuel felt free to develop an honest attempt to master his perceptions, without the veil of the spectacle clouding his vision. Here he could sharpen the blade which was his pen, and hone the skill of his communication. Such is how he wrote now, pacing the sidewalk. A reluctant participant in the society of the spectacle. That's what he was. That's what this was about.

The spectacle: emergent as a result of the introduction of methods for mass communication some two centuries ago, which caused people who were originally separated by geography—and thus not so readily coupled to one another—to communicate. Practically forced to, in fact, in order to be so-called 'participants'. Mass communication, as a novel and inherently global phenomenon, had a tremendous impact on the world environment in that it introduced the concept of an information-based technology into the *shared* sphere that was before defined by what was (is) physical.

Samuel wrote another heading, and underlined it.

New technology: the distillation of an environment's complexity, useful for the explicit purpose of some particular aim. This distilled product or means, reintroduced to the environment in a 'purified' way, alters how the participants interact with the environment, of course, and alters also the inherent direction of the environment's continued evolution. As the environment grows in complexity, which is only natural, the participants will become mere 'spectators' if they don't acknowledge that *they are the*

ones who make the tools—or at least, they have the power to do so amongst other mechanisms of society's spectacle, as conscious entities. If the society of the spectacle had taught anything, it was that perception is reality (see: gossip magazines). This unconscious adherence to the fluidity of perception within the masses of the twenty-first century needs to be brought to the forefront, to be exposed for what it is: the playground of reality; the future of energetic evolution; the beginnings of complexity born from and for conscious exploration, and thus the culmination of humanity's Hegelian triadic. A synthesis between mind and body, the false dichotomy burning at the forefront of so many philosophic systems dropped once and for all!

Ah. . . but now he was just talking gibberish. Here, he was just constructing a castle made of sand, soon to be blown away by the slightest breeze, for he had nothing to anchor him within the metaphysics he was proposing. Where could he find guidance, as he spun thoughts so whimsically, weaving webs of fanciful import across the vast expanse of blackness where such fantasies lie? How could he trust in his process, and in the product of his effort? Physical reality was based on a pragmatic analysis of utility. What would a purely creative reality be based on? He needed to provide this missing link to his argument, or else he would never be taken seriously.

But maybe this is all best to be pondered another time, given the context. So someone might think. A valid sentiment, on the face of it. Samuel looked up from his notebook. He felt he had a lot of weight on his shoulders, placed so suddenly upon him. He felt he was on to something worthwhile—at least worthwhile, in some regard and to some people—but he saw himself once more as if in front of a mirror, and around and

behind him, reflected back, was an abyss. He saw himself for what he was: a lone critter with a voice too mouse-like to penetrate very far out into the void in which he stood.

Hours later and he was still in front of the pawn shop. Only now it was open, its metal gate unlocked and pushed upward by the owner, like a garage door—rolled upon a crossbar bolted into the wall above the window and door, and just below the store's sign. Samuel looked around him, appraising the street once more as if with a gaze made fresh after meditation, but the street still looked as unappealing. . . as downright *horrible*, even, as when he had first laid eyes upon it. No amount of perceptual realignment would change that. He couldn't help but encounter the neighbourhood in this way, for it just did not sit right with him that such a street should exist at such a moment in history as this one. Or, if its physical circumstance existed, the dour dispositions of those whom populated its sidewalks and visited its stores and lived nearby did not have to be as they were. They could be freed, potentially, for it was their dissatisfaction with what they perceived around them which propelled the spectacle forward, unimpeachable. So it was Samuel's dissatisfaction, too; but his aim was to solve it a little differently. Yes he wanted to forfeit his physicality, and he wanted to encourage others to do the same. Is that what he was going about trying to figure out how to do? No no no. Not a negation of physicality; he wanted others to appreciate that they could participate in something a bit more. . . transcendent? But the task at hand struck him as more than a little daunting. The truth—and this others would be quick to note—was that he was fucked up. At least as fucked up as anyone else, and likely much more so. Thus, who was he to be an arbiter of sorts, as he needed to be?

Time: a measurement of movement. Some moments in time capture much more movement than others, depending on one's frame of reference. It was such measurements which captured the most information that had potential to yield the most truth about what was occurring—say, globally, rather than individually. In the all pervasive recommendation of the current epoch to '*live in the moment*', one is thus urged to make a choice: between orientation with the *personal* moment, or the *global* one.

Samuel's moments were constructed out of an ever-expanding assessment of the global situation. He strove to take in as many dynamical facets as pertained to whatever context he was currently encountering in his physical space. He was not living for his personal well being. He imagined himself simply as one constituent out of an organic whole, no more prominent than any other. The particular instances which made up his day to day, in which moments he observed what contexts and frames of reference others acted on, and abide by, were dynamic insofar as he could see how any one moment could have occurred differently many times over, if the participants involved had subscribed to another context or frame of reference or ideology or. . . whatever one may happen to call it. Samuel's insistence on fluidity was born from precisely this fact. He figured if everyone appreciated, on an intuitive level, that the reality of the moment they were operating within was simply a contextual happenstance, and not a concrete necessity, then people would feel that much more encouraged to give their inner creativity free range, no? Such is how he wrote now, allowing his mind to wander.

Samuel was walking away from the street in which he had seen the sun rise, walking deeper into the suburban neighbourhoods adjacent to it. At a glance such streets

did not appear any different than the one in which he lived. . . and yet there seemed to be a festering of some sort, lingering tacitly in the ten speed bicycle with the rusty chain and wheels over there; and the screen door hanging by only its bottom hinge and a thin chain barely able to keep the top of the door from falling entirely away from the house, which was itself seemingly hanging on to only a few nails and pieces of timber to keep from crumbling down completely, shingles on its roof missing; and an old rusted car stripped of parts, its frame sitting on two cinder blocks, an upside down wheelbarrow and a boulder, over by that garage. There was, on the other hand, a swing, hanging low down from a tree branch maybe twelve feet high, in a front yard. Samuel found that nice. For some reason he thought of Don Juan, and how he had, in his very being, come to represent a certain ideal. He had done that not by shying away from the world as it had its way with him, but by remaining resolute in his convictions to the bitter end, and many times over. Samuel found that inspiring. Don Juan had not shrugged off his history, or his physicality, in living his ideal, as Samuel was yearning to do—he had stood firmly by both. He had embraced both. For he *was* both, and more besides, as the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Was Samuel, in contrast, lacking courage when he so recently declared he would not extend care to the reality of the present world around him? To its suffering? That he instead was going to have it disappear simply by choosing to ignore it? Was that actually possible? Oh, oh! He was spinning in circles upon himself with all this thinking and backtracking! Where does it end? When will it end? He felt as if he were torturing himself even as he stood on the decrepit suburban street; torturing himself without even

having to lift a finger. . . And, well, of course this was not possible, to make things disappear as he hoped. . . that is, *unless* Samuel accepted that to embrace such a facet of reality as his physicality—and the history with which it is imbued—would grant him a sort of grounding in his quest for. . . truth? A grounding for the benefit of others with whom he might wish to tell of his quest. For, where does truth's light shine brightest if not while shrouded in tense juxtaposition with what is false? And what was false, to Samuel, were these concrete myths around him—this spectacle society had grown to be. Thus, as he endeavoured to abide to an ideal within his writing and his other creations, Samuel would simultaneously allow his body to become that symbol of his neglect for the spectacle, in order that others may acknowledge his suffering. Yes! His suffering. Yesterday. . . yesterday he should have pointed to that picture the girl had taken of him and said, “See here: *this* is *my* curse! I remain battered and bruised as long as the world you recognize as common between us insists itself upon me, even as I refuse to participate. If you do look upon this body, acknowledge that I nevertheless do not let it overcome me!” And said it proudly too, like Don Juan said things proudly.

It was evident then that if Samuel wished to align himself so completely with the global perspective, and to capture in his very being the motion of all that was around him, which he felt so very deeply and to his very core, he could not ever again physically remove himself from it. For then he would be ignoring one very real variable of the global dynamics of which he was *entirely* a part. He had to put himself right in the thick of it, amidst all the chaos born from these very real forces of nature running up against and conflicting with one another: the physical with the immaterial; order with freedom;

complexity with harmony; past with present. Yes, he had to remain amidst the horror of all this conflict which repulsed him so. And amidst the beauty, which lifted his soul so completely in his appreciation for. . . his connection with it. Beauty and horror: so it seemed his experiences had become parsed into a sort of dichotomy since leaving his room, for he kept returning to these two words specifically.

Beauty: the antithesis of horror? But not in the Hegelian sense, in this case.

He couldn't remain true to his ideal if he did not remain open to that which wrenched his gut as if asunder, as he beheld parts of the world he could not even fathom—so much did they repulse his sense of aesthetics. Samuel looked around the street. It wasn't so bad—not nearly as harsh as some other places in the world, surely. . . but it wasn't necessary either, for the community to look so worn and crumpled in upon itself, destitute of enthusiasm for life. . . So destitute of passion, as Don Juan had noted.

So it was to be, for Samuel. . . beauty and horror: his guides to truth. He felt sure he was making the right choice by ceding to their wisdom, for he felt it in his gut, and to his very bones. . . like Don Juan had felt the truth of his passion within his heart. Samuel finally knew now what he had to do, and he began marching with purpose toward the southwest of town. One step at a time, to provide coherency to his yearning. To his passion. He knew he was a mere apprentice in the matters of passion. He wanted to begin his training.

So it seemed that if he were to immerse himself into the world Samuel would have no chance of escaping certain aspects of his material constraints. So long as he had a physicality to account for, such a thing would continue to betray him. Or, not betray him, exactly. . . just tie him down to a being that had no relevance to his most peaceful state. And yet this—his body—was all anyone else had to go on. It was *sickening*. He didn't want to stand out. He didn't want to leave an impression. He didn't want people assessing him by his human worth—judging him based on a criteria they ascertained as being common between them. His body was his weakness. It *did* betray: the limits of his circumstance. And those were things he'd rather not be reminded of, for they were limits defined beyond his control.

All this, and yet he now knew that he had to be active in his explicit denial of these limits, when others came upon him and observed his physical destitution. Such destitution would be merely a lure, if someone cared to bite.

“Why have you become so worn and weak looking?” they might ask. “Why do you look so sad?”

“In my search for truth,” Samuel would say, “I necessarily neglect what is false. This body is a symbol for such neglect. My sadness continues only so long as this choice I have made continues to bring me suffering.”

“Are you a monk then? A Buddhist or something?” So they might enquire.

“I do not accept suffering as my lot. I suffer only in appeal to something greater.”

Samuel would answer.

“What might that be, if I may?” they would ask, and perhaps skeptically even.

“I'm not sure what truth is, I only know what it isn't.” Samuel would gesture around him, then. Like Don Juan had. “It isn't *this*.”

Samuel found himself back in his room holding a jerrycan at his side, recently purchased from Canadian Tire and filled to the brim with gasoline. The room upon his entry was just as he had left it: empty, and with the window open and the rug rolled up in the corner, and his bookshelf filled to spilling. From the early morning flurries there was snow spilling in from the window. With its communion with the outside and the fact that it was so barren, the room seemed more a cave than a modern structure. It gave Samuel a certain sense of nostalgia to be back within its four walls. A certain sense of unreality too, for though he had only been gone not more than a week he seemed far removed from who he had become while remaining within its domain. Sure, he had taken with him the ideas he had developed, but now, as he moved once more within the city, well, he hadn't been prepared for how much he would be made aware of his body. He hadn't expected it to be such a focus in his explorations. He thought this awareness was an important step in the right direction, toward his end goal, which was, now, and basically, to develop his ideas toward something. . . more tangible, so that he may be able to put them forth in a manner at the very least able to be entertained by another person. He had come to be precariously toeing the line of outright philosophy, and yet he knew he was no philosopher. He knew, as he developed his ideas, that he held no credentials to his name which would have people listen. He had to *live* his philosophy, and that was that.

And to live. . . to live, he could not deny his body, he had to instead test his ideas within the confines of his situation—the situation of the common, or even modern, man—and push the obstacles out and away, as much as possible (if at all possible), to ascertain how. . . viable his notions were, within the world, currently. To see where they could take him, if anywhere. He himself wanted to be the guinea pig. And so it was a natural decision, this act of his: he had set himself to definitively remove the option to return to his mind's haven. He could not allow such sanctuary to exist as refuge in those moments he would wish to avoid the realities of the task he had set himself. He had to free his mind in order to come to symbolize an idea with which the world, in its advanced form—and here he meant the state of its spectacle—could do what it wished, as he stood, in all his physicality, resolute and unwavering, for the sake of his convictions. Like Don Juan. He would be of no use hidden away within his room. He was sure of that. And as he was feeling a tad lost within the flux and immensity of all his ideals and values coming to a merging point within this hazy system he was desperately trying to scratch out for the sake of his well-being he would do anything necessary to abide to whatever sense of surety he could strike upon, for it seemed, as it were, like he was spiralling farther and farther out from any potential he might have to communicate with. . . well, even Ana, at this point. He needed grounding, somehow, for, looking back at his notes, they seemed confused and hurried. But he *was* hurried, in a certain sense: he wanted to relieve himself of the tensions he felt arose between himself and this world so that he could finally establish something tangible with which he could move forward into the future confidently certain he could be for Ana all she deserved. He was hoping that somewhere

out there, Ana was giving him time to figure these things out she knew only too well were pounding on his back, for they had been for almost as long as she had known him; and yet Samuel knew he was in a race against an ominous and leering clock—for she wouldn't be waiting forever.

Samuel was eyeing his bookshelf. He couldn't decide if all the books he had carefully selected should be subject to his. . . *purge*. On the one hand, it would just be the paper he was burning, after all; the ideas imprinted upon the pages had undoubtedly moved beyond the confines of their binding at this point. They were classic ideas, and as such they were out in the world already. They were in Samuel's mind already: their influence implicitly evident as far as their intentions reached. These were the ideas of the greats: their affect would not perish no matter how much was set aflame in the world. What was true would linger in the hearts and minds of many—even in those whom did not themselves take up the chase of such philosophic or academic query, for ideas which resonate have a way of trickling down over and through the structures of a culture, soaking into, to various degrees, even the most tucked away crevices. Yes, he would burn the books, merely because of what they were: heavy material which weighed down his purpose.

. . . But what of the shoebox? Here, despite himself, Samuel was made to pause his action even longer. Surely the same reasoning as what he used to rationalize burning these books held true for the letters Ana wrote? They too had the same influence upon his heart as the ideas penned by those thinkers—both noble and mad alike—had on the world. He understood the love her words had been intended to communicate, and in his

heart that love would remain even if he himself was set to burn. He doused the room with the gas, his eye and his hand disciplined—he did not over spend a single drop of fuel from out the red can, for he had further intentions for its particular chemical properties. He brought his potted plant to the door, though he wasn't sure what he intended to do with it; and yet he didn't want it too to burn. In his shoebox among the little artifacts of his life he had collected, for reasons of nostalgia and sentimentality, there was a matchbox he had kept from a little café in Vienna. On its green background, which was slightly travel worn, was its business imprint: mostly in capitalized lettering, though the name of the place itself—Einstein—was lower case and in a yellowed font. On the back of the box was the phone number to the café and its email address and etcetera. It was the only physical souvenir Samuel had from his trip.

At the threshold of the room he stood, his potted plant clutched in his hand, his shoulder bag slung over his right arm and filled with his laptop and the papers he had removed from the walls and his notebook. Samuel struck a match and, flicking it, sent it spinning end over end, and it travelled through the air as if in slow motion, landing in the middle of his room. The flames were fast in spreading. He shut the door behind him and walked down the hall, his footsteps ringing out, as Ana's had. Her letters he carried in his back pocket.

On the sidewalk he watched black smoke billow from his room's window, which was set far back from the street. He tore a bit of paper from out his notebook, and, having written the words, 'I need a home. I am healthy and insect free!', he placed the scrap note

on top the soil of his plant. He planned to place it on the doorstep of whichever house struck him as particularly hospitable within the next block—if any stood out specifically in that way. He didn't know whether it would be taken in, but he couldn't really carry it around with him everywhere he went, wherever that may be. It was a kind of spider tree, or something of the like. For the moment it was placed on the ground beside his feet, and the jerrycan too. He continued to watch the. . . what had he called it? his purge? . . So it felt to him as he stood on the deserted sidewalk. It seemed as if some intangible weight had been lifted, and his thoughts were no longer burdened by a sort of. . . malicious influence, which would only serve to hamper his courage when his resolve was tested. Samuel was startled out of his reverie by a voice rising from somewhere near the ground.

“Why'd you do that?”

Samuel turned and discovered that a little girl was beside him, somehow having approached him without making a sound. She was sitting on a bright purple bicycle with training wheels and a padded handle-bar. Yesterday had been mild enough to get the snow to melting, particularly on the roads and sidewalks as the sun warmed the concrete. The streets were hidden under a layer of slush. The little girl stared up at Samuel with grey eyes near hidden under a helmet coloured the same purple as her bike. Her pants were soaked up to her knees, and the path of her bicycle's tread, Samuel saw, was woven through the wet and heavy slush behind her, far down the empty midday suburban street.

“Because I don't need it. That was my mistake.” he said.

“Where are you going to live?” the little girl asked. She struck Samuel as if of the purest naivety. She was in no way sceptical, as many kids her age express tacitly in their

tone and questioning. She was just curious.

“I'm not so worried about that.” Samuel said. The girl said nothing in response, and the two continued to watch the orange flame, which every so often leaped boldly out his window, licking at the coniferous trees which had stood in front of his view those long two months. But the fire never met them—never closed the distance so much as to cause Samuel to worry. The two stood in silence, and once again Samuel found it to be a comfortable one, like the silence he had shared with the girl at the bus stop.

“Do you think you could do that to my house?” the girl asked after several minutes passed.

“What?” Samuel asked. Within the stillness of the street his surprise caused his voice to ring out, the edge of its note made sharp as it rose in unison with the crackling wood within his room, which popped and snapped almost without pause. “Why?”

“Because I think my parents made the same mistake you did.”

“What mistake?”

The little girl rolled her eyes. “You *just* said you realized you didn't need your house.”

“You think your parents don't need their house?” Samuel asked. The little girl nodded.

“Well, they're always fighting about it. They say they can't afford it. I hear them at night when they think I'm asleep.”

“But that doesn't mean you should burn your house down.” Samuel said.

“You seem pretty happy that your house is on fire.” she pointed out.

“Yea, I guess I am.” Samuel admitted. “But I have very particular reasons to do this. I didn't come to the decision lightly.” he added.

The girl shook her head. “I just think they'd be happier without it.”

Samuel paused. If nothing else, his own curiosity was piqued in turn, by this little girl, whose grey-eyed gaze struck him as peculiar in a way that was almost mesmerizing, as if Samuel could see clear through her pupils and into her mind, and she let him. She seemed very open and honest and straightforward, and there was a certain juxtaposition between the ostensible sensibilities kids around her age adopt in an attempt to seem mature, that were, in her, nonetheless funnelled through a certain. . . far off, dream-like quality to her manner and speech. He was encouraged in his curiosity by the innocence of the girl's example.

“Where do you live?” he asked. She turned around and pointed up the street.

“Not far. Come on, I'll show you.”

With both hands clasped to her bike's crossbar the little girl lifted it, and spun the bike around so that it pointed back the way she had come, and then she set off. Her pace was determined, and the small tires splashed through the slush and kicked up clumps of the stuff around her. Samuel had to jog to keep up with her. His stride was made awkward by the fact that he carried both the jerrycan and his potted plant. His shoulder bag still hung behind him and was made to sway with each step, its contents bumping heavily on his back. They turned down the very next street they came to, and as far as Samuel could tell it was a block practically indistinguishable from any other. The girl came to a stop at the bottom of the driveway of a narrow two story, painted white, the unmoving shutters

around the windows of a dark green. The second floor was set over top the garage. Half of it, anyway.

“Here.” the girl declared. The house's aluminium panelling contained maybe nine hundred square feet of space that, from the street, appeared motionless.

“Where are your parents?” Samuel asked.

“Work.” the girl said.

“Shouldn't you be at school?”

The girl shook her head. “School's done for Christmas.”

“Don't you have a babysitter?” Samuel asked. The girl looked at him fiercely.

“I'm almost nine!” she said. “My mom left me every number I need in case of an emergency. Besides, a babysitter is expensive.” she finished, as if it were a matter of fact. Which, Samuel supposed, it probably was.

She started peddling up the drive. Samuel followed, but not before setting his plant at the bottom of the front yard. The little girl led him around the side of the house to the wooden gate which gave access to the backyard. There was a rope hanging down from its latch, down near the height of the girl's shoulders. Grabbing it, she leaned with the entirety of her weight until the lock clicked, and the gate swung open a bit. She motioned for Samuel to come in as she carried her bike into her backyard, over the snow made dense with the weight of its thaw. She abandoned her bike once it was through the gate, leaving it to stand beside the fence, directly within the path of the gate's swing. With his foot Samuel nudged it a little farther into the yard, and then he closed the gate behind him. There was a sliding glass door granting entry into the house from the backyard

patio, and he saw that the girl had already slid them open—apparently, they had remained unlocked as she went on her bike ride—and crossed their threshold. Her head poked through the wall made by beige vertical blinds, her expression configured as if impatient for Samuel to follow as he had busied himself with her bicycle. He stepped through the doors and found himself in a kitchen so tiny it barely allowed room for a small circular table to stand in the corner, once the chairs were set around it. He almost felt claustrophobic in there, as if he were too large a version of the person it was suited for.

Samuel could tell from the pictures stuck under magnets on the fridge that it was the little girl's house. In most he saw her standing beside one or the other and sometimes both people whom were, undoubtedly, her parents. All three were captured posing in front of various landmarks around the province and the western side of Canada: one picture depicted the happy family waving at the bottom of the drive leading to the Fairmount hotel in Banff; in another they were all standing in front of Frank's Slide—though in this one their looks were distinctly somber; another captured them holding skis and poles, with goggles and scarves covering their features. There was one picture, almost centred on the fridge as if it were the family's favourite, in which the little girl looked particularly exuberant holding a watermelon on the top of her head; the background was of a beach along the Pacific coast, and the sun's summer rays reflected and shimmered off the water. The little girl had disappeared from the kitchen, into the living room, and Samuel moved farther into the house as well. It was there in the living room he saw, immediately and in the corner, the family Christmas tree. There were presents already placed under it wrapped in a mismatched array of Christmas and winter themed paper. The furniture in

the living room was also mismatched, for the couch was of a dark blue fabric, and an armchair of a lighter green was squeezed into the corner opposite the window looking out to the front yard; a fold out footstool of some generic department store design—one of those collapsible ones that can be folded flat and tucked under the chair when it is not needed—stood in front of the armchair. The girl was eyeing him expectantly.

“You want me to burn all this? All of your things?” Samuel asked. He waved his arms around him, and his words came out slow as he continued to take in all the subtle qualities of the little girl's home. Having seen her parents in the pictures captured in happier moments than the little girl had described them most recently existing in, Samuel felt he could see them sitting on the couch filling out a crossword together, or just chatting, while the little girl laid on her stomach, on the floor with a colouring book in front of her. Or maybe she would be reading. . . and maybe something substantial—Samuel was still not used to the presence with which the little girl affected him, as she stared at him with her grey eyes. Her attention had not moved from his face. She continued to regard him curiously. Hopefully, even.

“Definitely. My mom and dad never fought before we moved here. Now this house is all they talk about.” she said. Samuel gestured to the tree.

“What about your presents?” he asked.

“It's okay if they go in the fire too. I didn't really want anything, anyway.” she said. Samuel cast his eyes around the room once more, the jerrycan held loosely at his side. The little girl did not waver in her gaze, looking up at him from her diminutive vantage expectantly, the top of her head only just passed his waist. Samuel met her look:

the resolve in her eyes was steady. There was almost a challenge in them. Or a desperate urging. *Something*, and a something of considerable weight. In her eyes Samuel was reminded of his own as he saw them in that public bathroom mirror. The one he had smashed.

There was a clock hung on the wall that loudly announced each second that went by as Samuel remained motionless in his indecision. His mind had sort of drifted into strange territory, and he began to look upon this. . . proposal, of the girl's, as a sort of. . . well. . . Who else could rise to the occasion of the girl's plea which was so genuine? Samuel was in a unique position: he had no ties to anything or anyone, which meant he didn't have to account for his actions. He could just. . . *do* things, as the outsider he was. As a person detached from the world. He could keep his ears and eyes out for such persons as this little girl now standing before him, and do what they thought was right, in their own lives. . . do things they couldn't, for fear of the consequences. Samuel could introduce a little. . . variation, into the order of things. A little dynamism. Whether or not he chose to burn this house down was like a test of the anonymity he had begun developing. A test of his departure from his person—or at least those elements of a person that would have them opt not to do such a thing as he was now seriously considering doing. . .

“Well?” the little girl asked. Samuel's posture relaxed as he dispensed with the weight of his self rationalization.

“Alright. I'll do it.” he said. The girl's expression broke into the first smile he had seen her make. She had a few baby teeth missing and new teeth were grown in to varying

lengths. "On two conditions," Samuel continued. The girl's exuberance faltered.

"What?" she asked, hesitant.

"One: you've got to put the blame on me. That's why I'm doing this. . . because I won't get in trouble like you will."

At this the little girl looked at him as if despairingly, but she agreed.

"Two: you need to go outside while I do it. This is dangerous."

The girl nodded solemnly. Without a word she turned on her heel and walked to the front door, which stood at the landing of the staircase leading to the second floor. As she stepped outside she carefully closed the door behind her, as if worried she might disturb his concentration, or that Samuel might change his mind if any noise was too loud. Truthfully, that might have been exactly the case. As it were, as he traipsed up the staircase, his movement was made in swift pitches of motion even while his mind hesitated, once more as if he were trying to sway his mind to the reality of his limbs by the force of their automation. He started in the parents' room: he doused the bed and the dresser and the closet with gas, moving quickly so that the fumes did not rise and begin to affect him. In each room he moved backwards and out from all corners, ensuring every surface received enough of a soaking to encourage the flame to spread thoroughly and swiftly. He was careful not to douse his shoes or any other bit of his clothing in the fuel. Quickly he made his way from the second floor and to the basement, to which he found stairs behind a door off to the side of the kitchen. Here again he had been misled in his expectations of the basement's size: it wasn't of the dimensions of the floor plan above, but was instead exactly half in both length and width. It was home to the house's heating

system, and a washer and dryer, and, like the kitchen, Samuel felt himself grow a few feet in both height and breadth just by descending into the tight space where even the ceiling was low. There was a white painted cabinet with one vented door standing open, and inside Samuel saw laundry soap and other cleaning supplies as well as folded linen. He didn't spill any gasoline down here—he was worried the water heater would explode. Up on the first floor the Christmas tree received a thorough soaking. Despite how quickly he worked, the modest home space was soon made dense with the smell of fuel, and he began to grow dizzy, his intoxication increasing by the second. Samuel had backed himself into the front entryway and reached behind him to open the door. Once again he removed the matchbox from his pocket, and, now on the front stoop, struck one of the green-tipped sticks and tossed the small flame into the living room. He shut the dark green door behind him.

The little girl was standing at the end of the front yard's shovelled pathway, waiting on the sidewalk next to his plant, and Samuel joined her. Neither said a word as they watched the fire flickering through the windows, which soon succumbed to the pressure of the trapped heat and, as it forced itself free, the glass panes shattered outward in a cloud of black smoke. Samuel quickly moved to put his hand in front of the girl's face to protect her eyes from stray shards thrown down from the second story window. When the debris had fallen and settled and the only sounds left to meet their attention were coming from inside the house the little girl pushed Samuel's hand away, and they continued to observe the crackling house collapse in on itself slowly. Piece by piece they heard rupturing and popping and shattering as the fire ate up all in its path inside. Smoke

billowed out the windows. It rose in a torrent and was carried away upon the gentle draft of the mild day. Finally, Samuel stirred, coming out from the trance the scene before him had drawn him into like he were drunk on a certain impression that these sounds the house made were primordial in the power they reconciled. . . . perhaps the fumes had gotten to his head more than a little. He was staring at the house with an odd expression, like his mind was set to latch on to something and yet the ephemeral stream of his muddled thoughts did not provide anything his conscious could grab onto with surety. The little girl, sensing Samuel's renewed motion, snapped back to the present as well; it seemed her own mind had been set adrift.

“Are you going to stand here all day?” she asked suddenly. Samuel almost laughed at the accusatory undercurrent of her tone.

“When are your parents going to be home?” he asked.

“Soon, I think. So you should go.”

“I don't want you to get blamed for this. They know you've been home.” he said.

“No, your job is done.” she said, looking up at him. It wasn't the reflection within that made Samuel see fire in her eyes. “Don't worry,” she added. “I'll handle my parents.”

Samuel was walking away from the house with the jerrycan still in his hand. It remained half full, and he was feeling rather optimistic about this energy he found himself wielding. He was feeling more optimistic about things in general than he had for the last two months. Burning his room down seemed like it had been the best thing for him to do. He felt lighter. Freer. Like he could now be anything he so chose, with this fire in his hand. It was a peculiar nature fire had. A unique one. When it was wielded with care, its warmth brought people closer, and encouraged community during cold and dark hours—but one had to respect its power and keep a safe distance because, after all, everything burns. Samuel was wondering if, despite its primitive necessity and natural appeal, its elemental force was taken for granted? Taken for granted like human potential was taken for granted? He saw a lot of similarities between this duality which fire has, and the fluidity he felt inherent in people. In himself, for sure. In its very nature fire abides by a certain ideal Samuel found himself drawn to. Fire was both a creator and destroyer in its elemental temper. Samuel too could be both a creator and a destroyer, at times. Long before a value was placed upon it fire existed, and it will continue to exist long after, indifferent to the uses for which it may be captured in modern times. But fire wasn't only an aggregate of its material uses—it was a concept in itself: a natural manifestation of a particular force within the universe. One could even argue that its nature was integral to the formation and continuation of life. *Life*, that is, in its most unbounded essence. The potential to take it for granted grew as its nature was harnessed as an end in itself, instead of it being regarded as a powerful force which inevitably makes life *happen*. By learning

how to control and temper it, the modern man seemed to have lost an appreciation for its essential existence. . . Now, that was kind of like the weekend Samuel and Ana had spent in Banff, when they had stayed at the so-called 'Castle in the Rockies'. . . which was in fact the same hotel the little girl and her parents were standing in front of in the photograph on their fridge. His and Ana's had been a winter trip, and on the first of three nights that weekend, when the excitement of going away for the first time together was ripe and the town was offering discovery and adventure around every corner, Samuel and Ana dropped acid and went exploring. They didn't need to drop acid, but they had some left over from who knows where and when, and as anyone whom has experimented with such substances can attest, forests offer a certain appeal during psychedelic voyages. He and Ana dropped the acid right there in one of the hotel's restaurants, cutting in half the blotted paper which was the odd one out, out of three, with a knife served with their rather delectable dinner, and they were fast in finding themselves deep within the dark midnight forest, amidst trees that cracked and groaned sharply in the cold under the stresses of the wind; sounds which Samuel, at the time, had insisted were made from the calls of animals nearby, somewhat laboured and prolonged due to the plight belying their frozen circumstance, he figured. Despite this misleading settling of the cold stiff foliage around, the night was still within that valley of the Rockies, in which the wintry tapestry was so woven as if depicting two travellers holding the warm orange glow of their lantern up and out into the darkness and its flame was seen burning with resilience. The two wandered around listening to the whispers of the wind running through the barren branches. They rolled and somersaulted down snow covered hills and made snow

angels. They had a snowball fight on the frozen golf course behind the hotel. The night sky was clear as crystal above and Samuel felt he could reach out and touch the stars; maybe he even felt like he was on some distant planet far removed from any solar salvation and unable to thaw in the unforgiving depths of space. . . yes, the planet was one of those roamers that drift through the galaxy, with no stellar system to call its own as it was spun and whipped around wickedly by many bodies vying to influence its trajectory by the pull of their inertia. Samuel wandered off into the field, having noticed animal tracks running through the glades which bordered the sea of white set to sparkling under the glow of the full moon. They were a few days old, already on their way to being hidden under a fresh dusting. Deeper into the valley he went, and the farther he felt himself removed from the small mountain town left behind, the stronger became the pull urging him forward, into the dense unknown ahead, looming with silent but charged uproar like the wind one hears on a mountain peak which has nothing to rustle or sweep through and all one hears is its unobstructed rush over and through their ears. Samuel wanted to follow that encompassing silence. That rush of emptied motion. He looked around the field and realized he had gotten far away from where he and Ana had last been together. He had rounded a bend in the trees—a corner of the golf course's fairway—and he found himself surrounded by a wall of indistinguishable wood. He decided to turn back for he feared Ana might end up lost herself, prone as she was to getting swept away by the moment, and even more than he. Samuel retraced his steps, tracking his own footsteps through the snow as he had the animal's, jumping from one footprint to the other, trying to mimic his path perfectly so that if someone else happened upon his trail

they would be left unable to account for why and how his tread simply ceased its forward direction in the middle of the field. He laughed as he landed delicately with each leap. Oh was it silent out here! His laughter acted to attenuate the gravity of the night's looming darkness ready to suck him right up if he only allowed himself to be lured by its promise of secrets so hidden under the density of a space absent of light. In answer to his laughter the wind whistled and the fallen snow folded in on itself like whispers in reply. He found Ana. She had her arms wrapped around a tree. As he slowly cut through the dry, powdery snow, his footsteps swishing and the glittering powder he kicked up picked up by the wind, he saw that Ana wore a look of utter contentment, which he could see even underneath her closed eyelids, her mouth gently pulled upward into a small smile. He decided to let her be for the moment, and he found himself a good place to lay back and gaze skyward. She joined him in her time, moving to lay beside him, and they held each others' hand. Their forms were slightly propped up by a gently rolling slope.

“I'm getting cold.” she breathed.

“Okay.” he said, and after brushing his pants and jacket off he helped Ana up, and the two of them started making their way back to the hotel, which soon emerged in all its glowing golden magnificence from out of the black of night, its castle columns rising up before them in many-windowed and unconquerable splendour. Soon enough their path was lit by the cast of yellow lamps. The light reflected off the snow and off the brick of the castle; aiding their bid for warmth, it gently guided them from out of the cold, up and up the slope on which the hotel was situated, leading them confidently back to the front entrance. Inside, the hall to greet them was bathed in gold, from its floor to the ceiling,

interspersed with the reds and greens of Christmas decorations. The hotel had gone so far as to somehow inject the sweet smell of cinnamon and cloves into the air—perhaps pumped through the ventilation, so that everywhere guests went they smelled something akin to grandma's house saturated under the heavy fumes of Christmas cookies baking in the oven, wafting through the house as people in their merry motion swept it through the halls and into each room, often carrying a few sweets they had plucked freshly from the cooling rack. Samuel should have felt grateful for this so perfectly orchestrated welcome in from the cold, cold as he was. Here he found himself within an oasis in this frozen desert. Instead, he felt put off, because he felt himself lulled into a sort of infantile stupor, comforted as if a woollen blanket had been gently wrapped over his shoulders upon entry. The warm glow, the irresistible smells, the gentle, pleasant music echoing through the grand castle chambers: it was all put just. . . precisely. . . *right*, and it was practically hypnotizing. Indeed, it seemed to be just precisely right for reminding Samuel exactly why he was paying a premium for his room. Everything together was contrived to say, 'Here is luxury of the highest tier!' Outside, laying in the field, Samuel had fancied himself akin to a tiny branch, swaying gently in the breeze at the very tips of the tree's reach: such a branch as that which stirred in the wind above him as his eyes drifted amongst the stars that night. He had held a lantern in his hand, pushing out against the darkness of the unknown; against the void teeming with possibility. Those little unfurling branch tips: the lone individuals, yearning to reach farther than the tree's form has yet to. And yet so it is that these loners are still tethered to the tree—in other words they're still tethered to the whole of humanity, and at any moment they are able to draw in from the

cold if they so choose, into the protection provided by all the branches intertwined together, if only for a modicum of warm respite. It was only through the ingenuity of the tree that those little branches, toward which Samuel had attached a fond relation, can be allowed to venture ever farther from the main hub of their existence, from which they emerged. A necessary process. . .

Perhaps it *was* necessary to pause and seek out warmth from time to time, but the hotel castle had turned such warmth into a commodity, playing with that natural inclination all people have to seek out momentary relief from the world while on their travels and on their quests. Samuel felt as if taken advantage of, over all. He couldn't appreciate the sheer elegance of the grand, arching corridors, some of which seemed to lead to places of an eery atmosphere, as through their maze wandering guests came upon paintings of religious scenes which did not seem quite fitting, given the otherwise palatable elegance of the place on the whole, as well as photographs of the hotel's owners—perhaps—and other people whom all wore expressions which were not at all welcoming. Who exactly owned this place, anyway? And who has stayed here? Everyone of note at some time or another, must be, in the hundred years this place has been around. There wasn't a silence here, as Samuel had found in other halls of grandiose construction. Everywhere in the hotel he turned there was noise of a distinctly determined sort—melodies which soon seemed to turn almost mantra-like in its persistence. It was *oppressive*. Samuel felt as if his general mood had been. . . guided in a certain direction as he walked through the main floor gift shops which displayed caricatures of aboriginals with faces carved to smile wide and even silly, as well as a jewelry store with diamonds

priced for thousands of dollars, as well as a plush moose dressed in a mountie uniform which also was smiling down at him so affably from its display podium, challenging Samuel to dare find reason to feel downcast amidst all this magnificence. All of it together seemed so very contrived, and abusive of its tempering of fire, stripping it bare of all its elemental worth and its essential meaning to human history in order to turn a profit. That's what Samuel was left with upon his departure.

He had left the girl and her burning house far behind and had arrived once again on the outer edge of downtown. Samuel hid the jerrycan in an alley several blocks back, in a gap between a garage and a backyard fence which had much underbrush and garbage piled up in it as its unnecessary existence remained neglected. He passed two men dressed in suits, and one of them was pulling a newspaper out of the curb side kiosk.

"Did you hear about this?" he asked his friend. He pointed to the front page as Samuel walked by, but Samuel did not hear whether or not the other one had indeed heard before he had passed them and left the range to which their low, brisk tones extended. If it was a story worthy of the front page, the friend likely *had* heard of the event, for he just kind of seemed the sort one would assume would be within the loop of such things. The sort of guy keeping himself informed if only so that if someone were to ask him, '*have you heard about this?*' he could most assuredly nod his head and say, '*yes, I have*' followed by, '*it's appalling*', or '*unbelievable*', or '*isn't that something?*'. . . something like that. Such things warrant at the very least a noncommittal tone of laboured intrigue. The world was full of stories. . . it was positively *pumping* them out!

And every day, without fail! How was it possible to show the proper care any one story might warrant when new ones develop so quickly and one's attention is pulled elsewhere, *the very next morning*? So it was, at least, for the big news items. Samuel definitely could not keep up; not while he dedicated himself so completely to his own concerns, which were of course far and away removed from anything to do with tangible, or common, experience—nothing a newspaper's front page would ever bother declaring, surely. On the other hand, there were of course those stories tucked away on this or that page that perhaps pertain personally to someone or another—or stories which pertain indirectly as they're concerning the industry in which such a someone works. Those were the stories one *specifically* follows, of course, and they provide much to talk about between coworkers, primarily. But then. . . there are also the stories that become of national interest to consider and keep current with, for it was usually *national pride* which was at stake as the outcome of the event reflects back the values the country, as a whole, holds, such as the verdict in a federal court case, as an example. Or quibbling over the merits and drawbacks of a new piece of proposed legislation. *And then*, if that weren't already enough to worry about, there are: the entertainment pages, which broadcast the latest big budget movies as well as the local plays and which musicians are coming to town, all of which are reviewed by some writer or other, providing an opinion for his or her readers; there are coupons for groceries and restaurants and yet, when one finally makes it to the supermarket during the weekend, those items on sale are practically without fail out of stock as everyone else has snatched them up. So it is almost not even so fanciful a thing to do to imagine that around the dinner table of every home people sit to tuck in to the

same menu their neighbours are dining on while talking about the movie they saw on Saturday night in the theatre which was, they found, absolutely packed, before the conversation's concerns pass over to the sentence the Crown handed down to the man from another culture whom killed his daughter for disrespecting the family name. . . this is all assuming, of course, that one has time to actually *sit down* for dinner and discuss such things, before the next week's news items come under the diligent citizen's purview, and then the verdict of last week's court case becomes old news as one's limited time urges them to take up the news of the current moment. Thus one shrugs off what they might have missed with unconcern—such an action is deemed necessary. And yet! it seems international tensions never escalate; and worried epidemiologists, warning about potential pandemics spreading, never have their prognoses turn out as bad as they project; and suspicions of terrorist cells rise and dissipate, as, perhaps, someone is arrested, and interrogated, and released. . . or kept indefinitely (though that doesn't go in the paper). Over the dinner table the next blockbuster movie is mentioned within the same sentence as. . . that CEO caught embezzling millions of dollars mentioned in. . . the same sentence as the bomb that killed seventeen people—collateral fallout. And yet. . . and yet, who knows what's going on around the very particular path they tread every morning on their way to work? Samuel didn't, of course. He had never moved beyond formal cordiality with the clerk he buys coffee from—and they rotate so frequently as they get fired or quit and move on, anyway—and he didn't know at all why that restaurant he passed on the corner of. . . whatever street, went under, nor did he know where the owner found himself now, and whether he was broke or retired on a beach somewhere. Never mind that:

Samuel, seeing himself as a typical enough example of the modern man, admitted then that he didn't even know his own neighbours.

Except for the little girl, he thought. But then, both our houses are gone now. So maybe not?

Two blocks away from those two most gentlemanly of men, Samuel came upon a kiosk which was branded by the same news print, and plastered to the clear plastic window, so that its headline was visible at a glance to anyone walking by, Samuel saw what exactly the man had asked his friend about. . . So the headline read: PROTESTOR SHOT AND KILLED BY OFFICER. It was in reference to the student riots of Montreal, which had started back up again with renewed vigour, apparently (not that they had ever ended, but the newspapers had stopped reporting about it so frequently, and thus had removed the ideas and circumstances from the reality of anyone not directly affected or involved). Samuel had barely even kept a vague tab on what the latest developments had been over the last few months. . . hell, the last year even. Nobody around him talked about it, either, as far as he could hear. *However*, such a story as a cop shooting a citizen was one that needed to be reported, because, well. . . because it was a story that had already been told a dozen times in recent memory—in different cities, under different circumstances, sure, but the same basic structure of this particular event was burned into the back of everyone's mind. It was. . . an *active* story, or an active narrative arc. This headline Samuel continued to examine: blaring up at him so urgently and boldly, it gave the sentiments held against this arc a little jolt, to stimulate the opinions formed about such a thing happening—the opinions which everyone had all come to hold, really.

Questions were implicitly asked by this headline, given its underlying, common thread with other stories in recent memory, like: *don't you understand it is the officer's duty, as a professional in a dangerous occupation, to make such judgements?*, followed by, *can we trust these officers?*, and, *where does it end?* Etcetera etcetera. . . Such was what the discussion points would be everywhere Samuel went on that particular day, otherwise innocent in its routine. That's what stood out to Samuel more than anything: the headline, with capitalized letters positively shouting at any and every passersby, forced them to acknowledge this—was the journalist calling the incident a tragedy? . . . probably, underneath the opinion of the press. The *official opinion*. A tragedy: yes. No doubt. There were dozens of tragedies occurring right this very instant, all over the world. With all do respect to the protestor, but why was *his* name drawn—chosen—to be the one to have everyone's attention honed in on? Sure, it was news worthy, and that's how such sleight of hand works: so many events taking place, focusing on one—and even innocently so—nevertheless misdirects attention that would otherwise be cast upon another event happening. . . maybe for worse, maybe not. Who's to say? Nobody can keep on top of every story, whether it be little, or not so little, in relation to what's trending, overall, on the world stage. . . not when they themselves were so busy in their own lives. So it was, most had picked their 'go-to source' for such news they chose as most in line with their needs, in order to be informed of this or that reality, and thus they relied on these so-called professional reporters and journalists. Here a net of trust is strung up, and the person begins in their zealous naivety to parrot back the opinions of whatever source they trust, creating a web of self-reference and self-affirming perspective touted as true, or at

least pertinent and polemical, which anyone can whip out like a cigarette. . . that is, as a social crutch. As Samuel looked at the newspaper with all these thoughts stirred within him so, he was struck with a certain idea, and in a moment he knew *exactly* how he would be able to put to practice the spirit of fire, which he found kindled within him. So it would be. . . another sort of test run—to see what he could stir up. It would be something little, yes, but also something evident, in order to have a certain—notable; obvious; contrived—motivation behind it, and this made so obvious for the benefit of those whom it would directly affect. That was what he was able to do, after all. . . from his current position. If anything. To be so removed from society gave him opportunity to poke and prod here and there, merely to observe what waves he could kick up. Why not?

As it was, Samuel had a long time to wait before he could put his plan into action. All night in fact, and so he found himself walking around the mall when all its shops had been closed. It was not long before he was ushered out by a security guard, a little after midnight. Samuel was left to seek out some other place to stay warm as the night progressed; he found relief in alleyway nooks, which shielded him from the moon swept breeze reigning over the otherwise still streets of the financial district during these hours when. . . *oh*, when those peculiar *day walkers* are asleep. Ha! The night was relatively mild—it was nothing Samuel wasn't used to. The hours were slow in unwinding dawn's approach, but eventually, after recovering the jerrycan hidden out of sight of everyone—for they were not looking for it—Samuel found himself a comfortable enough spot by an apartment building's back door. He was leaned against and behind a concrete staircase so that only the very top of his head was visible to the security camera which held

surveillance over the rear entrance. Fortunately, there were no guards made restless by the long and uneventful hours of their shift coming to visit him. Even if they did take note of the back of Samuel's toque-covered head, he hoped they wouldn't be able to distinguish quite what they were seeing: he was barely moving, busied as he was, his head permanently angled downward as he wrote without pause in his notebook. He found he had a lot of material, and it was now time to try to weave it into a coherent narrative. . . into a structure that seemed believable in its scope.

As winter's morning slowly emerged out from under night's shade Samuel packed up his things and moved out into the street. Traffic was light, for the hour was only just after five, and Samuel walked with purpose down the familiar downtown avenue. When he approached his target, he sort of just leaned against it, and though he knew he had little time to make the dent he intended—it being his prerogative to reach as many city blocks as he could before people started milling through the streets—he nevertheless spent several minutes looking up and then down and then up and then down the deserted avenue in order to make absolutely certain there was no one rounding any corners and walking within his sight. Furthermore, Samuel delayed his action in order to give himself the time to summon the nerve to go through with this act of destruction he had set his mind to carry out. . . even though he had so recently burnt down the little girl's house as well as his own—and thus he should be used to the notion underlying the act he was endeavouring—it seemed this new plan of his would forever seal the direction down which he would travel from here on, moving forward in his days, alone and dissatisfied and with a certain power to his reach and touch he had not hesitated even for a moment to

bestow upon himself—for whom gives a person the right to do anything? Samuel found himself wondering then if such reasoning was almost like terrorist talk? *Terrorist* talk? Ha! Who was that talking in his head now? He wanted to spread beauty, not terror! If the actions he was preparing himself to take came to be seen as violent, well, then. . . *so be it*, he supposed. He would however try his utmost to have his intentions understood; it was a mastery of communication he strove toward, after all.

The seconds were slow in creeping by, as they had been in the living room yesterday afternoon, and much time passed before Samuel finally reached into his pocket, rummaging around coins that were set to rattling against each other. He withdrew a few loonies he had changed from a bill the day before, for the purpose. *For the cause!* Ha! Through the plastic windows, as he bent down to squint, Samuel saw that the kiosks were indeed loaded with the current day's paper—new news. There were three kiosks: two were charging a dollar to open and the third was free, the cost of its business supported entirely by the advertisements found within its covers. Once more Samuel glanced around: the hour was still dark as ever, and the streets were empty. Snow along the sidewalks and on the streets and dusting the window ledges of many buildings around reflected lights of all shades—coloured Christmas bulbs, streetlamps, fluorescent office lights shining down from second story windows, and the ever present, pale glow of the moon, never negated even by the most blinding of city lights. He deposited his coins, opening all three kiosks at once; they stood before him as if with mouths open and the doors lay horizontal like tongues stuck out at him, belching the news of the hour. From another pocket Samuel withdrew his matchbox, and with a single match he set each stack

of papers on fire. The flame caught quickly under the light breeze drawn to stir within the metal compartments. So the narratives spun for the day were set to burn. Samuel quickly removed himself from the kiosks' immediate vicinity, walking hurriedly, excitedly, down the block. It was on to the next set, and he could see them now, standing on the street corner two blocks over. It was at the back of his mind that he was stirring the pot and looking for structural weaknesses in the infrastructure of the world only so he could live a life *he*, specifically, deemed pleasant. And yet he was so concerned with the world as a whole as he was moved to action.

Samuel didn't know what he had been expecting, but the next day came round with newspapers churned out just the same. His efforts were noted in a page six article—relegated to the local news section—where his purpose was misappropriated as a random act of vandalism. And so it would become in the minds of most whom read it. Samuel didn't feel defeated, but instead validated, really. *Yes, his actions could cause a stir!* And that was what he had wanted to find out and it was this knowledge which now gave him confidence. *How* exactly they would make the everyday currents ripple and roll outward was another matter, and at best only a guess could be made about such things. All he

could do, and all he wanted to do, was prod and poke, and set a fire here or there, to draw attention to this or that object like he were drawing moths to a flame. Doing this often enough might soon enough have Samuel able to pick up on how the common person's attention is appropriated. . . he could gather data to reveal where everyone's mind was, over all. Perhaps he could eventually move toward something. . . bigger. But first he had to assess his points of attack, to see what may resonate with his audience, and what did not. His audience. . . ? No! These were *real people*, participating in the world Samuel sought to put on trial for questioning. The people weren't his audience, they were the *main event*. That's what he had to make everyone see, because news in all forms relegated the viewers to mere consumers of information and events: spectators of the spectacle. Samuel needed to show people how they could embrace their participation on the world stage. Thus he had to suggest a script that seemed tantalizing, in order to lure those whom might otherwise indulge themselves in passivity, making themselves comfortable in the seats of this theatre of terror and power struggle and nightmare and fear and. . . no one wants to get involved in such things. Now. . . what if Samuel invited *himself* to walk up those three steps which led to the stage, strolled to the centre underneath the spotlight, cleared his throat, and informed those whom were bothering to watch the world's current events that the entire act hitherto had been. . . well, just that: an act! An illusion. One particular narrative arc out of thousands that had been performed. And then, like certain television show hosts, he would ask for suggestions from the audience on what they might like to see next. But therein lay the twist:

“After such catastrophe, might I be right in supposing something a little more

light-hearted would be relieving? Perhaps something that focuses on the beauty in the world, instead of its horrors? Well, then, come on up and let's get this show started!" So he would say, and his voice would ring out not across an auditorium but instead every street corner. But how to make someone listen—even if only one—enough to encourage them to start urging such a change in scene? Wouldn't he be just like those preachers if he were made to stand on a street corner, doling out a philosophy no one had time to listen to as they busily shuffled along on their day's errands? Samuel needed to do something big, in order to catch people's attention as he wanted. As long as he stood up on that stage, alone, in a theatre patronized with wavering interest, the echoes of his voice would die out before anyone bothered to pick up their trail. Everyone would assume he was just the next performer, instead of a real person. It was the context in which he presented himself that betrayed his intention. He had to do something big, yes, but within the modern man's everyday environment, so that he could realize what was happening *was* in fact happening: not in the newspapers or on the television, but so close he could touch it. . . maybe not more than a block away from where he gets his morning coffee.

Samuel found himself downtown once again, at the corner of seventh avenue and fifth street. Right across from the CityTV station. Its main entrance opened up right there at the corner, swallowing up the sidewalk. The big white letters declaring the building's purpose were bold and obtrusive upon the glass panes of the structure's exterior. Samuel had a friend whom he worked for CityTV. For a moment, as the city metro went by in front of him, rattling east down seventh avenue, the thought crossed his mind to have her

somehow get him *in there* so that he could change the text on the teleprompter that night in order to have the reporter behind the desk explain the *real* reason for the newspaper kiosks having been lit on fire. He knew she didn't like the people she worked with, who bullied her and urged her every day to quit while knowing full well she couldn't because. . . well, no one can really do without a job right now, in this economy where what positions become open are filled quickly. No. . . Samuel didn't want to get her in trouble, and thus the notion passed just as quickly as the train finishing clattering and rumbling by as he continued to stand on the corner. Samuel looked around him. The courthouse, bold in its grandiose declaration of its rule and domain, spelled out in cement and glass, loomed behind and above him. He started walking to get his thoughts moving as his eyes drifted over the familiar downtown scene before him, and he wondered how many people he came across were withholding just as much trepidation toward leaving their room behind, and entering the world, as he was. Passed all the superficial layers of clothing and occupation and concern separating him from them he wondered how many still remained as lost as he was, despite how they so desperately tried to present themselves to the contrary.

He was walking south down Fourth Street and he took in all he passed with a confusing mixture of hopeful enterprise and jaded expectation. Under the bridge which let commercial trains pass between eighth and ninth avenue Samuel walked by a wall of graffiti. . . that had a stamp below it that declared the art had been sanctioned by the city government. Samuel had passed the graffiti many times, and every time he thought that such a thing as sanctioning it made the graffiti not *quite* graffiti, right? More like

propaganda, perhaps? Like the municipal government's agenda seemed crafted to cultivate a perception in the citizens that theirs was an artsy and hip sort of city; that it was booming in all facets of society, and not just economically speaking. And, true enough, where there is money, so it often happens that talent from all walks of life are eventually attracted. Much talent. Impressive talent—all sorts of artisans were made to put out their best work. But they were all made to calibrate their approach if they wanted a career with longevity, because Calgary was full of people whom knew what they wanted and were taking all the right steps to get it. In fact the city had such steps systematically arranged. Calgarians know how they want to spend their free time, and the city had grown in response to those things exactly. Yes, the money procured from the oil boom was being injected right back in to the infrastructure without delay; why should there be a delay? There was no shortage of money coming in, after all. Such citizens of a refined taste that only such prosperity can cultivate wanted intrigue, yes, but they only wanted novelty provided to them by hands of the so-called master class. A luxurious novelty: well paced, well executed, and just the right amount for the occasion. Oh yes they wanted class, in their restaurants and their entertainment, and theirs is the class of excellence that only money affords, for they can afford to get up and leave the table when anything is served below their standards, and never come back—for there is no shortage of venues to spend money in, and those serving these patrons of luxury know this. Calgarians, overall, have no time to give to those whom are mere apprentices of their craft. The concern they harbour for title inspires an awareness of where all others stand in relation to their practice, and in relation to themselves. A quantitative relation, determined

by earning potential. The dynamics of this picture are painted with precision, and coloured brush strokes give way to the compass and ruler of Euclidean geometry. The resultant image is not an exploration splayed on canvas (it couldn't be left at that); instead it strikes one as a blueprint. Sterile. Deliberate. Justified. Justified, for, in this city, all action requires explanation. A desire for excellence breeds contempt for capricious and unsure experiment. One better come prepared if one wants to entertain these people. They won't join in any exploration. They're too busy for that. Even Samuel, so sourly looking upon the product of capitalist regimes, definitely felt encouraged toward self-improvement, here in the perfect market system. Calgary was a well oiled money machine of a city, spurning everyone forward to do their best, for the rewards awaiting them if they do are endless in the capacity a person bred within this spirit has come to expect. So Samuel found that the demand these citizens placed on one another to be presentable at all times and in all things was strange—for humans, naturally, are rarely that. What a construction this city has built into itself, in the immaterial forces nonetheless shaping the stuff these streets and buildings and even this graffiti are made of! How do such forces come to be?

“Come one, come all! The show is about to begin!”

The voice was heard echoing across Central Park. The man whom was shouting was standing in the drained fountain, his well clothed feet dancing upon the cold cement of its basin, which was raised up slightly from the snow covered ground. People walking along Fourth Street, and walking along 11th Avenue, most of whom were milling about

during their lunch break and waiting in lines in front of food trucks or leaving Starbucks with a coffee and muffin in hand, and many were starting to gather in a crowd around the fountain, and around the man. He was wearing a top hat and a long purple cloak. A scarf around his neck fluttered around his person as he beckoned for more to come closer. He twirled a black cane which had a silver bulb at its end, clasping it with hands covered in purple leather gloves. Within the folds of his loose flowing cloak and the opened collar of his striped shirt were two chains swaying and bouncing with his motion the same as the scarf was. The man had dark rings of eyeliner drawn on his eyelids, causing his bright eyes to stand out from underneath the dark brim of his hat. He spoke with the confidence of a seasoned raconteur—the cadence of his speech danced over the syllables spilling from his lips.

“I hope I find you all very well on this cold winter's day.” he said, his eyes moving through the crowd, connecting with a person here and another there, smiling and winking and nodding at them. “You all look particularly healthy! Must be that those fine food trucks are serving only the best to you hard working ladies and gents!” The crowd, many of them holding food procured precisely from the trucks parked around the park, laughed and hooted as they raised their sandwiches and cardboard dishes overflowing with meats and vegetables. “Yes, well, and what better than a show to accompany one's meal? A perfect sensory event, allowing your minds to rest from your day's busy schedule, if only for a moment before you knock out that final leg of your respective work and you run down the last of your errands! Such is what I'm here for, for I do wish to enliven your spirits during this hard won hour of repose. Perhaps you have heard of

me? I am the Modern Man!” A few people in the crowd snickered. The man turned toward them, and with a twirl of his cane he pointed at one of those whom laughed.

“But do you not recognize me?” he asked the man directly, who being so specifically addressed adopted a sheepish sort of grin as all attention was directed toward him. He shrugged. “Is it my costume that strikes you as so unfamiliar? Or my eyeliner?” he lowered his cane and with a sweep of his arm moved around the fountain's edge, now addressing the crowd at large. “But surely we all wear costumes in this life, do we not? I have found myself the costume of the eccentric! The entertainer! The costume of a beguiling and bewitching story teller, for a story is what I wish to share with you today! As we are all standing here dressed to the nines for our particular vocations, out under the winter sun as respectable professionals scavenging and preying upon the Earth for our daily sustenance, don't mind when I boast that mine is the oldest profession of human history! It cannot be otherwise, for surely we must not have had history without a few wily fellows like myself around to tell of it? Ah, see how I got you!” People were filtering in and out of the crowd as they were called forth to enact the rest of their day's narrative, but the bulk of the man's audience did not shrink as he continued.

“We come to know ourselves through the stories we tell, do we not? Yes, yes, you've heard this before, I'm sure: you are all the authors of your own life book and all that. But this is beside the point; I add it only as a suggested theme to keep in mind as something belying what follows:

Now, a story must begin with a particular word, as a journey must begin with a particular step, no? Such a thing must be carefully selected, as this initial action comes to

define the course the traveller will abide by with each subsequent stride. Without ado, the particular step which is to be the first for our story—for the journey we will embark upon here and now, together!—which I wish to share right here and now is. . .” The man paused, looking around at those listening with a sweeping and piercing gaze, and as he bent low, leaning toward the crowd dramatically, they in turn and perhaps involuntarily leaned close to him, and the man whispered,

“*Lost*,” before standing upright with vigour and positively bellowing:

“Yes, lost!” he said, nodding emphatically. “Oh! With such melancholy does this term strike the modern ear! With such spite do we regard it! Isn't it just the common sentiment of these times to zealously *rebel* against its connotations? *There is no time in life to be lost!* we cry out as one, to our kids and to each other and most certainly to ourselves! Instead we must act with surety, if only to act at all, or else the world will pass us by in an instant, no?” Again the man paused, asking the question as if expecting a reply, and he received what he sought in the form of nods and murmurings of agreement from the crowd. He smiled and continued,

“*Yes!* the world moves much too fast: it is a full time job just to keep up with it. And, have you noticed that as our professions become more specialized it isn't even the world in its entirety that an individual must struggle to keep astride? We all must devote the lion's share of our time and attention just to remain relevant within the sector of our vocation, for, within the global infrastructure in which we all perform, there are literally tens of thousands of teams and individuals competing for the edge which will nab them the first place prize in whatever field they have immersed themselves within. I'm talking

about *everybody*: scientists of all disciplines, engineers, teachers, doctors, and even the behemoth corporations themselves: we're all fighting for that relevance within our practice in order to provide for ourselves and our family a future that will promise security and maybe even a little excitement and novelty; but above all to maintain promise of living the sort of life we so choose, as individuals! We seek to create and establish a world in which we and our families can thrive, do we not?

But the story does not stop here—” and indeed the man did not stop this time to await an answer before rushing forward, “—for we do not yet have a story without identifying a conflict: as we all have faced conflict in many forms, and as we face conflict in our efforts even to communicate and be understood, we would not believe any story which existed without it (for a story is such an attempt at communication in its very essence, after all)! In the story I share with you today, our antagonist is that very thing which, as it runs far and away ahead of us in this race we run day to day, outstripping our every effort to obtain the gold medal, is running away also with the vitality of our life essence in this endless and futile chase as we grow exhausted and weary of continuing on!

“So it is that our antagonist is this very specialization I spoke of earlier! This rapid specialization demanded of us by our need to proclaim that fighting edge, *which inevitably compartmentalizes our perceptions of the world!* And we have accepted this so-called progression of society as a fact of our reality, have we not? Do we not acknowledge that the scientist cannot speak to the politician, and the artist cannot speak to the scientist, and neither can really speak to the person of business? So it is, this

compartmentalization—this *isolation!*—nurtures the gap which has emerged between us at the very bottom of our being, as simple humans! We know more about the world than we do each other (not to mention ourselves)! We find ourselves in strained relationships, for we do not have the time to indulge in the mysteries of another! Where does that leave us, as individuals? Are we now destined to construct bubbles of our own concern in order to survive, carefully eliminating that which is not pragmatically pertinent to our lives? But what opportunity is then left to allow for the dynamic infinitude of our conscious imaginations? We need to strive to understand our conscious first and foremost, for our perceptions are limited only by our imagination. Did you know this? If we do find that we finally have a moment to pause and take rest from our busy lives—perhaps on a Sunday evening, *if* we are not *too* exhausted to use our minds somewhat actively—we turn to our imaginations only for escape! Instead of using it as a tool for unlimited creation! Thus I speak of this conflict: the conflict of the modern man! Such is the story I wanted to share with you all, and I find it infinitely more tragic than even the most refined and dare I say Shakespearean drama, for the story I relay is a true one, and it is stranger than any fiction!” The man finished, breathless after his impassioned delivery. His shoulders rose and fell rapidly. He jumped up upon the ledge of the fountain and began to slowly walk around the circular rim. What eyes remained watching him latched on to his every move. He did not speak again until he had come full circle. He turned abruptly to face the crowd.

“I know the lunch hour is winding down, and most of you will have to return to work. And quite soon. Thus I think it most pertinent to proceed toward the culmination of

this event we have shared together.” The man jumped off the ledge, back into the fountain, and all at once his movements became much more swift and precise, almost business-like, as compared to the flowing and sweeping gestures which had imbued his character thus far.

“I am a storyteller, and as such I am not unfamiliar with the art of illusion. I wish to have those of you whom have remained with me thus far to leave feeling as if you've gotten your time's worth, for I know time is such a limited resource. I am no magician, but I have prepared this final act and I am confident I will be able to pull it off successfully—allow at least a little leeway if I falter at all, for I am only but a mere apprentice in this craft I have chosen to pursue. This final act I have designed in the spirit of a certain type of event that has spotted our local news this week just passed. Perhaps some of you know of the fires to which I am referring, both the two houses which burned down in the city's southwest and the kiosks which were set aflame downtown the night before last?” Many of the crowd nodded. The man nodded too, looking to many with a tragic expression upon his countenance. “It is toward these fires I wish to focus, in effect. I hope I have gathered your trust enough that you believe me when I say I mean well by those whom were affected—particularly the little girl and her parents, who lost their home so suddenly.” Many of the crowd nodded again. “Good.” he said. “And so here we go:

Now lately I've been trying to understand what relationship, if any, might exist between the concepts of creation versus destruction. If you'll forgive me, I will admit that I was rather optimistically spurred on by the fires ignited within our town this week, for I

have come to see fire as a symbol which unites both these concepts as one.

“Yes, there have been many fires this week. Perhaps you read about them in this morning's paper? Maybe you saw the photos? I saw them. I was left wondering why the girl captured in the picture on the front page was smiling? Did you notice this too? She was positively beaming, wasn't she? I wonder. . .

“It's a curious nature fire has. Remorselessly, unthinkingly, it sets everything to burn until nothing remains but a pile of ash. It embodies destruction at its most pure—and yet it put a smile on the little girl. *Why* the smile? Why why why? Could it be that destruction is only destruction seen from a particular perspective? Could it be that the girl whose house burnt down did not see her house destroyed, but her family's life created anew? Could it be that the fire set to eat up the newspaper kiosks the past two days was creating a world free from ideology, if only for a moment, during which time we were all left to think for ourselves—about our own lives? Did you notice maybe that you spoke to one another a tad more openly, as you mutually pondered the significance of the event happening right in your own stomping ground?

“Upon my investigations into this duality which exists within fire I have come to see creation and destruction as one and the same thing. Fire symbolizes this mutual and unbreakable relationship, for it is in fire that these two elemental forces meet: fire has created civilization; it brings people together for many things and in many ways, and when people come together, well. . . that is when true creation happens, as the dynamic tensions of our various perspectives attempt to find harmony and synthesize with each other in order that we may not only survive, but advance!”

The man paused, and finally he acknowledged the rumpled bundle of clothing which lay in the centre of the dry basin, next to the fountain's spout, which had persisted in drawing curious glances from every member of the audience throughout the man's speech.

“And now ladies and gentlemen, for the main event!” He bent down and with a flourish he removed what the faded coat and sweater had been covering. A bright red jerrycan was revealed. Several of the audience members recoiled in surprise. Perhaps a few felt fear. Most leaned in with hungry interest.

“Oh, don't be frightened! You all know that this is just a show, after all! An act! All of this, I mean to say! I assure you: I know exactly what I am doing. They don't let just anyone dress up in this way and claim to be a conjurer. Illusions are in part my purview, and you must know that already and rightly so. . . for I have introduced myself plainly!” The man was circling around the fountain once more, and as he glided along the edge of its diameter he was allowing a trickle of gasoline to lay down a line behind him until he had circled upon himself, enclosing his movement within the ring of fuel, or what was apparently fuel.

“Ah! I see your scepticism.”

The man went over to a young boy standing as close as he could get, his shins digging into the fountain's edge, its ledge separating him from the man, and the man encouraged the boy to sniff the jerrycan's contents, so as to confirm that what was inside was indeed gasoline. The young boy nodded, and the purple cloaked man stood back, triumph in his eye.

“It has been these fires this past week which has inspired me in my latest trick! You could say the energy of their flame was fuelling mine own! When I saw one, two, ten, twenty kiosks set to a roaring blaze, I felt as if a part of myself were set on fire too. Did any of you have that same peculiar sensation?

“You all know me! We are the same, for I am the Modern Man, and I must admit that I have been focusing too much upon the tragedies of my existence as of late. I have found that this serves only to perpetuate them. I have unwittingly hemmed in my own imagination due to the constant focus I place upon my woes.

“Now, would anyone be so kind enough so as to lend me a light? I've come all this way: I have brought my gasoline and I have dressed in my purple cloak and drawn eyeliner around my eyes, and yet I seem to have forgotten this most essential item.” The crowd laughed, and someone held out a lighter to the man.

“I will now set this costume on fire, and with it burns all that I appear to you. We shall see what remains!” The man bent down and struck flame upon the ring of fuel encircling the stage, and the wall of fire roared up in an instant. Those at the front of the crowd backed away from its rippling heat. And then the man, almost nonchalantly, as everyone's attention was for a moment diverted away from him and toward the flickering fire, doused himself in what remained of the gasoline in the jerrycan.

“I am the Modern Man, and I set thee to flame!” Samuel flicked the lighter's chamber open, and the spark thus thrown ignited his whole body within the blink of an eye. The crowd gasped as Samuel stood centre stage and took a bow. Then the applause came and grew steadily in appreciation for the wonderful noontime performance, which

had been so unexpected! The flames continued to lick Samuel's clothing—under so many layers the heat was delayed before it reached his skin. He continued ambling around the stage, bowing and waving to the audience. Many waved and bowed back in their celebration. As the fire started searing his flesh, Samuel could not restrain himself, and he cried out in agony. The audience laughed and clapped with renewed vigour, the Modern Man alight in his destruction! Samuel's casual stroll around the stage broke out into a run to and fro as he searched for help, screaming for someone to extend their aide. The audience grew more enthralled, thoroughly enjoying the raconteur's acting. They watched the Modern Man burn, clapping and cheering and laughing. Many looked at their watches and at the read out displayed on their smart phones and, realizing it was time to head back to work, began walking away from the burning fountain, talking excitedly to their coworkers. Philip's Po'boys, as well as the other food trucks, were packed up, done with another day, and began to wheel right away.

The day wasn't warm, of course, but it wasn't too cold either. It was one of those days Canadians know and cherish when, if it *has* to be winter for a large portion of the year, at least—they all say in unison—'*at least have it be like this most of the time*'. Necessarily

so, most Canadians find something to like about winter, given that its conditions had come to dominate much of their lives. If a given year weren't *too* cold, a surprising number would even say they prefer the winter season to any other. Samuel was one of these people. He fancied there was a certain feeling unique to the winter atmosphere of Alberta; a certain clear and clean crispness, like the mountain air had been frozen, sealed up, and carried across the plains to Calgary and Edmonton and the other, smaller towns and, arriving there, it was opened up and allowed to pour out over each city, having been made to retain that remarkably fresh effect upon one's palette. The snow all piled up makes everything look clean and gleaming white, and on days when the weather is relatively warm and the sun is out in full stride, being outside is like gliding through a field of gems glittering and sparkling. Thus was the type of day it was, and Samuel, finding himself waking that morning feeling almost jovial, and certainly carefree and as if cleansed after yesterday's events, decided with an optimistic spirit he hadn't felt for many, many weeks, that it was thus quite a perfect sort of day to go out for a walk, without any thought extended toward where he was going to go—he just wanted to be outside to enjoy the city as the whimsy of his step led him some place. . . interesting, undoubtedly, if only he placed his trust in it. Besides, it was a very real fact that Samuel didn't really have a place to set up camp indoors, anymore—this indeed a fact, though it bore no weight upon his morning's peripatetic inclination. So it would be out in the world he would be spending nearly all of his time, from now on; even regardless of whether or not the weather was so inviting as he was so fortunate to find it this morning.

Once having vacated the sheltered corner he had found for himself to spend the

night, and getting to moving with a zeal with his belongings hanging off his shoulder, it was toward the Bow River that Samuel set his sights. He wanted to walk along its shore, eventually arriving in Kensington. Along the way he would come to pass that part of the river which was his personal favourite: near the recently constructed Peace Bridge which—as he had overheard someone say and had henceforth never been able to view in the same way again—looked like a giant red Chinese finger trap. He had laughed when he heard the girl say it, and the girl—for she was walking ahead of him, talking to her friend—snapped around and smiled sheepishly,

“Well it does!” she stressed.

“I don't disagree with you, now that you mention it.” he had said.

Despite its inexplicable aesthetics, Samuel continued to enjoy the Peace Bridge, and particularly at night when it was lit up with so many lights. He also liked the area around it: the field where dog walkers and joggers and bikers crossed each others' paths from morning to night most weekends and summer days and where, in the summertime, geese made their home. Last summer Samuel had been able to observe the growth of newly hatched goslings from fuzzy yellow awkward things, walking and swimming in line behind their parents, to slightly bigger, browner, and even more awkward fuzzy things, for they had started to venture out on their own, with an unsureness that was still defining their gait; finally they had reached full adulthood, with all of the characteristic colours composed into the silhouette one identifies as familiar to geese, and the cycle of their mating season enjoyed its culmination in late autumn—just when the season to fly south returned.

The river he was walking beside was starting to freeze, and sheets of ice broken off from the main frozen body floated down the river and traced the flow of its current like those tiny computers meteorologists used to chart weather patterns. Samuel had once read a book written by a guy whom used floating garbage to do the same thing with ocean currents. The author had referred to the floating waste as flotsam, a word traditionally used to indicate the debris left floating from a wrecked ship. Samuel liked the comparison.

Soon enough he arrived near the Peace Bridge, in the field where the geese had lain in previous seasons when dogs chased frisbees and tennis balls, the field's greenery now covered in snow mostly untouched except for areas of regular foot traffic which everyone used due to the snow already being flattened under the routine tread of so many pairs of feet—the footprints a document of another current out of many which comprised the city's ebb and flow. Samuel looked up to see the balconies of his favourite penthouse: perched atop the condominium directly adjacent to the pathway which had granted him entry into Prince's Island Park. A pathway bordered with pots of flowers in the summertime, carefully trimmed and arranged in coordinated patterns of colour, now a pathway beset, quite simply, with that glittering snow which encouraged the day's appeal. The apartment was a brick building, and older. It was not comprised of floor to ceiling windows like many apartments more recently erected within the area. Instead the windows were of a dark tint, and the building itself was red brick all the way up to the top two floors, which were made distinct by a beige stone defining the contours of the extravagant balconies of the two story penthouse. *This* was the sort of area in which

Samuel would like to buy a place for his mother, some day: buy her an apartment from which she could enjoy a view of the river and which had an entrance opening right there into the park, where she could go for mid-morning walks on weekend days and relax along the river's shore. Yes, that would be perfect! That would be just what his mother needed, and especially going into retirement: a place she could enjoy the rolling waters, as she was wont to do for hours when she had no errands to otherwise attend to and no place to be. His mother could spend entire afternoons enjoying the motion of nature's most simple attributes, he knew. And as Samuel looked up at the building, his stomach right then, quite suddenly and so unexpected given how Samuel's day had started, did a sort of somersault, before plummeting to somewhere near his feet, for he was struck anew with the knowledge that he was nowhere close to repaying his mother for all the years of self sacrifice she had spent raising him and his sister. Recovering from this punch to the gut, he was left wondering whether he really could entertain living out the ingenuous design he had set for himself in the days just recently passed? It was of no question that if he did so choose to insist continuing down this course he had defined for his art and thus his life, one clear, collateral result, was that his mother would be forced to work until she was seventy years of age, at least, for she had in her life sacrificed any notion of saving her earnings in order to provide a comfortable existence for her children, and now, with them finally out of her house, had to play catch up with only herself to rely upon. For how could she count on support from Samuel as she approached the age of retirement when he spent his time thus? Here he had been playing the artist the last few days, thinking he was really doing something of worth, and maybe even something necessary,

and yet as it stood he was homeless and jobless and growing more removed from anything productive by the day. Sure, he felt freer, perhaps, psychologically speaking—and since yesterday especially—but, really, he couldn't deny that he was letting those closest to him down. Letting them down, for the artist, necessarily engaged in the pursuit of self knowledge, is fundamentally at odds with the pursuit with which a participant of society would instead occupy themselves, whom instead aims to understand himself not but through external things, which, having been fully realized in the so-called participant's life through successful application of his industry, beget such understanding only when the participant acknowledges their limits in fulfilling his inner yearnings, which, he then discovers—and perhaps too late, for he has reached middle age at least, by then—were much simpler than the motions of society had him imagining. More primitive, even, was their causation. Samuel, even before leaving high school, had resolved not to participate in the system thus set up, precisely because he felt it would do nothing to aid him in his ideal of a life well spent. That was five years ago. What had those five years built toward? . . . Bent in upon himself, right then, looking up at the penthouse, Samuel put into explicit and candid vocabulary *exactly* what those five years had resulted in: he had locked himself away for two months, doing nothing more than complaining, really. . . complaining, into a fucking journal.

Samuel violently tore his gaze from that top floor apartment, with its views of the river and the Rocky Mountains beyond the intricately woven wrought-iron of its handcrafted railings. Views Samuel could only imagine giving his mother. He looked down dejectedly at the frozen ground. He kicked a loosened chunk of ice, and watched

the momentum carry it over the rocks lining the river's shore and into the black winter water. He was ashamed, really. And this shame: its source, where? Well, wherever it happened to stem from, this so sudden reversion in his perspective, from his morning's sprightly optimism to his present one, happened in an instant, and all at once his expression, having been so recently contented, clouded, and his shoulders slumped as he seemed to collapse into himself, utterly deflated. His nausea resurfaced, stronger than it had ever been before. For some reason an image flashed before him then. A dream image, perhaps, for it did not depict the sort of motion ever to have taken place in reality, though the clarity of its relief was seared so vividly upon his mind's eye. . .

. . . He was performing some menial task as a bartender, polishing glassware during the mid-afternoon lull in the restaurant, and because of the relative inactivity around him as servers crossed out listed chores in order to prepare for the dinner crowd, Samuel quite quickly allowed himself a moment to engage very heavily in a conceptual problem he had been mulling over in his mind since last night. As he was thus concentrating so inwardly he was unaware that, from somewhere before him and across the bar, a customer was trying to gain his attention. Resolutely ill-prepared for an interruption in his reverie, Samuel continued polishing glassware, oblivious to the customer's urgings. Oblivious, that is, until a very peculiar sensation rent through Samuel's entire body, from the hairs on his head to the tips of his toes. A sort of sensation that felt as if he had, quite spontaneously, shed a layer of skin; that, in his movement, he had left a part of himself behind. As a result he felt lighter. This so alien interruption rippling through his ligaments finally broke the spell of his reflection, for a moment. He

looked around, but was unable to find any cause to this phenomenon he had never before experienced: there was no vent above him, and nobody had walked by him, stirring the air around his person; two things he thought might have been the appropriate explanation, for so subtle was this feeling, like a breath upon the nape of his neck, but so encompassing too, so that he could not brush it away and go on with his polishing. Looking toward the front door of the restaurant to see if the door had been opened, Samuel finally took notice of the customer whom was still standing opposite him on the other side of the bar. Only now the customer did not have an impatient look turned toward Samuel, because he was then engaged with another of the bartenders, and quite amicably so. Samuel would have thus continued his work, eager to get back to his thoughts. . . except he was prevented from doing so when he remembered that there *were* no other bartenders working at so slow an hour of the day's business!

How odd, he thought.

He turned his attention once more toward the other bartender standing so close to him. Eyeing him carefully, it took but an instant for Samuel to ascertain that this other bartender, talking so well with the customer as he himself had been unwilling—or even unable—to do in that moment; the other bartender with a smile on his face and an attentive charm in his eye; that other bartender, Samuel realized, in a horrible moment of a wrenching disorientation shifting his perceptions like tectonic plates colliding within the depths of his very being; that *other* bartender, was *himself*. Samuel—the one polishing glassware—stood gaping, unable to comprehend what he saw then before him: his duplicate in every way, except that *he*, for some reason, did not appear quite. . . solid.

As if he were but only a mirage. This was something the customer did not seem to notice, however. So it was, the Samuel polishing glasses put down his rag and went over to stand before the customer. . . beside this. . . *impostor*, to declare to the customer that *he* could be of assistance, and that he should not pay attention to this. . . *other*. The customer did not take note of Samuel, however, for Samuel had for so long not taken note of him, and instead the customer continued speaking with the other bartender whom, after having satisfied the queries directed to him, began walking away from the bar to the kitchen, and the customer made his own exit, quitting the restaurant, out into the street.

Samuel urgently followed the apparition, whom he found, in the kitchen, had introduced himself into the idle chit chat taking place between a few of the cooks. Again, the other bartender—the other Samuel—was very engaging, it seemed, more so than Samuel felt he could be, in that moment, lost as he was in his own head. The other was all smiles and laughs, and quick to joke, and he easily made the cooks laugh, too. Samuel watched the apparition then with a mixture of wonder and maybe even a peculiar intrigue, for the fact that he had never seen himself—or an imitation of himself—behave so. . . openly. So it was, as the day progressed and the evening staff arrived for their shifts as the dinner crowd began to filter in, Samuel watched this *thing* assume his role, performing all the necessary duties as the restaurant's bartender, meeting even the most minute responsibility with aplomb, even as no one paid him—the real Samuel—any mind. As if he weren't even there, standing off on the sideline, consciously ensuring he was not in anybody's way. No matter how hard he tried, Samuel could not come up with an explanation for what had taken place—for what *was* taking place. As the evening

came to a close, Samuel followed this other Samuel as he quit the bar and moved out into the downtown streets, down the three blocks to his apartment building entrance—*Samuel's* apartment building entrance. So it was that during the night Samuel had had the peculiar sensation that he was growing lighter as he watched from afar with perplexed disbelief this other engage others as if he were him—as if he were *Samuel*. He felt lighter, as if his touch were becoming of a lesser effect on the things he brushed by, and that even his voice was growing fainter, and it seemed to happen every time this other spoke to someone else, whether a fellow worker or a guest sitting at the bar. Indeed, not even the wind could be bothered to stir the bangs of his hair or the sweep of his untucked collared shirt as Samuel walked home behind this apparition. As such he found himself nervously compelled to time carefully the moment the apparition opened the door so as to slip in behind; he feared that he would be too weak to open the door by himself. By the same degrees in which he seemed to be fading away, the apparition, in turn, he noted, seemed to become sharper and more in focus and more solid in his presence.

Thus the dream, or image, or whatever it was, ended, when this impostor opened his—Samuel's—front door, and came face to face with Ana, whom happened to be walking by the entrance upon his arrival. Quietly slipping in before the door was shut, Samuel watched as Ana greeted the impostor with a smile, and when they kissed it was from behind Ana's back that the other—his double—looked right at Samuel, and with a wave of his hand, and even a little wink, seemed to say: “I've got this.” And then Samuel felt himself fade away completely, and he couldn't help thinking that maybe this was for the best. . .

All around him it seemed as if the faces moving through Prince's Island Park were somehow leering at him. Thus Samuel was almost walking with a limp—crumpled in upon himself as he was—insistent that he get to moving so that he could get away from the ogling crowd, which was looking at him so blatantly, he knew, because they were aware that he didn't fit in; they were aware he was homeless. . . that he was a bum, and they were silently accusing him of the crime of walking amongst them, as if he belonged. And as he realized that he was the impostor, Samuel was compelled to hide his face as he walked hurriedly along the river, trying his best not to meet the eyes of anyone he passed.

Yes, he had been playing the artist. For he had made the efforts to free himself to do so. With disregard toward anything but his own concerns he had freed himself from the tethers of any obligations, and thus he was able to fully direct his efforts toward. . . self indulgence. Yes, that's what he had set himself up to do, because he was a fucking lout. And what had he freed himself from, then? Such was the question that surfaced in his mind, coming from somewhere he didn't quite recognize, and yet it forced itself upon his thoughts, demanding an answer. He was anxious to meet the question. . . it was the sort of question he imagined these faces around him would ask him, leering and grinning viciously as they asked it and then watched him shudder and panic and squirm. . . Certainly if he were left alone, isolated, he would not bother to ask himself such a question. There would be no point! So the people around him jeered:

“Look at the coward!” and, “Man up!” and, “What a leech!”, and the like. . . All sorts of similar sentiments that had almost become cliches as he looked around despairingly for some way to avoid having to answer their question, so that he could

ignore them and focus on developing his passion, in order maybe to share it in a well composed form. . . ?

That's what he strove for, no?

Oh *yes!*

He felt *very* passionate about sharing his ideas, and developing a way to share them. . . for some inane and totally unjustified reason, no doubt, no matter how much he rationalized the fact. . . rationalized the fact that he was a fucking layabout. He paused then, thinking this, grinning to himself even somewhat wickedly, and he stepped to the side of the path winding parallel to the meandering waters of the river which pounded out the path in which it now was allowed to roam in and around the cityscape; stepping to the side, he did, to allow the steady traffic of joggers and walkers and an occasional bicyclist—stubbornly retaining their preferred mode of transport through the winter months—to pass. He then unclipped his pen from his pants pocket, and with his bag's strap hung over his shoulder he brought his bag around to his front so he could retrieve his notebook, and he wrote, in a messy scrawl, an addition to the list of definitions he had begun:

Passion: it increases at the rate at which satisfaction decreases. Which is to say, passion is a yearning toward a state which the individual experiencing passion recognizes is optimal for his or herself. It goes without saying that what is optimal is not something which is destructive, long term. Passion leads to the healthful flourishing of everyone, eventually, for passion is contagious. Those whom have it, inspire others to seek out the same within themselves.

Needless to say, Samuel hadn't stopped at the Peace Bridge to sit on one of the

benches along the footpath to watch the river rippling and rolling and softly crashing upon eroded rocks transforming the river bed, and thus the river's motion, with their presence, as he often did, for he felt an urgent need to keep moving. And he didn't stop in Kensington either. He didn't grab a coffee or tea to warm him up. He had his jacket unzipped, and he found his t-shirt pleasantly permeable against the wind's soft breath.

Samuel continued his trek along the river to the 14th street bridge, and from there, quite unconsciously, he began heading north. Cutting straight through the city on 14th he veered off the four lane and wandered around neighbourhoods he didn't much frequent. Eventually, along twenty-fourth avenue, he came to an area he had come to know well: the university campus, and, realizing it was Friday, he looked at his watch; it was that time slot of the week when a favourite professor of his was open in his office to receive students. (Samuel had taken a semester of open studies at the university to see if he might find something interesting enough to invest himself in. He had not, and he had left the school quickly, but not before striking up an amicable enough relationship with Dr. Wallace, whom had taught a philosophy course). In those hours when Dr. Wallace was not particularly busy and Samuel found himself around campus he would drop in to say hello. The ideas either of the two had been entertaining since last seeing each other would be pitched back and forth during these visits.

The familiar halls he walked down on his way to the Humanities department were quiet, the fall semester for the most part over and exams finished, and only a few students roamed alone with their heads down, or if they were in groups they were speaking a little more hushed and private. When he arrived at the office he sought, he saw Dr. Wallace

inside and alone, bent over a laptop. Samuel paused at the threshold of his professor's office, and knocked upon the door's frame. Not looking up, Dr. Wallace said,

“Come in.”

Samuel entered, making himself at home on the seat he always took.

“Busy marking papers.” he observed.

“Samuel! Nice to see you. Yes, I am.” Dr. Wallace said. Then he added with a small smile, “As always, I'm afraid. And with finals over, I'm working round the clock to get these grades in.” His eyes slowly moved up from his screen to look at Samuel. Then he performed an obvious double take. “Samuel, you look terrible.”

“Really?” Samuel asked, a bit surprised.

“Like you've been through hell and back.” Dr. Wallace said. Samuel let out a small laugh that was more like an exhalation he had been holding in for quite some time.

“I guess I haven't been keeping up appearances.”

“So, let's have it then. Something must be on your mind.”

“There is, yes.” Samuel affirmed. “But before I burden you with my youthful woes, might I ask how you have been as of late? How are your classes?” He felt very relaxed in Dr. Wallace' office—about as relaxed as he had been since leaving his room, once more emerging back into the bustle and flow of society. Maybe it was being within the walls of academia—in here one was about as close as they could get to theory while still 'contributing'. His professor's space was much the same as his own study had been: books and papers were scattered and in piles everywhere; plants were in the corners, and a coffee mug with the words *what is the exact meaning of semantics?* written on its side

was filled to the brim with coffee, which Samuel knew was likely to be old and forgotten. Dr. Wallace himself looked the same as ever. Stocky and jovial, he had thin blonde hair that was kept longish and messy. To look at him, no one would suspect the man was a professor of philosophy—more like the owner of sports shop, refusing to let his age temper his enthusiasm for adventure—but if one asked they would find he had three PhDs, as well as a few honorary degrees from various schools in which he had taught throughout his career. The books he had published formed a considerable stack, if one stood them so—mostly collections of essays, though he had penned a work of fiction about twin brothers who realize they are the same person born from a schizophrenic mind, and the parents, both psychologists, whom had adopted the child specifically because of his psychosis and had succeeded in maintaining the boy's illusion for many years beyond his reaching adulthood, extending themselves to unfathomable lengths to that end in order to subject each of the two distinct personalities to very specific and various extremes of social conditioning.

“Well, I have that class on meta ethics I'm teaching, as you know, and I like the group well enough. There's one girl who is particularly enthusiastic about the material. She takes the discussion to interesting and often contentious places. Not unlike Ana.” Dr. Wallace added, giving Samuel a wink. He watched as Samuel's face, which, upon his entering, had already reflected trouble, became a mask of an even darker configuration.

“Ah.” he said, and, perceptive as he was, he added, “I thought you two would last. What happened?” During the fall semester following the summer they had met Samuel and Ana happened to find themselves enrolled in the same course, which Dr. Wallace had

been teaching. It was in Dr. Wallace' class that their relationship was given the chance to blossom as they found in each other immensely satisfying debate partners. Homework assignments they worked on usually at one or the others' house; abstracted theory was quickly forgotten in light of the indelible influence of a more. . . primal concern.

“I broke it off.” Samuel muttered, looking at the ground. If he allowed the tears welling behind his eyes to fall he didn't know where it might end, and thus he pressed onward, somewhat aggressively even. “I want to know your opinion on whether or not a person can be truly passionate about more than one thing. . . ?” he asked, and he surprised himself a little, then. He hadn't known that this was going to be his question, but as the words left his mouth they seemed an absolutely correct summation of his quandary; he realized then that the conflict which had been raging inside him for the past two months was over whether or not he should devote himself to his art, with which he wished to make a difference in the world—and thought himself quite capable to do so if only he gave himself over entirely to it—or whether it was enough to devote himself to doing right by Ana, and deal with whatever life threw their way with ease if only they had each other. Indeed, he remembered having juxtaposed these two ideas not so long ago, in a short story he wrote, or maybe when he was just letting his mind wander. Sometime when he had been in his room, must have been. Dr. Wallace leaned back in his chair. His brow was furrowed and his head had tilted to the right. He let his enquiry into Samuel and Ana's relationship pass unanswered for the moment. Instead he sort of chuckled, then.

“Samuel, you're a funny young man. You know that?” Samuel gave him a dour look. “What I mean is, nobody else I know or have known would come to someone—

even a friend—and ask point blank such a question as the one you just asked me, without any explanation!” He paused. It seemed he was weighing his next words. “All I am left to do, since it seems obvious that you hold a view toward the negative, is to play devil's advocate, so that we may see where this question is really meant to take us. So yes, I do believe it to be possible, with the caveat that my definition of passion is, let's say. . .” he drummed the fingers of his left hand upon his desk beside them, “to have the drive to invest oneself so deeply into something that to consider one's sense of self is to take that something into account. Such a definition is open to my revision, as we're speaking off the record here, and candidly so.” Dr. Wallace had a bemused expression on his face. His work, blaring up at him from his laptop screen, was for the moment forgotten.

“Yes, I would say much the same regarding such a definition.” Samuel said. “But if one invests themselves so deeply into something—be it a certain cause they believe in, or an idea, or an attitude toward life or a person—so much so that they come to define the meaning of their existence by it, well. . . how can they do that with more than one thing?” Samuel asked.

“A person can wear many hats.” Dr. Wallace said.

“But is it so easy to take one off and put another on? Like the switch of a light?”

Dr. Wallace laughed.

“I think you're taking that colloquialism a little too literally.” he said. “But I see your point.”

“And?”

“I'm thinking.”

“Well what I've been inclined to think is that yes, a person *can* wear many hats, but only because they must. One's life, after all, is filled with many occasions calling for one to put on variously different articles of clothing, and even change their entire outfit. *But!* because of this, a person runs the risk of losing track of who they really are. . . because when looking into the mirror in which they see themselves through the eyes of others they begin to build a habit of looking outward to the external to find a sense of themselves. On the contrary, passion is that urge one finds *within* themselves, which truly allows them to find out who they are, and from there they can strive toward their ideal. Whatever it may be.”

“Lacan would say that you would be striving toward the real. And that you will never get there.” Dr. Wallace noted. Samuel almost rolled his eyes, but he stopped himself.

“I know he would. I guess my real question then, in order to sidestep that particular rabbit hole, is: does a sense of self need to exist, or are we better to detach ourselves from anything which may define us, so that we can live as the unique, complex bundles of infinite energy we were meant to be? Leaving our trace only by the influence of our energetic fields? I mean, living with the freedom to listen to our response to the moment only, and never mind any sense of obligation we might otherwise concern ourselves with? Would the world be better off if we simply let free our inhibitions and became exactly as we wished in the emergent moment? A complex configuration of so many past moments, influencing our alignment with the present one, so that simply our presence, if we allow ourselves to be present and act as we are inspired to act, will

change the course of that moment? If everyone felt encouraged to do that, it would only be for the better, no?" And then, quite suddenly, Samuel threw up his hands in anguish. "I'm just so sick of thinking, period!" he shouted. "What the hell are we talking about here? Or I guess it's just me—*what the hell am I talking about?* I'm setting myself up to run around in circles. I'm chasing my fucking tail here!" Samuel was now standing, and his shoulders were heaving up and down. His fists were clenched. He was looking around the room. He was looking for something he could break and smash and tear up to let his anger out. But he couldn't do that, he knew. He had a strange desire for someone to come and hit him. He wanted to be pummelled. He wanted to be left on the ground, his teeth kicked out of his mouth, his limbs broken, his cheek resting on the asphalt with blood collecting in a pool around him, soaking into the threads of his clothes. He stood there in Dr. Wallace's office, rooted to the spot.

"Relax, Samuel. Relax. Take a deep breath."

Samuel took a deep breath.

"And another."

He wavered on his feet, concentrating on his breathing. He lulled himself into a passive state. He sat down.

"Sorry," he said. His professor waved it off amicably.

"Don't worry yourself about it. I do that at least once a day. It's part of my morning routine."

Samuel smiled sheepishly. "You joke, but I'm really taking this stuff seriously."

"I can see that." Then, a little more serious himself, Dr. Wallace said, "Therein

lies the problem, Samuel. As Camus said, this life is patently absurd. And we must revel in it—and revel uniquely to our person.”

“That's a very bourgeois attitude to hold, professor. There's much going on in the world that simply can't be waved away by deeming the whole of it an absurd drama. You're lucky to be in a position to take life so parochially.” There was much bitterness in his voice, and as he spoke he realized he didn't at all mean what he said, and Dr. Wallace didn't think so either, for he said,

“Samuel, I know you well enough to not get offended, because I know you're not always like this. But don't assume I'm facing the same difficulties as you and choosing to happily ignore them.”

“Well what are you doing to change things?”

“What I can, when I have the opportunity to do it. I take it. Believe me, I take those opportunities wholeheartedly. Yes I do. I do what I can with the simple tools I have.”

“I guess I know that. You spent a few years building schools and teaching in—”

“Uganda, Philippines, all over South America. And it was ten years, in total. And I go back during the summers when I have a chance.” Dr. Wallace said. “And you? Why don't you do the same?”

“It won't change anything. Excuse me for saying so.” Samuel said sullenly.

“You would be surprised. Every little bit helps.”

“You know what? I don't want to talk anymore. I really can't stand it. It's like I know what I need to do, so I've just got to go and do it, you know?”

“Well, having read your essays, I think I know you better than you may care to admit. And believe me when I say, I know you could do a lot of good.”

Samuel, having sat down, had been staring at the ground, his swivel chair turned to the right so that he wasn't facing the professor. He was talking softly. He looked at the professor.

“I imagine these traps I feel are around me. They're just things I make up to save myself from the immense effort it takes to be heroic, in this life. 'The world is not but a mirage of obstacles.'”

“Who said that?” Dr. Wallace asked.

“I did. But I always forget to skip the assumption of objectivity and forgo simply declaring, '*My world*'. It's probably because I read the classics too much.”

Dr. Wallace laughed at that.

“They're more real than you think. I certainly feel them.” he said. Samuel grew silent, and he turned his head away again, because the tears he had fought so hard to keep down were now making their presence known at the corners of his eyes.

“You know when I feel most free from those obstacles?” he asked. He was looking fixedly at a poster on Dr. Wallace' wall. It was one of those pictures of a cat hanging from a tree branch. The words underneath her at the bottom of the poster read, '*Hang in there*'. Samuel couldn't help but laugh.

“That picture is ridiculous.” he said.

“Ridiculous it may be, and it sums things up nicely.” Dr. Wallace said, joining him in the laugh as he was quick to do in most situations, and with most everyone. “Anyways,

you were saying you felt most free when. . .?”

“When I'm with Ana.”

“Then why aren't you with her?”

“Because to be with her I have to think about our future: finances, houses, retirements. All to support our relationship. All I want to do is love her, but the world doesn't run on love. And so I have to figure out what I need to do in order to provide for her, and I can't do that because I'm that unreasonable man Bernard Shaw was talking about—I won't adapt myself to the world. I need to change the world—or at least my part of the world—before I can even think about investing myself in it. When I can be comfortable in the world, then I can love freely. And so I turn to ideas, because that's what I'm good at, and I wonder how I can use them to affect change? And they hit me and beat me down and don't do me any good. They don't get me anywhere. They're beside the point.”

Dr. Wallace looked at Samuel for a long time. Finally, he said,

“You're lucky I'm done with classes, because I don't think it's best for you to be left alone with yourself and your thoughts at the moment. How about we go get a beer?”

“You know, you don't have to call me Dr. Wallace right now. We're in a bar.”

Samuel's professor said. Samuel nodded.

“Alright, just Wallace then.”

Wallace shrugged. “I hope you don't mind, I've invited my wife to join us.”

“That's fine.”

Usually these two, when they were together, did not cease talking with an excited verve obvious behind every one of their words as they engaged in such abstracted dialogues as what was beginning to once more arise between them in Wallace' office, but, now that Wallace had resolved not to get Samuel too worked up over theory—for he appeared to have been indulging a little too much in it as of late, and relentlessly so, as far as Wallace could tell—their conversation was now beleaguered by a dearth of shared interests. Wallace, when he was not working as a professor, liked engaging in more outdoor type activities: kayaking, canoeing, hiking, and the like. And he wasn't quite sure what Samuel was interested in, for theirs had been a relationship built up from philosophic discussions both in and out of his classroom, and such discussions, once they were through, left little occasion to get to know other things about each other. Instead, once their debates had come to comfortable conclusions, or at least appropriate stopping points, Samuel was quick to leave Wallace' office after thanking him for the chat. For Wallace that had been fine, for he treated such visits from Samuel only as a welcome break from his work, which he was quick to resume once Samuel was once more on his

way.

“Ah, here she is now!” Wallace said. He stood from the table, and as if with some relief. Samuel observed a lady with long graceful limbs sweeping toward them around bar stools and high tops, which were all mostly vacant at this early evening hour in the pub. Wallace kissed the woman on her lips, taking her hand in his as he did so. Samuel rose from his own stool, and Wallace and the woman turned toward him.

“Samuel, this is my wife, Elizabeth.”

“Hello.” Samuel said.

“It's good to finally meet you. My husband has had only positive comments regarding yours and his acquaintance.”

“My wife is a doctor too. Psychology. But again, we don't really need to introduce such formalities into the evening.” Wallace said. Samuel nodded. All three took their seat around the table. Wallace and his wife sat opposite Samuel and beside each other. A soccer match was playing on the flat screens over top the bar. A large single pane mirror behind rows of bottles reflected back a doubling of spirits and liqueurs available—a varied selection for the pub's varied clientele. Other than Samuel, Wallace, and Elizabeth, there was only one other table occupied, and two middle-aged men were playing a round of pool on the other end of the room. The pub, Samuel knew, had been recently remodelled, and with its long lines and sharply angled open design it somehow appealed now to a crowd which had, on average, grown decidedly older since the days of graffiti on the wood and booths and beer on the floors making them sticky almost as if by default. Now it was a mixture of middle age blue-collar types and university faculty

members to be found during evenings, mostly, though that's not to say that it was exactly a rarity for students to find their way inside for a few well-priced pints, because the pub wasn't far from the university campus. Indeed, Samuel noted, it wasn't so far from the bar Ana worked in.

The trio enjoyed rounds of cards as Samuel listened eagerly to both Wallace' and Elizabeth's stories of their experiences within academia, which was a world Samuel very much romanticized. All three indulged in pints of a heavier ale with notes of licorice and Christmas spice, which had been brought into the pub specifically in spirit of the season. It was December twenty-third, and both Wallace and his wife were feeling very much relaxed heading into their winter holidays. Samuel was enjoying their company, and as the pub began to fill with the dinner crowd and his and their rapport was firmly established, Samuel felt himself loosen up as hand after hand was dealt and the conversation lightly danced from topic to topic and Samuel was quick to joke about anything and everything as if he finally felt able to dispense with his stresses through laughter—that best of medicines. He realized he hadn't laughed so easily and openly in months. Wallace, much the jester himself, matched Samuel stride for stride and witticism for witticism, and Elizabeth encouraged them both with her coy intelligence, playing the judge, critic, and instigator in the efforts to which the two men beside her extended themselves. It was in this buoyant geniality between them, developed readily as if they all three were long standing friends, that Elizabeth decided to turn the conversation specifically toward Samuel, and Samuel, in quick response, put his his guard up to the intrusion. Elizabeth seemed to settle into some professional persona in which she felt

herself grow justified for her enquiry, adopting almost a concerned look in her eyes and face—just like Jocelyn's, in fact—and she began,

“I'm happy to have met you now in such high spirits, Samuel. Alex filled me in on the troubles you've been experiencing as of late—as far as he could gather—when he invited me here. Over the phone.” she said. Samuel nodded slowly.

“Now don't get mad at my husband, but he's shown me one or two of the essays you wrote, when you were in his class. He thought they were quite remarkable—eccentric, no doubt, in the rote iconoclasm behind the words—but remarkable. I happened to agree with him.”

“Thanks.” Samuel muttered.

“Alex said your question was whether or not someone can give themselves over entirely to more than one passion?” Seemingly with much effort Samuel resolved himself to reply,

“I must admit I am reluctant to get drawn into this, here and now, when we are otherwise having such a nice evening, but I'll bite: Yes, I think that to observe the world as one must in order to understand it well and fully, one must remove themselves from experience on a personal level. I've found I need to remove myself from all things which might influence me. In order to develop my ideas.”

“That's not what I gather based on what I've seen of your work.” Elizabeth said.

“Me either. Your arguments were always very thorough.” Wallace interjected.

“I was only complaining in those essays you read. I couldn't see how what I was writing was moving toward anything of benefit, either mine or someone else'.” Samuel

said.

“I didn't see it as complaining.” Elizabeth said. Wallace shook his head.

“Why should you? Given how integrated you are within the order of things, as a professional academic no less, you could only agree or disagree with how I approached the problems you no doubt have faced personally.” Samuel said.

“I think you're a bit too far removed from these areas you find yourself fit to critique if you think my husband and I didn't engage your work as individuals first, and professionals second.” Elizabeth said “But I'll give you the benefit of the doubt on this one.”

“Like Wallace said: I'm quite thorough.” Samuel insisted. Elizabeth shook her head, as if to shake off Samuel's pointed stare.

“I'll forgive your antagonism for the moment, for I know you're having some difficulties as of late.” she said.

“I just don't get why you had to interrupt the evening to focus on me and my problems.” Samuel said. He eyed her sceptically, and his anger from earlier started rising. He couldn't help it. This anger so suddenly within him was unlike anything he had otherwise experienced in his life, easy-tempered as he normally was, and almost to a fault, if he was being honest. And yet, before she could speak, he added in a biting tone, “I bet you're using what of the material I wrote that you remember to build a psychological profile of me, in order to better understand my current problem.”

Elizabeth smiled, her expression as if steeled. As if she was well able to control herself, professional as she was. “It's a habit, I suppose. But I only want to help in the

way I know how. If you'll let me.”

Samuel shook his head.

“Why do you insist on being so stubborn?”

“I thought you might appreciate her advice, Samuel. She's really good at what she does, you know.” Wallace added.

“Then let us discuss passion in and of itself. My question is what's on trial here, not me.” Samuel said. Wallace leaned back on the high back of his chair.

“That's fair.” he said.

“From what Alex told me, you became very frustrated in his office. It's my opinion that such things shouldn't be bottled up, or else something regrettable might happen.” Elizabeth said. “But alright, I'll move on: I was thinking about your question on the drive over here. . .” So she began, but the bar was beginning to grow louder, and she paused and leaned in close to have her voice heard. “I think I've found an answer based on my own experiences. And I would say yes, a person can have two or more passions, because I find that I do: I have passion both for the success of my marriage, as well as my work.”

“Oh, now that's good. I'm going to have to say the same.” Wallace said, nodding emphatically. Elizabeth laughed.

“If you didn't, I think we'd have a lot more to talk about later tonight.” she said. Wallace showed the palms of his hands and shrugged.

“I said I don't disagree!” he said plaintively.

“Wallace said earlier that someone can be passionate about more than one thing if

they understand the diverse demands placed on their person. That is, they find different aspects of their being are made passionate by different things.” Samuel said. Elizabeth cast an odd look at Samuel then, but she didn't say anything.

“I still stand by that.” Wallace said. “When I find myself at the school, I reacquaint myself with the passion I have for being a professor. I love the atmosphere, and I love nothing better than the moments my students and I have to share ideas.”

“But my question is, if you look deep within yourself, are you really able to find more than one thing at a time your essential being is really pulled toward so much so that if you don't indulge this urge then you will not consider yourself to have risen to your full potential?”

“I really believe so.” Elizabeth said.

“Me too.” Wallace nodded.

“If that is true, there is not time enough in the world for you to dedicate yourself to both.” Samuel said firmly.

“Ah, so the question isn't about love or passion at all.” Elizabeth said.

“How do you mean?” Samuel asked.

“You have no shortage of those, which is evident in your work, and evident now just sitting across from you. I can *feel* your intensity. I noticed it the moment I sat down.”

“I'm at a very intense place right now.” Samuel said. “And you really can't help but focus on me in your analysis, can you?” It was meant to be a joke, and he attempted to contort his face into a goofy grin, but he wasn't well used to such expressions as of late. Yet he didn't want the night's rapport to falter so suddenly, and he added, “I'm only

joking.” Elizabeth made a wave with her hand.

“I am a psychologist, after all. Might I ask you, Samuel, what your passion is? You must have an answer, for you seem to have given this a lot of thought.” She looked to him with her chin resting in her open palm and her elbow propped up on the high top. There was a light hanging down from the ceiling over their table by a thin wire, its small bulb shrouded in a green shade. As night fell quickly outside, the lighting within the pub grew soft and warm. Samuel did not hesitate.

“My passion is for beauty. Seeking it out, experiencing it, and bringing more into the world.” he said. Elizabeth nodded.

“I hope you don't mind me pressing—now now, it's more productive that you have me, a detached stranger, pestering you about such things—but you broke up with your girlfriend recently? . . . Don't throw me over the coals—I honestly believe the matter to be pertinent to our discussion.”

Samuel sighed. “Yes, I did.”

“Because of this conflict you found between doing what you think you should, in this world, and focusing your passion on your girlfriend. . . what's her name? I'm basing most of my understanding off of the essays of yours I've read. As you presumed.”

“Ana. I didn't know Wallace was so cavalier with these things. I almost wish there was a student-teacher confidentiality, similar to what you have in your own world.”

Samuel said. He had quickly become exhausted by the questioning. He grew almost annoyed, a little. Elizabeth looked sharply at her husband. Wallace raised his eyebrows and looked askance, nowhere in particular. Neither side of the table, it seemed, was

appreciating the others' approach.

“Ana?” Elizabeth then said, as if with recognition. Again she looked at Wallace. He nodded. Elizabeth's eyes widened in surprise, but then she seemed to assume her composure and she pressed on. “Like I said, I hope you don't mind that I've read your work. Couples share things with each other. Especially things which have struck them notably, and even as peculiar.” She looked at Samuel long. “A budding artist should be flattered their work has garnered such attention, I would think.”

“It was only your ideas I found intriguing, Samuel. Those were what Elizabeth and I discussed.” Wallace said. Samuel shrugged.

“Okay, okay. That sounds fine. And you discussed Ana's work?” he asked.

“Yes. Her ideas were very adventurous, one could say. And her enthusiasm was evident. She was always a pleasure to read.” Wallace said. Elizabeth was nodding as well.

“In fact, as her ability to develop and sustain her argument improved during the semester, I found her polemics quite exhilarating.” Elizabeth added.

“You wouldn't have had anything to do with that, would you?” Wallace asked, winking at Samuel. “I found by the third and fourth essay the structure of yours and her prose became very similar, at times.”

Samuel shrugged. “Maybe here and there. She's very focused on her own internal harmony. . . . During the semester she was particularly concerned with how she personally resonated with the ideas we had in class. She had it in mind that philosophy has become too abstracted from the individual.”

Wallace nodded. “I remember.”

“That's one of the things I appreciate so much about her, in fact,” Samuel continued, “because I concern myself so much with the harmony that exists between things that are external to me. Which, I know, is probably none of my concern. . . I try very hard to emulate her.” he said. “Sometimes I needed to help her in explaining her ideas to others, though.”

Wallace nodded. “So it seems.” he said. “But that's not a bad thing, I don't think—this focus on things outside yourself.”

“It hasn't done me any favours as of yet in my life.” Samuel said.

“I was going to ask you how your passion for beauty stands in the way of your love for Ana?” Elizabeth asked.

“Because when I'm with her I'm happy and I don't care about any of these things that I beat myself over the head with. . . And then it's almost as if being with her is the easy way out, because I know that if I focus all my time and energy and passion toward introducing a little of what I would like to see in this world. . . well, I think I could do a lot.” Hearing these words spoken out loud so matter of fact for the first time had Samuel slightly recoiling inwardly from himself. Ana's face surfaced before his mind. He was quick to feel the nausea again. His vision wavered, and it wasn't from the beer. The bar began to spin. Elizabeth's voice was coming from somewhere in front of him.

“Your problem isn't a question of love or passion. Your problem is that you're an idealist, and you wonder why you need to sacrifice your ideals in choosing to live in this world. You wonder: why can't I just do what I have passion for, and love who I want to love, and get by on that. What's more, you think about the big picture, so you wonder

why it can't be that same way with everyone. You see that many people around the planet are suffering. And their pain is your pain. That can't be helped, it's just your nature. Yes, before you ask: so much I gathered from your essays.” Wallace nodded toward his wife across the table at Samuel, as if to say, 'She's something, isn't she?' Samuel didn't know how to politely respond, right then. He was fighting his way back to the table from wherever his mind had spun off to in agony.

“Thanks, Doctor. But I'm getting kind of tired of people telling me what my problem is. No offence meant, because you're probably right.”

Wallace raised his eyebrows.

“I'm just trying to help.” Elizabeth said quickly, her cheeks blushing slightly red.

“I know. I get it. Camus has written whole books on the probable subject of my strife.”

“Well maybe then you're just too smart for your own good.”

“Ha! That's a new one.”

“And you just like to wallow in self misery.”

“You're quick to turn the daggers, aren't you?”

“Hey now.” Wallace said. “Everyone get along nicely.”

“You're right, Wallace. I apologize.” Samuel said, looking at Elizabeth.

“And don't call him Wallace. It's disrespectful.” she said.

“He was the one who suggested I call him Wallace! Before you arrived!”

“Well I did say something less formal than doctor, but I was alluding to my first name.” Wallace noted.

“I didn't know your first name though.” Samuel said.

“It's Alex. I've been calling him by his first name all night.” Elizabeth said.

“Wallace is fine.” he insisted. His wife gave him a look it seemed he understood well enough, but he continued, “It's fine! That's what the other professors call me at the school.”

“I knew that! That's why *I* did. I overhear teachers calling each other by their last names all the time.” Samuel said.

“I've never heard you call someone by their last name.” Elizabeth pointed out.

“We only do it in school. It's a joke, to make sure we keep our roles straight. For the students' sake, you know? We only play at it sometimes.” Wallace said.

“And personally I wouldn't feel comfortable calling him Alex. I would think *that* would be disrespectful.”

“You see? Here we have just a simple misunderstanding, as happens so often when people get together!” Wallace said, smiling. “Let's get another round shall we, and drink to putting this tense little moment behind us?” He rose from his seat and strode up to the bar.

“I do apologize, though. I just want to make sure you know that.”

“Okay. I accept.”

“So what's *your* problem, then?”

“My problem?”

“Yea.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don't know. I guess I'm trying to make a joke, again, though it doesn't seem to be working all that well. . . I mean, everyone has problems, and you know what they say about psychologists being the sick ones.”

Elizabeth smirked. “Yes, I have heard that one.”

“And you know mine, maybe better than I do—standing removed as you are and able to observe. I'm curious to know yours.”

“Can't venture a guess?”

“I'm not the psychologist.”

“Thank god for that.”

“Oh yea?”

“You're too sensitive. My job would chew you up and spit you out.”

“I always figured being a psychologist would set you up for a life of putting people on edge. You know. . . people are always on their guard around you, thinking you'll read into their every gesture.”

“I have had that be the case often enough, yes.”

“Well, anyways. . . So. . . you're with Wallace—or, excuse me, Alex—”

“Thank you.”

“—because—”

“—because he knows exactly who he is. And he did *before* I met him. He's my precious stone, you might say.” Samuel laughed at that. Elizabeth smiled, and shrugged.

“That's why our relationship is so easy.”

Wallace sat back down.

“Alright then, a beer for a smile. Come on, fork them over.” It took a moment, but Elizabeth volunteered herself to go first, looking at her husband long until finally she gave Wallace the biggest smile she had, and an obviously sardonic one at that, and tilting her head a little, even; but her eyes as she took the full pint from her husband were playfully amorous. “And now you.” Wallace said, turning to Samuel. Samuel tried his best, but, like he had in front of the coffee shop clerk, what he gave them was more like a grimace. Wallace' own mouth sort of twisted sideways on his face.

“Well I guess that will have to do, given the circumstances. Now cheers everybody. To. . . affability! We must try our best for it to be so, and when we make mistakes we must let them go! I just made that up.”

“Cheers.” Samuel said.

“Cheers, you silly man.” Elizabeth said.

“I'm the silly one, am I? Well, so be it!” Wallace said, crossing his eyes and blowing his cheeks out. Elizabeth reached out and popped them with her palms pressing on either side of his face, and he expelled the air and stuck his tongue out to his chin, closing his eyes as if dead. Samuel laughed. Two people appeared quite suddenly at the table, a man and a woman, and the man said quite enthusiastically,

“Alex! What a surprise!”

“Well what do you know!” Wallace said.

“Angelique!” Elizabeth said.

“Hey, fancy meeting you here!” the woman said to Elizabeth, smiling easily. For a moment everyone kind of stared at each other. It seemed that the new couple did not want

to intrude upon something they might not be welcomed to, and yet it was obvious they wanted to sit with Wallace and Elizabeth. Wallace spoke up.

“Well now, we must not allow such a serendipitous encounter to pass unrequited—would you like to join us?” Wallace asked. Almost as an afterthought he looked hurriedly toward Samuel, whom, he was not altogether surprised to see, seemed relieved—perhaps a couple new voices introduced into the conversation would refresh the evening and bring it back to life, Wallace thought. But he asked Samuel anyway, to be sure, “If that's okay with you?”

“The more the merrier!” Samuel said. Truthfully, he found himself a little taken aback by how enthusiastic he was to the suggestion of more people around him, somber as he was. But, who was he to refuse such a reunion between friends?

“And isn't that so!” the woman—Angelique—said.

“Perhaps we move to a bigger table so all five of us can fit around it.” the man suggested. So it was, the high top the three had made themselves comfortable around only had room for one other person. Fortunately, though the pub was transitioning quite smoothly toward an evening which seemed to promise much clientele, they were able to snatch a booth up, directly below a flat screen hanging near the ceiling. The waitress came by and took the drink orders for both Angelique and her husband, whose requests for both his and his wife proved very specific. Samuel didn't recognize what either of the two ordered, and as he spoke so assertively with the server and then with Wallace and Elizabeth Samuel observed this newcomer minutely: he found that the man's bearing struck him almost as if immense, as if he took up the entire side of the elongated table:

that booth with room for six. He wore a blue blazer and a bold, solid colour tie, and the fabric of his clothing was obviously of a high quality, like Robert's. But unlike Robert, this man did not look so conscious of himself; he wore these materials not like he intentionally chose the best to make a statement, but like he simply couldn't wear anything else. His dark blonde hair was short and fell casually, and Samuel noticed a silver watch gleaming from underneath the man's cuff-linked sleeve. His wife—for she must be his wife—sat beside him. Her eyes were entrancing, to Samuel. She looked at him as if like a predator well satiated and made playful in her unconcern. Everywhere upon her person Samuel looked he saw something glittering back at him: around her neck, on her wrist, on her ears; even her black dress sparkled just so, catching the soft evening lights. Between the two of them, the pub seemed to crumble away from whatever it had been hitherto, and became something else altogether. Indeed, when the waitress returned promptly with the man and his wife's drinks, she was all smiles, and even seemed to defer her gaze, as if she wasn't quite sure how to address them.

“Thank you.” the woman in front of Samuel said, the words taking their time to come out of her mouth. The man, in turn, nodded his acknowledgement, and the waitress whisked away.

“Samuel, I'd like to introduce you to dear friends of ours: though he sold away a life of ascetic reflection in the austere and exalted realm of scholarly research for that of a glutton, I don't mind having a drink with him.” Wallace said, indicating the man in front of him.

“Ha! I was never an ascetic.” the man replied. He extended his hand across the

table toward Samuel. “My name is Zarathustra.” he said. “Recently I’ve been going by Zoro.” Samuel took the man’s hand quickly and shook it until the man let go.

“And this is his wife, Angelique.”

“Ann. How do you do?” she asked, giving Samuel her hand. He seemed to jump forward as he took it, eagerly and delicately.

“I’m well, thank you.” he said, his throat somehow dry. “Nice to meet you.”

“And your name?” Zoro asked, his voice booming through the chatter and music around them—or, more like cutting through the noise, for he did not really raise his voice, though Samuel heard him quite clearly. He looked to Samuel expectantly.

“Oh! Yea. . . Samuel.” he said.

“So what brings you to my neck of the woods?” Wallace asked. Beside Samuel, the women began exchanging words, and both seemed to be coming from places of much warmth and familiarity. The man—Zoro—responded,

“I’m afraid I’ve become something of a philanthropist, as of late. Such are the duties my position has won me. . . and I’m not one to say no very often, if the reason behind the request is a noble one. Why would I?”

“Philanthropy huh? What might that entail?”

“There are a few kids at the university who unfortunately have had their scholarship funding rescinded going into the next semester. I’ve just been by to recruit them to work for me.”

“What would have you so concerned with a few students like that? That happens to thousands every year.” Wallace asked.

“Not as unceremoniously as it proved to be in this case, I'm afraid.” Zoro said.

“What sort of institute would rescind a scholarship without cause?”

Zoro and Wallace looked at each other, and then Zoro allowed a small grin to slide over his face.

“What. . . ?” Wallace asked. Zoro kept smiling, and something seemed to suddenly click in Wallace' head, for his hand went to his forehead and he let out a chuckle. “*You* provided the funding?”

“Naturally. I had to get these kids to Calgary somehow.” Zoro said. He smiled wider.

“Why didn't you just hire them outright?” Wallace asked. Samuel was very much interested in this exchange, and as such he leaned over the two women as much as he could without actually stretching himself across Elizabeth before she said,

“Would you like to switch me seats?”

Samuel nodded.

He rose from the booth and stood back to let Elizabeth out, and then he sat back down, now in between Wallace and her. He carefully exchanged her beer with his, placing her pint glass in front of her. Angelique watched the commotion with amusement, and when they were settled once more, the ladies continued their conversation as before, and Samuel picked up on the conversation's thread he had moved closer to hear.

“I don't know if I would call that philanthropy, exactly.” Wallace remarked. Zoro shrugged.

“Somehow I've gotten it into my head that the move is best for everybody.”

“And the kids? They lose out on a proper education.”

“Don't think I set my sights on any ordinary group, Alex. Do you by chance remember what Gibbon said?”

“About education? 'The power of instruction is seldom of much efficacy, except in those happy dispositions where it is almost superfluous.' That one?” Wallace said.

“Very eloquently put.” Zoro affirmed. “Besides, I'm paying these dropouts more than they would make having worked ten years anywhere else.”

“What is it your company does?” Samuel asked, pressing himself into the conversation. Zoro eyed him.

“Our chief concern is based in a branch of biophysics dealing with—I guess one could say—emerging complexity.”

“He's out to prove that Darwin's theory is shortsighted, is what he's doing.” Wallace said. “No need to be modest.” he added, his eyes on Zoro, who laughed then.

“I'm far from modest. But I prefer for such information to come up organically. I never offer more than has been asked for.” he said. “Must be the biologist in me.”

“Emerging complexity? How do you mean?” Samuel asked.

“Well, like Alex said, within organic evolution I don't believe the buck stops at survival, merely. Look at humans, for example. We've done survival. Now what are we trending toward?”

“Destruction.” Samuel said. Zoro and Wallace both laughed loud at that. When they settled down, Zoro said,

“If no one is courageous enough to take the reigns then perhaps you might be

right. But I happen to be. . .” He paused to think about it for a moment, seemingly searching for the right word, “an adapter, let us say—and one whom believes in the possibility of the moment. Given the evolved complexity of our current epoch, we have never lived in more interesting times. And that's an axiomatic rule of our universe's physics. Personally, I don't know what could be more exciting than living with the knowledge of such a fact as that.” Zoro said.

“And here I've locked myself in my room to get away from the world for the past two months.” Samuel said. For a brief second, it appeared to both Wallace and Samuel as if Zoro were revolted, so inept was he at hiding his true feeling. But he soon regained his composure, and responded with quite an air of surety:

“That's the worst thing you could do with your life—lock yourself away. You need to give forth the entirety of your being to the world, and this at every moment. In that way you cannot fail to leave a lasting influence.” Zoro said.

“That sounds good, and I've actually thought the same. But I'm just not one hundred percent certain who I am. A lasting influence is thus hardly something I would like to leave, if it were destined to be so indecisive.” Samuel said.

“It's not the matter of who you are that's important, but what—” Zoro was cut off by Angelique and Elizabeth both laughing loudly. “What's so funny?” he asked. A grin was quick to appear on his face, and his eyes naturally roamed over the two women beside him.

“Nothing, nothing.”

“Just girl talk.”

“Uh oh.” Wallace said. He turned to his friend, “That's the mystery you should be throwing money at, Zoro.”

“I don't believe there is an amount that will get any man close to an answer.” Samuel muttered. At this, Angelique giggled.

“Wouldn't you know it?” she said.

“If not knowledge, then wisdom.” Samuel said, smiling somewhat bashfully at finding her attention so suddenly directed upon him.

“Oh, I like this one.” she said. Samuel's eyebrows seemed to rise up and up of their own accord, and Angelique added, almost with a purr in place of a wink, which, for some reason, coming from her, would seem a little too masculine, almost, “Looks like he can tumble.”

“He's a regular spark plug, he is.” Wallace said, clapping Samuel on the shoulder. Thankfully, the waitress arrived asking if they would like another round, and Samuel was saved from the attention directed toward him just then, and he was left to puzzle out what exactly Angelique might have meant. The night was only just getting started as the pub reached its full capacity and people were everywhere, standing in the middle of the floor or sitting crowded around tables, all with drinks in hand, scooping up nachos and chicken wings and fries. There were even a few couples dancing by the pool tables, next to the digital jukebox. Everyone seemed to be letting off steam as the holiday season officially arrived—this was the last weekday of the year that most of those whom were comprising the crowd that night had to work. So it seemed to Samuel—already working on his third pint and feeling very much more warm and loose and relaxed than he had when arriving

—that the spirit within the pub was positively elated. . . it seemed to be quickly becoming one of those nights when a rare and fortuitous combination of elements gives rise to a uniquely perfect moment. He watched the scene unfold, and the colours and shapes were moving before him like an oil painting when the lines start to blur together and each coloured stroke holds its own distinct position upon the canvas and yet each gives rise to another, so that the scene depicted could not exist without all the separate details coming together as one. Added to this was the fact that his company was interesting and open—he found himself not more or less intrigued by any of them. . . Zoro, his wife Angelique, Wallace and Elizabeth: they were all uniquely, and thus perfectly, themselves, each essential to the night unfolding. And then Samuel's eyes fell on the dancing couples, swaying behind the ever shifting crowd of the pub between he and they, and he found he could not look elsewhere. It was several moments he stared like that, and briefly the room faded away entirely as he honed in on the twirling and the hands clasped to each other and the women smiling, their hair tousled.

“Would you like to dance?” Angelique asked. Samuel was brought out of his wistful reverie.

“Dance?” he asked vaguely. Angelique declined her chin, with her eyebrows raised expectantly.

“Oh, go on!” Zoro said. Samuel felt a lump rise in his throat. Angelique wasn't the only one staring.

“Alright then.” he said. He smiled meekly at Angelique, and when Elizabeth swept her legs aside so that he could get up from the table, he found Angelique remained

sitting. She was, once more, as she had been when she had been introduced, holding her hand up and out to Samuel, again with that expecting look so naturally formed upon her features. His movements were thus made a little sheepish with such attention, and he looked from Zoro to Wallace to Elizabeth, and then back to Zoro, whom wore a bemused expression, and then finally down at Angelique, and he found the courage to take her hand and she rose quite beautifully from the booth. Walking not quite in front of her, not quite behind her, and certainly not beside her, having thus taken her hand, Samuel followed her and led her and walked with her across the room. He hadn't quite figured out if he was imagining people parting to let them through, and when the two of them arrived at the dance floor a flurry of dance steps was rushing through Samuel's brain, from the waltz to the two-step to the tango. None of those suited the music playing. He gulped thickly the lump that had not dissipated in his throat. When their hands rose and Angelique turned to face him, Samuel found himself once more entranced by her eyes, and when they started moving he could not think at all about the steps, with each smoothly transitioning to the next and he couldn't tell if he was leading the dance or if she was, though they seemed to be moving well. He smelled her perfume and her hair and the soft touch of her palm in his, and as they moved across the laminate flooring Samuel could distinguish no other shape or sound but Angelique and the music; everything else lost its relevance upon his consciousness in deference to a whirl of colour and the gleam of light off Angelique's sparkling jewelry. The song ended somewhat abruptly, though it seemed their dance lingered a moment more before it too finished, but delicately. Samuel's heart was pounding in his chest. Before he knew what he was doing, he bowed

to her. She smiled pleasantly, and returned a curtsy, lightly lifting the sweep of her dress. The next song had already started. It was faster, and the drums took centre stage. It was almost like swing, Samuel thought.

“One more?” Angelique asked.

“Yes.” Samuel said, and in her hand he was again whisked away into a scene of sights and sounds which all remained indistinct and yet seemed to accompany perfectly his and her movement, as they swayed and she sashayed and their hands let go and they parted for a beat before finding each other once more, her twirling and laughing and he spun her so easily as if entirely effortless as her dress flowed up and around her and continued on spinning as he caught her, and stopped her, and the glittering fabric wrapped lightly around her legs before once more the song came to a close, and both of them, laughing. . . and he bowed, and she curtsied again. It was actually after three more songs played before they finally made their way back to the table, where Zoro and Wallace and Elizabeth seemed immersed in discussion. His heart continued to thump loudly and Samuel still didn't know whether he should lead her or follow or keep astride, but when they reached the booth and he kept her hand while she sat down he said,

“Thank you for the dance.” and he couldn't help himself from lightly kissing her hand, still caught up in the exhilaration of the moment. This last flourish on his part seemed to happen so fast, and he struggled hard to regain his composure. She giggled softly.

“The pleasure was mine.” she said. Samuel noticed then that the other three of his company were all staring at him, openly amused and even a little flickering wink, from

Wallace, and Samuel blushed violently. He sat down abruptly.

“We weren't prepared for such a performance.” Wallace said, with that twinkle in his eye. Elizabeth nodded.

“I wasn't quite expecting that from you.” she said.

“I didn't really know what was happening. I wasn't even me up there, I don't think.” He took a long sip from his water glass.

“Now what did you do to this poor boy, huh?” Zoro joked, his arm appearing around Angelique's shoulders. He kissed the top of her dark brown curls.

“Just seeing if he could keep up.” she said, smiling.

“And?”

“He'll get there.” she said. To no end did this please Samuel, and his face positively lit up before he could perhaps hide his reaction. To this as well as Angelique's pithy review, everyone laughed.

“We ordered a plate of nachos while you two were up there. Should be coming soon.” Zoro said.

“Excellent.” Angelique said. “I'm famished.”

“Me too.” Samuel said. Everyone laughed again. The platter of nachos arrived, and once more Samuel and Elizabeth switched seats so that he sat beside Wallace. As he settled himself in, Zoro, from across the table, looked at him and said quietly,

“You can't find that locked away in your room.”

“I guess not.” Samuel said. He helped himself to some nachos, but only a few because they just made him more thirsty and the lump in his throat had become a lump in

his mouth and he couldn't really eat, anyway. Instead he just continued to soak in the scene, the tables around him filled with people tucking in to their own meals.

“So what is it you do Samuel?” Angelique asked.

“He locks himself away in his room, is what he does.” Zoro said. Angelique looked from Zoro back to Samuel.

“But you must be doing something in there all that time?” she persisted. Samuel shrugged.

“Writing, I guess.”

“Oh! An artist!” Angelique said. “I should have guessed.”

“An apprentice of art, really. I'm still not even sure I know what art is. Or even if it's worth exploring.” Samuel said.

“His essays are actually very good.” Elizabeth interjected.

“See, I don't even know what that means.” Samuel said.

“Oh, come now Samuel, you're just being self deprecating at this point. Take the compliment and move on.” Elizabeth said, perhaps a little sharply. Samuel shrugged.

“I write myself, you know.” Zoro said. Samuel looked up.

“Oh yea? What about?” he asked.

“Poetry mostly, nowadays.” he said.

“Huh, I didn't figure you the type.” Samuel said. Zoro nodded, almost gravely.

“There is perhaps no finer exercise for the mind than poetry. Both reading it and writing it. I happen to think art to be one of the most pure ideals our species can aspire toward. So if it is true that you are an artist, do not waver in your conviction.”

“My conviction is the one thing I'm sure of. How to apply it to a world that would rather not have anything to do with it, is a different matter, and that is the one I'm currently grappling with.”

“Do not pay mind to what anyone else may think. If you find that will in you to rise up, then you must not betray its power.”

“For some reason I've gotten it into my head that I want to encourage everyone to the same.”

“Why would you care to do that?”

“Well, it's almost like you said: if everyone was encouraged to trust that when they put themselves fully out into the world it would only be a good thing, then the world as a whole will only be better from it.”

“You ask of people a lot of courage. There are many among us who are meek and cannot possibly rise to such a challenge.”

“I happen to think everyone has this courage within them.”

“But do they have the wisdom to guide it? Even if they find the natural will within them, as it exists in all things? Never mind that, for the moment. . . Here, now this is something I've been working on:

In light of duty, I have come to believe:

not for a moment can I reprieve,

as a ship out to sea comes to grieve

without a captain.

For I have watched idly this century

the fruits of my eternal pathos come to be
I waited, with time on my side, and quietly;

Woefully I watched nothing happen.

With no hesitation did I emerge
upon my common tongue were many words
that no one before or since has heard:
my Will to Power pronouncement.

I have no intention to preach or lead
Truth—a transcendent beacon—hath no creed
I have seen many in vain portend vital need,
yet their yells' echos are lost to distraction.

But one last time, I dare to ask
if there are any whom will take the chance
to amble forth and partake in this dance
though it has gone out of fashion?

Into the unknown, do you dare to go?

To revel in the abyss, and call it home?

I am not surprised I remain alone.

With noble spirit, I say! Heed eternity's attraction.

Alas, I have become merely wishful now as I seek to hear
for my words' sweet sentiment ringing out so clear. . .

Wait! . . . Aha! upon a new tongue do they appear!

With repetition I fortify the bastion.

Now *I* listen close, for my sake only

I abide by what the cosmos show me

You too, should listen! and give this fact testimony:

Mortality holds no traction.

For the ship was built by many hands

And it did not alone chart course to many lands

The creation of this vessel deserves no reprimand

Indeed it represents advancement.

Thus the world grows small with such a ship

its purpose manifest and will soon outstrip

any one man alone, who is but a blip

upon the world—a small fraction.

And if Man himself remains deaf to the call

of the Captain's voice above the squall

then as Ocean crashes *I* shall not grieve at all!

through Ocean, Truth: thy nature's Law reacted.”

“That seems too easy.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, you propose to ignore the man whom does not know how to listen to the law of nature.”

“So I do. The wisest of us will thrive, and those whom do not bother even to

attempt to align with their nature will perish, eventually. Is it sentimentality that disinclines your favour?"

"What of your value placed on complexity? Surely the more variables are within any system that are free to influence it in any way, encourages the system's evolution. And thus the more complex it will become?"

"You decline to note that this is not my choice; it is simply the natural progression of events. You can see it happening all around us even now. The majority of the ship's hull has been lost to ruin, and those who do not have Will enough to secure their safety will drown in what's to pass. So it will come to be."

"And complexity, though?"

"As far as complexity and man is concerned, I say one man able to hold the perspective of ten equals those ten in how he can influence the environment's further evolution. Think of a computer even, with one central consciousness, with the entire network of mechanistic processes around the world linked to its brain. Man will necessarily fall before such an evolved being, and made totally irrelevant."

"I truly believe every conscious being is able to look within and find natural law, and act on it."

"History says otherwise."

"History is marred by strife that acts to keep most everyone down."

"Exactly! To try to end strife is an idealism, and I'll have no part in it. It is those whom rise up above strife and thrive regardless that deserve to carry forward into the future's unknown."

“No no no! I do not accept that! I cannot! *Everyone* must come into this future! Everyone has a place upon this Earth! Forget a 'Will to Power', give me a Will to Feel! To feel is to individuate. To have the courage to act on feeling is to have nothing less than genius.”

“You have faith in emotion to lead the common man toward Truth?”

“In part, yes. If such a man is truly honest with himself, and if he has seen beauty and is able to recognize it and strive toward it of his own volition. Beauty is an empathetic experience. . . such is what I mean by emotion. Beauty is that feeling of awe we experience when confronted by things whose connection to us we can only appreciate with wonder. Thus the more someone understands themselves honestly and openly, the more things they can find beautiful in this world, for everything in this world has either given rise to the conscious spirit within every person, or was made from this conscious spirit.”

“I don't believe you and I think much differently on these matters, in truth.”

“I seem to have more faith in the common man than you do.”

“To age well means one's perspective grows richer.”

“I suppose we will see on that final day when we can judge ourselves most honestly.”

“So we shall.”

It wasn't much longer before everyone around the table seemed to leave, excepting Samuel. First it was Zoro and Angelique who excused themselves—for they

had a plane to catch later that night—and then it was Wallace and Elizabeth who, looking to their watches, departed, citing the lateness of the hour. Indeed, it was near one-thirty in the morning by the time Samuel found himself alone, five or six or eight beers later, and again scribbling in his notebook, peering with beady eyes through the late night throng, now mostly college students. . . toward the pool tables where couples were still dancing when songs they recognized came on, flipping through the jukebox' catalogue. And all Samuel could think of, as he sat swaying drunkenly in his seat, was how right Elizabeth was to question him: why did he feel it necessary to detach himself from Ana in order to remain true to his passion for beauty? Wasn't she, Ana, the most beautiful thing to have happened to him? How could he encourage others to open themselves up to beauty when he didn't even allow himself to experience it? He finished the last of his pint in a single gulp and placed the glass down on the table, a little more heavily than he intended. He was feeling terrible. The nausea had resurfaced sometime through the night, a couple hours ago, and hadn't subsided. Confronted by Zoro, he found a man whom had the courage to stand up to his convictions. Samuel was not demonstrating the same courage in his own actions. He felt disgusted with himself. He scribbled in his notebook with a heavy hand,

The punchline to this whole fucking deal is that moment after you've scrambled through the house in each others' arms and you've ripped off each others' clothes and you've lost yourself in ecstasy and sometime after climax you find yourself with your limbs tangled up in bedsheets or sprawled out ass naked on the floor or somehow crumpled awkwardly in on yourself in a jacuzzi, the last of the water sucking down the

drain. And when you turn toward whomever you've chased after to enact this insane fit of passion, you find someone who laughs with you. At the absurdity of this cosmic joke.

That's a beautiful moment. . . if there is but any beauty to be found. . . surely then.

And he thought:

I write and I write. . . and the only truth I've ever come across in these two months is what I found tonight—and just in the very richness of my experience of it! It was beautiful! Yes I need to seek out beauty and encourage others to see it too, but I can't neglect the personal experience of it myself! Why have I been so fucking stupid?

And he wrote:

Because I was trying to go about it as if there were a rational solution to the realities of life. Life is an organic process, and I was trying to freeze it and look upon it under a microscope. I was trying to understand the world by looking at a map of the globe; never would I be able to appreciate the sights and smells and sounds of any particular side street in. . . whatever, Bangalore, then, by detaching myself so far from it. I have to immerse myself in these places, and smell them, and listen to them, and watch them, with my own eyes. And just hold on to the truth I find in the resonance I feel in the very pit of my stomach.

And he thought:

And now I can't ever experience these things as richly as I could, now that I have pushed Ana from my life.

Here he was, wallowing in his self misery just as Elizabeth had figured he was prone to do, and drunk as all hell, it seemed, as his vision of his notebook swam before

him, and isolated from absolutely everyone and everything around him. So he felt was the case. So he had done to himself, if such *was* actually the case. And why? Because he didn't think himself worthy of such experience as he had tonight? Is that what he had been running away from? Zoro had been right: he wasn't doing himself justice by locking himself away in his room. The truth was that he was scared. Scared to death of what might happen if he opened himself up to the world, and let it all in until he was bursting at the seams and all he could do was attempt to hold on. For the world knew what it was doing, after all, and he knew nothing. He had attempted to solve his problems too rationally. He had eliminated good and nurturing influences from his life so that he could attempt to solve the world as if it were a puzzle. He knew after tonight that he had been entirely off the mark in this ideal. He now realized, right then in the booth, as the evening unfolded before him, that the only way to get by in this world was simply to experience it fully; to seek out nights like tonight, and encourage the moment to last by getting other people in on it. And he had always known that, and that was what filled him with such self loathing right then—the fact that *he had always fucking known that!* He had pushed Ana out of his life to solve a problem he always had the solution for, and now it was likely he would never get her back. And he shouldn't. Serves him right to hurt someone so much and expect forgiveness. He didn't want forgiveness.

And then quite suddenly Samuel got that same feeling he had felt rising in Dr. Wallace' office. The feeling like he wanted someone to pummel him. He cast his eyes around the bar. He was going to do it. He was going to find someone to beat the shit out of him. He had become so far gone from any sense to his thoughts that he just needed to

be brought back to reality by a solid wallop to the head. In his room he had grown accustomed to listening to every impulse his gut and his mind presented him with. He had destroyed his room, burning his furniture. He had allowed the onslaught of memories and emotion wash over him for days on end. He did not hide from winter's freeze, so similar to the chilled depths of space. And yet, out in the world, he hadn't really listened to these same impulses. He had mentally sequestered them, like in Wallace' office: he had lulled himself into an incapacitated state. No longer:

He found his target, and after fumbling in his pocket for the cash he had withdrawn from the ATM near the washrooms earlier and paying his tab he slowly rose from the booth and began stumbling his way toward the guy, who was standing at the bar in a group, his arm around a girl who seemed tiny in his clutch.

“Hey you fucking oaf.” Samuel said, tapping the guy on the shoulder. The guy turned around, surprise on his face. The whole group turned around. The girl was looking at Samuel curiously. In height he matched the guy, but he must have weighed forty pounds less, and none of it was a difference attributable to any extra fat on the guy's frame.

“What? You're talking to me?” the guy asked.

“Yes I'm talking to you.” Samuel said, putting his finger in the guy's face. “I've been sitting over there—” he pointed, “—for the last half hour and I can't get over how you look like such a fucking prick.” Even as Samuel said these words, drunk as he was, he did not feel that sense of detachment one experiences in their drunken state when rationale kicks in. He was instead full within the moment, casting daggers into the guy's

face, and practically spitting. So much was his desire to get himself where he was going —where he had been going for a long time coming. “Did you know you look like such a prick?” he continued. Despite his senseless energy, he found it fortunate that the music was loud enough and the pub busy enough that his words didn't cause much of a scene. He might have lost his nerve then and just walked straight out of there.

“I don't even know you, man.” the guy said.

“What's your problem?” the girl beside him asked.

“My problem is with your ape of a boyfriend.” Samuel said, quickly returning his attention back to the guy. He was having trouble keeping the room from spinning. He felt like everything was coming at him in waves, crashing down upon his senses.

“Hey buddy why don't you just back off now, alright? Before something happens.”

“Let it happen then, buddy.” Samuel said, pushing the guy back into the bar. The guy's expression clouded and he began to move toward Samuel. His friends were hollering at him to swing. The girl held him back, her hands around his wrists.

“Don't!” she said. The guy stopped, looking at her.

“Such a big guy, and you're going to let your girlfriend get you out of a fight?”

Samuel asked. *Fucking hit me, god damn it!* he thought. *Hit me!*

“Punch him Oli!”

“Yea punch him! He's asking for it!”

“Go ahead *Oli*, take a swing.” Samuel said, pushing the guy back again into the bar. The guy was looking from his friends, who were watching excitedly, to his girl, who

was looking from him to Samuel with disbelief, and finally to Samuel, and his expression clouded again.

“You fucking asshole.” he said, moving fast toward Samuel.

“Oliver! Don't!” his girlfriend said sharply once again. He stopped once more. By now Samuel had backed up into the middle of the floor for room for what was coming, and he had run into someone or other as he did so, whom he didn't see, and whom quickly stepped away from him and the ugly mess unfolding. The room was still spinning, and the guy was still glaring at him, though now it seemed his expression was tempered, maybe by his girl. . . and all at once Samuel saw that it wasn't going to happen.

“You're not going to fucking hit me?” he shouted. The guy shook his head.

“No way. You're fucking loaded. Go home, get some rest.”

They glared at each other. The girl had her arm around the guy's waist. After several moments, during which time Samuel fought to keep his nausea down, he slurred,

“Fine! I'll do it myself.” he said, and he turned right around and walked out the door, into the night. As he started walking his breath billowed out in front of him. He was walking—or stumbling, rather—without paying mind to anything around him except for the *fucking freezing* temperature.

“We should follow him.” the girl said. The guy looked at her incredulously.

“I'm not going to follow that asshole!”

“I think we should. I think he's really going to get himself hurt.” she said. Her voice came out low and determined despite the fact that her heart was hammering within her chest.

“He'll be fine. He's drunk! The dude just needs to walk it off.” the guy said. The girl continued to stare at him, her eyebrows raised sceptically. “Are you serious?” the guy asked. The girl nodded.

“Fuck.” the guy said. He grabbed his coat from the bar stool.

11

Yes, the night carried with it a particularly frigid chill. The type of chill that cuts right through any layers one might have on and gets right down to the bones, and yet Samuel's jacket swayed open around him, his t-shirt pressed against his torso as the wind swept the streets around, now empty for the lateness of the hour, excepting a few cars on the road. As he got to walking Samuel's mind got to racing, muddled as his thoughts were, and his stride was unsteady on leaden limbs. He kept repeating to himself the words he had spoken with such vehemence to Zoro. Words which seemed to have come from out of nowhere, and yet struck Samuel almost as a revelation, in the moment. . . that bit about a 'will to feel'. So it struck Samuel quite suddenly that his problem of not wanting to stand out—indeed, to, at the end of his life, fade away—had stemmed from his want for courage. It felt horrible to admit to himself, but there was no denying any longer. Why else the reason to instigate a fight but to bring himself to confront this fear

he had of the world beating him down?

Samuel past a poster lit up in a glass bus stop terminal informing him on how much he could learn about himself if he bought their DNA assessment kit: '*live your life with confidence*' and, '*the future is tailored to you*'. . . So it read. He was stumbling noticeably, and he found himself wishing for another drink, just to keep himself feeling so numb. And as he walked down the street, ambling, directionless, not really paying much attention to where he was going, not bothering to look for vehicles before crossing streets, somewhere the thought in the back of his mind that he just wanted to be done with this place once and for all and maybe getting hit by a car wouldn't be such a bad thing, and he took his jacket off so that his arms were bared to the windchill, and as Thomas Mann had observed, despite their opposing nature, extreme cold and extreme heat hit the body the same, and Samuel's exposed skin was burning hot with an intensity able to be matched by any flame if he so chose to thrust his arm into it. And he mocked himself then, as if his exposure to a little cold made up for his not being able to face the world so head on. That he was a coward. And in his mind's drunken meandering he got to wondering about that advertisement at the bus stop. He got to wondering whether the cities of the future would have those scanners which read a person's I.D. chip as they passed . . and thus from every subsequent window advertisements would shout out products so. . . *tailored* to the individual. Ah, yes! We were so concerned about finding our individuality within our consumption, he thought merrily! . . . And it wasn't even really a question of 'if', of course, for such things as tailored product placement was happening as people browsed the internet. *No no no!*, the question should instead be: to

what degree would this be the case? For, as it was, people were already uploading their entire lives onto the computer. . . in the form of pictures, videos, blog posts and status updates. Their Facebook page and Twitter feeds and tumblr posts were becoming as if their diary. Except it was now not at all private, but available for the world to see. . .

Stored in data banks. . . eternally. . . Waiting! And we can look back on any day or any moment of our lives and remember where we've been, and who we are. And anybody else can look back at these same moments. And when we're dead and gone, these pictures and these words will remain. And so. . . what if all this information thus collected from our lives, and so precisely assembled—chronologically, or in albums defined by certain feelings and thoughts, perhaps—perhaps indeed, this information—so *fastidiously* arranged—would make it so these data banks made our lives become more real than even our own memories could have them. . .

And, now, what if this information existed within the very infrastructure of our cities—for it would *have* to anyway. . . to some degree, in order for advertisements to operate as described. . . *Where does it go from there?* Cities we've visited will welcome us back and bring about the means of transport to reach our favourite destinations we frequented—the ones we 'Liked' from our phone. *What if.* . . as we have chips implanted underneath our skin. . . *our biological responses to all our experiences—from our birth to our death—was recorded, too?* What if the environment around us responded to our movement? To our very presence? So that it wasn't just advertisements that were tailored to us. . . but *music* would play and pictures—our own pictures—would flash at us, and the writings on the walls would be *our own words*, reflecting back to us digitally? How

would we react to this? Would it be as if we had a friend whom has known us as long as we remember accompanying us everywhere, quietly sharing in our experiences? Would we thus feel propelled to live honestly and well, so that what's recorded invigorates our spirits as our lives are repeated with every movement we make? *And to live richly!* so that the mark we leave upon the city is an inspiring one to our future selves and to others whom visit the places we've frequented in our lifetimes—places perhaps where our presence is thus made stronger? Or would we be haunted by our past? *And always haunted.* . . the memories projected from the walls reminding us on every corner and down every street we turn that our lives we have spent are not as we would have liked? . . Well. . . well. . . either way, our time—our participation, good or bad as we would judge it, in our minds—would become just. . . a part of the very fabric giving to each city its. . . uniqueness. Perhaps we will never again have to worry about being forgotten—only misremembered. Is that why we so zealously update our internet persona? This world of the future would cut out the middlemen, however: the ego and superego; our stories would be recorded down to the most minute detail. We wouldn't be able to hide from ourselves. The cities—these living, breathing cities, growing so organically with us. . .

Samuel, for reasons that probably needn't be intimated, did not find this particular scenario his intoxicated musings had painted a very aesthetic development of events. But this is where it seemed the world was heading, really—this picture painted Samuel had not even taken to absurdity. But where did it end, then? This data collection, that is? Such would be the case of society's infrastructure running away from us, and we would be left simply trying desperately to assimilate what our technological achievements had wrought

us. We would be forced to adapt. . . But Samuel's imagination had finally found its limits, for he couldn't begin to fathom what a person would look like and act like in such a future where the past was such a significant aspect of a person's reality. That seemed as if it would take away the very essence of conscious freedom as it existed in the moment. . . So why the inclination to such documentation as that which is exemplified through social media? People were aiming to create themselves as they saw fit, no? Yes! . . So it seemed, the essence of our existence was indeed our subjective understanding of it—not an objective profile of every move we make. Indeed, with only that—confronted by such objectivity—our lives would cease to have meaning to us. Our thoughts and our memories had been taken from us and embedded in an infrastructure external to us. . . these things would appear as if a document of *another* person's life, for we would inevitably rebel against our pasts in light of our experience of the present moment. . . So what then when current society ultimately—*inevitably*—runs away with our individuality? . . . individuality which will be swept up in favour of an objective achievement of mechanisms located wholly outside of us (unless we allow them in, in final defeat)? *This* must be rebelled against. And *could* be rebelled against, easily: people need only to find the *courage* to recognize their true selves, and live as they wish in light of this. And we need not fear where this may lead. Society's mechanisms would be forced to adapt to *us*, instead of the other way around.

So it was inevitable that Samuel's feet had led him to the bar Ana worked at without his conscious input. It was two-thirty in the morning—a half hour passed last

call, in other words—and Samuel's vision, hitherto swimming, came to focus quite clearly upon the bar's front walk, where Ana was folding up the sign reading out the bar's daily specials in multicoloured chalk. When she saw him standing there, only a few paces away on the opposite side of the street, she froze, and her eyes widened, and even from this distance she could tell by Samuel's posture that he was drunk. Samuel's own body seemed to stiffen under her gaze, and he tried his best, in his unsteady state, to stand confident and upright before Ana. He took a deep breath, and made his slow and intentional advancement toward her.

“Hey.” he said, standing before her.

“Hi.” she said. There was uncertainty in her voice, and that single word had taken its time in rising up and out.

They both lapsed into silence, staring at one another as if unsure they were seeing the real thing before them. And then Samuel watched her eyes flick to somewhere over his shoulder. Turning, he saw, standing across the street, that the guy from the bar—Oli, he remembered the name—and the girl. His girlfriend. Both were standing with their hands stuffed into their pockets and their jackets' zippers zipped up as much as possible, up to their chins. In addition, the girl had a scarf wound around her neck and ears. . . It really was cold outside tonight. Seeing them following so close, Samuel, in a moment of intoxicated stupidity, felt that anger he had felt in the bar rise up again. He figured the guy had come to carry on their fight, for there was no other reason for him to be standing there, and he hollered across the street at them, his words slurring,

“What the hell do you want?”

He turned to face them squarely. How they then reacted made it clear this wasn't what they were expecting from him. The girl's eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“We were just following you to make sure you didn't get hurt.” she said plainly.

“ . . . oh.” Samuel said, quietly, so that the wind picked up the word and it didn't make it across the street. Snow had started falling on this Christmas Eve. The decorations and the lights contributed to making that block on which Ana's bar was located—home to many interesting shops and restaurants—appear particularly festive, but so it was this night that it was only the four of them out in the stilled lane to enjoy the picturesque setting. Ana, sensing the stilted manner the couple across the street had in their approach to Samuel, ascertained that they and Samuel did not know each other. She was puzzled by how Samuel had harangued them so. . . with such relative violence that was not at all like him. And as Samuel stood there, remaining silent and slightly wavering on his feet, she heard the guy across the street mutter to the girl,

“I told you he was an asshole. Come on. Let's go.” The girl nodded, but not before turning back to Samuel to say, quite pointedly,

“You're welcome.”

Words which caused Samuel, for some reason, to stir with renewed agitation. He began to shout,

“I didn't ask you two to. . .” but Ana grabbed his arm from behind and she called out,

“Thank you for watching out for him. I'll take him from here.”

The two were quick to turn on their heels and march down the street in the

direction from which they had come. Samuel, slowly, turned to look at her once again with his blood shot eyes.

“When I pictured in my head us meeting again, I had a butterscotch candy cane for you.” he said. Ana laughed.

“Why?” she asked.

“Because I know they're your favourite.” he said.

“Do you want to come inside? It's cold.” Ana asked, unable to hide her hesitancy.

He nodded, and with a wave of his hand gestured that he would follow behind her. She smiled nervously and led the way.

Bar stools still needed to be placed upside down on the bar and the high tops—doing this was the last part of Ana's closing routine, when she was left alone to close her own way—but other than that, the barroom was clean: the floor was mopped; the well was cleared of ice and the liquor bottles shelved; the cash drawers were counted and the money was placed in the safe in the manager's office; and the bar was wiped down, freed of beer and soda stains. She told Samuel, whom had insisted to carry the chalkboard sign in from the sidewalk, to place it by the front door. Slowly, as the reality of his being there beside her washed over her, making her anxious and excited and fearful and many other things besides, she walked toward the bar and sat herself on one of the stools. Samuel did the same, and she noted that he took his time as well, as if he too was unsure how to act. When Ana looked into his eyes, she realized she had been holding in her breath and that her heart had begun to thump loudly in protest, needing oxygen. She expelled and drew in a lungful carefully, quietly. Quietly she sat there, the two of them simply looking at

each other, Samuel seemingly as much at a loss of what to say as she was, and she noticed then just how horrible and ragged Samuel looked: his skin, pale from the cold and the liquor, and his cheeks sunken as if he were starved; he had a buzz cut, which was something she had never seen on him before—in addition to the heavy bags under his eyes, it made him look, well, kind of scary. Like he was ready to snap at any moment.

She waited for him to break the silence. . . She was not the one whom needed to explain herself—neither the reason for his being there in front of her drunk as she had ever seen him, or why such a tension existed between them now, which was absolutely suffocating and she almost cried out again, for it was as if this face and those eyes she knew so well were a million miles away from her. As if they belonged to a stranger. Slowly, Samuel acknowledged that she was waiting and that he must be the one to speak first, and he sort of shuffled himself around on the stool, as if nervous. He cleared his throat. His eyes for a moment glanced downward as he attempted to find the words he sought. And when he looked up, there were tears in his eyes, and he remained silent, looking to her as if desperate. For an instant, Ana surprised herself as she suddenly felt agitated, and she blurted out,

“Two months you've been gone and you have nothing to say?”

“I don't know what to say.” But, seeing this wasn't enough, he took a deep breath, and he let out in a rush, “I was feeling like love was a fantasy. I was seeing so much suffering in the world, and then when I looked at you, none of it seemed to matter. . . Some part of me didn't think that was right. I didn't think I deserved such happiness. I guess. . . I broke up with you, because I didn't believe I could live up to it. To love, I

mean. . . I didn't think I could convince myself that I should have it. . . when so many people die having not loved at all.”

To this she listened intently. When it was her turn to speak, Ana did not hide her anger, or her sadness, or her confusion; she did not hide anything that had come to pass in his absence. She wanted to get it all out. And she too spoke in a rush of words spilling over top one another as they tried to get out, all at once.

“I know that feeling. . . that love is a fantasy, I mean. I've always felt that way. I've always believed, since I was younger, that true love did not exist. But then I found you, and these past few years have changed my mind. Not for one second in the time we've known each other have I felt anything less than love for you. When I saw you my heart would beat faster and my stomach would jump—”

“Mine too.” Samuel said quickly.

“—and everyday I was with you those feelings grew stronger. And then two months ago—I'm hesitant to admit—you shattered my world. I want you to know that. . . I want you to realize that the first few weeks after we broke up, I was numb, broken, and I couldn't eat, and I couldn't sleep, and all I kept thinking about was your smile, and your touch, and your voice, and all of the beautiful moments we had, together. . . and then a few more weeks went by, and I was starting to think: what the hell was I doing, letting someone so close to me. . . ? Someone who could affect my life so much, and at any moment? I wondered, was that the sort of influence someone should ever give to someone else?”

Samuel merely hung his head, unable to look at Ana. Several minutes persisted in

which neither spoke, and then finally, he muttered, as he looked up, even somewhat hopefully,

“I still got the butterflies in my stomach when I saw you outside tonight.”

(If Ana were honest with herself, she would have to admit the same.)

But she wasn't about to tell Samuel that.

“I don't know what to say to that. I really don't. If you love someone, and they give you butterflies, you don't push them away.”

Samuel shook his head.

“I don't know. . .” he said. He shrugged emphatically. He was having trouble speaking, it seemed, for how drunk he was. It seemed it took everything he had just to keep from swaying in his seat. He continued, “And then I got to thinking: maybe 'love' is just the Pavlovian effect in action once again: a flood of feel good hormones triggered in response to your seeing that one person with whom you've shared so many experiences and made so many memories and enjoy talking to so much.”

“That's not love.” Ana said quietly. “It's not just chemicals in your brain.”

“I know.” Samuel nodded.

Ana took a deep breath.

“. . . I was thinking that I don't think I would be able to love someone else again as I loved you. It would just be a cheap imitation, really. Every moment, no matter how excellent, would just be a reminder of the moments *we* shared. . .” she said. She quickly looked away to the bar as her voice broke.

“I felt the same way.” he said. He raised his arm as if to comfort her, but he

seemed to waver. He dropped his hand uselessly.

Wiping her tears with the inside of her forearm, Ana looked back at him.

“Which is why I think you're silly to feel like you need to throw away something so strong and so pure, which only by luck you have been able to experience and understand, simply because the world has not been so kind to others. Do you know what you could do to live up to love, so that you can feel like you deserve it? Accept that love, and cherish it, and in turn give as much love back out into the world as you can. Why would you sweep away such a powerful emotion? In favour of suffering? That's stupid. It would just continue the suffering.”

Samuel nodded. “I know. I'm really stupid. I conjure up these abstractions in my head. . . I've been doing that for the past two months, because I figured that with them I could get somewhere. . . maybe better the world in some way. But I didn't get anywhere. . . I was already where I needed to be when I was with you.”

“You're not stupid, Samuel. You just think too much.” Ana said. Samuel nodded, laughing lightly. And then he said, quite suddenly,

“I'm writing a book. It's almost finished.”

“A book?” she asked, surprise in her voice. “About what?”

Samuel thought about it only a moment before replying,

“About us. About love. . . how it works, in this world. I guess.”

“I didn't know you write. . .” she said. She wanted to say more, and she opened her mouth to continue, but it was several moments before she could think of how to respond. She was torn between wanting him to tell her more, and being somewhat

affronted that he would feel it fine to write about something so personal without asking her. What did he plan to do with this book? Perhaps sensing her hesitation, Samuel then blurted out,

“It's a little rough around the edges. The prose at times feels a little excited and rushed. . . but it *is* written by a young man; if it were perfect it would only be artificially so. But, I think, everything I can say now is better said in there. I've found that writing. . . words. . . they really are the best way I have to communicate. I'm at a loss for what to say to you now because for the past two months I've been unloading all my words onto my computer: why I broke up with you; what I think about myself; what I think about the world; what I think about a lot of things, actually. It's all in there.” He paused. Ana was looking at him intently. “And. . . I also wrote about why I need you back. . . and why I think you shouldn't take me back. I wrote about why I'm nothing without you by my side.”

As Ana listened to him say these things, she realized that she was trembling. . . from anger, or happiness. . . or something else altogether, upon hearing these words. She didn't know. In the moments she sat silent then, Samuel seemed to be doing everything he could to avoid her gaze. He was terrified of her reaction. Finally Ana said, rather sharply,

“You broke up with me. . . and you wrote a book? I don't know what to think about that, honestly.”

“I didn't break up with you to write a book. It just sort of happened. I. . .” he looked around despairingly. “Forget it. I'm tired of thinking about it. It's just a whole mess of ideas that really mean nothing at this very moment, when you're here in front of

me. *This* is what matters. The rest is just pointless mental masturbation. I know that now.”

Ana shook her head. “I don't know if it was pointless. If you needed to write it to understand things better, than it was good that you did. We both know you're prone to living your life inside your head. . . maybe it's good that you've found a way to express yourself.” She paused before adding, “I wish I had something similar.”

“You don't need any specific medium, I don't think. Not like me. You draw, you paint, you write, you sing. . . but it's all secondary to your actual experience of life happening now—”

Ana cut him off.

“No, Samuel, stop.” she said. She fixed her eyes on him, and it seemed to take everything he had for Samuel to meet her gaze. “I really can't get over the fact that this whole time you've been writing a book. . . as a sort of catharsis for something you caused in the first place. Doesn't that sound a little backwards?”

“Yes, I know it does. . .” Samuel said. “I have no idea what I was doing, or why. I just know I needed to do it. And I know I wouldn't have been able to if you were there.”

“I get it Samuel. I knew you had to do something like this, even the very moment I left you I knew that. Don't worry. It's just. . .”

“What?”

“Why wasn't love enough? Why wasn't I enough? Why did you need to do this?”

Samuel looked like he might be ill, and all at once it seemed his intoxication resurfaced, and he doubled over as if about to vomit.

“I feel awful.” he said. He extricated himself sluggishly from his stool and began

to teeter toward the door, saying something in a slur over his shoulder, "I'll come back tomorrow. . . when I'm sober. . . I'm sorry for coming here tonight, like this. . . I really am. . . I'm so sorry. . . I can't think straight right now. . . I can't believe I showed up like this. . ."

Ana, catching up to him by the door, said,

"Samuel, it's fine." It took every ounce of her strength to admit what she then said: "I'm glad you're here, regardless of whether you're sober or not." And for the first time, she smiled at him, and Samuel positively beamed back at her. She could tell from the way his eyes moved in and out of focus just how drunk he still was. She laughed loudly and carefully led him by the arm back to sit down, this time at a booth. "Besides, if you leave now, I probably won't hear from you for a week at least, because that's how long your hangover will last." Gingerly she directed him into the booth, and he sort of slumped onto its cushion: half sitting, half laying down, propped precariously on his elbow. She sat beside him. His eyelids were heavily and easily drooping closed, and each time they shut fully he would urgently snap them open as his entire body jerked stiff, and he muttered quietly,

"I didn't know about. . . love. I wrote it down. I made sense of it. Of love. I know what love is, now. I know it. I just need you to. . . tell me if I got it right. . . I. . . I'm not sure. I've been wondering whether I'm completely insane to. . . ah, whatever."

"You're not insane. Maybe you just haven't found in your life something that really holds your attention, so you turn to other things." Ana couldn't keep the hurt from her voice. Samuel winced. He looked at her from the cushion.

“I think I have, in fact. But I've always told you that I need to have the overall structure of my life set. . . to my terms. I think I've just been trying to straighten out what those terms are, so that I can just *be*.”

“So is your book here, then?”

Samuel nodded, and from his book bag he withdrew his laptop and, powering it on and opening the proper document, he turned the screen toward Ana. She eyed it skeptically.

“You want to be a writer now?” she asked.

“I think if I work hard at it, I could even do some good in the world with my words. . .” he said cheerfully. At this, Ana faced him abruptly.

“So if it's good, then what? You're going to choose to stay with the words and ideas you can't write while I'm around? Choose them over me?”

“No. . .” he said, the surety in his voice from a moment ago wavering. One look at Ana and his face fell. “No!” he repeated. “I've done what I needed to. I've figured things out.”

Ana brushed this off.

“Until it happens again. . . until you have to figure something else out, and then you'll leave me again.” she said.

Samuel was speechless. He merely shook his head, as if desperate.

“You want to know what I think? I've heard you say before that you want to live your life by ideals. . . but to me, *love* is the highest ideal. And you threw it away.” she paused, before adding, somewhat spitefully, “And I know you want to analyze that

statement.” There was anger in her tone.

“I would.” he admitted.

“And so I think *that's* your problem!”

“I just want to come to my own conclusions.” Samuel said.

“You tear things away from what they really are when you think. You try to figure everything out, when you should just let things happen organically.”

“But I put them back together again!”

“No you don't! They're never the same after you've got your hands on them, because you've made sure you're able to take pieces apart again to weigh them against new information as it comes to you. You never just trust yourself, no matter how much you think you do.”

“I just can't shut my mind off like that. It's not so easy.”

“Yes you can. You just need to have faith in the big picture. It'll work itself out without ideas—yours or anyone else'. What the whole comes down to isn't that it's run off ideas. The whole is run off life: emerging, interacting, inhaling, exhaling, dancing, dying, birthing. The only thing it needs from you, is to take part. Cause it wouldn't be the same if you didn't. . . In my opinion it would be worse. And you just have to trust me on that.”

Samuel nodded, and, exhausted, he rested his head back on the cushion. “Do you remember that night in Vienna. . . when we met Lukas, Cat, and Mat? The night before I missed my flight?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Do you remember that poem you wrote?” he asked.

“Yes. Why?”

He smiled then. “My book's almost finished. All it needs is your poem.”

“Why that one?”

“Because it's beautiful.” he said.

“The story is about us?”

Samuel nodded sleepily.

“I'll make you a deal then.” she said.

“What?” he asked. With effort he opened his eyes.

“You can use my poem, if you let me pick the name for the girl.” Samuel laughed softly, and he agreed. Ana watched as Samuel took the computer back for a moment, and he proceeded to write out her poem from memory.

“There!” he said, unable to hide his triumph.

A silence fell between them then, lasting for several minutes, and Ana thought Samuel had fallen asleep as he lay beside her in the booth. Ana was left staring at the screen in front of her, eyeing the opening paragraph. The title struck her in that moment as something vulgar. . . *Chasing Tail*? She looked over at him, laying there. . . she would have to give him the benefit of the doubt on that one. . . he wouldn't be so crass without a reason for it. . . He had written about love? But she knew he wouldn't just write a love story. . . he was too analytical for that, and this she knew from reading the essays he had handed in for philosophy class. . . Which means he had. . . what? Tried to figure out love. . . ? Such a thing couldn't be put down to some sort of formula. And yet he spoke as if he had done just that. And then Samuel sat up with a start, causing her to jump, a little.

“Will you take me back?” he asked her.

“I don't know. . .” she said. And that surprised her, for she had thought she was quite sure. Something held her back now. “I guess I want to read your book first.”

Samuel nodded. As if he had been waiting to hear her say precisely that.

“It's all there.” he said, and finally his exhaustion got the better of him.

-the end-