

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Chris Anderson

This thesis is the first of three sections in what will be a book-long project of creative nonfiction essays. The book will parallel the author's diary with three other family diaries, spanning four generations. This thesis deals with the first of those diaries, written by Antonio Bonetti's, the author's great-grandfather. The narrative traces the author's struggle with clinical depression, juxtaposing this with his great-grandfather's political struggles in the city of Trieste during the nineteenth century (then under the Austro-Hungarian empire). Both the author's and Bonetti's diaries are excerpted and commented on by the author, comparing the author's experiences as a psychiatric patient with those of his great-grandfather as a political prisoner. This is the "conversation" of diaries. The irreverent tone of the Antonio Bonetti's prison diary confounds many of the author's expectations, leading the author to discover more commonalities than anticipated, namely a sense of humor in the face of severe diversity (the punchline as life boat).

Where We Are Buried: A Conversation of Diaries

by

Eric Hill

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Eric Hill, Author

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Preface

Los Angeles, 1971:

My first diary had been assigned and carefully read by Ms Hana, our fourth grade teacher at Paradise Canyon Elementary school. Each day she would set class time aside during which we were instructed to free-write in our diaries, small string-bound volumes of wide-lined pages with the title "Spartan Composition Book" printed on a manila cover; on the back was a list entitled "Useful Information," which included conversion tables for troy, avoirdupois, and apothecaries' weights. We were asked to fill at least two pages every day, and while Ms. Hana referred to these sessions as "free-writes," she would usually suggest a topic for us to ruminate on. Besides having us turn these diaries in at the end of each day for her to read, she would often urge us to share our entries with the whole class. She also invited us to feel free to write in our diaries outside of the free-writing sessions. What Ms Hana evidently failed grasp was that we wanted neither to free-write inside nor outside of the free-write sessions. What we, as fourth graders, wanted was to be free of writing altogether.

On one particular session she suggested we write on our definition of the word "freedom." My own definition centered around the sound of the recess bell, which of course meant that I wouldn't have to write in my journal any longer. "Define freedom." The phrase was every bit as problematic as her mandatory free-writes. "Define" from the Latin, "definire": to limit or put a boundary around. To capture and confine. Nail it down and yoke it up. I think the double-bind of the phrase may have escaped Ms Hana, but she

believed she was setting us free, letting our little minds wander and explore new possibilities. If she was unable to see the irony in her compulsory free-writes and public diaries, it was the result of naivete on her part. Nevertheless, it was a gentle naivete with good intentions. And I think we all sensed this.

While the task of having to keep this diary didn't exactly thrill any of us at the time (nothing labeled a "task" ever could, particularly when it involved writing), it was easy for all of us to forgive Ms Hana, partly because of who she was. We would have done anything for her. Her demeanor of dreamy kindness and doe-eyed hippie smiles contrasted dramatically with anything we'd experienced up to that point. We all loved Ms Hana because she seemed so much younger and easier going than any of the teachers we had been subjected to, all of whom had tended toward the stiff and severe, some of them downright harpies. Ms Hana behaved and looked differently than the rest of them. Four years late for the Summer of Love, she donned the familiar uniform: long flowing hair, little steel-rimmed Lennon cheaters, and colorful cotton gypsy garb. She stuck out in a faculty of sealed coifs and polyester, Joplin amidst astronaut wives and librarians. We also endured Ms Hana's free-writes because we knew from experience that it could be so much worse.

I eventually did start writing in my diary outside of the allotted free-write sessions, my free free-writes, although there was always a certain ambivalence on my part about the content, what I should and should not include. Without Ms Hana's assigned topics I was left to my own devices. On the one hand, I wanted to run wild and write anything: the diary as literary

recess, the playground smuggled into the classroom. It was my opportunity to let my hair down; it was my safe haven for punctuation errors and misspellings, for that puerile humor and those “dirty words” that only dare surface in the farthest regions of the blacktop. On the other hand, I had to be somewhat restrained since Ms Hana would be reading it.* So my free free-writes would always be slightly less than free since I knew that I had an audience. Also, looking back on those notebooks now, I notice a certain amount of pandering that might not necessarily be there in a private diary, part of it being the result of knowing that this would be read, but also as the symptoms of some pre-pubescent longings for Ms Hana.

Up until that point writing had been presented as less of a means of communication than it had a chore: the forcing of what had to be well-formed letters on the page while the teacher paced the aisles, looming over our shoulders and making damned sure we didn’t get out of line either on the paper or in practice. Writing had put us on the alphabetic chain gang.

Half-way through the school term Ms Hana disappeared (we never found out why) and was replaced by Mrs. Dixon, doughy white arms and steely blue eyes, the standard issue hair and plastic clothes. The first order of business for Mrs. Dixon was to initiate a new project for us. No more free-writing. We would each write a report on the California mission system. Each of us would choose one mission (there were plenty to go around; I got San Juan Bautista), research and write a report on it, as well as build a replica

* I have little doubt that, given Ms. Hana’s liberal deportment, there would have been any risk in expressing myself openly. Nevertheless, I had been badly burned the preceding year by exercising my right to free speech when I carved a forbidden word into a eucalyptus tree with a pen knife during recess and was promptly whisked away to the principle’s office.

of it out of sugar cubes. The real ones had been constructed from adobe bricks, using slave labor courtesy of the local Indians, thousands of whom either died of disease, abuse, or suicide to escape captivity.

My second diary started out as a suicide note. I began keeping it in 1983 at the suggestion (prescription, really) of a psychiatrist who was treating me for severe clinical depression. The idea was for me to use the diary as a form of therapy, to help me write myself out of the morbidity and despair that was threatening to bring me down for good. And it seemed to work a few times, although during those moments in which I was able to pull myself out of a particularly nasty bout of depression and actually live, I wrote very little, often summing up days of activity in a few sentences on the fly: "Went to Nepal. Got laid. Finally finished the particle accelerator. Gotta go." It was when my depression hit full force that I became the most prolific, filling pages and pages of unreadable self-loathing and surrender, repeating the same themes of pitch-black spiraling despair and hopelessness over and over, some of it, very unfortunately, taking the form of poetry: the greeting card as suicide note, Hallmark's Kevorkian line. My diary suddenly afforded me the opportunity to nurture my despondency, turning it into a voluminous purgatory of avoidance behavior. As long as I was writing I wouldn't have to go out and face life, but neither could I end it; as long as the suicide note remained unfinished, I had to keep writing, adding more pleas and apologies and excuses so that those I left behind would know exactly why. For me the diary entries had become, as Paul Bowles calls it, my "alibis for not living."

My therapist eventually gave up on the diary idea, instead prescribing heavy doses of antidepressants. I, however, chose not to give up on the diary and continued to write in it, right up until the time I was committed for a

poorly executed suicide attempt. I would have continued to keep the diary inside but they frowned upon sharp objects and I was too proud to go Crayola.

When I read back on those entries from this period it's like looking at someone else's yearbook; there's that vague sense of borrowed *déjà vu*, as if I should know who these people are, but don't. And for this I am thankful, although there is also some guilt for having forgotten that much suffering, of forgetting all those I left behind. Nevertheless, even if my emotional memory refuses to yield to the mnemonic cues, it's all there, several accounting books filled with the evidence. The diary as cemetery.

On the other hand, I have also experienced a close sense of connection while reading someone else's diary entries, a kindred spirit with those whom I have never known except through their writing. It is a spark of recognition that occurs during those magic conversations, finishing each other's sentences, clicking, living, connecting. One of these people was my great-grandfather, Antonio Bonetti, who, having been arrested for political crimes in 1883, began a diary in prison.

The differences between us were formidable enough: a language, an ocean, a century. But when you click with someone, these things tend to take care of themselves. What we shared was blood, getting locked up (albeit for slightly different reasons), and the writing of diaries. And in the process of translating him, of learning who he was, which in a sense is who I have become, I entered into a conversation. At first most of this conversation took place in my head as I gradually deciphered the passages from Italian to English. Other times I'd respond to him in my own diary, free associating on a particular passage, paralleling his entries with some of my own, or

sometimes responding to him in the form of a letter: "Caro Bisnonno" ("Dear Great-Grandfather").

While "caro" translates as "dear" as in the English equivalent of an affectionate salutation, it can also refer to something expensive, something for which the price reflects its great value. In this sense, our conversations weren't so much free associations as they were valuable ones, an exchange which cost time and patience and effort. And as in any valuable conversation, the trick is to know when to interrupt and when to sit back and listen.

Where We Are Buried: A Conversation of Diaries

You Are Here

September, 1971.

I stood in a Serbian Orthodox cemetery just outside the Italian port of Trieste, trying to make sense of the names carved into the marble cross towering before me. I was nine years old and, for the moment, I was alone.

The cross was there to mark our family plot. I had found it only after wandering through row upon row of obelisks and stone angels, skimming over names that seemed to grow longer and more unpronounceable as I moved deeper into the cemetery grounds.

If there were others walking around, I don't remember them. In my memory I am alone, having left my parents back at the gate. They both moved far too slowly for me, and I think I was anxious to find our grave site on my own. The last thing I had yelled to my mother as I rushed off into the headstones -- a phrase she repeated back to me for years afterward -- was: "Where are we buried?" She pointed to what she thought might be the general vicinity; not having been back since just after the Second World War, she couldn't be certain. But that was good enough for me. I didn't need a map, just an approximation, one little hint so that I could begin my improvised graveyard Easter. *Now you're warmer, now you're definitely colder.*

Many of the names I had passed along the way were written in characters that were completely indecipherable to me, yet they also seemed strangely familiar, something like a combination between the alphabet I knew turned inside out and musical notation. This pushed my already overwhelming sense of dislocation to a new level. Graveyards have always

made me feel the trespasser; I feel conspicuously anachronistic, too animated and noisy to have any business there. Here was a graveyard in another country, on another continent, headstones in another language, some of them in a writing I had never seen before. And there was me: red, white, and blue bell bottoms, a striped Hang-Ten shirt, my favorite high top sneakers, orange canvas covered in Peter Max cartoons, running through headstones like Easy Rider's bastard son.

Some of the names, those chiseled into the darker, lichen-covered stones, hovered over dates reaching back nearly two hundred years before I had been born, long before Trieste had belonged to Italy, before it had been a part of Yugoslavia or Germany. I didn't know any of this at the time. I wouldn't find out, or care, until I returned 14 years later on my own. All I knew at that moment was that this was the city where half of my genetic material either lived or had been buried. And at that particular leg of our trip, after having been subjected to countless encounters with my breathing blood relations, my preference was leaning toward the latter. The living had worn me down.

Trieste had been our last stop on a month-long trek around Italy visiting family. It seemed like no matter where we were, no matter which coast, city or province we visited, we had relatives there -- and lots of them. There were cousins in Sicily, second cousins near Naples, aunts and uncles and more cousins in Rome, second and third cousins near Venice and Milan, eighth cousins thrice removed by marriage in Bergamo. I began to wonder if I wasn't related to this entire nation of cheek-pinching, yammering guineas. They were everywhere and they all seemed to be expecting us, especially me,

the one they hadn't seen yet, the one they'd heard so much about: Bruna's son. The second they laid eyes on me I was a goner; they were all over me like a cheap suit, grabbing at my face and prattling on and on in a rapid-fire series of what sounded to me like hysterical Chico Marx gibberish. Each door we knocked on made me cringe, if only because I knew what was waiting behind it. The names of the cities would change, as we'd move from place to place the house or apartment building would fade from blue to white to green, but the results were always the same. There would be the long walk up to the door, a knock or push of a button, the tense wait while my parents and I stared silently ahead like strangers on an elevator, and suddenly out would pop a face like a grotesque Jack-in-the-Box, wide smiles and wider eyes, fingers poking and grabbing and pinching, hands rubbing my head and grabbing my shoulders, all accompanied by that endless flow of foreign babble. Once through the proscenium arch, the rest of the cast would descend upon me. More grabbing and pinching, and prattling on for hours, sometimes days.

And so it went for a month. I had been accosted and manhandled and bored in every major Italian city by these hordes of tediously incomprehensible strangers who allegedly shared my genes. By the time we got to Trieste, my mother's home town, I was was more than ready for a break.

Much of the fatigue I was experiencing, I imagine, might have been the result of linguistic shell shock. Even the face grabbing, while invasive, was at least understandable. I could translate physical contact. I knew how to distinguish cheek pinches from a punch in the guts (having been a slight child with a big mouth, I had spent elementary school as one large

hematoma). And while I did have those nine year old boundary issues, I knew the intent here was affectionate. As far as what was being said to me, however, I remained suspicious and withdrawn. I was completely lost in my mother's tongue, surrounded by her familiars. This was her family, not mine. Family speaks the same language. Most of the time I was unable to tell if they were talking to me or about me, their eyes directed my way, smiling, significant, sparkling. But other than the few times when my mother would translate things for me, I hadn't a clue as to what they wanted from me; and even then it often remained questionable. "Ti sei divertito?" Was I diverted? From what exactly? Death? The local Mafia operations?

The rest of the time they conversed among themselves, their words flying around my head like nervous birds, bouncing off the walls, driving me back into a rude silence or off to find something with which to distract myself. This was not easy. Every book and magazine was in Italian; the radio and TV were out too, being every bit as incomprehensible as our hosts. If they had a dog, however, I was saved. I knew fluent dog. In the midst of culture shock and badly shaken bearings, after a long spell of home sickness and being overwhelmed by fascinating yet alien surroundings, few things are more comforting. Give me a dog and I can endure the otherwise unendurable. They have achieved global unity through their wise decision to eschew as complicated or pretentious a language system as ours. If any species will construct a successful Tower of Babel, I have little doubt it will be dogs.

I suppose it was partly this comfort of the familiar, like an appreciation for the ubiquity of dogs, that the cemetery instilled in me. One bone yard is very like another. There are those cypresses that graveyard landscape

architects seem to love the world over. Death is death the world over, transliterated across the board, multicultural, interdisciplinary, class-unconscious. If Justice is blind, death is Helen Keller, an equal opportunity phenomenon. Plus, death is nice and quiet, and silence lacks any trace of an accent. The manner in which a particular culture chooses to dispose of the remains may differ. In Tibet they perform "sky burials," cutting up the bodies for the vultures. In places like India they cremate the deceased on platforms, in Europe they bury or store the body in catacombs. We express differing dialects in the ritual of disposal. But that's the living imposing their need for differentiation upon the dead. Once we shut up, we go back to speaking the same language. I read somewhere that all infants, whether born in Japan or America or Holland, all produce the same number of phonemes. Gradually, as they are forced to discriminate among a few, once a particular language is introduced to them, phonemes are forced into morphemes, the marble block takes shape as Swahili or Basque, while the dust and refuse of one language is picked up as the central core of the other. We begin by sharing every sound there is, gradually chiseling it down to national and even individual linguistic mantras, ending with the same silence. Maybe that's why we have moments of silence when someone dies, in order to "speak" their language, or why I felt compelled to be silent and still even at the noisiest age of nine, and again 14 years later at the age of 23 when I came back to same cemetery:

Trieste, 1985: Dream the other night, probably inspired by the "Silenzio" sign at the monastery in Assisi last week, watching all those monks walking silently up and down the steps. In the dream I am living in a Medieval monastery where all the monks have had their vocal chords severed as a sign of penance and worship; it is a circumcision of the voice. They gather in the sanctuary to "sing" and

“pray.” They gather as they might in a choir and open their mouths all at once like hungry baby chicks, mouthing the words that never come. They are the Senza Voce, the vocal castrati, who speak to the invisible with the unheard of and the unspeakable.

My parents had dragged me to Italy to meet my other side. Growing up I had been peripherally aware of it, of that other side of me, of my “Italianess” for whatever it was worth, but all the facts had remained far too vague for me grasp or bother with. When I was shown photographs or told names or offered stories attached to these names, it felt as if I were being read a bedtime story; these people were more like characters from a fable than the living, breathing and tediously real members of my immediate family. And having grown up on the west coast, the label “Italian-American” meant very little to me. I was familiar, through film, with what Italians did, where they lived, how they behaved. “Real” Italians live on the east coast, in real cities like New York and Boston, in areas called “Little Italy,” not in a suburb of Los Angeles. The only Italians who live in Los Angeles are in the witness protection program. Real Italians had Italian surnames so that in the event they wanted to “be made” in the Cosa Nostra, their pure heritage could be traced back to the Old Country. And real Italians were from the southern part of Italy, from Sicily and Naples, even Rome, not from Trieste, which is about as far north and as far east as you can go without being in Austria or Yugoslavia.

I had heard about real Italians, seen them in film and TV. As John Gorka sings, “My mom’s Italian. I’ve read those mafia books. We don’t belong.”

I was born and raised in Los Angeles. I grew up avoiding my “Italian heritage” at all costs. For one thing, if my alcoholic zia Nella was any indication of what Italians were like, if she was an emissary of all that is Italian, I wanted no part of it, or as she herself once said, “Please, remove the disgusting to make me vomit!” Growing up I was like every other kid in wanting desperately to be like every other kid, no “weird” food or family or customs or coloration or hair, just one of the gang. It got to the point where I would avoid inviting my friends over because I was ashamed of my mother’s accent: “Naw, let’s go over to your house.” Their mother could’ve been a coke whore, johns lined up down the hall, dusty mirrors and rolled Jacksons. Fine. Very LA, in fact. Anything was better than hearing, “Your mom talks funny,” anything was preferable to having her walk into the room while I had company and say, “Have you eat?”

In many ways, I was just as ashamed of my father’s side of the family with their southern drawls, which I always equated with simplicity, “salt of the earth” to the point of mild retardation. But they never left Texas, and we only had to visit them once in a great while. My father’s drawl had softened and at least he never dropped a word, or worse, used the *wrong* word. I could forgive my father for being different because, while it did stretch the boundaries of my provincialism, it was nonetheless *American* and thus familiar.

My American life would be periodically interrupted not only by my mother’s accent but also by the occasional phone call from places so much farther away than Texas or Disneyland. I would only hear our side of the

conversation, my mother rattling off dialect into the mouthpiece and laughing or crying.

Just how far away this other side really was remained an abstraction for me even after flying over there with my parents. The plane ride had taken about the same time as our drive to Fort Worth did every summer to visit that very familiar side of my family: an eternity. But I knew better. This was completely different, if for no other reason than the feel of the place was so entirely alien. There was something in the people, something in the shape of their faces, in the timbre of their voices that seemed intriguing at first, and then odd, and finally unbearable. It was something I couldn't quite put my finger on. All I knew was that it was a world removed from Dallas or Houston or Los Angeles. Not to mention that the food was better: The land of pizza and spaghetti; as far as nine year-old cuisine, I was in heaven. I even forgave the waiter at a restaurant in Rome for failing to comprehend the concept of a root beer float.

But my parents hadn't brought me there to eat pizza, they brought me there to expand what they must have considered my stunted horizons, maybe to pull the provincial bug out of my nine-year-old ass. They had brought me there to expose me to another culture, a culture that they saw as being part of my heritage. The problem was by this point, I was slowly dying of exposure, nursing a particularly nasty bout of culture shock. The novelty of the new had quickly worn off.

I had grown weary of the overly animated and noisy. The cemetery was a breather, a much welcome rest from the clamoring of *famiglia*. Here in the cemetery I could finally be alone, and the cool stone words remained

soundless and held still long enough for me to examine them (rather than them examining me). It was a place where I could think without being incessantly molested by the unintelligible.

I think I had even had enough of my parents at that point, which is why I had taken to running ahead of them wherever we went. And after three weeks of traveling with a culture-shocked nine year-old, they seemed more than happy to give me a little space and time. I had watched their protests grow weaker as the trip progressed. They would still call after me, but the sincerity wasn't really there any more, the tone was less urgent than it had been at the beginning when my abduction by Gypsies still seemed too horrible to contemplate. By the time we had arrived in Trieste, I'm sure second thoughts were beginning to arise. I had worn them down to silence and as I bolted, leaving them at the gate, I looked back to see the tops of their heads gradually disappear behind the stones.

Of the two of them, I think it was my father whom I ran from the fastest. For my mother, the native, this was merely a visit home. But for my father, the tourist, this trip was an ideal opportunity to give me some sort of extracurricular history lesson. This had been his first trip to Europe as well, and everywhere we went he had been ready with the guidebook, reading about the area, who had conquered it and when, recounting to me every detail whether I wanted to hear it or not. The only historical or geographical tidbit that mattered to me was that this was the city where my mother had been born, before she came to America where she gave birth to me. As far as I was concerned, that was the beginning of time right there. That's about as far back as I could handle at nine. Beyond that, I remained mostly unimpressed

with Etruscans and Celts, with ruins and architecture. I'd climb the ruins for hours, but the nano I had to hear about who had built them, when and why, I'd be fisting my little peepers, all yawns and fidgets.

Still, while racing through the headstones, I do recall feeling something palpably dense and heavy, something that weighed upon me as I ran through generations of dead Slovenians, Italians, and Austrians. It was the feeling of being overwhelmed by too much time and gravity, of being nine years old and American and alive in a place that was older than anything I had ever come across in Los Angeles. And while I had begun my search running, speed reading the dead as I searched for our family name, before long this feeling had slowed me down to what seemed a respectable cemetery pace.

Our cross bore three names, each one a mnemonic device etched in stone waiting to be unlocked, a mental and emotional catalyst for the descendants of the organically forgotten. It was our family album, the names dated like diary entries. But you had to know the code; for the family album to work you have to be a part of it, "you had to be there" for the Proustian cupcake to kick in, for the alchemy of tea time to grow a town from a spoonful. I have often time-traveled on nothing more than the smell of baking bread or a silly lyric; even bad songs can jog good memories, guilty pleasures or forgiven photos of me with that haircut circa 1980. But you have to have the link. Dreams, vague visions and déjà vus, they all reside in a niche, in a grayish swell somewhere to the rear of my occipital lobe, triggered by a word, a sound, or the synesthesia of memory that seems to kick in like

the nubs of mental wings, the growth pangs of slow evolution, reattached for the moment and borrowed by another me... I remember this... or dreams... there is a sacred place, a crypt of the mind where memory is resurrected through the seance of words . . .

Los Angeles, 1988: . . . that inner room, the sacred place where forgotten thoughts go to die like elephants, later to be reborn as the dreams of others. In this manner the soul of each of us lives on together, like the layers of an onion, the collective memories of all who have ever been. When we dream, it is the dead borrowing our thoughts so that they might remember.

The first and the oldest name on the cross was the only one written in that same alien hand I had seen on the other markers. It was also the only name that had actually been carved into the cross itself, at its intersection; the others lay near the base.

I reached up to the first name, running my fingers over the recessed characters, as if by touching the letters I would be able hear the pronunciation in my head, the voice of an ancestor whispering to me through the conduit of the stone, telling me stories, answering all of my questions. Had that voice spoken to me I don't imagine I would have understood much since I didn't (and still don't) know any Serbo-Croatian. I also imagine that, being nine and alone in a cemetery thousands of miles from home, I would have pissed my Old Glories right on the spot.

But had I been brave and fluent enough, the voice might have told me that the strange writing that confounded and fascinated me so much was Cyrillic, an alphabet that Mussolini had ordered, along with Greek and

Hebrew, to be chiseled off many of the headstones throughout the region in an effort to eradicate that which was "unItalian." I would have found out that Trieste was city with a very long and fascinating -- if troubled-- story; that as a commercially and militarily strategic port in the Adriatic, it had an extensive history of international tug-o-wars and bitter border clashes among an impressive list of powers for hundreds of years, including the Celts, the Roman Empire, the Venetians, the Turks, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Yugoslavia, and, of course, Italy; and that consequently, there were long-standing ethnic tensions and clearly delineated class structures between Italians and Slavs. Italians and Slavs, the stuff and history of my own blood.

The voice, however, remained silent and I was left to my own resources among the unpronounceable dead.

The second name, one of those at that base of the cross, was one I knew, both because it was written in familiar Roman characters and because I recognized it as my grandfather's:

Cap. Milos Rassevich
March 6, 1886 - September 9, 1944

All that I knew about Milos Rassevich had come to me through stories from my mother. And many of her memories of him consisted of stories he had told her about his travels. He had been a sea captain, ferrying passengers and freight to ports in continents all over the world. My mother told me how while she was growing up he would be gone for as long as six months at a time, returning with stories and curiosities from China, Australia, America, Africa, etc. Many of the stories he told her surrounded food. He loved to eat

with the Arabs because he found them generous and civilized; he found dining in Asia difficult because he never managed to get down the stick technique. His upbringing had been a strict one, centering around an Orthodox faith, but it had not stuck. In fact, it had had the opposite effect. He had little use for religion and refused to attend church, a fact that my grandmother, a devout Roman Catholic, found infuriating. At the outbreak of World War Two, he had refused to fight for Mussolini, both because he was a pacifist and because he despised the Fascists. Consequently he was given mine sweeping duty along the Adriatic. He managed to beat the odds, surviving to return to his civilian role toward the end of the war. In 1944, American planes bombed his ship as it pulled out of the Triestine harbor, killing him, his crew, and most of the passengers on board.

But these were all things I had learned second hand. Since I had been born 18 years after he had been killed, I couldn't remember him in the strict sense. I could remember my mother remembering him. I could no more summon up memories of him than I could bring him back from the dead, but I could recognize his name in the stone and make some connection. And I suppose I could even make the argument that what was left of him was at that moment standing there before the marker reading his own name, if there is a collective unconscious and if there is ever a stirring in the double helix. But that's me talking now, not then. I don't think the nine year old would have warmed to such a metaphysical proposition, although I can't be sure anymore. In some ways I think I can "remember" him better from my mother's stories than I can myself at nine; and in fact, much of what I remember of myself comes from her stories as well. If she made him up, she

made me up too, well enough that I'm here to write about it.

When my parents finally caught up with me I would learn that the first name, the Cyrillic name that floated above my grandfather, belonged to his father, Admiral Teofilo ("Lover of God") Rassevich. He had been a strict follower of the Serbian Orthodox church, knighted by the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, and served as a naval admiral with a fleet of ships at his command. Teofilo was the reason my grandfather became a sea captain, although my grandfather refused to sail in any military capacity, which evidently drove Teofilo up the wall. In fact, Teofilo insisted on it, forcing my grandfather, who was then 16, to sail with him to Australia as part of his crew, treating him abominably so that no one could ever accuse him of nepotism. No one ever did; but he was criticized by family and crew -- behind his back -- for being an abusive Prussian asshole. He had also been the major reason my grandfather had become an atheist. All and all, from what I could gather, Teofilo had been respected and feared, but not liked very much. According to my mother, he also seems to have been relatively hard to suss. When he wasn't cracking the whip he was unreadable. My mother had few stories about Teofilo. She had many more about her father, and when she recounted these times for me it was always with a fondness and admiration. She cherished those few days in between his journeys, and her impressions of him remain strongly rooted in nostalgic fragments that are mostly positive, tagged with adjectives like, "kind," "generous," "funny," and "brilliant." Her only regret is that she never got to know him as well as she would have liked. Like a guest who leaves too early, she had had to let go of him too soon. She had been in Naples at a nursing school during the war when she heard that

he had been killed, not off in some faraway sea, as she and my grandmother always worried about, but in the harbor right by their home.

The third and last name simply read:

Al Nostro Teucci
April 21, 1918 - September 8, 1922

"To our Teucci." Teucci (diminutive for Teofilo), was my grandfather's only son. And while it seems odd to me now that my grandfather would name his son after a father whom he seemed to have despised so much on so many levels, I have to wonder if it wasn't simply a matter of following tradition. Or had he made peace with his father at some point? Teucci also had a nickname: "Solo Vedo" ("I'm only looking"), a reference to a propensity for getting into things, breaking heirlooms, glasses, taking things apart around the house. When he was questioned, his response was, "Solo vedo!" Teucci, "Little Lover of God," had died before his sixth birthday from meningitis. My mother's last memory of her brother is him pleading with her as she played by his bed to keep her voice down because his head hurt so badly. His death had hit everyone in the family hard, but particularly Milos. He had asked to restrict his voyages to the Adriatic so that he could be close to home. Nevertheless, Teucci had died while my grandfather was away, and he never forgave himself for not being there. My grandfather changed after Teucci's death, withdrawing into himself, distant even when he came home between voyages. My mother said would pace all the time, as if he were looking for something that he'd lost around the apartment.

Other than this, I heard very few stories about Teucci, but then he hadn't really been here long enough to produce many memories. I wondered what he might have been like had he lived. Would he have taken after my

grandfather? Or would he have been more like his namesake, cold and impenetrable? If my grandfather's name evokes elaborate and affectionate stories, then Teucci's begs questions. Like any child's grave, he would remain an unfinished story between dates that were placed much too close together for much comment. His was the shortest entry.

This was our cross and our family lay beneath it. Here was Teofilo. And with him, Milos, the devout atheist buried under a giant marble cross with his father whom he had despised. All three fell in descending order down the marble cross. The patriarch was at the top, his name carved in Orthodox script, his relation to me distanced by time and all those superlatives that get tagged onto the oldest of ancestors: "great-grand father." And then there was "grandfather," the greatness removed, and finally "Teucci," neither "great" nor "grand" or even a surname, but gone and therefore earning his name in stone, his short life reduced to a dash between numbers. Evidently, the longer you're dead the more titles you earn. The knighted admiral, the captain, and the little boy.

Not two weeks after we all returned to America, a fourth name was chiseled into the stone. My aunt Anci, my mother's sister, committed suicide and was buried there as well. I had just been with her. We had visited her in Rome and she doted on me and gave me things and drove me all over the city. Now she would be recorded on the cross. She didn't seem sad at all while I was with her, and yet she had been, very sad. It wouldn't be until later that I would come to understand Anci better because I would find myself laden with that kind of sadness, but she wouldn't be there to talk about it.

Years later, when I returned to Trieste and looked at the grave a second time, yet another name had been added (the last, there being no more room), that of my grandmother, Maria Rassevi née Bonetti. She was the only “pure” Italian among them, and the only hardcore Roman Catholic. Nevertheless, she was buried there with my grandfather and his family, there in the Serbian cemetery. The Catholic priest who presided over her funeral procession was not allowed beyond the gates of the strictly Orthodox cemetery. Instead, he was left to stand there, Virgil at the gates of Paradise bidding his charge adieu, while the Serbian priest took over as the procession continued to the grave cite, swinging his censer, sprinkling holy water onto the casket, completing the intricate process of burying a Roman Catholic next to her atheist husband.

This, my second trip to the cemetery in 1985, was different in several ways. For one, I was now an “adult” of 23. For another thing, I had found the cross right away; everything had shrunk while I was gone. I remembered the way, finding us easily without a map or Virgil, and stood there reading the list of names, thinking about the first time I had stood there years before. I was alone again, having left my parents back in America this time, and there were two more names, names of people whom I had before, while they breathed and moved. Looking at the cross this time I couldn’t help noticing that in my grandmother’s case they had used the official truncated version of the family name: Rassevi. Not long after Italian nationalism under Mussolini took hold in the ‘30’s, all the names of Italian citizens had to be Italianized. In order to remain in the country your name would have to be or at least sound Italian. Hence, “Rassevich” was chiseled down to “Rassevi,” the patronymic vich castrated, the son removed, and suddenly Slavs were

miraculously transformed into full-blooded Italians, just as my grandfather had been miraculously converted from atheism to Serbian Orthodoxy. Posthumous conversions. All these layers represented the fragmentary nature of myself as well. My blood retranslated, transmogrified so many times over. This is where we were buried and translated, from Slavic to Italian, from Orthodox to Catholic, from atheists to believers, etc . This was my Rosetta crucifix, my dot on the map, my legend of directions, saying: You Are Here.

It also occurred to me, looking at the marker, that these names recorded more than just our family history; it was a record of the history of the city and the people that had lived here and still lived here. Between the Cyrillic and the Roman, the Slavic and the Italian, there was a cultural history. This was a shorthand for an ongoing record of events.

There was one name that wasn't on the cross, and yet it was a name that would come to mean a great deal to me. It was an Italian name, a "true" Italian name, not the retranslated Slavic variety: Antonio Bonetti, my grandmother's father. Having been fiercely Italian he wouldn't have been caught here dead or alive. I'm not sure where they wound up burying him (I imagine in a Catholic cemetery somewhere in Trieste), but I found him in my parent's garage.

The Garage as Diary (and vice versa)

Accompanied by some friends of mine on the first of June, 1883, I entered the prison of J. R. Pretura to serve the sentence of one month for my political crimes . . .

Los Angeles, 1983.

I found the diary by accident. It was during one of many archaeological digs through my parents's garage, a garage that had accumulated so many layers of history over the years that it had gradually pushed my mother's VW Hatchback and my father's Corvair van (yes, they made a van, also unsafe at any speed) out onto the driveway. The outside was unremarkable enough. Nothing fancy. No automatic doors, just heavy wooden ones rigged to giant industrial springs that would resonate each time I struggled to lift them. Like our house, it was a basic brown painted box, a post-war quickie thrown together with Celotex and stucco, a flat tar paper roof (only in Los Angeles), somewhere in between eyesore and forgettable.

Yet therein lay the impressively voluminous residue of a family of five, stored, shoved, crammed, and precariously balanced on every shelf, nook, crevice, every available micrometer of horizontal space piled with: boxes of letters and photographs, worn-out appliances (Ronco impulse buys), exercise equipment rusting with good intentions, rejected gifts too guilt-heavy to hurl; my sister Michele's brushes and crusty palettes, tubes of paint squeezed at agonized angles, broken easels, her giant abstract expressionist oils, unframed and coated in dust; my father's tools, his electronic equipment and failed inventions; my sister Mara's microscopes and boxes of slides,

various unidentified specimens, biology texts and lab books strewn with rat pellets; and then there was all the crap my mother brought when she came over from Italy (including generations of the crap her own mother had saved over the years, overseas residue of a long line of dead relatives who would never see America). Consequently, what had once been a two car shelter was now a Jungian repository of shadows, a warehouse of who we used to be.

It was a place I tried to avoid, particularly after moving out on my own. The rub was that I could never afford an apartment big enough to store all of my own excess and was forced to leave much of it behind. Hence, it often became necessary to make the pilgrimage over there to dig up the occasional necessity.

My initial impressions of this bird cage were something less than complimentary. However, as the days have passed, I have begun to make the acquaintances of many honorable companions among the inmates, and finding every one of them to be buona pasta, I have gradually been forced to concede that the rosy descriptions given to me by my friend Dr. F. are to be substantiated after all.

I don't recall now what I had been hunting for on this particular occasion, but I have no doubt that it must have been nothing short of vital; few things could have motivated me to leave the comfort and safety of my apartment to go rummaging through that Fibber McGee and Molly avalanche of nostalgia and neglect. But, as I say, there were times when I couldn't avoid it. I would be digging around in my own files and boxes for something -- a tax return, a transcript, an indispensable book or owner's manual that I never thought I'd have to refer to -- when I would suddenly feel overcome with dread; my apartment was far too tiny to leave room for any doubt. Whatever I

was looking for had to be somewhere in that black hole painted brown. Even after the realization, I would rifle through the same drawers and file cabinets, hoping with every tissue of my being that I might somehow avoid the inevitable journey over there. The garage was always my last resort.

For one thing, no matter how early in the day I began spelunking for something, I knew that I wouldn't be surfacing again until long after nightfall. It was a time vacuum, mostly, I admit, because I would begin looking for one thing and invariably wind up getting sidetracked, sometimes for several generations. I'd go in clean and sharp early Saturday morning, focused with the sole intention of rescuing *a single* item -- e.g., a vaccination certificate. Hours later I'd stumble out into the night, dusty, bleary-eyed, pith helmet soiled, arm in a bloodstained sling, all my bearers slaughtered by neighboring tribes, rifle jammed, bloody useless. And worse, I'd walk out with armfuls of everything lost from my childhood -- year books, unfinished model planes, incomplete chess sets, a 1971 Guinness Book of World Records, Hoffa, Earhart, seventeen minutes of tape, Jake Barnes's gonads, you name it - - and of course sans my vaccination certificate. Once again, the Pandora's box of my parents's garage would seduce me away from the land of the conscious and the living just long enough to make me forget what I came for. I confess, I get so easily lost, sidetracked by shiny objects. I'm guilty of it even when I set out to look up a word in the dictionary, seduced along the way by etymologies for terms I had never dreamed existed, and slowly coming back to the realization that I had forgotten the original word I'd been after.

I hated going into that garage because I know myself and my propensity for getting sidetracked, for getting lost in garages, cities, and worst of all,

myself. I have spent my life getting lost, getting distracted, losing my place, going too deep and forgetting to come up for air and food and sunlight, down to where, as Garcia Marquez puts it, "fish are blind and divers die of nostalgia." And sometimes it takes years for me to find my way out.

Middleton, Wisconsin. May 1, 1997:

I am lost.

As I write this I am 35. The number means nothing to me . . . other than as a reference point, a coordinate on a map to mark where I am.

And I suppose this would be the map, at least according to Dr. L, who over a decade ago told me to start keeping it. Not to say that I hadn't entertained the idea before, but somehow having the activity prescribed to me by a "professional" as "therapy" made it seem important enough to commit to. So I continue, faithfully recording dates, describing events, people, dreamscapes, and spilling out internal drivel, all those things far too embarrassing and pathetic to share aloud. Why? In the hopes of making sense of this; or to run with Dr. L's tedious metaphor, I plot a longitude of time against a latitude of space in an attempt to look back and measure my progress, hoping that by seeing where I've been I can figure out where I am.

Where I am at this moment is in the middle of America (and as I write that it occurs to me that I can always find myself in the middle of "America"). I am in the back room of a Borders Books somewhere in the Midwest, getting paid squat for shelving travel, selling maps and guides to people who actually have the money to go places. Me, helping people find maps, "the man who quotes Nietzsche, and can't find his ass with both hands," says K.

A mattress commercial on TV once told me that I spend a third of my life in bed. I know I've spent at least another third standing in line at the DMV, pinching the ends of plastic bags in the produce section, chasing pubic hairs around bathroom tile and porcelain with a sponge, etc. The remaining third has been taken up making U-turns. At 35 I still manage to get hopelessly lost. Driving or walking, I've retained my knack for heading down the wrong street, taking the wrong on ramp or exit. I've been here since September -- it's a such a small town -- and I still don't know my way around; but then I lived in LA most of my life and it was no different. K says it's because I get distracted. Makes her crazy. It's gotten to where I don't even notice it; I just assume that I'll get lost and allow time for it, leaving an hour earlier than I think I'll need to. I rationalize it as an opportunity for covering new ground;

gives me something new to write about. And, after all, I always seem to find my way back home eventually.

I have been significantly *lost* three times in my life. The first time is one of my earliest memories. I am four, walking with my mother through the Pasadena library. I wander off (or maybe it was she who wandered) and the next thing I know I'm running down tall corridors of books, crying, terrified, my voice echoing off of marble, gripped by that horrible feeling of sudden isolation (is that why I hate libraries?).

The second time was L.A. (although I consider that less a literal than a philosophical displacement). One minute I'm surrounded by boxes of depositions, and the next thing I know they're hauling me out of my office and off to the booby hatch.

"You are going on a journey," says Dr. L. "On this journey you will need three things." Cut the New Age crap and medicate me, Buscaglia. "The first thing you'll need is a watch, the second is a compass, and finally a will."

"How about a map?"

"There's no map for where you're going," says Dr. L.

Putz.

"You will be the author of the map because you will be traversing uncharted territory, navigating a terrain unknown to anyone before you. The watch will be to measure your progress. The compass will be to keep your course true --"

"And the will," I say, hoping to wrap it up as quickly as possible, "is what keeps me going, no matter how treacherous the journey is."

"No," says L, visibly perturbed but with a grin, "the will is so that we'll know whom you left the watch and compass to in case you don't make it back."

This is my third *selva oscura*, the difference being that for once I feel neither fear nor depression. In fact, as I sit here writing (instead of pulling "dead wood" to send back to the publishers), surrounded by volumes of crap and classics, best sellers and hidden treasure, I feel exquisitely lost. I am happy, if for no other reason than because I can finally say, "You are now here."

But avoiding the garage was only part of it. Going over there also meant risking a conversation with my mother:

April 1, 1984:

"Do you need money for clothes?" No. "Then why do you dress like this?" Why don't we start with because it's the weekend. Because I'm doing laundry. Because I didn't realize that a visit home required a coat

and tie. Because I'm 22 goddamned years old and live on my own and hold down a job and what possible business is it of yours what I choose to wear?

I love my mother. I do. And not just out of a filial sense of duty or some culturally induced piety peculiar to the sons of Italian mothers, some virgin Mary carry over that compels me to honor her. I genuinely admire who she is and what she has done. Part of my appreciation might even come from some recognition on my part that she is indeed my most direct living link to that side of myself, the semi-known and half-understood part. And because of this I try to talk to her, or better yet, listen, because I want to hear more about her life, partly because it is the first volume of my own and partly because it has been every bit as tragic and fascinating as any book I've read or any film I've ever seen; she *lived The Bicycle Thief* and beyond. For example, I know that she spent the Second World War in Naples at a nursing school, bombed by the Americans and Germans, as the plague broke out and Vesuvius erupted. But even these tidbits I've had to glean mostly from my sisters or my father. My mother was a legend in her own time because what we knew about her past circulated among us like rumors.

I love my mother, but when we are in a room together for more than fifteen minutes at a time, some inexplicably painful ionization takes place, the atmosphere around us crackles with electric irritation, and we arc and we hum, until I am left simultaneously drained and stressed from the effort of restraint.

The problem is that we don't speak the same language. Her Old World sensibilities grind against my worn jeans and T-shirts, my jazz drowns out her opera, my laughter interrupts her silence.

I used to think that our communication problem might have been the result of a collision of tongues: her English on crutches, my Italian on life support. But gradually I came to realize that it had more to do with her absolutely uncanny knack for bad timing, for testing my patience at the most vulnerable moments (unintentionally, although you couldn't have convinced me of that at that time). It sometimes centered around language issues, but I was certain that this was just one of the media through which she worked her nefarious influence on me. There were questions of what I considered bilingual etiquette. For example, I always noticed that whenever one of my friends was present and she needed to tell me something about the family, she would only say it in Italian, like a rude whisper in front of guests.

My embarrassment concerning her accent gradually abated. I went from wincing at her questionable pronunciations and word choices, to "tolerating" them. It was big of me, no doubt. By Junior High School I had acquired enough worldly wisdom to see things in their proper perspective; *comprendere tutto é perdonare tutto* (to understand everything is to forgive everything). On one particular occasion we had gone camping, my family and me and my first girlfriend, Kristi. And as we unpacked, my mother looks at me, my mother who holds a PhD in psychology, speaks four languages fluently, she looked at me, her son who was at that time flunking 8th grade English, and she says . . .

April , 1993:

"Did you bring the Bixby?" No, I didn't bring the "Bixby." I also didn't

bring the Ray Walston, the Mrs. Livingston, or the Lou Ferrigno. But I did bring this: a *Frisbee*. Say it with me now, learn it well. Because a Frisbee is something you hold in your hand, and a Frisbee is something you toss to a friend at the park or for a dog at the beach to catch in mid-air. And a Bixby is something that contracts prostate cancer and dies slowly and horribly. Tell me, which would you rather play with?

That's what I *wanted* to say. But I didn't. Because even at 15, where the contract explicitly stipulates that it is in the duty of every teenager to be an asshole towards his or her family, I exercised restraint. Some valve kicked in and shut me down, or I was beginning to learn the concept of compassion. Something deep down in me suddenly recognized that, as in the case of Ms Hana's free writes, she meant well. *Comprendere tutto é pardonare tutto*.

Years later, right after my parents had finalized their divorce and decided to sell the house, we ran into another linguistic snag, although this time it was less of a matter of embarrassment than pure confusion. I was helping her sort through things and at one point she said, "I want you to have your grandfather's *baúl*." Excuse me? "You know." No, I don't know. "His *baúl*." (Sometimes when she can't think of an English word, she'll resort to dialect. I usually find it easier to pretend I understand; otherwise, we both wind up red-faced and confused). I don't know what you're talking about. "His *baúl*. It's in the garage." No thanks. "You know... the *baúl*! I want you to have it. His *baúl*. You said you wanted it." I never said that. "Yes, you said --" Look, I don't even know what the hell it is, why would I say that I wanted it? *Testa dura*.

As was often the case, we continued to argue, her insisting that I knew what she meant and me wanting to escape the responsibility of inheriting my grandfather's "baúl."

I imagined a tubular item, set high up on a forgotten dusty shelf of the garage doing slow pirouettes in a mason jar of cloudy formaldehyde. I'm not above a hand-me-down, but I held my ground this time. When she finally dragged me out to the garage to see it, I realized she had meant his sea trunk. This I could deal with. Unless, I thought, she means what's inside. Turns out it was just the trunk.

I once asked her to describe everything she could remember about coming to America for the first time. The question threw her, I think. While I was growing up, our conversations had traditionally vacillated between two poles: moments of tension and surface pleasantries. Mostly we avoided talking unless absolutely necessary. I knew she loved me because the food kept coming, but she was rarely emotive or physically demonstrative with any of us. She'd kiss me if I was getting on a plane or driving across the country, but I always had the feeling that this was somehow tied to her morbid obsession with death, a kiss of superstition.

She is small. By the time I was nine I was already taller than she was. And yet this small-boned and slight Italian woman carried history with her, a world war, the kind of weight and poignancy that I could never hope acquire in my lifetime. There's no competing with nostalgia. And while she never once said, "When I was your age . . .," her silence weighed heavy on me, gilded with an Old World guilt.

When she was in the house all of us observed silence, particularly the living room, which she had decorated so intricately with her own personality that none of us lingered there for long, with its combination of Aztec and Mayan gods side by side with a Byzantine Madonnas. The windows in that

room were stained glass (a fact that never seemed odd to me until one of my friends pointed it out years later when he confessed always feeling a “tad uncomfy” at our house). She remained beyond our reach, out of the range of emotion and comfort. I never dared raise my voice at my mother, even loud enough for conversation.

My father, on the other hand, I would openly attack when I was a teenager. But we communicated. We talked, we laughed, we screamed obscenities at each other that would make a whore blush. He was from Texas, after all. There were no formalities. We shared the relaxed exchange of hysterical Americans on their home turf. He had been a Depression child, but somehow he never carried it the way my mother nurtured her War or so many centuries of brutal secrets. And my mother, I think, always resented that closeness I had with my father. She looked disapprovingly upon our fights and our laughter. We were children. We were Americans. What did we know from tragedy? We both communicated in the genial atmosphere of Southern hospitality, genuine and relaxed. With my mother conversations tended toward Old World formalism. So when I asked her about coming to America, she hesitated, but she talked.

I knew most of the facts, the historical placement, the details. I knew that she was 25 when she first came here, that she spoke no English, that she came over in 1946, a year after the war, two years after her father had died. I knew all that. But these were details I could have gotten from so many others, my father or sisters or cousins.

What I didn't know, what I was suddenly curious about were her first impressions of that moment. I was intrigued precisely because of the image I

harbored, overly romanticized to be sure, of what must have been the last great wave of Italian immigrants sailing into New York. I remember a black and white photo from an old history textbook describing the great immigration from parts of the world to America: lines of sunken-eyed Russian Jews, Sicilians, Poles, and Irish, etc., many etceteras, all nameless and frozen in that classic Turn of the Century Ellis Island pose of half-starved and impoverished culture shock, all swaddled in gray and black scarves and rags, strange hats, and moustaches, the epitome of wretched refuse washing up on our front porch. I had gotten the image from American films and photos in textbooks and paintings. I wanted to hear it from her. What was it like?

Like a carnival, she said. In fact, she had been sure it was a carnival, asking someone next to her what the celebration was for, all the noise and lights. That's New York, they answered. It's always like that. She then told me that this is what America seemed like to her from then on: too big, too noisy, too much. For her it remained a carnival, particularly when she arrived in Texas, where she would eventually meet my father. She remained nostalgic for Italy, for her small city port layered with history, and this nostalgia often seemed to express itself as a kind of silent rebellion against this nation given over to children. For her, America is still too young, a global adolescent she frowns upon or regards with gentle head shakes of disapproval. My father and I are too young. Never serious enough for her. And suddenly I felt guilty for putting her through this carnival even though I hadn't brought her here; I hadn't even arrived. Or had I? The half of me that came from her, the half I share with my half sisters, nodded grimly in

complete agreement with her. The Italian side of me beats my breast and asks forgiveness for my father and me and this carnival gone on too long.

That magnitude of guilt can strain a conversation. Hence, after moving out I generally avoided any encounters unless they were absolutely necessary, usually holidays and family tragedies (the distinction was often a difficult one, particularly for guests outside the family who were unfamiliar with our tradition of gathering around the piano to scream at one another), or, as in this particular case, when I needed something out of the garage.

My garage expeditions followed a relatively routine pattern. I would start with the right side, lifting the heavy wooden cob-webbed door, and begin removing boxes. After digging through a few of these and, having established that there was nothing there of mine, I would then stack them in the driveway, pause long enough for a sneezing fit, and climb back into the cool dusty dark.

I could rarely be sure which were my boxes and which were someone else's; none of us were big labelers. Consequently, I would drag out a stack of boxes, wrestle the the tape off only to discover that instead of the 1984 tax return I was after, I had pulled out one of my sister's old stuffed animals or some year books. A box of my sister's shadows, stuff she stashed away. It was either storage for the sake of nostalgia or keeping the past hidden. In other words: That which is no longer essential since it's either broken or doesn't fit anymore (but that you can't bear to throw away), or that which is too embarrassing to keep around where someone might see it (yet that you can't bear to throw away). Either way, it's usually an item heavy with some emotional potency, a talisman for somebody. Which is why I have learned

garage sale etiquette is a very delicate manner. You can't just got jumping out of the car, skim over these people's lives, snort and bolt. Even if you don't buy something, even if it's all very obviously crap, that poorly executed ashtray was made by the grandson of the woman minding the till, you linger, picking it up as if removing something from the reliquary, smile, and leave only after what feels an appropriate amount of consideration. The key is to strike that balance of decorum that falls somewhere between Thanksgiving at Grandma's and rifling through the bin at Good Will.

My digs would often continue unsuccessfully until at some point, I would hit that inner core, what I liked to call the Old World layer. I knew that when I hit this level I had gone too far. This was my mother's stuff. There was no mistaking it. Everything was foreign, letters and documents in Italian, black and white photos of men in pinstriped double-breasted suits and fedoras, or porkpie hats and suspenders. Dandies and no-goodnicks from the old country. Women donning plumed hats if they were young, or black if they were over 40 (I am convinced that back then all Italian women over 40 automatically became widows, either because their husbands were killed on the Russian front or by their wives for having a mistress). Relatives and friends I knew only by an occasional passing reference. There were also men in military uniform, women in nursing garb, often my mother (looking vaguely nunnish). And right here is where I should have stopped, knowing full well that everything in these boxes and trunks preceded me by at least two decades and an ocean. Finding a copy of my 1984 tax return here would be tantamount to uncovering a neolithic atomic generator. And the deeper I went the more anachronistic I grew.

And yet this is precisely where I would start to get lost, fascinated by this buried and forgotten side of me.

. . . In order that I might pass my time here with as little boredom as possible, I have managed to procure this diary and some ink (clandestinely, since such objects are strictly prohibited) and have taken it upon myself, in a manner permitted by my meager writing talents, to describe a few salient facts that will no doubt take place during this forced and entirely undesired sojourn.

It was during one of these forays into the core that I found the diary. It was buried deep, deeper than I'd ever been before. The cardboard box that I found it in, barely held together by yellowing, mostly adhesiveless tape, contained things that preceded even my mother by a generation or two. The photos were mostly daguerreotypes, the letters rendered in that beautifully calligraphic script of another century. The diary itself had a black leather cover. When I opened it the brittle pages threatened to pull loose from the fragile string binding and crumble:

*One Month in Prison
the memoirs of
Antonio Bonetti
Trieste, June 1883*

... and all of it was written beautiful calligraphic hand that spoke of a time so far removed from my illegible post-modern scrawl, a time well before microprocessors or e-mail.

Meanwhile, one hundred years later, in 1983, I began my own diary, on my lunch hour, in the windowless back room of a small bookstore in Pasadena, California. I began keeping it for a variety of reasons, some of which I suppose were the same reasons anybody begins one: out of ennui and desperation, as a map of days, as a companion, as a message-in-a-bottle. It wasn't because I thought I had anything of great import to say, or because my life, at twenty-one, had been so remarkable as to warrant careful recordation. I had never taken a stand so controversial as to jeopardize my freedom, and I sure as hell had never been arrested for anything, certainly not any "political crimes." The only spot on my record up to that point was a warrant for an unpaid leash law violation. I hadn't refused to pay it in order to make some significant political statement; it had simply slipped my mind. I had been asleep when the animal control man woke me, my dog, Larry, standing at his side, caught roaming the neighborhood as always, leaving the occasional lawn curly in a neighbor's front yard. I had signed the ticket, placed it on my desk full of papers, and gone back to sleep, forgetting about it until a warrant was issued the following year. When I received the delinquent notice, I dutifully paid it. Not an especially criminal moment. Certainly nothing worth noting, in a diary or otherwise.

That particular year, in fact, had been rife with so many disappointments and false starts that the last thing in the world I was interested in was recording it all for posterity's sake. 1983 was the year I had dropped out of college with failing grades (in music, . . . at a community college). It was the year I had been fired from my only job at a major donut chain for refusing to recycle the roach-riddled shortening under the deep

fryer. 1983 was the year I officially stopped attending church following an incident in which I was attacked by a group of fundamentalists at a “spiritual retreat” for not voting for Ronald Reagan (I also decided to stop voting about then). And it was also the year I had finally decided to break off a long engagement when Faith, my fiancée, ran over me with her mother’s car, a candy-apple red Toyota Cressida, with a silver crucifix dangling from the rearview mirror.

Nothing there to boast about or offer up to history, unless I intended on compiling notes for a How-Not-To book, field notes for a study in failure. My primary purpose for writing any of it down was to hose myself out, to begin anew, clean slate. I had had enough of me and my surroundings, and anything attached to either. It had been my one sincere wish while growing up in Southern California that the LA basin had had a flush handle. Just one good push on it every few years and that brimming desert bowl of alienation and crime, all that Hollywood pretentiousness and its celluloid brain pap, its powder keg of racism veneered with a rich white liberal hypocrisy, all of it

would vanish down a shit-brown swirling vortex of smog and bedroom communities, down into the sewer system of the San Andreas fault.

But since there was no handle, no possibility of any mass public cleansing, I decided on a private baptism. This would be for a house of one, private, confessional, cathartic. The diary as paper confessor, as silent therapist, and as my own porcelain bowl.

Looking at my great-grandfather’s calligraphic writing somehow made me feel guilty, like a sloppy slackard who had done nothing with his life

other than goof off, get drunk, and botch the interview at the Burger King in the Glendale Galleria Mall:

Pasadena, 1983: It doesn't get much lower. Sitting at one of the bright orange plastic booths with the "assistant manager," a bright-eyed girl five years my junior, answering a series of questions she reads off of a clipboard. "Okay, let's begin! First, do you think it's important to get along with fellow employees." Yes. "Good! Okay, next, do you feel that customer satisfaction is the goal of--" and so on. Until she got to the last one and I couldn't do it. As deluded as it seems to me now in retrospect, I actually thought she'd appreciate the candor. "Okay, just one last question. What do *you* think it takes to be a success in this business?" Look, can I be completely honest with you? "Oh, I hope so!" I don't equate working at a Burger King in the mall with success; I'm applying for this job because I can't find work anywhere else. And right at that moment I watched something in her eyes go out, the assistant manager smile still in place, but the mask slipped just enough to see what I had done... unintentionally; I didn't mean *you*. Oh God. And I swear I heard a sound, an echo of the phone call home to tell mom she'd been promoted to assistant manager, the sound of a curtain coming down because of candor, and the sound of an application being torn into very small pieces.

And they all frowned at me from memory, all the daguerreotypes from dusty boxes, the immigrants swaddled in tattered rags looking for any kind of work they could find, sepia ancestors in high starched colors taking life very seriously. Nobody cracked a smile near the fin de siècle, especially in Europe, where things are always old and war-torn. They all had a serious agenda back then, even the kids. I can't imagine there being any color, not because the camera technology wasn't there, but because times were too hard for such a luxury; color was a frivolity. Everyone lived a black and white, smileless existence, and nobody ever went bungee jumping or even considered having sex for fun. And whenever they gaze out from shelves and fireplace mantles

through their ornate frames, their eyes seem to be judging me. "These kids today, they don't know the score."

And then there was my great-grandfather's prison diary, a record no doubt of severe hardship, a smileless existence of struggle and oppression.

I decided I wasn't in any real big rush to translate it. For one thing, my already poor Italian had atrophied to a couple of toasts and directions to the toilet. Plus, the idea of slogging through a prison memoir while I being treated for clinical depression made about as much sense as a screening of *The Deer Hunter* at the Veteran's Administration.

Instead, I kept it as a curiosity, filed it away with my other books with the intention of coming back to it when I felt emotionally and linguistically prepared. A couple of years later, after having returned from my second trip to Italy, I decided the time was right.

One of the first things I decided to do was enlist my mother as my translation consultant. I don't think she even realized that we had it in the garage because when I brought it over to show it to her she transformed into a teary-eyed and laughing pool of nostalgia. This opened her up. I could almost always count on getting her to talk with anything from the Old World layer. Anything from one of those boxes seemed to work its mojo on her otherwise impenetrable silence, but this got her going in a way that I had never seen. She immediately broke out the photographs and the stories.

We wound up working out a fairly regular routine. I'd translate about four or five pages and then bring them over for her to check over. Every

Thursday evening we'd meet for coffee and pore over the entries. Sometimes we'd even talk like people.

Accompanied by some friends on the first of June, 1883, I entered the prison of J. R. Pretura in order to serve the sentence of one month for my political crimes.

His "political crimes" consisted of a series of articles he had written for a subversive newspaper called *L'Indipendente* in which he called for the surrender of the city of Trieste (then under Austro-Hungarian rule) to his beloved Italy. These articles were judged to be nothing short of treasonous and ultimately led to his incarceration. Nevertheless, they echoed the sentiment of many ethnic Italians living in the city at that time. Like my great-grandfather, they had grown fed up with living under a foreign flag and empire, tired of living as aliens in their own city (their restlessness exacerbated by the fact of Italy's declaration of national independence two decades prior). Ethnic Italians hold a unique place in the city of Trieste. Traditionally, Slavs have made up the majority of both the "lower class" and the aristocracy, while Italians have tended to hold the middle ground, the merchant class (an inheritance from its Venetian heyday). My grandfather was a merchant as well as a journalist; he owned a stationary store.

The official name for his crime was "irredentism," literally "unredeemed." The *irredentisti* were a group of ethnic Italians whose political agenda centered around reclaiming territories for Italy which had been usurped by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. One of these territories included his native Trieste. Since Italy's declaration of independence,

irredentism had picked up what the Empire considered a dangerous momentum. My great-grandfather was a dangerous character.

Strictly speaking, not all irredentists are necessarily Italian. Nor are they all cut from the same piece of cloth. Some came from faceless backgrounds and were suddenly cast into their fleeting fifteen minutes by a single revolutionary act, such as Gavrilo Princip, the Serbian student from Bosnia whose assassination of Archduke Ferdinand (heir to the Austro-Hungarian crown) in 1914 essentially triggered the First World War. Others were indeed extremely Italian. Some of them were quite well-known, such as Gabrielle D'Annunzio, Italy's flamboyant poet and WWI flying ace who rounded up 1,500 deserters from the Italian army after the First World War and declared war against his own country (only in Italy) in an effort to recover some of those lost territories.

The more I read about irredentism the more I began to realize that it wasn't exactly a new idea. It was basically a new skin for a wine that had been around for quite some time. After all, the systematic resistance of a native people against an occupying foreign nation and the reclamation of the "homeland" is a theme that evokes a distinctly historical sense of déjà vu. In the first century A.D. irredentists were called Zealots, a Jewish sect in Palestine that resisted the Roman Empire; Jesus' disciple, Simon, was a Zealot. In America they were the indigenous peoples who fought in battles at places like Little Big Horn and Wounded Knee in what culminated in a futile attempt to drive back the foreign invaders; leaders like Red Cloud and Geronimo were essentially irredentist leaders.

But Antonio Bonetti didn't assassinate anybody, or rouse up an army of deserters, wipe out a cavalry, or even storm the Bastille. His crime, while none the less "treasonous," was a little more subtle. He was a writer, a journalist. Still, as a regular contributor to *L'Indépendente*, one of the two irredentist newspapers in Trieste, he marked himself as a revolutionary in the eyes of the Empire. The entire staff was regularly being arrested and issues confiscated.

Unfortunately, none of the articles for which my great grandfather was imprisoned still exist. *L'Indépendente* went out of circulation long ago. All that is left of him, all that I was able to dig up from that dusty garage was a handful of family photos, a silver spoon etched with his initials in the handle, and his diary. This last item, while seemingly innocuous, was to be yet another act of defiance. Any manner of writing materials were expressly forbidden to political prisoners. Still, the risk was evidently worth it to him.

That he had voluntarily defied the law of the Empire through his writing, and had been entirely willing to accept the consequences, to go to jail for his political beliefs, made me admire him more than I could ever express, but it also made me feel phenomenally inadequate. I have never gone to jail for my beliefs. Neither did I (nor do I) have any intention of ever doing so. I've tried to imagine a scenario that would demand my taking a stand so firmly and openly that I might be tossed into the pokey. I was too young for the Vietnam War, but had I received my draft notice (at eight), I imagine I would have handled it much in the same way I would handle it today: Give the draft board my solemn word, pack sensibly, and brush up on either my French or Portuguese. I would have handled it the same way I handle most

things that don't concern my immediate circle of family or friends: the middle way, the way of the coward, wu wei, the same way despised by the soldier and the protester alike. There's this thing in me that refuses to act on blind faith; to be well-informed is to realize that there is no way to be well-informed, unless you consider American media coverage information as opposed to propaganda. I'm too suspicious to commit my life (or death) for the sake of rumors. To trust the media, the government (any government), the church (any church) is, for me, to engage in some form or other of blind faith, and I've never quite been ready for that. As my mother likes to say, "Fidarsi é bene, non fidarsi é meglio," To trust is good, not to trust is even better. Take an issue as seemingly trivial as flag desecration. I find myself caught between the wavers and burners. Why is everyone getting so worked up over a piece of cloth? Why do they want to make a Constitutional amendment forbidding the burning of a gaudy rag, a symbol that gets shaken in my face all too often as "evidence" of patriotism? On the other hand, why are there Visigoths out there who find it necessary to burn and destroy what other people hold sacred? I promptly run from both. For me it's always been less of a matter of questioning authority than questioning the questioner about questioning authority: All the slogans, bumper stickers, catch-phrases make me every bit as suspicious as the authority they claim to challenge: "Question authority!" Okay, what's the question? Or do you mean *tell* authority. Once, while waiting for the light to change, I read the two bumper stickers on the car in front of me: "One planet one people, please" and "Celebrate Diversity." Or the sign in a store window that says, "Prejudice will not be tolerated on these premises." Irony ignored, face value slips away like

a mask. As I've gotten older (more jaded?) I can't just read anymore; there needs to be a plural for the verb: I *reads*:

Stern Grove, San Francisco, on July 24, 1998, noonish:

... I thought maybe by now, at 36, the emperor might have at the very least put on a chemise or some pants. Instead he looks even nakeder than ever before (can anyone be more naked than naked? In a crowd maybe). The difference is that I no longer necessarily side with that smart-ass little heretic (And I never once mistook his alleged naivete for anything but, particularly since it took the form of declaration. I was a kid once; I understand power plays). Too easy (and, I now realize, too willing a surrender to Hans's manipulation of me as a reader). In fact, I find myself feeling compassion for the emperor, so tragically manipulated by the tailors. Am I getting more conservative with age that I could so radically flip my sentiments and loyalty from the "innocent" heretic to the gullible political monarch? Have I turned my back on my paranoia leftist liberal upbringing? Actually, I think I could easily argue that my new reading is in a sense far more radically left. It's all about recognizing the masks of authority (rather than simply buying into the given terms of the power "play"). Who is the authority? The authority "figure" is, of course, the emperor. But the emperor's actions, decisions, even breath all fall under the power of the author (unseen and unreachable -- and therefore undethronable -- as his laws and declarations come to us via the messenger, shielded by physical anonymity and past-tenseness). If Hans is trying to pull a cautionary tale here concerning the question of authority and the dangers of crowd-think, I would ask Hans to turn the tale on himself and see if he doesn't find himself chasing it in a whirlwind of political *déjà vu*. Rereading the story in this way turns me into the little heretic smart-ass, does it not? What could be more "radical" (in the "root" sense of the word) than questioning the questioner of authority (particularly when his methods of manipulative authority and power are so covert and insidious)? You want me to question authority? Fine, I'll go directly to the source (rather than participate in your shadow play).

I discovered an old newspaper article in the same box in which I found my great-grandfather's diary. It was yellowed and brittle. It was his obituary. He had died before Trieste had been turned over to Italy. He hadn't lived to see his political dreams realized. But as a final gesture of disrespect and

defiance to the Empire, he asked that the Italian flag be draped over his casket as it was lowered into the ground. And it was. Short of having his rigor mortised hand formed into a middle finger salute, I don't think he could have gone out with morechutzpah or style. The article went on to say that so many people attended his funeral that they had to place the casket in a small boat and float it out in the middle of a bay near the city. The turn-out was too great for the entire service to be held in a church.

Long after his death, Trieste and other regions were claimed by Italy. And things then progressed to a *very* Italian state of affairs, thanks to Mussolini. I seriously doubt Bonetti would have been enamored of the fascists. And while I see the potential evolutionary link between patriotism and xenophobia, I do believe it's possible to be proud without being exclusionary. His situation certainly dictated a fervent pride, maybe as means of survival not unlike that of the Jews or Native Americans, that not necessarily spill over into a fanatical zeal. The polyglot nature of Trieste almost demands tolerance.

As I say, I myself have never taken a stand, at least not nearly as dramatic as his was. I consider myself fairly dependable, loyal, sincere, even enthusiastic. Where my family and friends are concerned, I am a kind of zealot and fan; I will go to the canvas for any of them. For a cause? Too abstract. My wife is my cause, my family, friends, even my dog (if I still had one). And while I imagine my own funeral may scarcely fill a modest living room, I would argue that I too possess the capabilities of loyalty and conviction.

“Slacker! Fence rider.” Sure. Which is why I’d make a such a lousy soldier for the cause. In a Wildean context, I am a piece of work. I am art because they just don’t come any more useless than me. When Mussolini’s Northern African campaign finally fell apart, his army driven back defeated, his disgust with his own Italian army was expressed in his comment: “A once great nation made flabby by art.” That’s me, Benito. Fifteen sit ups tops, but I’ll write you one bad-ass poem.

I don’t know why I felt it was important to find some common ground with my great-grandfather. He was dead, after all, and the only genuine common ground we might share would be if I choose to have my remains transported to Trieste. Part of it came from the fact that I felt a little odd reading his diary. He was dead, no doubt about it. Still, there is something even more private about handling the possessions of the deceased (can they still be called “possessions” if you can’t take it with you?). It wasn’t guilt exactly, although with me that’s always a fairly safe default setting. I think it had more to do with an uneasiness about embarking on what I assumed would be translating a long polemic of strongly held beliefs. Was I the right person to be doing this? Would he have disapproved of my nonbeliefs and antistances? For another thing, my translating abilities are only a little better than my math (four years of prealgebra in high school). Would I unintentionally mutilate his most heart-felt political convictions? “Workers of the world, have a snack.” The old Italian rally cry goes: “Tradittore tradittore!” (translators traitors!). How was I qualified to even begin to approach him textually, conceptually, or otherwise? What right did I, a devout coward and apathist, the most apolitical animal to ever avoid a voting

booth or political rally, despite the fact that I was his great-grandson, what right did I have to render his passionate political voice, committed to paper behind bars, into my own tongue? The very irony in the fact that he had been jailed for writing newspaper articles claiming that he, as an Italian, should have the right to live as an Italian, to speak the Italian language in his own city of Trieste, was not lost on me as I twisted his beautifully phrased 19th Century Italian into Modern English. I could hear his voice objecting from the grave, a voice that echoed suspiciously like Thoreau's, "The question is what are you doing *out* of prison?"

When he had written the diary, in 1883, he was 36 years of age, married with two daughters, a respected business man who owned a stationary store just outside of Pola. He was well-educated (a rarity for a nineteenth century Italian), a journalist with a passion for political activism. And he was in jail.

As I write this I am 36. I also keep a diary. That's a start.

In fact the diary aspect alone gave me some vague twinge of camaraderie. Certainly radically different events triggered us to keep a one. My journaling arose as need to find sanity, balance, to pull myself out of a dangerous psychological spot: suicidal depression.

I also kept a diary in order "to describe a few salient facts that will no doubt take place during this forced and entirely undesired sojourn," mine being an oppressive state of mind, my territory claimed by a hostile power.

The closest I have ever come to being in prison was when they hauled me off to the booby hatch for trying to kill myself in my office. It seemed like a good enough idea, but I think they objected to me doing it on company time.

I was hauled off against my will and locked up, despite all of my protests and assurances to my boss and co-workers (and the attendants who removed me from the building and into the fun bus) that I was “perfectly sane.” Was my great-grandfather dragged off to jail protesting his innocence? My instinct tells me no. Besides, there was no doubt he had written the articles that had gotten him arrested; his name was on them. The evidence nailed him red handed. He knew what he was doing when he did it, and he knew what the repercussions would be. His descriptions of being run through the system certainly rang familiar to me. Bureaucracy hasn’t changed much in a century, whether processing prisoners or patients.

Anyone passing along the Via Tigor will immediately behold an edifice which appears, architecturally speaking, strikingly irregular, its only ornamentation being iron bars and gates. This would be the so-called “prison of Tigor.” The first and second floors are where prisoners are formally arrested and processed by the police; this is where I found myself initially detained, just long enough to partake of what proved to be an exciting initiation process. The third floor is where the prisoners of the magistrate actually reside, and, having been issued my ticket of embarkation, it was here I was eventually directed, my final destination.

I approached a door, rang the bell, and after a time, an old man arrived, a pair of spectacles perched on his nose, and a pipe in his mouth which I judged to be older than he. He examined my ticket and, finding all to be in perfect order, proceeded to lead me to his office where the head custodian and the vice chancellor completed my entry paperwork. They required of me my name, surname, country, and condition. They also took my personal belongings, evidently all items that might prove indispensable to them in the event that I should suddenly become a fugitive.

The similarities between how prisoners and psychiatric patients are processed, suspiciously monitored, and stripped of anything which might identify them with the outside (including any objects that could be used to

harm other or themselves), raises some interesting questions regarding how we continue to distinguish between guilt vs. insanity. The criminal, having committed a crime while of sound mind, is locked up in a jail cell. The psychiatric patient, having been committed for being of unsound mind, is locked up in a psychiatric ward. The former bears the burden of culpability, the latter the stigma of "mental illness." The former hopes for parole, the latter for recovery. Both are allowed to leave only after having been adequately "rehabilitated." The prisoner serves a sentence, pays a debt to society. The patient is held for under observation and subjected to treatments. I was told by the doctors that part of the criteria for committing a person was that they exhibited behavior which could be construed as harmful to others or themselves. I, having tried to kill myself, fell into the latter category. Bonetti, having tried to kill an idea, would have to be placed in the former. And while I consider suicide a rather private matter and treason a political one, I can't help feeling a twinge of camaraderie when reading these passages. Bureaucracy has a way of inadvertently nurturing a kindred spirit among its victims.

With the completion of these last few formalities, and having successfully sequestered this innocent pen and even more innocent paper, I was ultimately led to my assigned cell. The room itself is sufficiently spacious, and more important, well-ventilated. It is furnished with two windows, both views of which have been insulted by a strange grating of wooden bars. I addressed one of the benevolent guides who escorted me here, inquiring as to the purpose of this grating. He responded simply by referring to them as "muzzles." No one observing this muzzle from the street could ever imagine the torment such a window inflicts upon the prisoner, one that splices the rays of the sun and through which one can hear the light steps a young girl or the trivial and harsh gate of laborers as they pass by unseen.

At night my cell door is locked, but during the day it remains open (being that it is occupied by such an upstanding citizen). In this room there are six beds, and of these only three are occupied. I take the fourth.

I don't know that I could explain why, but it seems inconceivable that he would have put up much of a struggle. From his paper voice I take him to be a gentleman, one who holds to his principles with a quiet dignity. I have no proof other than his diary, but there is something even in his descriptions of the prison system that gives me the distinct impression that he might very well have even enjoyed the experience of it all, at least inasmuch as it provided him with an opportunity to be a smartass (in this we are also alike). Besides, as I say, he must have known that what he was writing would have him arrested; I even have to wonder if it wasn't the first or the last time. Nevertheless, having seen photos of him, smartly dressed and well-educated, I see him entering the prison as a gentleman and a scholar.

I, on the other hand, went kicking and screaming, trying shamelessly to talk my way out of it, evidence to the contrary notwithstanding: wrists bandaged to slow the flow, witnesses from work who testified to my history of sadness. I spent that afternoon trying to convince Dr. Morga (Torquemorga as I came to know and love him), the head of psychiatry at Kaiser Permanente on Sunset Blvd, that I was A-okay-right-as-rain-no-problemo, my credibility undermined by severed veins. Not to mention several unfortunate comments, voiced in the heat of the moment and aimed -- very unfortunately -- at the head of the psychiatric ward who expressed some reticence about my release due to the manner in which I made the request: something along the lines of, "Listen to me you greasy little fuck, if you don't

let me go I'll rip your tiny heart out through your eyes and walk out of here over your ugly corpse!":

Los Angeles, a lifetime ago:

It's hard for me to believe that only five days ago I tried to take my own life. Or did I? I seem to remember it more as pinching myself to wake up from the nightmare. Who should I believe? Myself or Dr. Torquemorga? Maybe the worried looks of all my friends and family? To be completely honest I'm not really sure anymore. All I know is that I've had to explain myself countless times to so many furrowed brows and teary eyes that I've actually begun to take my own word for it. But what actually did in fact happen? What was really going through my head? It seems so vague now. That day I felt so heavy, a leaden depression, almost paralyzed. Down to the little room on 13 where I closed and locked the door. Don't know how long I was down there but I must have been in pretty bad shape because I don't recall the phone ringing (they tell me they called again and again). I do remember someone knocking and then trying to open the door. Later M began knocking and called my name (all this after the deed had already been done). I don't even remember now where I got the blade; probably from my desk on 12, but I don't recall, and I guess that part of it scares me a little. The rest was like watching myself in a dream, a detached third person role, that side line image of the innocent and horrified bystander observing with morbid curiosity. It wasn't really me, it couldn't have been, yet it was a blade. When the story got back to me via JW it had somehow turned from an X-acto blade into a paper clip. A fucking paper clip? What do they think I am, psycho? Doing myself in with a paper clip would be a little like performing dental extraction with an ice cream scoop. I guess the thing that made it seem so dream-like was the fact that it didn't hurt at all. I felt so numb and detached from it that it was all more like cutting into a piece of steak you might buy at the market. It even began to resemble a piece of raw red meat, the way the skin separated so easily, revealing a white fibrous membrane just before I got to all the muscle or any of the deep veins and deeper arteries. Somehow it even felt sort of good, as though I were finally getting into the meat of things, finally seeing inside myself and realizing what was really below the surface. It also finally quelled all those yearnings, all those death threats from within that I had grown so weary, sick and tired of listening to over the years, listening to that part of me that was so tormented by fear and depression, that was constantly begging for release. But I suppose that thing in me that wants nothing more than to curl up and die is not nearly as strong or loud as that thing in me that wants to live. The red was like that dot

on a map that says: "You Are Here" Now I can find my way home. At that point I remember looking down at the two gashes in my wrist and at the puddle of my own on the floor and I knew it was time to clean up and go on. Unfortunately it was at this very moment that M decided to unlock the door and find out what the hell was going on. I remember hearing her voice telling me to unlock the door. I kept telling her to please go away and that I needed to get myself together and that I would be coming out in just a few minutes. I don't exactly know why she chose to open the door at that point, but she did, using a skeleton key. And as she did, I quickly and instinctively stepped in front of the puddle that had been me and held my wrist behind me. I remember her walking up to me and asking if everything was all right. I said I was fine and asked her if she wouldn't mind leaving me alone while I collected myself. I think she was even ready to do just that when she happened to look at some white cardboard boxes full of depositions near the desk that were smeared with my bloody finger prints. And there on top was the blade. What followed was panic, not mine but hers. As she was asking me what the hell was all that, she was grabbing the phone and dialing security. After that it was all pretty routine: phone calls, bandages, people staring wide-eyed like frightened animals, promises of confidentiality (which, I found out later, were promptly broken). I was quickly driven to the hospital where I was put into the incapable hands of a greasy little man with a goatee named Dr. Morga, head of the psychiatric department at Kaiser Permanente on Sunset, who told me I was going to be hospitalized and did I have any objections. I asked him to be a little more specific, so he explained to me that there are three levels, the first one was for out-patients, the second was for those who go voluntarily, and the last for those who must be admitted against their will. He also described the recreational programs and so on and so forth. He then asked me what I thought about it all, and I said it sounded like a regular Club Med, but no thanks. He then went on to emphasize that it was important that I be placed in a protective environment for my own good. I thought maybe he didn't hear me the first time so I said no thanks again. To which he responded, "I'd like to put down on the chart that you went voluntarily." I think it was in that instant that a chill ran up my ass as I suddenly realized that I was no longer in control.

While I have never been committed to any ideology strongly enough to be willingly locked up for it, I have been committed, locked up against my will for what others deemed a bad idea. However, even if depression could be

read as a form of individual ideology, and suicide the ultimate goal or agenda of that ideology, I evidently was neither willing to fulfill my obligation nor be “imprisoned” for it. I suppose one of the frustrating aspects of the whole situation for me at that point was that I had already decided to shift gears and take control, and yet I wasn’t allowed that. No matter how convincingly I presented my case, I was undermined by my own blood, my credibility shot to hell by my own actions. I was the failed assassin, sequestered away for questioning, and no matter how eloquently I defended myself or my actions, the matter had been decided before I entered the room. On the one hand, I can entirely appreciate the difficulty of their position; this is my curse, the ability to see the other side. Still, looking back on it, there is something heart-wrenching in the fact that anyone would refuse to even listen to a human being in so much distress, to “take my word.” I look back on that me with sympathy. I don’t know him anymore, but I find the compassion useful in that it has translated to others.

When I juxtapose our situations, it occurs to me that both of us, Bonetti and I, were deemed dangerous enough to be set aside, locked away as damaged goods, both of us held under suspicion, him as a threat to the Empire and me to myself. In both cases, we were unhappy with a system, feeling that it didn’t function adequately, didn’t represent the needs of the whole. If the connection here is tenuous, it is also representative of that contrary motion I continue to see in the public versus the private, the manifesto versus the personal diary, one moving politically outward, the other intimately inward, the centrifugal malcontent tried for disseminating

dissent into the crowd, and the centripetal social maladroitness detained for attempting to implode into the chaotic vacuum.

Maybe a turning outward keeps us from losing ourselves inwardly. I've thought about it and even dabbled in a group or two. For a while I became a diligent dilettante, visiting church after church, actually reading up on issues before entering the voting booth. I once even attended a communist political rally near the college in Viareggio, Italy:

July 23, 1991[written next to a trampled decal bearing the hammer and sickle that reads: "Partito Comunista"]: . . . my little red paesani who held a communist rally like only the Italians could. Plenty of free beer, wine, and food, while the band played "Brazil," "Proud Mary," and "Volare." Afterward, we all headed over to the stands where they were handing out propaganda, selling Che Guevara T-shirts, and drinking heavily. Not exactly Red Square entertainment. Lots of dancing, eating and drinking. The Italians, putting the "party" back in communism.

But then there were those like my friend Ron, who burned with a political purpose and fervor that at times frightened and annoyed me, refusing to have a beer at the John Bull because it's an English pub and "you know what the English have done to the Irish." But it's not an English pub, Ron, it's an old warehouse that's been thinly disguised as a Tudor structure run by Pasadena businessmen, a try-too-hard theme-driven meat market where the juke box plays skiffle and ska and bagpipe version of "God Save the Queen," where bartenders with bogus accents say "cheers" while pulling overpriced pints of cold Guinness. So just relax, and have a goddamn Bass, will ya? "You're going to Starbucks? But--" Yes, I'm going to Starbucks, and I'm going to order the Abominable Working Conditions blend... with an

English scone. Ron who grew worse after returning from volunteer work in Nicaragua, secretly hoping, I suspect, that proximity with the land would somehow turn his skin several hues browner, his bright eyes darker, and his middle class liberal guilt to dust.

I've seen too many friends get just as easily swallowed up by outer forces as I did by the black hole inside of me. My cousin Robert who replaced crime and drugs with a glassy-eyed devotion to a church that made Jesse Helms look like Abby Hoffman, organizing seminars on the evils of rock music: "There is a group by the name of Queen, which is a euphemism for homosexual, and when you play their song 'Another One Bites the Dust' backwards, it says, 'We decided to smoke marijuana.'" Robert, a formerly bright individual who was gradually forced to commit intellectual suicide in order to attempt some reconciliation between his neotenic moral pap with the functioning world.

My own reticence to fight the good fight, to join and support, to fling myself headlong into any group with a cause, or commit myself to any organization that has a building or a symbol, comes from several places, not the least of which has to do with the way I was raised. But while this reticence has deepened over time through observation, I also find myself pulling away to get a better view of even my own position (or nonposition). I don't think it would fair to suggest to my dead great-grandfather, for example, that the impetus of his ideology, Italian nationalism, evolved into Mussolini's fascist Italy. I don't think even I'm quite that naive. Still I feel that the mechanism was certainly there, and here. What I like about America

is that we mostly export our fascism to other countries; don't shit where ya eat.

Even before I began translating his words, I found myself having imaginary dialogues in my head with him, all anticipations of what I might find in his diary, maybe out of some intimidation on my part that my incarceration could never hold a candle to his. Many of these dialogues played themselves out in the form of my own entries, some of them reading like letters, two diaries corresponding over a century, the two of us across the table from each other arguing politics over prosciutto and bread (and lots of wine). Looking back on a lot of those "conversations," it seems to me that I was inductively jumping the gun since at that particular point I had only translated the first page, and the entries I wrote in response to this were not in reaction to any ideological theories he had expounded, but rather a response to what I expected him to say, to the sentence: "Accompanied by some friends on the first of June, 1883, I entered the prison of J. R. Pretura in order to serve the sentence of one month for my political crimes":

Pasadena, 1989: ... As for me, I don't vote for the same reason I don't go church or "follow the game." I've never been much of a team player. Groups make me nervous, particularly manufactured groups, institutions, anything that screams forced community, no matter what "side" they purport to be for. I have my communities. I won't join a party, but I occasionally throw them. The difference is that my organizations have assembled in a relatively organic manner, and they tend to disband quietly. Organic organizations. They are associations of chance, employing the same random mechanism and variation as wild procreation as opposed to careful breeding. The truth is that those groups which have always frightened me the most are those that seem anxious to have me join. They come to my door with pamphlets, they call me up as if they know me, they accost me like political prostitutes outside of markets with clipboards and smiles.

If I am somewhat wary of elitism (while recognizing myself as the worst kind of elitist), at least I understand its purpose; it's quality

control; it's merely the social or cultural version of natural selection. I tend to be a little suspicious of human nature when it sports a badge or a uniform or a petition. If someone's hounding me down, me a complete stranger, in the hopes that I might become one of them, I'm guessing they either want my money, are trying to rack up karma points, or are hard-up for membership. I could be entirely wrong. Their motives could be wholly sincere and altruistic, but *fidarsi é bene, non fidarsi é meglio*.

Reading back on all of that now, all I can say is, "methinks the lady doth protest too much." It seems every bit as naive as it does defensive. And while I do recognize the writer, I find myself shrinking from this extremist stance of noninvolvement. I'm still somewhat suspicious of groups and people with clipboards today; the difference is I'm no longer setting out to draft the Apathist Manifesto. I still don't vote or go to church or belong to any organizations (that I know of). The difference is that now, rather than being paranoid or fanatical about it, I find the whole business vastly entertaining, particularly in regards to something like our legal system: Take twelve randomly selected people, the extent of their legal expertise having been gleaned from reruns of *Matlock*, twelve people who didn't even have the resources to figure out how to avoid jury duty, stick all of them kicking and screaming in a small room and ask them to decide on a series of complex and delicate legal issues, which will then culminate in their collective opinion of whether or not another human being should be hooked up to a faulty electrical appliance in the state of Florida. It just doesn't get much more entertaining than that. But, as de Tocqueville pointed out, a democracy is always right but for all the wrong reasons.

It also seems to me a little presumptuous to compare myself, a 20th Century right-handed heterosexual American WASP, to a 19th Century

Italian political prisoner of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. I envy those who harbor either a sincere patriotism or faith or who have a people with which to identify themselves. I empathize with William S. Burroughs when he says, "I have never felt close to any cause or people, so I envy from a distance of incomprehension those who speak of 'my people' . . . Jews, blacks, Palestinians, Chinese . . . But to affiliate myself with any such aggregate would be an act of brazen dilettantism that I could not begin to carry off." Even that I am an American is a fact of chance. I was born here because of a series of events beyond my control. I am neither ashamed nor particularly proud of the label. I happen to be a citizen of a republic, a representative democracy, and a "world power. " I am hated by many for what I happen to be, as well as by those who can't understand why I don't hate back. I am an enemy to jingoists and anti-Americans alike, caught between the wavers and the burners.

The only "people" whom I could possibly claim would be those that Bonetti claims (in his case, with a vengeance and at a price). But as I say, I've never identified with the Italians or the Italian-Americans (particularly after a Sly Stallone movie or Madonna video). I have enough trouble identifying with my own mother, let alone a people or a cause.

Bonetti, on the other hand, was very ethnic conscious and proud in a way that only those who are asked to suppress it could be. And while I can appreciate his position, it's something that I, as an American mongrel, an accidental nonbreed of Italian and Irish and God knows what else, am unable to identify with. In fact, I even find that I distance myself from those who stand ready to use their one-sixteenth Irish blood to drive the snakes from the

suburbs of Pasadena. Why is it I can take a political prisoner who claims his right to be Italian seriously (or at least sincerely), and yet I scoff at those diluted mutts who have nothing better to do with their time than foist their roots on me who never asked? "I've been doing genealogical research on my family..." and out come the charts and stories, photos and artifacts. And out the window my spirit flies, while my smiling nod of a body politely remains anchored to the kitchen table for the duration of so many generations.

For one thing, I suppose it all seems a tad too arbitrary for me. I've talked to so many American-born citizens who have reclaimed far too much foreign soil as their "homeland" with only the authority of a genetic roulette wheel. Nobody seems to want to "claim" their German or English heritage, but everybody and their dog has a drop of Cherokee or is the direct descendant of a Nigerian princess.

When the film *1492* came out in theaters, my half-sister Michele (who has always made of point of reminding me that her one-eighth Cherokee blood allows her to claim "legal Native American status") and my mother the Italophile both asked me to go see it with them. My mother was interested in going since the film was being screened on the 500th anniversary of Columbus's "discovery" of America; she wanted to make sure that they portrayed this great Italian hero in the proper light. My sister, on the other hand, wanted to make sure that the film revealed him as the genocidal maniac he really was, the Native American's version of Hitler. I thanked them, no. I don't remember what excuse I gave at the time, but I know that deep down it was because I could think of few things I'd rather do less than sit through a long movie in between two polarized agendas. The political and

ethnic layers of significance were too complex for me to wade through: an American film directed by a Brit, with a French actor playing an Italian navigator who got hopelessly lost and wound up killing a lot of Indians for the Spanish crown for tobacco and some prime real estate. And beside, it's just a movie.

Still, ethnicity aside, one of the things that became obvious from Bonetti's diary is that he and I would have a lot to talk about, not so much because of shared family blood (three generations diluted) or a political cause, but because I came to like him as an individual. His diary, if it is any genuine indication of who he was, contains the voice of someone I would seek out as a friend. Here was a guy who sounded like he was *buona pasta*, a mensch, a good fella. Not to mention that he was evidently a bigger smartass than even I.

And if the translating of his words were itself was a chore, there was something of an ease about the voice behind the language, the sort of comfort you don't feel often but when conversing with a few intimate familiars. As I translated the entries I would often find my thoughts ricocheting off a particular passage, my mind wandering back to a related memory of my own. But this meandering was hardly the result of boredom; in fact, it was that same wandering I try so hard to corral during a particularly electric conversation with someone I admire, that chomping at the bit, waiting to step in and add something, wanting to hold back and listen and yet straining to step in, not wanting to interrupt and yet seeing so many connections and feeling that need to share.

It's for this reason that I consider a diary to be neither purely private nor a monologue. It is, it seems to me, fundamentally a conversation, if for no other reason than because it is essentially a volume of echoes, eavesdroppings from the day smuggled home. Here is where I put all those private thoughts that I have gleaned from so many other conversations on the street, of events and voices stolen from the open light and brought into some hidden pages. If it is a private conversation then it cannot stay private for long, whether bound with lock and key or hid away in a garage; it all comes from and therefore must return to public domain. For me these conversations always seem to escape or are released through that endless loop of listening and sharing, a need that manifests itself in my own diary.

After rescuing him from a dilapidated cardboard box and dusting him off, I translated Bonetti out into the open again, and we whispered back and forth through the bars of our lined pages, each of us surely realizing, maybe hoping, that these secrets were sure to be overheard.

* * *

Muzzled Windows: A Conversation Between the Bars

Trieste, 1883:

As dusk settled in I went to the clerk's unmuzzled window to gaze out at the via Tigor. Among those who passed by, it was not rare for me to see friends or acquaintances. They would wave and, with pity in their eyes, try to encourage me... and then they were off once again down the street, the cruel bastards, leaving me in this place of shame.

Years ago when was I playing piano for a group called Lost Anthony, I first came across the phrase "place of shame." It was the title of one of the songs in our repertoire. And while I always wondered what the lyrics referred to, I never bothered to ask; I knew what they meant for me and that was enough. Later, I came across the same phrase in a very old book about the prison system.

I recently dug up an old tape of the song and listened to the lyrics again:

The truth comes out now, all in vain,
buzzing black into my ears,
With eyes that beckon boats to shore
and prayers that no one ever hears.
All your powerful friends have come,
They wait like needles in the vein.
The hand of hate has cradled me
and laid me down in this place of shame.

... Many (and this seems incredible to me), upon seeing a man gazing at them from behind bars, will actually stoop to mocking him, then quickly pretend it was all in jest. In most cases, they would make all sorts of remarks, certainly not very nice ones, some of which continued to rattle the timpanis of my ears long after they had gone. The less evil among them would only masticate thusly: "Poor little

devil. . . who knows why he has come to this . . . and so well dressed too!" At one point I was spotted by an insolent urchin who laughed and yelled: "Ha, ha, ha! Look, they've put him in a cage just like a parrot!"

But unlike most parrots, who only repeat what they're told, this one could write . . . which is precisely what got him caged.

I once told what I thought was a parrot joke to a professor: An Irishman walks into a bar with a parrot on his head. The bar tender says, "Hey, where'd you get that?" "In Ireland," says the parrot, "They've got millions of 'em."

The professor smiled vaguely and then informed me that this was a racist joke. No, I corrected him, it's a parrot joke. And I went on to explain that first of all, the humor comes from the fact that it is absurd; parrots don't articulate thusly. Secondly, I don't tell racist jokes. I do, however, collect parrot jokes. Nevertheless, as he pointed out, I'd taken the Irishman's voice away. The parrot not only spoke for him but owned him as well, controlled him. After thinking this over I was more than a little embarrassed. I had been telling this, along with all of my other parrot jokes, for quite a while. I explained that I didn't make the joke up, I was merely repeating one I had heard told to me. I had no intention of taking anyone's voice away or of being offensive. Nor had I considered it in the light of control or negative power. It was just a joke. But rather than chance pissing anyone else off, I decided instead to release my Foucaultian parrot.

One of the conditions of Bonetti's sentence was the removal of his "voice." If he was a parrot they were going to make damned sure that his wings were clipped and turn him into a proper jail bird. Writing of any

kind was out of the question; someone had taken great offense to his words. Still, he obviously managed to smuggle a plume or two into the cage.

I would have gladly kicked his tiny ass but for the distance between us . . . and these damned bars. Santa Paziienza! On another occasion another little mulo [literally "mule"] tried the same thing, but this time I was ready, hurling a pressed ball of the prison bread. It had the contrary effect, however, as he merely shouted with the voice of ten urchins, attacking me with every manner of insult, and afterward, turned a dozen pirouettes, cackling down the street as he went.

If there is any shame in this "place of shame" I believe it has less to do with having committed a "crime" than it does from being put on display for it. Bonetti's public writings led the empire to revoke his status as a private citizen. I was promptly removed from public view for the very private "crime" of attempted suicide (evidently successful ones are perfectly legal; once over the border there's no extradition process), and placed under constant observation. Both punishments amount to the adult version of sitting in the corner with a dunce cap ("And you'll stay there until you straighten up and fly right!"). The trick is to smuggle a little bit of privacy in there, a place to hide where no one can see or hear you. The stigma, however, remains long after the punishment is over. Once locked up you are marked as suspect. At least for me, it continued long after my own release.

Los Angeles, November, 1988:

. . . the only thing that's worse than having been "under observation" while in the hospital is being under observation outside of it. If one more of my close friends or former co-workers comes up to me with those cautious eyes and gently asks, "How ya doing?" I'm going to loll my eyes back into my head and salivate all over their sharp looking slacks. While I fully realize they all mean well, if anything's going to put me back into canvas it'll be their tip-toeing concern ... One nice

thing about the family is that most of them have either made the cut or come pretty damned close. So everything there's business as usual; boobies of a feather. Nothing like a little psychotic camaraderie to make a fella feel at home.

. . . And speaking of the prison bread, it never ceases to amaze me the variety of ways in which it has been put to use by the prisoners. Should someone be in need of a candle holder, such can be easily fashioned. Or if one desires a game of dominoes, a set is simply fabricated from the bread. The same goes for cards and figurines (including animals of every species). Anything of any size and shape can be made from this bread which, after only 48 hours, becomes geologically hard. One inmate tells me that in the prison at Capodistria he used this same type of bread to make a clock which he swore kept precise time.

As for me, up to now, I have found sufficient joy in utilizing it for ammunition, packing it into tight little balls and (so far without getting caught) hurling them through the window at any and all who seem deserving.

I remember once reading about how John Dillinger carved a gun out of soap while in prison, colored it black with shoe polish, and bluffed a guard with it well enough to escape. Robert Stroud, the "birdman of Alcatraz," with little more than a grammar school education and some primitive equipment, researched and developed cures for various bird diseases, writing what was at the time the definitive book on the topic. Antonio Bonetti hurled balls of hardened prison bread at various passersby who pissed him off. About the only thing I learned to do in lock-up myself was how to pretend to behave myself long enough to be let out. Although this in and of itself became a valuable tool. It's not merely a matter of jumping through hoops, it's being so good that you convince not only the outside world but also yourself that you have transformed. I remember an

old television perfume commercial that suggested that “dreams are where we invent ourselves.” If this is true then the diary is where we constantly reinvented ourselves. At that particularly period in my life I desperately needed to find the means for reinvention. I left the old me for dead, a chalk outline on the 13th floor of a high-rise in downtown Los Angeles. But whatever there was left to salvage, what rose from the ashes seemed like little more than ruins. The diary as blueprints for renovation.

I have also enlisted the use of a small looking glass which I hold just outside my window in order to catch the glare of the sun and spite the eyes of passersby. Sometimes, when the sun is just right, I find that I am able to direct this reflected light into the windows of the surrounding buildings. Once I aimed the reflection of my mirror at a servant girl who often worked by one of these windows. She remained perplexed, until, unable to locate the source of this strange apparition, she was forced to leave. But before she left I was successful in reducing her to a state not dissimilar to Faust's Margherita. I also foiled some painters working in the courtyard. In their stupor, and upon realizing that this phenomenon would continue unceasing, they began to curse, entirely unable to detect from which direction it came, all the while unaware that it was this spiteful hand who was the author of their blindness.

Umberto Eco describes the mirror as a kind of prosthesis, not so much in the sense of replacing that which is missing but rather as an apparatus that extends the self beyond what might ordinarily be possible. In the case of writing, particularly the writing of someone who is no longer alive, I could see how the term prosthesis might reflect both a reconstructive and an extensive interpretation simultaneously. Text as a means of time-travel as well as a paper mouth, echoes like the shadow pains of a missing voice.

This “spiteful hand,” “the author of their blindness” who spends his time annoying people from his muzzled window is the same one who has been confined for rankling the reigning powers (the child in the corner performing skillful acts of ventriloquism and disrupting the class with rude noises). A mirror, ordinarily a tool to see the self, is used instead to send signals through a muzzled window. The diary is where he writes about it. The mirror as pen or the diary as mirror (if a somewhat imperfect one).

A few years after I was released from my own incarceration, I decided to get to the bottom of things, to dig down deep and rummage around in all that was me. All the medication that the doctors had prescribed was numbing me, the mood elevators and anti-anxiety drugs kept away the extreme highs and low lows, but they weren’t allowing me to see very far. Prescription drugs and being locked up by strangers certainly hadn’t done much except make me suspicious of traditional psychiatric methods. So one night I locked myself in a bathroom and self-administered a handful of psilocybin mushrooms, a “consciousness expanding” medication. There was a mirror on the door of the medicine cabinet over the sink that was to be my lens. I was bound to discover the true me; if I couldn’t rewrite myself with these tools, it seemed to me, then nothing would help. Reading back on it now is a little like watching home movies of myself masturbating; I suppose there’s a fine line between self-discovery and merely indulging in a feedback loop.

Temple City, 1992: . . . I gathered up enough courage to touch the mirror with the tip of my finger and watched ripple like a pool of quick silver. Do I dare take the plunge? was one first thought. I’m no Alice; I’m a thirty year old man who’s locked himself in the bathroom with *teonanacatl*. Still, I can pass through now. Before it was solid, a wall, and then a door, and now my window of opportunity. It’s not a

very easy decision. I don't remember what's in there. Reflections, mistakes, failed prototypes, and secrets. And do I really want to go digging around in of all that so soon? It seems like just yesterday that I rose from the manure. Still, I enter (quiet, I speak). The mirror, I mean, not the medicine cabinet door; I know what's in there, but it hasn't helped me one iota. And so I resort to an underhanded over-the-counterculture panacea and come away with little more than gibberish, the chemically induced word salad of schizophrenia; very few are allowed to come back with souvenirs; they pass through the border check with little more than unfocused photographs of God and all his secret dreams. Who am I fooling? Mercurial, I pass into the land of reversals and Mad Hatters. Hermetically sealed behind glass, I reflect on all that was me (dead now) and all that will be me soon (coming alive). Evolution between worlds. The lizard, in an attempt to remember his lost fins and scales, approximates with feathers and wings, and takes to the air. If the sleep of reason produces monsters, the sleep of lizards produces Quetzalcoatl. And then there's me, the failed hybrid, neither fish nor fowl. Hatters went insane from the quick silver used in fashioning bowlers; 19th photographers died for the same reason ("shadow catchers" dying as they stole the souls of Indians). Dr. Thompson, my mother informed me not long ago, committed suicide. And my first thought was, it's not easy finding a good dentist. Was it the mercury amalgam he mixed for my cavities? Was it something I said or neglected to floss away? And the Cheshire cat grins with a mouth full of fillings.

Nobody gets to see both sides and not lose their shit. The trick is to come back and try the best you can to remember it all. Make sense of it. But that takes years of work, not one night in the toilet with illegal drugs, where the head suddenly becomes a church, a laboratory, a school, and a locked facility. Here is where I lose flush the bad and brush my teeth. But how much enlightenment can come from one Dark Night of the Stool?

At night we played the usual card games, and there was the same novena of cussing from the head guard, about the game and all the saints in paradise. Looking at him, I realized he was getting angry, and enjoyed it immensely; yet I did not forget to compliment him on his game and copied his vulgarisms just as loudly. In this manner I was able to keep him calm and rendered him more manageable in order to better use him.

Before going to bed, we began fighting a new and up to know unnoticed regiment of distinguished cockroaches.

The next day, however, two relevant things occurred to break up the monotony of our lives here. First, a fight broke out between the recluse in cell number 5 and another half-refined tenants. After beating each other, as it often happens among these type of people, they managed to sufficiently suffocate their anger and resumed playing cards. It is worth noting that in every cell, whether male or female, there is always card playing. It is also true that the cards are all so filthy that they are barely recognizable. Still, for the inmates these are more than sufficient to kill off the better part of a day. The second most popular game here is dominoes. The head jailer here is crazy for them and has brought a very elegant domino set from his own home, totally out of place in these seedy surroundings. In the head jailer and among our knowledgeable comrades we have found competitors of the first order. I always lose to the head jailer simply because it's more convenient to do so, but with the others I battle with a discreet infamy. Thus, somewhere in the midst of one game to another, one romance to the next, between chatting with others in the adjoining cells, I find the days passing without too much boredom.

When I still fairly young, ten or so, my father decided to show me how to play chess. I got to where I knew the value of each piece and how it moved. Beyond that, I found the game tedious, at least the way my father would play it. He'd take forever when it was his turn, always thinking at least two or three moves ahead. I, on the other hand, preferred to play my own brand of existentialist chess, finding the random immediacy of the moment far more interesting than mulling over any elaborately premeditated and careful plan of attack; chess was far more interesting when approached more like a stock car race. Of course I would lose to him most of the time. But occasionally I could gain the upper hand through my sheer unpredictability. I remember an old Latino man in a laundromat in Los Angeles explaining to me that gang members will "never fight a white guy with a knife." They don't know what they're doing and because of this they're far more dangerous.

On those few moments when I could kick my father's ass with my dangerous lack of technique, he would let loose with a flood of expletives. It was worth losing ten games to one just to learn a few new phrases.

Also in our cell, for three days, we had a new college boy, who had the unwelcome peculiarity of breaking the silence during the night with a deafening arsenal of intestinal clamor. It was a defect of nature for which he was incessantly excusing himself. I, because he was a compatriot, immediately pardoned him, and since it was only for three days the rest of my cell mates were quick to follow my example. Truly we could not do otherwise. Yet by simply inserting the small end of a bottle in such a way that a simple remedy might . . . Oh, such thoughts!

Following his visit, there was a beautiful surprise waiting for all of us: I was invited to attend a display of dramatic entertainment. Watching from the bars of room number one, where the most refined prisoners are kept, I beheld a beautiful construction made from mattresses and sheets: a tiny theater of marionettes.

Following an overture of whistling, the curtain rose and the comedy began. The voices of workers speaking a Venetian dialect played the principle parts as masked versions of Tacanapa, Arlecchino, Pantalone, and Colombina. These said characters came to life through the four hands of two inmates hidden behind the scenes who through their movements created a brilliant form of theater. The four hands of the hidden inmates were impeccably bedecked in the dress of the period.

As soon as this comedy ended, another more curious one began. I should note here that our favorite window onto the Via Tigor is very far away from the street itself, and between the window and the street there is a large wall, and if this were not enough to segregate us from the world there are also iron bars. And would you believe: a fifteen year-old girl sat at our window watching us; frightened to death she began screaming, pleading with us to allow her to pass undisturbed. Seeing that we were insensible to her begging, she then threatened to call a guard. Finally, encouraged by a passing gentleman, she left us, or better she flew off but not before flashing us all an obscene gesture. The only thing we can gather is that she mistook the prison for an asylum or a house of spirits. Later, in place of our usual card game we conversed and afterward went to bed.

Today was a festive day in our room No. 1 as there was some entertainment: mimes, puppets, and dancing. A little later there was pantomime and somersaults.

Later we played a little joke on our bankrupt friend and really made the fly jump onto his nose.

I figured I either translated this completely incorrectly or it was an idiom with which I was unfamiliar. Counting on the latter, I was able to get the gist; "made the fly jump on his nose" was obviously tantamount to "pulling someone's leg." Nevertheless, I wanted to make sure I was in the ballpark. I was also curious to know what the logic was behind it, so I brought it to show to my mother, asking her what it meant. "It means," she told me, "to play a joke on someone." Yes, I said, I realize that, but what does it mean? "It means," she told me with a straight face, "to pull someone's leg."

We stuffed rags into his clothes and created a lifelike dummy which we placed near his bed. Then the clerk, whose help we enlisted, wrote a notice for us that for one day only a man would be placed into our room, an accountant by trade, and that he was a good clean person, but presently he was completely drunk, so drunk that when he entered the cell he threw himself onto a cot fully clothed and went immediately to sleep. The idea of passing the night near a drunkard, shaken by our convincing discourse, our bankrupt friend ran to the clerk in order to lodge a formal complaint they had disrespectfully placed an unsavory drunk amidst us clean fellows. The clerk feigning disbelief upon hearing his story, forced our bankrupt inmate to lead him over to the cell to see for himself. By then night had fallen and there was little light to see by. Nevertheless, he pointed to the alleged drunkard and said: "Signor Capo (captain), how can you pretend that poor gentlemen like us could possibly sleep soundly with such a man, not knowing what sort of mischief he might be capable of upon waking." The clerk responded very seriously: "Don't worry about it. I'll throw this goddamn pig of a drunkard out right this minute!" Saying this, the clerk grabbed the "drunk" by his legs and finished him off by tearing him up into a thousand pieces, as towels, table clothes, and rags of all sorts went flying about the room. Upon

witnessing such a brutality, our bankrupt friend became petrified, and for fifteen minutes we all laughed until the tears were streaming four-fold. A little later we tried to make our unfortunate friend fall from his bed by positioning the cot and the mattress in such a way that a little movement would cause him to slip off, but our calculations were mistaken and thus, completely unsuspecting, he continued to sleep, snoring like a priest. Thus ended the last Sunday I will spend, hopefully, in this place.

Pranks, fart jokes, puppet shows. Gramsci he ain't. The dry polemic I had anticipated never arrived. In a way, I started to grow curious about the details surrounding his sentence, about his particular views, maybe a mention of the articles he wrote that were considered to be so treasonous as to be deemed sufficient evidence for his arrest. But there is not a single mention of it, nor any political remarks whatsoever. Just pranks, fart jokes, and puppet shows. There is also the occasional love poem (worse even than many of my own suicide verse) which he would either stuff into balls of the prison bread or tie to gifts given to him by visitors through bars, like any healthy Italian male, trolling for anything that smacked of estrogen.

As usual, as dusk settled I took possession of my favorite window. Remembering the flowers that Pepe Strigone gave to me, I thought to offer them to the first beautiful woman who passed by. Tied with a red string I attached the following sonnet:

*Jealous of your looks which vigilantly refuse
my immense love that bears all
A hidden flame I have learned to hide
Note that I keep it for you alone, a secret to all others.*

Considering all the pages recounting his flirtations with the prostitutes in neighboring cells, as well as the fact that he is married at this point, I'm assuming that much of this might fall under the jurisdiction of poetic license.

*How many times, la giaconda, are you happy?
The words, the eyes lit by joy
That with only you my thoughts are understood
Of love, of desire ardent and restless*

*I love you, yes, I love you. Oh, if in your heart only spoke
Pity me, deserted and alone and in despair
Open your gentle soul to so much affection.*

*Pride refuses a rejected love
Such a sweet apparition
Let me hope, and you'll make me happy.*

As a professor of mine once said, "Did you write that with a pen or a shovel?" What I find interesting is that he took the time not only to write the sonnet on the piece of paper he stuffed in the bread, but actually copied it into his journal. For later use? Because he thought it was good? I'd like to believe it was the former. I know that I've written my share of prison bread sonnets, and I knew it was embarrassingly bad. Nevertheless, if you want to successfully flirt with a *bella* who's strolling by your muzzled window, you write schmaltzy love poetry. If you're looking to get your ass thrown in jail, on the other hand, you pen a series of politically inflammatory articles.

Off in the distance I viewed an elegant figure, one with which I had already exchanged some furtive glances. In order to see over the wall which lay between the street and the prison, in order to throw her the aforementioned nosegay tied to my sonnet, I employed every bit of my dexterity, so that they would land right at her feet. Not without a slight hesitance, she picked them up, opened the envelope... read it... and after ten minutes had passed, she retraced her steps on the street. Who knows what she was thinking? Who knows what sort of dreams she had in mind? After all, the flowers that made up the nosegay gave her a certain right to return because the yellow rose expresses jealousy: "do not forget me." Understandably enough, there were also some tears. Tears! Oh, that these things did touch her heart!

In the evening we enlarged our card playing ranks to introduce a game called Cotecio, which can be played by many and which makes us laugh a great deal. However, who wouldn't laugh to see the head guard missing all the signals, losing the game time and time again, and, becoming infuriated, spitting on the cards and declaring that he will never play again. He is a true head guard . . . and actor! After another tirade of fifty profanities to all the saints, and then realizing

he had forgotten some of them, he finally went to bed as we played on into the night.

This morning the recluses from the lower class section played one of their usual jokes: A woman claimed that she gave birth to a child. In order to give her story credence, she created a small figure out of rags as well as fashioning a make-shift crib. I'm still uncertain how it was possible for her to acquire the necessary materials to accomplish this, however the results were staggeringly credible! I, because I am strictly above involving myself in such a charade, took a rag which I had soaked with water and hurled through my bars at the "newborn." The poor little thing didn't even seem to notice. The mother and those around her protested, trying to repay my cruelty in the same manner, but they missed and eventually the matter was ended.

That evening I played the head guard at dominoes; in order to keep him happy I let him win.

Regarding food: I always anxiously anticipate the arrival of the so-called baba [an affectionate term for "mother"] as I love to watch her distribute food to the inmates one by one, each bowl being passed through the bars of their cells. The daily meal is as follows: at seven o'clock a.m. there is black peasant bread: at eleven, a bowl of soup, which consists of beans and barley. Finally at 5 o'clock p.m. another bowl of soup, this time of a different quality (more like cream of wheat) made from pasta and rice. And this rice is to laugh at. They assure me that this rice is being cooked at the same time as the meat, and yet it resembles rice only in name, since from the taste and the consistency one would have great difficulty distinguishing it from lumpy corn starch. Two times a week, on Monday and Thursday, as a substitution for soup, in the morning and at 5 p.m., we are given a little polenta with a choice of grated cheese or something which resembles butter but which is nothing more than the fat left over from cooking prosciutti, which is generously donated in huge quantities on Easter by a local merchant.

Hospital food ain't exactly an epicurean repast either. Although it certainly provides incentive for a rapid recovery. I think in the case of prisoners, it must be a system of punitive cuisine: trial by heartburn, a deterrent to the chronic recidivist.

The phrase "rice to laugh at" is a clumsy rendering of a pun that doesn't carry over (at least not with my limited translation skills). The word here for rice is "riso," but "riso" also means "laugh." But as James Thurber pointed out, a joke is like a frog in that they both die on the dissecting table.

And today is Sunday, my third still in prison. I don't know if it's a change in the weather or my nerves, or some other cause, but the fact is that today everything seems to irritate me. In order to remedy such an ugly day, some of my dear friends came to see me, discussing all the latest news, from one thing to another, causing great bursts of laughter among us. They remained with me for quite a long time. Later that evening, in our cell a comedy was staged: the battle of Assisi: it progressed like a scene in a seedy Venetian bar, culminating in assassination and theft. Naturally, all the scenes were artistically created for the sake of the play: the trial, the judge, jury, attorneys, and the accused. For the bar, the host and the hostess (a prisoner dressed as a woman), the policeman, the jail, and a justice. Everything was represented with such accuracy and naturalism that for anyone else it would have seemed quite astonishing. But for us it was all natural, all standard procedure, particularly for the inmates having already lived some of the parts, and who can say how often they have represented these roles in reality?

When the play I wrote about a highly dysfunctional family opened in Los Angeles, I didn't tell my mother. Looking back on it now, I think she would have survived it (after all, she survived the real thing, as did we all). Still, I suspect I neglected to mention it because I was nervous enough as it was without having her in the audience watching what amounted to a

theatrical equivalent of home movies. Some playwrights prefer to keep that fourth wall firmly in place. Having a mother on either side of the proscenium arch would have sent me over the edge.

Later, when she came to hear me do stand-up, much of the material centering around her and the family, her only comment was, "My attorney will be in touch." I think she was joking.

Ah, the awe with which I beheld the judge of the court, a severe man yet dignified. And to see him address the accused who feigned the part of the innocent victim. A table on which there used to be a bucket of water was suddenly transformed in the judges bench; a dirty bed sheet served as his robe. A straw mattress was set up to serve as the desk for the defense, and two more for the jury. Half a dozen sheets from our beds were supposedly rugs thrown over the ground, they gave the room a truly majestic character. The defense was played by two policemen. As you well might imagine, the judge, jury, attorneys, etc., were all dressed in the same color, that is, the gray uniforms provided by the prison; according to their title they all had some costume distinction in order to tell them apart. For example, the judge wore a pair of glasses . . . made of cardboard. The attorneys wore robes made from dirty sheets around their shoulders. For guns the police guards used broom handles and hats with feathers: hats made of cardboard and the "feathers" fashioned from pieces of straw. It was hard for one to believe, seeing the elaborateness of this production, that it had all been done spontaneously. During the day, as might happen in a true theatrical comedy, they had rehearsals, during which everyone was on top of their role, and everything was in perfect order. Much of the credit, then, should go to the director of the play, a man by the name of Cicada. He is in here for being a thief and a pick-lock. Knowing this, and yet recognizing that he was so cultured and talented, it was difficult to judge him for his occupation. Later I will go into more detail concerning him and his companions.

Our head guard, after having sworn a thousand times not to play cards again, has finally maintained his promise. We had to substitute him with one of the new arrivals who has turned out to be a very good player, in fact, because of him we won the game.

Today chaos came from every direction: the head guard gave us some new rigorous regulations ala Russia. We racked our brains trying to understand the motive behind his fury but we came up with nothing. Gossiping here and gossiping there, spying on one side and spying on the other. Oh, it is a true Babylon! In the evening they took away our oil lamps, but we underhandedly substituted it with lamps we stole from the wall in the corridor, and thus we could still play our usual card game.

Today is Monday and there is a great commotion among the inmates of the prison. The clerk was found hanged in his office. Apparently another guard entered the office that served as the tomb of the unfortunate youth. Such a horror! It was my impression and deep feeling that it was the real clerk who had committed suicide, but instead of him it was only his clothes stuffed with rags. The real clerk was found in his underwear curled up in a corner of his office, wanting to observe our response to his suicide.

They say that suicide is a way of getting attention. I think that might be oversimplifying it a bit. I think that there might even be different reasons, different styles and intentions. Nevertheless, I have discovered two interesting reactions to the subject of suicide whenever it comes up in conversation (not that it comes up especially often). On the one hand, there are those who grow markedly uncomfortable, people who for whatever reason -- embarrassment, traumatic associations -- would rather change the subject, move on, those who refuse to acknowledge that suicide is an option or that it ever occurs. They would sooner discuss animal abuse or child pornography than even mention suicide. I once brought the subject up with woman I worked for; I had just found out that my dentist had killed himself and asked her if she knew a good one as I was due for a cleaning. Her reaction was one of immediate discomfort (although maybe it was the reference to dentistry), and she quickly said that it was a small minority of the population

who were suicidal, to which she hastily added, "You know it's against the law," as if I had just pulled out a crack pipe.

The other reaction I get is quite the opposite, although one I find equally as curious. These are the people who suddenly seem relieved and even intrigued. They open up as if having suddenly found a kindred spirit, not in the sense of misery loves company as much as if to say, "You know what I'm talking about, then." I get a similar reaction when people find out that I keep a diary; it's as if we instantly have all the common ground in the world. And in a way, there is something there. I try not to go around advertising the fact that I was locked up for having attempted suicide (or that I keep a diary), but there are those moments with close friends or family members where the subject comes up naturally (I'm not sure how that sort of thing comes up "naturally": "Yeah, I hate going to the dentist too. Incidentally..."). It's that opportunity or catalyst for a great outpouring. It's suddenly safe to talk about that which is ordinarily taboo or traumatic, the details too intimate.

But even these people seem to feel that I go too far when I laugh about my own experience with it. "You shouldn't joke about it." Why not? I have yet to find the subject that I'll keep my hands off of, and my suicide is my own, thank you very much. It's a family curse. We speak a dialect of humor that many can't even begin to understand. Even when it comes to a subject like suicide, we can't even leave it alone. For one thing, we're no strangers to the subject matter. Being a smart-ass runs in the family and so does suicide. I remember my sister, Mara, the mad scientist who tends toward the large, confessing to me that she had tried to kill herself by ingesting "enough

strychnine to kill a large horse." "When I woke up nearly 24 hours later, still very much alive," she says to me with a straight face, "I decided that I had a weight problem."

A little while after having turned the lamp and preparing to go to sleep, I felt someone touch my right hand. I quickly said to myself: it must be the clerk, who has opened the door of our cell without my noticing and hid under my bed. I lit the lamp but he was neither under my bed or even in the room. Could he have run away before I had lit the lamp? No, impossible, because opening and closing the door to my cell would have made some sort of noise. Could it have been someone else in my cell? Not a chance. They are all respectable family men who are always ready to support my practical jokes but never to play them. And so? After wracking my brains with fantastic thoughts about it, I finally decided to turn off the lamp. After five minutes of darkness, the same old story repeated itself. This time, however, I was certain that no one had come near my bed. And so? After searching every corner of the room, I finally raised my eyes into the air and saw a hanging thread and at the end a large wad of paper. The source of the thread began outside of the cell, so that it was impossible to see the sacrilegious hand which lowered the ball of paper and then immediately raised it to the ceiling. All I could think was that it was a good thing they hadn't tried stealing any of my matches for the lamp, otherwise the joke might have been able to continue on into infinity, with me in the darkness wondering. In any case, I found the joke to be a good one and I added my laughter to theirs, both of us continuing to laugh until they finally fell asleep and I lay there planning my revenge.

At ten p.m. a guard came to take an inmate to court for his trial. The inmate was a poor fisherman who had been with us for ten days. He was fifty-seven years old and, seeing that they were putting him in handcuffs, he nearly fainted from fear. I watched from my cell and, seeing this poor man reduced to such a state, I could do nothing but look at the guard who cuffed him with sheer contempt and disdain. Through such an action this guard revealed to me the depths of his inhumanity, since by merely bending the rules in such a case he could easily have allowed the old man go to court without such an extreme measure as this, not to mention exposing him in such a criminal manner in full view of us all and in doing so dishonoring and frightening him. The old man, after all, didn't demonstrate any of t

he telltale signs of a hardened criminal or that he was a fugitive who would make a break for freedom at any given moment.

After a couple of hours passed, I walked up and down the corridor and then heard someone call to me. I went to the bars of a window where the voice had come from and the poor fisherman, in a thoroughly humble manner, drew close to me in order to ask me something: "Signor, could you do me a favor and give me a match to light my pipe?" I responded, with pleasure my friend, but unfortunately I don't smoke. However, I assured him, I would immediately go to procure one. I brought him back half a dozen matches and then inquired as to the progress of his trial so far. "I received two days in jail." I asked him for what crime? To which he responded: "Signor, I was working with my son in a bragozzo [a kind of fishing boat] and with us we had a young man who always has to be right no matter what he has said or done. My son argued with him and the man threw a row lock onto my son's foot. He cried out from the pain. In that moment, when I saw my son suffering, I took the knife I had been using to work on the net and stabbed him without realizing what I was doing. The judge, understanding the circumstances, gave me only two days and ordered me to pay for the man's stay in the hospital. When I am able to earn the money, I will surely do so. To be frank, when I saw them handcuff me I thought, poor me, I am surely finished; I will never see my family again. I should mention that I have been detained only twice by a policeman, but this is the first time I have ever been placed in jail. In fact, this guard later even gave some money to buy tobacco. These guards are both saints and tyrants." I asked him then if his family knew anything yet. "Oh, no," he replied, "they know nothing. Usually we are gone for long periods of time on the fishing boat, sometimes until Easter. They all think that I am out to sea fishing." I then asked him how he had been spending the days here in prison. "Ah, Signor, it seems as though I have been here twenty years already!"

In order not to appear less generous than the guard, I gave the old fisherman ten florins for some tobacco, and on top of that, since, as a result of his crime, he had lost his job as a fisherman, I recommended him to two friends of mine who work as consulates for the Kingdom, so that they might repatriate him at no cost. During the forty-eight hours he spent here, having compassion for his situation, I also shared part of my dinner with him, and from this point on every time he saw me he respectfully held his hat in his hand. In order not to exalt my few merits too much here, those of which there are very few, but to be a faithful narrator regarding these events, I must let you know that during my brief sojourn I have gained many friends, one today another tomorrow, by sharing my food, myself not being much

of a glutton as it is, and finding most of my meals as superfluous and excessive. Since the quality of the food provided for the nonpaying prisoners is something less than that found in a trattoria, one can well imagine his enthusiasm in accepting my offer. Hence, sacrificing nothing, I was able to do a good deed. Still, whenever I passed by the bars of all the other inmates I would hear, "Sior Tonin! Signor Antonio Benedetto [Antonio the Blessed]!" In short, I became the god and patron saint of all scoundrels.

During Thursday there is nothing worth remarking on. But toward evening our room suddenly transformed into the ruins of Alexandria. Mattresses, sheets, pillows, anything which I could get my hands on, in order to make my revenge more complete, were employed for the war effort. All was in ruin. After our usual game we all returned to our cells, and no one knew where to find their own bed, sheets, mattress. Upon seeing the confusion and the slaughter of our sleeping quarters, and seeing that only my bed remained intact, the others decided to take their revenge, overturning everything, afterward turning off the lamp and taking away my matches. I, however, seeing that this was coming, provided for myself in advance by hiding a small candle; with it I was able to reorganize all my things, leaving the others to their own resources. This, however, was not the end, for as soon as the lights went out, once again the battle resumed. Pieces of bread, brushes and combs, socks, towels, essentially everything that was handy to throw at our adversaries was utilized. The battle was unequal, though, since it was me against everyone else.

After two a.m. the battle finally terminated, and during our assessment of casualties, it was discovered that the table had been injured during the battle and had to be positioned in an irregular manner in order for it to stand on its own. A bucket which we had previously used to wash ourselves with had been demolished. A pair of socks were found drowned in our drinking water.

Tomorrow will be the last night I spend in this institution. Today is Friday and I have hopes for an armistice, but if there are thorns they will stick you!

Saturday, the 30th of June, 1883. My optimism did not pay off. Yesterday evening, while I and another friend were getting ready to go to sleep, we found our sheets sewn together. When, after fifteen minutes spent in undoing the stitches, we believed everything to be clear, just like a miracle, outside from every window one could hear a

metallic and devilish cacophony that would not cease. The head guard who lived close to our cell came to our bars to see what the ruckus was all about, but no one seemed to know. After having addressed all of us with more than fifty curses each, he returned to bed. I then lit the lamp and discovered the mechanism responsible for the noise and sent everything straight back to hell, and from that time it was tranquil again. Further jokes of all types, however, continued on until late into the night, until the police station below demanded that there be silence.

Tomorrow night will be the last night I spend here and therefore it is easy to assume that it will not pass without incident.

This morning the warden scolded us very seriously, and I, pretending to be nothing more than a victim, echoed his displeasure. The echo was simpatico ... and cost me nothing ... but then again ... lest I

forgot that the cause of this echo [i.e., his voice] has cost me thirty days in jail. Ah, and what a generous echo I am.

My wife has accused me of cultivating a brown nose. I like to think of it more as a skill for schmoozing, a natural talent for being able to sympathize with those hold all the power and opportunities. I have managed to squeeze out of many a tight situation, including the booby hatch, with my own generous echoes.

In the mean time, while making my bed as I have done everyday, I asked myself: Who knows if I will ever perform this duty again? Perhaps never again and yet ... if one can see princes asking for hand-outs, why shouldn't I, who is not a prince, do the work of a servant? It is a job like any other, as a thief once described his profession.

The Bonetti family was not rich, but neither were they destitute. They were among those Italians living in Trieste who made up the merchant class. Still, Antonio, being educated, had an advantage over most. A very small percentage of 19th Century Italians were educated, a fact that made unity

extremely difficult, even after Italy's declaration of independence. Yet it was also this advantage, his literacy, that also got him jailed.

The thought which troubles most on this day is will it be possible to salvage this diary? If the authorities discover the existence of it, I fear they will sequester it from me. There is nothing contained in it which might justify such a measure, however writing is expressly prohibited here or permitted only under the condition that the authorities know about it.

I think one of the reasons I never allowed any of my therapists to see my own diaries (although it was a therapist who got me to start keeping one) had to do with my fear of leaving a paper trail. On the one hand, I don't think there was anything in there that would lead anyone to believe I was bug shit loopy. Nevertheless, I soon discovered that any "evidence" to the contrary was largely open to interpretation. Being locked up and observed has a way of making one somewhat paranoid about speaking (or writing) out of turn. I became Raskolnikov with pen. Hence, to this day I try to only share my diaries with nonprofessionals.

As Bonetti points out in regards to his diary, "there is nothing contained in it which might justify such a measure." There is not a single reference, in fact, that might be construed as having anything to do with his politics, the very reason for his sentence. Nevertheless, by writing *anything* he was breaking the rules and tempting fate. His crime had been writing. I have to wonder if knowing this is part of why he decided to keep it. On the one hand, he risked a much longer sentence, or even being transferred to Lubaña, a maximum security prison for those doing hard time for more serious crimes. Considering the laxness displayed by the prison employees, I

have to wonder if they would have allowed him to keep a personal diary had he only shown them what he was writing. Still, there is that sense of freedom when engaging in what is forbidden. The diary as oasis. By keeping it a secret, like Orwell's Winston, he had a place to go that wasn't inside a cell but inside himself. Whether or not it was worth the risk may have to do with knowing that you are retaining some sort of control. The risk involved and freedom may, in this case, be one in the same.

I was only formerly detained and punished once for my own writing. It was in the third grade, roughly a year before I was forced to free-write in my diary for Ms Hana, and it remains my first conscious memory of what I would consider a true "free-write" in that it wasn't penned in a regulation bound volume; nor was I forced to keep my well-formed letters between the lines on that low-grade brown page, pieces of wood pulp tripping up my giant blue pencil while a teacher peered over my shoulder.

Instead, it all went down shortly after the end-of-recess bell sounded on the upper playground of Paradise Canyon Elementary School. At that moment I decided it would be a good idea to carve "fuck" into the trunk of a eucalyptus tree. No one had dared to me to do it; the act had been more or less a spontaneous one, executed alone at the farthest reaches of the black top as the 3rd and 4th graders filtered back into their classrooms. Nor was it among the more memorable of my childhood crimes (easily upstaged by an incident involving half a Hostess fruit pie and Mrs. Bolander's ballet shoes). Nonetheless, the moment remains with me, mostly as a result of the repercussions that followed immediately thereafter: the swift hand of justice

(attached to Mrs. Zondler) bunching up the back of my shirt and dragging me like an ill-manipulated marionette to the principle's office for questioning.

When asked to explain my actions, I was naturally at a loss for words (I now realize that they were less interested in any answer I might have had than they were in eliciting that uncomfortable silence from a guilty child's bowed head). Had I, at that particular moment, been able to rise above their intimidation tactics, had I been equipped with the calm and perspective that hindsight has provided me as I write this now, I might have simply pointed out this is what eight year-olds do when afforded the materials and opportunity. Any eight year-old boy, I might have argued, in possession of a pen knife, a tree, a forbidden word, and a brief interval of what appeared to be unsupervised time would have acted in an identical manner precisely because this the nature of the beast. Instead, I remained essentially speechless; or if I said anything, it was very likely that guilty child's default response, that non-answer and childhood version of an insanity plea: "I don't know."

In any case, with this single act I had managed to violate a number of school policies: 1. Defacing school property, 2. being in possession of a sharp object other than a pencil on the school grounds, and 3. the use of obscene language. For Mrs. Alsberg, our principal, the latter was by far the most serious offense, the one that would dictate the terms of my punishment. My sentence included writing a letter of apology to the school. There was some other duty as well, something along the lines of a week's worth of litter patrol; but I don't recall it since few tasks could have been worse than being asked to write *anything* for any reason, making that line between punishment and assignment seem all the more arbitrary.

Lovers carve their names on a tree within a heart, a proclamation to the world that they have found something of value. Mine was an act scarcely different, but for the fact that I left out my signature. I had discovered the power of the word "fuck" and that was enough. Every one of us is a Columbus at the beginning, every new word is another continent added to the map . In a way, perhaps this *was* my signature since it felt as if every word I came upon for the first time became part of my name. No one had ever, in the history of the school, written "fuck" on that particular eucalyptus tree; and even if they had, no one had thought to do it at that particular moment: the end of recess, the most conspicuous and dangerous moment, that twilight of our semi-freedom before the bell called us back to being desk-bound and supervised. Mine was an inspired and original act that spoke volumes about the author who carved it into the juicy living xyla, far more than a coerced letter of apology scratched into regulation bleached wood pulp.

In the afternoon, after cleaning up, I prepared everything for my departure. And then I, along with the clerk, changed the clock from eleven to ten o'clock. This, stealing an hour, was the only true theft I committed . . . in this prison. A little later, I went to the window (my one weakness during this entire month) for the last time, and threw to my beautiful young lady friends a piece of paper inviting them to come back here next Monday where they would discover a nice surprise. How wonderful to think of them waiting by the window for their surprise, which will come like lightning in a serene sky. I will suddenly appear among them, and they, unaware that the time of my release was at hand, will stand dumbstruck.

It seems to me that a married man tossing love sonnets in bread through the bars is one thing. Planning a post-release rendezvous is quite

another. Knowing nothing about his married life (since he makes no mention of it here), it's a little hard for me to do much other than speculate. There is a word in Spanish, *esposa*, which means both "handcuff" and "wife." I have to wonder, given all the drinking, flirtations, and games that went on in the prison, if this "incarceration" wasn't a welcome break from home life.

Dinner time came, and instead of the same old food, I was presented with a variety of dishes and a great flask of wine. The first course was a ground meat dish. Excellent, as my brother-in-law on the outside is fond of saying. The second course was boiled chicken. And finally, a beautiful slab of cheese. At this point, eight thirty, I found the room in semi-darkness. After devouring the carne pasticcata, I began cutting into the chicken. . . but then a strange thing occurred: the knife submerged itself with an frightening rapidity, so that after having gazed into the wound, I noticed that the chicken was not a chicken (nor the cheese true cheese) ,but in fact a sculpture made from the aforementioned prison bread. It was those assassins among my friends who did this; from the bars, completely unobserved, they were able to enjoy the fruit of their prank on me. Had this imitation of a chicken not been of such volume and weight I would have liked to have taken it with me since the color of the form of this masterpiece should be seen as it is an uncanny likeness to the real thing.

My wife and I, both being vegetarians for some time, will often buy fake meat products: tofu hot dogs, Garden Burgers, meatless pepperoni and sausage, etc. I have one friend who accuses me of being a closet carnivore. I don't even know if it's that I'm longing for the taste of meat as much as I'm fascinated by how close they can get to the genuine article. In a few cases the taste, texture, and appearance seems frighteningly authentic to me. Given the strong legal and social taboos, I wonder how long it will be before someone markets a reasonable facsimile for the cannibalistically curious.

I then grew afraid that the flask might contain something which was also an imitation but, fortunately, this was not the case. It was wine, and quite good. In order to arrange my cell a little more like a guest room, our head guard, who had said a thousand times that he would never again play cards with us, joined our game and, with a full glass, toasted each of us, and managed to continue to play on into the night without once uttering a single profanity.

At times it became difficult for me to keep in mind that I was translating an account of a political prisoner's time spent behind bars rather than watching an episode from *Hogan's Heroes*. Pretura was a privately run facility, which may have had something to do with the somewhat casual adherence to regulations (not to mention that the Italians, pre and post Mussolini, aren't exactly known for either severity or regulations). Being somewhat wary of authority in a uniform, a symptom of having been raised in Los Angeles where I was stopped often, both walking and driving, I always appreciated law enforcement Italian style. I remember once watching a policeman directing traffic. Lax Romana.

Our bankrupt friend, after having gone to bed, felt the dripping of some unidentified liquid on his face; looking around and yet observing nothing out of the ordinary, he began once again to speak of spirits, and a thousand other things. After he and his bed had been completely soaked, he looked up and saw a wad of paper just under the ceiling which appeared to be the source of the dripping. After the joke was over, and we all died laughing, and after everyone had finally gone to bed and the oil lamp was spent, something like snow began to fall on our faces. Because all of the matches were hidden, everyone was forced to passively accept the situation whatever was falling from the sky.

Trieste, July 1, 1883. This morning I was the first to wake, and I found the room, myself, and everyone else covered beneath avalanche of

snow. But then again, no, it was instead white flour. I then discovered that the flour had been sprinkled over everything from a small tube of paper which had been blown from a distance. This, I must confess, was the only joke of which I had been the only author; the phony chicken had been the work of the bankrupt inmate. Presently I began to primp and make myself handsome, because I assumed that my beautiful ladies would be waiting with their hearts in their hands. Poor little things, I began to feel sorry for them.

Again, the temptation to brand him a "typical Italian male" seems too easy, but there is something of the dandy here. I also couldn't help noticing a conspicuous absence of references to his wife (my great-grandmother) or his family. Hence, this diary of a political prisoner and family man remains suspiciously light on references to either.

Today is the last day of my prison sentence, and I should feel some sense of joy, full of liveliness, but it is not so. When I think about having spent one month in this place, having become so acquainted with it, in fact I would even say developing an affection for it, when I think of all these things, I find myself spontaneously at the point of tears. Oh, how much pain I feel when I think of having to depart tomorrow!

All jokes aside, in the month that has passed, I have suffered many annoyances and bothers, and not a few moral sufferings and humiliations, having missed the freedom of the open air, and if it was physically bad for me, then morally it was even more painful. However, having such good friends here, for friendship always makes one feel royally received, and there were even times I had forgotten that I was in prison because I was in the company of good friends who became family. Don't believe that spending one month in jail is a month stolen from existence; oh, to the contrary! Here one learns many things, many useful things which would be impossible to learn on the outside. Oh, the time spent on this side of these walls, if we want to, can be spent so well. He who enters a child exits as a young man. The young man who enters becomes half a man, and the half a man a complete man.

He opens this passage with the phrase *celie a parte*, or “all jokes aside.” Having grown up in a family where straight answers were rarely exchanged, this expression or its equivalent became a necessary code among us, a time-out signal that would ensure genuine communication amidst a routine onslaught of smart-ass comments. Otherwise, between both of my sisters’ biting sarcasm, my mother’s practical jokes (which she seemed to derive all the more pleasure from when they went just a little too far), and my father’s unwillingness to answer any question without first launching into a series of smartassisms, there would have been no way to discern a punch line from a cry for help. I can appreciate much of this in retrospect; it was a sense of humor, after all, not medication that brought me back to life. But when I was younger it would drive me bat shit whenever I would ask my father a question and he’d respond with a series of entirely ludicrous answers, all delivered with the poker face of a Zen master. One of his more inspired moments was when I asked him to help me with a take-home geography exam question: “Define a continent.” His answer was, “A body not surrounded by urine,” to which he added, “‘and no man is an island,’ but fortunately most of us are continents.”

In Bonetti’s case, “*celie a parte*” seems to indicate that following the pages of food fights, practical jokes, and puppet shows, a moment of sincerity was about to raise its head; “*celie a parte*” was the fanfare announcing reflection without the net of a punch line. And here I expected to read a moment of genuine reflection on the hardships of his prison stay, which he alludes to in some sense. Most of it, however, reads more like a heart-felt outpouring of nostalgia, with even a slight note of regret for having to leave

behind those whom he had come to know affectionately: "However, having such good friends here, for friendship always makes one feel royally received, there were even times I had forgotten that I was in prison because I was in the company of good friends who became family." And again, "Here one learns many things, many useful things which would be impossible to learn on the outside. Oh, the time spent on this side of these walls, if we want to, can be spent so well." If he is right, that there is something to be learned from the experience of being incarcerated, it isn't a new sentiment. I remember an essay by Malcolm X in which he states that no school could have given him as rigorous an education. For me, the experience of being locked up and questioned by mental health experts left me with a sort of education or enlightenment. It's also not a very new observation, but it's one I now have first-hand experience with: History may be written by the winners, but what's even more troubling is that the keys to asylum are often held by the genuinely disturbed and disturbing.

In Bonetti's case, both inmates and guards seem to hold somewhat of a fond place in his heart. His entries at the end, it seems to me, are less the reflections of a released prisoner than the tearful farewells of someone returning from summer camp.

In this respect, I even found myself experiencing a twinge of sadness, having wrapped up what had grown into a year-long task of translating his diary (a sentence eleven months longer than his). It's that same vague precursor to shadow pains I experience when I know I'll be finishing a great novel and losing the characters like old friends moving away; we'd stay in

touch, I'd recommend them to others, but the present tense narrative had faded and all those postcards and phone calls, like social prostheses, could never replace that time spent together. As the old Italian proverb goes, *partire é un po morire*, "parting is like dying a little. Antonio Bonetti died one hundred years before I found him in our garage, but, at the risk of sounding overly poignant (*celie a parte*), he was reborn for me as I struggled with his 19th Century Italian idioms, laughed at his irreverence, and found myself touched by a kindness and tolerance that appeared to cut across class and position, expressed equally to guards and inmates, to Slavs and Italians, and especially to those women who strolled by his muzzled window.

In terms of fragmentation and transformation (*He who enters a child exits as a young man. The young man who enters becomes half a man, and the half a man a complete man*), I do know that when I left the hospital, even before that, I left some of me behind. Mine was a resolved fragmentation of selves, a cleaning of house, a sloughing off of dead layers. There were a lot of conversations going on inside of my head at that point, long and heated debates, tiresome for all parties involved. It felt good and cathartic and right to finally abandon those morose sonsofabitches and come out into the light again. I like to think of it as having killed that thing in me that wanted nothing more than to lay down and die. Reading back on the record of my own "imprisonment," I still have compassion for that person, but I'm also glad to be rid of him, of them, of that. That part is history, dead and buried, *requiescat in pace*, good Goddamned riddance.

I truly believe that no one under any other circumstances could offer a better model for clearly understanding humanity: The content from

the sad, the sincere from the false, the noble and the generous from the vile traitor. Here one finds people of every class and custom. From the maid to the lady, from the prostitute to the virgin. From the thief to the honest man, from the poor to the rich. From the thief of your wallet, to the thief of your honor. From the assassin of your life to the assassin of your happiness. Here is paradise, here is hell, and here unfortunately is purgatory.

Here one finds hate and envy, pleasure and pain, favors and spite, esteem and contempt, compliments and insults. Here reside the thoughts of another, the interests, the sentiments, and here one experiences the spectrum of the other, for everything and everyone one becomes a god or a demon. Here one cries while lying, and one lies as they laugh. In here everyone who is present is good, and everyone who is absent a scoundrel. One derides some and pities others. If you ask anyone the reason for their conviction they will answer -- even without good motives they'll find reasonable justifications -- : I am innocent. Vice versa, if you ask someone the reason someone else has been placed here they will say: they deserve it, swindler, a thief and a assassin.

How many more things are there to say, how many more reflections to ponder, how many subjects to deal with? But for all this I would need a different pen, my pen is an ordinary one. They cost me six florins for twelve.

And here I should end this, and reserve this final entry, the best part, for my departure from the familiar walls of this room and from this pen from the house of pain, and back to my own pen, the one without pain that remains semi-inoperable upon my nice desk at home.

And now, I continue a little further.

I pick up the story again still behind the walls of this place. It is a quarter to ten, and the clerk wants to play yet another game of dama (card game). After this, the clerk, who is by and large, the funniest of all those here, comes to me dressed as a waitress and presents me with the bill which I have here transcribed:

Albergo "Tigor"

Bill

<i>Room, thirty days at 56 a day</i>	<i>19.80</i>
<i>Electric Light</i>	<i>3.00</i>
<i>Room service (impeccable!).....</i>	<i>1.50</i>
<i>Expenses (inqualifiable)</i>	<i>.60</i>
<i>Transportation</i>	<i>.50</i>
<i>Porter (bellboy)</i>	<i>.80</i>

total : 24.20 florins

guard clerk,

Zappaovi

And all of it respectively stamped with an official watermark.

Finally the hour arrived, after thousands and thousands of apologies and best wishes, after numerous handshakes, accompanied by some kisses, I performed my solemn and much desired exit from this place, where for thirty days and the same number nights, it had received the honor of my visit. When I was in the courtyard, I sent the last of my goodbyes to my good companions who had treated me so well. They responded to me by waving towels and handkerchiefs and even bed sheets. And there in the free air, I found two dear friends who were waiting to accompany me home. Here then, as I write at my desk this last entry, among the belongings I had sent ahead of me to my home, I discover a broomstick, a soup bowl, and a piece of paper upon which, in red ink, was written: "Evviva Bonenetti!" This from my friends of a shared misfortune, planted among my belongings to make me laugh, even after I had left for the outside, and I became thankful anew, and thankful also for the

patient person, reading this, my memoir, who makes me hope that they will find something worthwhile here.

"...thankful also for the patient person, reading this, my memoir, who makes me hope that they will find something worthwhile here." The reference to a reader shouldn't have surprised me too much. He was after all a journalist and it stands to reason that he may have intended to publish this.

Nevertheless, up to that point I had assumed his intention was merely to *keep* a “diary” not to deliver a “memoir”; that is, I had been reading it as a personal record kept as means of surviving jail time rather than as an account of prison experiences intended for publication. The address to the reader dramatically shifted my interpretation of the document and raised several questions for me, not the least of which was that if he intended to publish an account of his imprisonment for the political crime of writing subversive literature, wouldn’t he then take the opportunity to make at least a few references to his political position? By the time I had finished translating it, every one of my Gramsci expectations had been met instead with punch lines. The obvious answer here would be that he very likely chose to avoid the risk of yet another prison sentence. But was his fear of the empire so great that rather than produce a sincere polemic he instead wrote this *commedia dell’arte*? Judging from the rather lax discipline of the prison in this case – where the guards not only tolerated the inmates’ childish antics but in many cases actually participated – I am inclined to believe that the irreverent and often puerile tone is less of a smoke screen or repressive device than the personal inclinations of a 36-year-old child.

I am inclined to believe that because, as I write this, I am a 36-year-old child with many of the same inclinations. It also occurs to me that the reader he addresses here is me, if not consciously then at least practically since I am the only one to have read his diary for nearly a century, and possibly the only one to have read it at all besides him (given some of his poetry alone, I’m guessing he didn’t intend to show it to his wife).

And here I really must stop, wishing to myself, that in writing these memories, that I will never find the occasion to do this ever again.

*The exconvict,
Antonio Bonetti*

Trieste, July 1, 1883.

* * *

Corvallis, April 1999:

I'm still here. And as I write this, trying to wrap it all up, it occurs to me that an ending is a somewhat arbitrary thing, particularly in regards to diaries and conversations. There's no *end* to a diary, just a series of entries, all of which stop only when the diarist does. A conversation ends, but there is always the potential for continuing it later. Bonetti's diary, begun over a century ago, ends, all the entries finished or swallowed up by his exit. But since my own diary continues on, in a sense so does our conversation. I am what is left. I am here, thousands of pages later, ripples in the pond, still writing this, still listening.

I remember seeing a painting by Masaccio, "The Holy Trinity," hanging in the Basilica of San Marco in Florence. There was God the father at the top, just below him the Holy Spirit as white dove, and then a little further down a crucified Jesus, all of them in descending order, much like the names that were carved into the cross over our family plot. At the very base of the painting there was a section that for centuries had been covered by a large marble slab. It depicted an entombed skeleton lying just beneath the Italian

phrase: "I was once what you are, and what I am you will become." When I first saw it, the phrase struck me as somewhat morbid (which is, I imagine, what Masaccio had in mind, and why the 15th Century church fathers covered it up for centuries); to me life was morbid enough without having this type of mocking reminder. Now that I've grown a little less morbid, I find that phrase funny, even playful: the grotesque grin of the entombed skeleton, imprisoned by the painter, covered up as inappropriate by the church, laughing at the living for taking it all so seriously.

I also read it on a slightly more creative, if cryptic level: "... what I am you will become." In a very real sense, I have become him. I am here and I am what is left. Alan Watts claims that "no one is willing to admit that the evil gleam in your father's eye when he was coming after your mother was you." And to a large degree, I can see myself, even my diary as a continuation of his voice and so many others.

What began as an assignment, a suicide note, failed therapy, has grown into whatever this is, reflections and bad jokes and nostalgia. This is me now. What I am is what's left, this blood and this diary goes on, interrupted along the way by prison sentences and stays of self-execution. I'm still here, and the conversation continues.

(From here the author's examination of the second of the three diaries will begin. Many of the the themes and references established in this first section will be further explored and developed. By the third section, all three diaries will be engaged in conversation.)