

A Novel Elysium

by

Evan Crichton Anderson

A PROJECT

submitted to

Oregon State University

University Honors College

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English (Honors Associate)

Presented May 27, 2014
Commencement June 2014

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Evan Crichton Anderson for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English presented on May 27, 2014. Title: A Novel Elysium.

Abstract approved:

Steven Kunert

As a metafictional work of science fiction literature, *A Novel Elysium* explores the timelessness of both the human mind and its literary surroundings, comparing the self-awareness of its characters to the sometimes tragic or empowering metaphysical realizations of human beings. Within this framework, any concrete place or time is unimportant; temporal and physical locations are created by the relations of the characters to their world and also by the relations of the readers to this text. The subjects are art, intention, pleasure, perception, and existence, and each character comes to know these or become undone by them at the conclusion of *A Novel Elysium*, just as the reader comes to realize they are being directly addressed, rather than shown an unrelated fictional tale. Drawing on the full imaginative and mnemonic powers of its characters, the work abounds with references both to other literary classics and to itself, creating a semi-circular dialectic about the perceived relationships between past, present, future, and fictional and non-fictional reality.

Key Words: literature, metafiction, science-fiction, metaphysics, writing

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May 27, 2014
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Dean, University Honors College

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

Evan Crichton Anderson, Author

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I would like to thank
Steven Kunert, Peter Betjemann, and Keith Scribner
for aiding and influencing this creative project
as well as
The School of Writing, Literature, and Film
Oregon State University

A Novel Elysium

E. C. Anderson

I

The hundred-emerald chandelier hung high-slung from the marble domed ceiling, softly casting fine green light throughout the cavernous entry hall. Two slowly snaking white stone stairways wound around the oval walls to spill their final steps on either side of where a young artist was waiting, as he had been told, with his hands and wild intentions clasped impatiently behind his back.

Several servants had already taken his meager collection of luggage—he was assured he would want for naught—to unknown portions of the house, and he had been notified that Mr. Obren was “presently concluding a small matter of personal finance, but afterwards was *dearly* hoping to show him about the estate, himself.”

And so he waited, the soles of his shoes sprouting roots in the rock.

Tall triangular panes of crystal were cut into the ceiling. Sun shone through them and onto the suspended stones, dropping razorlike gems of light which twinkled on the floor.

The artist watched the colors mingle as the chandelier spun slowly round. A prison of prisms, he mused to himself. So this shall be my sentence. My crime?

He found it difficult to reason out precisely why he had accepted the patronage of “Energy Emperor” Phineas Obren, though he knew it had little to do with the man’s personality. That much had been clear upon their first meeting, two weeks ago, nine hundred feet below where he now stood.

“I expected an artist to have more vision,” Obren had said after the first refusal.

He remembered that. *More vision.*

Obren had casually twirled his ashplant high in his hands, examining its silver hawk head while delivering the lines, oblivious to the indignation beginning to bubble like poorly peeling paint.

In actuality he remembered the majority of their first encounter quite clearly. It was hard to forget. The events and their qualities were completely alien to his knowledge of human interaction. The first being the thunderous three raps on the door. The second: the man and mind behind them.

He had been touching up one of the winged tongues in his painting *The Six Births of Matrimony* when the knocks came. The magenta brush tip quivered above the canvas. Someone was upset? He set it down. Cleaning his hands with a nearby rag, he traversed the room expecting only to hear another artist’s woes of imperfection.

As he first opened the door he could not say whether a lingering veil of smoke had drifted into the hallway, or if a man such as the one before him could exist beyond the ethereal realm. Mr. Obren wore a tall tailcoat the color of fog, similar trousers, a loose white ascot, and was leaning lightly on the ashplant. His graying, driftwood hair was barely blonde, combed over his crown, and trimmed short in the back. The fact that this mysterious visitor stood silently still for a brief moment after the opening of the door only gave more weight to the artist’s theory that he had accidentally stepped through some portal to a cold, shrouded coastline.

A glimmer in the gray eyes and the shade was suddenly alive: “Good afternoon. Phineas Obren. Obren Energy. Might I come in?”

He said nothing, stunned.

“Excellent.” The ashplant nudged him slightly aside.

Obren swept into the studio and immediately set to fastidiously examining the physical qualities of all items within his reach. The rag on the floor was turned over by the ashplant. A half-eaten apple was plucked from position among a still life of carefully rotting fruit. He reached the easel and began inspecting the brushes. “An interesting space you have here.”

“Are you sure you have the right person?”

Swiveling swiftly, Obren stopped before *The Six Births of Matrimony*. Everything but his eyes ceased to move. “O yes.”

He closed the door. “Well then, might I ask why you’re here?”

Obren looked at him directly for the first time, almost concerned. “Do you like your studio?”

What? “I...don’t know you.”

Returning his gaze to the painting, Obren said, “You know *of* me.”

Scoffing, he said, “It’s Obren Energy.”

“We know of each other.”

“We d—please don’t touch those—you do?”

Obren placed the brush where it had lain undisturbed before his arrival. “I have recently taken a great interest in your work. Your *Magnum Corpus* is to be hung in my home.”

“I wasn’t told you had bought it.”

“The operation of a public gallery is not my concern. *You* are.”

He took a second to contemplate the artist as the public. “Me.”

Having to do a half-turn while sweeping the stick, Obren indicated the entirety of the painting before them. “How could you not be?”

The patronization chipped his civility. “What, specifically, is your concern then?”

Obren’s shoulders relaxed, his eyes lost focus of their present surroundings—he had prepared a response. “Coincidence and convenience have brought me here. The coincidence that we live in the same building intrigued me—”

“You don’t live *in* the building.”

“—and the convenience of our proximity enticed me to pay you a visit. I have seen now that your skill surpasses my expectations, and I should like to aid you in furthering those talents.”

Remarkable, he thought. He seems completely unfazed by my presence, as if he’s making the speech for an invisible audience.

“I am one to believe we should act on fortuitous circumstances,” he continued. “*Wu wei*, if you will. And I cannot deny that this meeting was of the simplest arrangements. Likewise, I suggest something of ease and benefit to both parties.” Obren turned, facing him squarely, the ashplant a microphone balanced before him. The hawk’s head was hidden in the palms of his hands. “Live, and work in my home.”

The words resounded around the room without reply.

“I wonder if you understand what I am offering,” Obren said finally.

A thin film of contempt was forming in his mind. “Patronage.”

With a *thick* of his tongue, his houseguest heaved his attention back onto the painting. “Naturally, any materials you might need would be freely supplied to you, and I could not ask you to pay any living expenses—of which there are many—while a guest in my home, but it is much more than that.” Pausing, Obren bent down to inspect a lone, low-soaring tongue, its

tip cocked like a head, observing a featureless figure running frantically across an open bluff. He smiled. “You would become a member of the most prestigious society: individuals with unsurpassed wealth of wit, inquisitive minds, conscious philosophers. It’s the revitalization. To forsake the digital age and live wholly within the metaphysical world.”

“The real only slights my work.”

Obren had sighed. *I expected an artist to have more vision.*

—Footfalls along a marble hallway. Someone was approaching. He rose from the day couch, leaving the memory throw pillows behind.

A young woman appeared around the open double doors to his left. She wore more cleanly cut livery than the male servants, yet was carrying a small cloth. A loose, blondish bun and wireframe circular spectacles adorned her head.

She lingered in the doorframe for only a moment, but he could not truly say how much time had passed.

He thought it was possible she drew her strength from the walls. “Hello.”

She conceded a small smile, though her eyes were alive with thought, as if his simple greeting had triggered within her some secret cognition. Entering the main hall, she made straight but leisurely for the left hand staircase, at which she pressed the cloth firmly to the jade banister and began to slowly ascend the steps. Her chin never lifted from its lowered, focused position, and through a few wisps of hanging hair he saw from her face that she did this duty with an almost religious relish. Her heels echoed in the dome like Obren’s offer in his home. While she passed in a long semi-circle behind the downward-shining shafts of light, he noticed that they had become more off-axis since his arrival. Akin to the girl’s trip around the stair, the sun was also drifting towards the right wing of the house. As if on cue, the slanting rays suddenly fell in a faster arc, and the intangible gems scurried across the floor. Perhaps it was from a new facet of his prism caught in the light, but time seemed to accelerate within that brief burst of seconds, marked only by the altering angles of photons.

A visceral vision of time, he thought.

More vision. More vision.

Damn. The nerve. And right after complimenting my work. Don’t think about it. I’d like to see him paint his foot, and replication is merely a matter of time. What vision does he have besides his two murky eyeballs? And with the eye—*my* eye—close by him. Lightning certainly never struck *his* cornea. I could have said anything, been cryptic, could have said nothing—tried to say nothing. Don’t need vision to see I won’t like it. Should have said that. But here I am, waiting. Watching time fall away.

“I’d prefer to just be left alone with my work,” he had said.

“Ah, and in time I shall.” At this, Obren did a vast turn, easily encompassing the room with his ego. “But where? Certainly not here. Absolutely inconducive to creative thought.”

“It’s not the strength of the cell, but the will of the prisoner.”

“Prisons, hm. Good idea.”

“What?”

Obren testily tested the canvas, tilting it slightly forward from the side. Gray light fell upon his misty visage. “I see you have neglected your window.”

He assumed what he considered an Obrenian air. “Titanium and one-way mirrors will look *much* better in the autumn.”

A satisfied smile began to grow from unknown origins across Obren’s face. He reset the canvas. “Tell me, you’ve declined the society, and I wouldn’t be foolish enough to offer you the money alone, but, how would you like to see the sky?”

He shrugged. “I see it occasionally when I go outside.”

“You call that—” He gestured through the floor with his ashplant, implying the asphalt far, far below. “—outside? And what *sky*? Thin grids of blue between titanium towers? That’s not nature, lad.”

Lad? He pointed to the computer. “I can—”

Obren reached up a hand, his voice taking a tone of curt formality: “Sir, do not attempt to tell me that a blue rectangle is a facsimile for our boundless and blinding atmosphere. It is the same for all photos. You know this to be true, or at least feel it to be. I believe it’s why you’ve forbidden cameras at your exhibitions. Now replicas of the mind’s eye...these are things which can never be fully—exactly, rather—experienced by others. A worthy subject for reproduction, I would say.” He paused to inspect the edge of the image. “A shame, though, that so much of our creativity comes from combining aspects of things already seen. This work here, for example; familiar images, but not necessarily morphed as they are. Perhaps that is where the creativity lies: in the arrangement, yet once again that returns partial importance to the things arranged. O, to view the unseen things which lie beyond our waking knowledge...”

“I offer you a dream,” Obren had said. “Not in the sense of the paradisiacal or greatly desired, that’s for you to decide, but something entirely parallel to your known sliver of reality.”

By now the emerald lights which once had danced upon the floor were crawling up the wall of the left hand staircase. There was still no sign of Obren. They’re not the shadows of the gems, he thought, where shape is bound by lacking light. They are projections. It passes through those lifeless bodies, warped to cast their double image on the wall, brimming with the possibility of motion. They hide their souls outside themselves. Or is it simply one speck of the soul of the Sun?

Angles in the skylights trapped the rays upon the stones, but a high, horizontal shadow somehow rested on the western wall. It crept down slowly, marking the hour. He felt its great weight pass coldly over his consciousness. He remembered the phrase “the shadow of doubt.”

Why am I here? he asked himself. Obren’s new *discovery*—his prize; a trophy to sit in the hall, collecting dust in his shadow as he stands brazenly blocking the sky which was promised to me. He was right, though. I would not have the chance to do this alone. Trapped within their dreamscapes, I cannot let myself become the projection of other minds. Remain my own moral agent. It’s also my dream now, and soon I must awake. Only in the real can the surreal be acknowledged. Or forgotten. Very well, I’ll enter his dream. Share his vision. It’s not my fault if my own subconscious is imparted on the fiction. Perhaps I’ll even do a little bit of that mys—

“Edmunn August Weir...”

Enchanted as no one else could be by the invocation of his proper name—the words were not sound, but a drawing string—the arrow of the artist’s attention flew to the upper mezzanine.

Phineas Obren stood straight and centered with a single hand upon the banister. The hawk was nowhere to be seen, but in Obren's eyes he saw the interest of a wizard freshly finished with his spell. He swept his free hand through lengths of light. "Do you like my sunny pleasure-dome?"

Edmunn frowned. Two could play at being enigmas. "Do *you*?"

Obren descended the side of the stairs lying beneath the shadow of his own construction. "All that I have and am is now merely the vehicle of your creativity. What *I* like doesn't matter."

He scuffed the stone with an idle foot, and took another look around. The open opulence swallowed him whole. "It seems prosperous enough...but rather vacant."

"That will change later this evening." His host alighted on the luminous floor, and crossed without a handshake towards the door from which the girl had entered. "I apologize, lad. Tonight and hereafter you can make them wait for *you*."

So he *does* know. "I'll have them build a sundial."

Obren glanced around the corner, down the obscured, unknown hall, then said simply, "Come along."

Despite its docile, U-shaped exterior, Xanadu—as Obren called it—was a Byzantine arrangement of two-door hallways, scattered stairwells of varying floors, windowpanes replaced with mirrors, dance halls and closet washrooms. Edmunn followed him through what could have been the entire estate before realizing it was a single section of the eastern wing. Cut backs, corners and parallel pathways foiled his attempts of mental mapping, and he found himself running to catch up with his guide whenever he would drift too far ahead, beyond his sight, fearing unreasonably that Obren might have glided through the walls and out of existence. There were rooms linked to the rest of the manor by only upper balconies, open to the inner garden and protected by a colonnade. The garden itself, nestled between the two great wings of the mansion, was a flurry of south-facing fountains and flowers, sheltered patches of sweet-smelling trees and wistful, weather-worn gazebos. Like the complexity, the luxury baffled him. All was marble trimmed with jade, and everything was gilt in gold. Pastoral paintings surfaced the ceilings, deceiving his orientation with their verisimilitudes. Hidden galleries of priceless treasures erupted from ponderously pointless doorways, while nearby rooms were barrenly dedicated only to the views that they afforded. It was the bastard palace of the Sun King.

In all, the tour, which he felt left many regions unexplored—though that could have been from his continued lack of knowledge of the layout—lasted eighty minutes. He was dizzy with unfamiliarity, and hardly listened even to the sounds of Obren's words, absolutely ignoring their meanings. He would be expounding on the specifics of a certain ornate object and, instead of paying heed, Edmunn would watch the shadow of the western wing fall far across the garden, reaching for the other to unite the house in darkness.

At long last they arrived, Obren assured him, at the final hallway. Like so many others, it contained but two double doors. He had just passed through the threshold of the first, and was told that behind the second lay his studio and quarters. The hall was some fifteen feet wide by sixty feet long and evenly spaced with six jade half-columns asleep against the right hand wall. Across from the unformed, lifeless golems, a long bank of

windows ran the length of the hall, granting a view of the opposite I of the U. Only by comparison to the empty other did Edmunn discover they were approaching the end of this arm of the manor.

Refusing to cease with his heel-toe gait, Obren placidly pointed a finger directly across to the upper, south-east end of the home. “Those are my rooms there.”

High on the third and top floor of the building, Edmunn could see fully the inner façade: the tall white columns of the opposite wing, encasing the rooms and railings behind them. It struck him like a lavish prison for titans, a Tartarus of ebony, obsidian, jet.

The doors grew wider in his mind. He felt a sudden toll of dread, as if, upon their final opening, his fate, and he along with it, would be sealed within a diamond cage, wrapped in runes of black and gold, a stasis of eternity. There was never a point of no return, but what chilled him more was the eve of discovery, a strange new thing which comes to being and sweeps the past from out its wake.

The echoes of their shoes along the long, high hall were reminiscent of the maiden’s steps that had seized his mind from memory.

A tide of urgency rose around him, compelling him to speak. “A young woman came in while I was—”

“Ah, yes, Anastasia. Surely you have questions about her behavior.”

“Well, yes. Some of her actions—”

Stopping and turning, Obren said, “She was born mute, regrettably.”

“O...” Silence temporarily engulfed them.

His host began again. “Yes, such a pity. Her mother, a servant here, died when Ana was very young. I took a liking to the girl, and arranged daily lessons for her, frequently acting as tutor myself. Now she does any of the duties she wishes, and, if I might say, is a sensational chef.”

They stood before the double doors. “What about her father?”

“I try not to get mixed up in the affairs of those whom I employ. He never made himself known to anyone.” Grasping both handles, he added after, “Your personal rooms are accessed by the balcony.” And using his weight, he pushed them open.

All the other walls were windows. Edmunn stumbled through the room devoid of any furniture. Any details besides its sprawling size eluded him, for his mind had passed through glowing glass.

Out of a hovering field of fog, opacified by listing light, countless colossal titanium towers barely bared their weary heads. What sunshine missed the milky rivers reflected off their shining sides and ricocheted with gleaming glory off their walls of one-way glass. A myriad of mighty mansions perched as crowns atop their brows, girdled round with tousled nature growing green like verdant locks. He hunted hard for the horizon, but it had hid somewhere amid the spires, domes, and tops of trees.

“Welcome to Elysium,” Obren said. He closed the heavy doors behind him.

II

“What is your opinion of Daniel Wright?”

Victoria Lusk regarded the reflection of her father’s calculating, curious eyes. She thought of how it was really his right hand holding the watch, rather than his left as she saw in the mirror. Even now, while he spoke with his daughter, working his way towards serious words, he measured the minutes, honored the hours, and rode on the rotating hands of chronology. The pocketwatch’s thin, platinum chain tethered his body to the abstraction of ‘future’. She wished he would be willing to experience her presence. “*Je ne le connais pas bien, papa*. We’re only acquaintances.”

She felt her hair fall back about her and heard Tara’s voice—a whisper—toneless beside her ear. “Let me know when I should return.”

The image of the young maid, similar to her in age, appeared behind her in the glass. It shrunk as she exited the room, leaving a wide margin for the elderly man who stood stoically upright against advancing age.

At the sound of the closing high mahogany door, Victor Lazarus Lusk looked again at his daughter’s reflection. “*Acquaintances*...after so many years...and do try to speak up more rapidly next time...and why on Earth in French?”

The rift was ever-expanding between them. “The French live on the Earth, *papa*.” She maintained the accent in the address, a recent addition to their discourses. Such a lovely word for father, she thought. “*J’adore la langue*.”

“And I adore you, my dear, which is why I am here to talk about this.”

How generous. “My life is not one of your business transactions.”

He laughed, derisively. “If only you knew the amount of time I spend balancing your checkbook.”

She said nothing, positive he had it recorded to the picosecond.

Obviously anxious, Victor glanced about the room, orienting himself physically before extracting and examining his link to the fourth dimension. “I only mean that I have very much invested in you.” A great gulf opened where the floor had once been, devouring what memories dangled from their connection. He must have read its existence in her expression, for he soon said, “That is not a statement of money.”

“And yet it is.” She owed everything to him, a monetary fealty from the moment of birth. When does the life of the individual begin when its shape and motion are guided since conception? What force conducts consciousnesses into their bodies?

“Money can be gained to be lost,” he said. “It is time which must be invested carefully.”

She stopped applying her lipstick, maroon in an ivory sea. “You want me to move my shares into Daniel’s account.”

“They remain yours, my dear, and only a few. See the return.” After she had not responded for an immeasurable interlude, contemplating infinite possible memories, he said, “You were very close as children.”

“He was more of your friend than mine—and so much *older*.” Victoria had always felt that Daniel’s age was something which penetrated deeper than the physical world.

“You’re not so different in age anymore. What are eight years?”

Laughing, she said, “A third of my lifetime.”

He considered things of which she was not aware before speaking: “That fraction will only decrease, my dear.”

“Father, please.” She spun on the stool, and was confronted with the reality and depth of his person. The hard lines of his face, at their impressive right angles, appeared to be brass rather than bone, and the muscles attached there, through years of stress, were tightened into isolated, interacting gears. The aesthetics, which she retained, were drained, and the demand for practicality had worn his expressions so thin one could tell what he wanted from merely a glance. An aspect of humanity she thought had been lost. He seemed instead a faceless, functioning watch. “I will see him tonight at Mr. Obren’s dinner.”

“Excellent, excellent,” he said, winding down. There was no doubt that he had known of Daniel’s whereabouts before calling on her—Victor Lazarus Lusk never wasted his time—so both sides took the exchange as a simple surrender.

The air became thick with their unshared thoughts.

“Will you be accompanying me?” she asked, filling the void.

He checked the face he saw more than his own. “Pressing business matters call my attention, but send my regards to the host.”

This response had never changed throughout her lifetime.

“Shall I send in Tara?” he asked.

She scanned the tempestuous top of her vanity. “I’ll call for her soon enough.”

A sharp *click* accompanied the shutting of the watch, and signaled the end of their conversation. She heard his being diminish as his footsteps grew fainter, and shortly she was alone.

Frustration ebbed in from the corners of the room at her father’s attempt to now overtly direct her life, rather than remaining its enabler. No longer content with the occupation of puppet maker, he had sought to become the master, pulling and controlling her with, as he surely saw it, platinum puppet strings. The *gall*...

Yet...he *is* the maker. His genes and generosity afford me life. Does he have the right to write my future? Which is what? Uncertainties of life bring only the present, and, in such, *I* am the catalyst. Wealth and will operate outside of similar spheres. What is my will, then? So many years studying the burdensome obscurities of knowledge. Maybe it was merely a suggestion of direction. Is that where I will? No, there is only what I will do now, and here.

It was all so confusing. Victoria took the tiny key from the vanity and inserted it into the bottommost drawer. The lock pins slid with a quiet *chk*. Pulling it open, she removed the small jewelry box and set it before her. Silver trim and supple velvet—the hinges spun soundlessly as she lifted the lid.

There were only a few left. Certainly not enough for the rest of the week. She would write to Parles. Until then, she picked up one of the last Euphetamin pills, cracked it in half with her front four fingers, set one back and dropped the other in her glass of water. The slim stem might have radiated a ray through the liquid, for once the half-pill had sunk to the center it started to sizzle and separate loudly.

Victoria watched as the small solitary pill was absorbed and dissolved by its homogenous surroundings. It disappeared; she drank it down. In her

mouth and throat the water still was bubbling from the reaction. A gulp and it was gone.

Faint orange light from outside the house was all that filled her fitting room, save for a pair of candelabras which rested on the vanity. Her breath barely disturbed the flames, and their bending energies threw wavelengths of around six hundred nanometers into unlit crevices and corners.

Her father was entitled to his opinion, and she not sharing it didn't make him a villain. All he wanted for her was what he wanted for himself. Could anyone be blamed for hoping for another what they deemed best and beautiful? She didn't think so, it was only a misunderstanding. Daniel was certainly a handsome man, by convention. Tall and taut, he fit his fitted suits just as his tailors hoped he would. He spoke slowly because he weighed what he said, and that which he did was usually interesting. She did not mind when they interacted, but had not been inclined to invite him into private. He seemed a trifle...stuffy, like the air in a ballroom at the end of an evening: full of sound and smiles, but choreographed and self-aware—a verbal dance. Maybe his intents were unintentional, implanted by the seed of his super-ego. Either way, she would see him—

The letter. She had to write it before the party.

Drawing out a slender pen and stationery, she sank into the comfortable cushion as her curving calligraphy began to write itself.

*Dear Dr. Parles,
A refilled prescription would be greatly appreciated. As always, thank you
for your discretion.
V. L.*

Now she could bring some with her. Everything would work out well.

The letter slipped sibilantly into the envelope as she moved them both to the middle of the table, sliding some cosmetics out of the way. Helping the nearest candle from its holder, she held it horizontally above the seal. The little flame remained upright, and momentarily seemed the only existing emanation. Slowly, wax fell from about the wick in *plips* upon the paper. *Plip*. Each one spent several seconds falling through the air. *Plip*. And its resistance wrenched their shapes from spherical to ovoid. *Plip*. She wondered what her skin would do.

Reaching out, she intercepted one of the intermittent drops. *Hot* then heat like a painless pin through the palm of her hand, her fingers seized inward and fire flinched from her grasping gasp while her body twitched then started to cool before *plip* and a pin on her curling knuckle. The falling flame was freezing fast and she moved the candle up to *plip* the wax ran down her wrist, her shoulders shook then up her arm went *plip...plip...plip—knock knock knock*.

Scrambling, she scratched the wax off her arm. “Yes? Who—a mo—come in.”

Tara's perfectly circular face peered through the newly open entry. “Some time alone, Miss Lusk?”

“I've had it, no, come in, come in.” Blushing by her ecstasy, she turned to face the mirror. Had she seen...or was the mind embarrassed by the body?

Tara's form grew greater in her gingerly approach. Unlike Victoria's father she refused to use the glass as a visual connection, staring instead at

the back of her head. Now she stood behind her. "I can continue, if you would like."

"Yes, I must be leaving soon. Also..." She held the letter aloft. "Please have one of the footmen see that Dr. Simon Parles receives this."

Sitting and accepting the paper, Tara vanished. Her voice was delicate near her ear: "Of course, I'll send them once we're done."

Victoria sighed softly. Everything was fine. Tara hadn't noticed; if she had she would have told her. They weren't the best of friends, but theirs was definitely different than a working relationship. In the mirror her dark hair rose and gathered itself around her, then Tara's hands appeared here or there, brushing and pinning things together. Occasionally, a few fine fingers would graze the naked nape of her neck and disturb the short-shorn hairs which grew there. She closed her eyes and felt the fires' warmth upon her cheeks.

So daintily that she couldn't be sure if even air was coming out, Tara began repeatedly whistling a melody from Debussy's *Clair de Lune*.

Lulled by the lilt, Victoria lost track of time. Her thoughts fell faintly into darkness, and her hair was a forest on the sides of her face, full of life and waves of light. She started slightly after a while when Tara said that she was finished.

Later, once she was settled in the seat of the carriage, the sharp cry of the driver setting the horses into motion roused her from what she realized to have been a state of partial wakefulness. She checked her clutch to verify she had remembered the Euphetamin. It lay burrowed beside her compact.

The carriage jolted forward from the unsmooth strain of real muscle. Horse hooves clotted across the stones and drove her further from the home, out through the surrounding grounds and onward towards the party. Leaning her head into the open air, she felt her face disturb slow-moving molecules and simulate a gentle wind. The sun had sunk beneath the heavens, and the ominous oaks of her father's estate—spaced perfectly like random raindrops—were all but shadows wreathed in flame.

The driver halted at the edge of the property to let the skyway with no ceiling extend to the adjacent building. Its edges blinked with little lights. Looking down, she saw the canyon clouds were fringed with orange, underbellies nearly translucent from their lower illuminations.

On they rolled past other manors, hemmed by hedgerows and the road. Accelerated by anticipation, her heartbeat matched the steel shoes. Had her father talked to Daniel? They could well be in collusion...

The extravagance of Mr. Obren's mansion sprung from round the nearest corner. In the quickly quenching day the marble loomed not white, but gray, dulled by yawning yellow squares which shone through cracks between the columns. Music murmured from within as many people came and went. Five young footmen manned the entrance, which grinned as a glittering greenish maw. The hand of her driver held the door, and her heart held her breath as she stepped from the carriage.

III

Readjusting his ruby cufflinks, Daniel Wright observed himself descending the stairs. Almost too gallantly, his shoes were soundless on the carpet which, a regal red, coincidentally matched his attire—perchance a potent omen. As was his style, he was dressed to both accept—he never *followed*—and reject the common mode. His tastefully tailored ebon suit was nearly a return to the Old Nouveau, if not offset by the strikingly modern frilled cravat so crisply crushed around his throat. Though he had bathed vigorously, the smell of the morning’s hunt clung underneath his clothes, mildly penetrating the cologne with a subtle, almost manufactured masculinity. He read in his own motions a sense of austerity, a notion of importance in the coming events.

Thinking of the acid which was scheduled to be poured down the sides of his home later in the evening, Daniel hoped that the party would prove a suitable distraction. To be *discovered*...even the idea sent a mortal tremor through his spine. Rebuking the thought, he sternly straightened his lapels and surveyed his surroundings.

The sprawling steps sloped gently down from what Phineas had aptly named the Port Hall, for its central location within the mansion and magnificent view of the garden, accessible by the doors at the height of the marvelous main chamber. At their base was a wide landing, leading through a vaulting entry to the dining room. Dinner had not yet been announced, and the guests—himself included—were congregating here to wait. Servants bearing beverage trays of shining silver weaved through clustered conversations, returning regularly to the kitchen to resupply themselves with Phineas’ famous green champagne. They were in the easternmost section of the central wing; through the windows to his right and the others across the corner, he saw more servants set the table.

Musicians played somewhere out of sight in the adjacent room, their glissandos flowing in, around, and up the stairs. Daniel could not help but smile when the wall of voices dampened briefly as people noticed his arrival. It was good to have his company enjoyed by those whom he admired.

He spotted Phineas, in a cerulean suit, standing on the second step and talking to the aspiring poet Mrs. Robert Darden. Had he seen him? Best to first say hello to the host.

“A perfectly pleasant evening, Phineas,” he said as he approached them.

“I’m glad you think so, Daniel...”

Already he knew the party would be a terrible triumph.

“...We were discussing Alice’s new chapbook before you appeared.”

Alice Alusia Darden straightened defensively, like an ice sculpture refreezing itself. Similar to her writing, he found her graceful—if a little dated, but for some inexplicable reason sharpened all to points. Her hard blue eyes had hissed at him since the second they made contact. “How do you do, Mrs. Darden?”

“Daniel.”

Grabbing a glass from a passing tray, Phineas regarded him. “As I was suggesting, what do you think of a full release to the public?”

“O why thank you,” he said, accepting the cool crystal stem. It had been frozen beforehand, or, he thought, as it had passed by the woman beside him. “I haven’t had the pleasure of being presented with it.”

Mrs. Darden was apparently inspecting the moldings.

“Ah. I’ll have to get one to you.”

“But...” He faced her. “Being familiar with your earlier works...” How to phrase those stabbing stanzas? “Might they not be ready for such...*aggressive*...intellectualism?”

“I see my husband,” she said. “Excuse me.”

Phineas smiled as she left them to join a gathering which was clearly lacking Mr. Darden. “I see the status quo.”

“If my possession of opinions is cause for her alarm, I doubt there will be much getting on.” He sipped the champagne. “Has Simon arrived?”

The slim rim of the glass, upturned, mimicked the mouth of Mr. Obren. “Mr. Parles must be making more delightful renovations.”

Daniel stifled a wince. The esteemed research scientist, doctor, and entrepreneur had purchased an estate in the community some months ago, only to raze the Renaissance manor which had proudly stood there and erect in its place a puzzling pile of glass, metal, and pious solar panels. He had either a blatant disregard for the modest environmentalism of his neighbors, or was too oblivious to notice. Whichever it was, Simon’s aesthetic impairments were beginning to wear on a few select members of society, and Daniel hoped his friend could be swayed into proper action before it was too late.

“But come, enough of that, there is someone you must meet.” Motioning first with his drink, then climbing the steps, Phineas led him to the upper landing, where a solitary man was overlooking the garden.

Upon what he now realized to be his second inspection, Daniel recalled passing this particular figure on the way into the party, but the man had kept still enough initially not to be noticed against the twilight, a fitting match to his dust-covered suit, which was too short in the arms and left his wiry hands free to fidget furiously with the ill-folded breast pocket handkerchief. He crumpled a crease of it with his left thumb and forefinger, and at the sight of Phineas and himself, finished his drink.

“Forgive me,” he said with absent eyes out the window. “I’m nervous.”

Their host lifted his glass in salutations. “I would be surp—”

“I’m curious...” The stranger nodded towards the garden. “How much did it cost to bring those trees here?”

Driftwood eyebrows crinkled together. “Come again?”

“Well, they are just very old—quite nice, to be sure—and judging from everything, you haven’t been here sixty years.... How much did it cost to bring them up? Were cranes involved?”

“Hm/hm.” Phineas glanced at Daniel, brows floating up and apart on their way out to sea. “How astute. You’ll have to watch for this one, however.” A glass swung his direction. “Our resident art critic and moral philosopher. Daniel, this is the artist Mr. Edmunn August Weir. Edmunn, Mr. Wright.”

“Mr. *Wright*, truly?”

“Truly,” Daniel replied. Offering a gloved hand to the snide young man, he shook briefly and felt his remaining in conversation with the bohemian to be inconsequential.

All of them waited for another to speak. Weir, with his garish grin widening, seemed undiscouraged by the silence. After more people had passed through the Port Hall he asked Phineas, “Well when will they see the new piece?”

“After dinner. It appears food is in order before—ah, Miss Lusk, how wonderful. Welcome.”

Daniel’s eyes flew to the spot where Phineas’ were fixed, where Victoria, in red, had paused in the doorway. A low rosy bodice and small supple bustle melded into smoke-like tendrils of lace, evaporating from black into her fair milky skin. Her earthen hair was up and curled. From this distance, the green glow of the chandelier hanging heavily behind her appeared absorbed by her mind and ejected through those irises to dim all other lights.

She came towards them, a palatial procession of one. “Good evening, Mr. Obren. My father—”

“Sends his regards, yes, but when will he send himself?”

Her eyes patrolled the floor. “It is hard for him to find the time.”

“My dear, I jest. We are all aware of Victor’s...*dedication* to occupation, and that he sent you is, frankly, more of a joy.”

Teasing too harshly, Daniel thought. She is not *sent* anywhere, she goes where she will. Now she is here, standing beside me. Such lace, such taste. Hints of the forbidden. Eve with her apples. Arms like branches stripped of bark—young, bare, pliant. The soft, sharp bones of her face, not coming to points, *comprised* of them. Each one a revelation. Her mind a razor locked within willow roots.

It was incredible to see her again, this instinctual reaction. “Miss Lusk, it is a pleasure to see you tonight.”

She realized something. “Mr. Wright. Good evening.”

Tense. Why? “How—”

“Ah yes,” Phineas said. “Sorry. Victoria Lusk...” He flourished between both. “...Edmunn August Weir, the artist.”

They made eye contact.

“Hello, Mr. Weir.”

“Miss Lusk, hello.”

“I hear we are to see one of your new paintings.”

“If only we could hear it as well.”

“Would you be a fan of oscillating it quickly back and forth?”

“I would be a fan if I did.”

Another voice visited them from the top of the stairs. “*There* they are. Phineas, I knew you were hiding your guests around, you devil.”

“Only from you. Edmunn, this is Robert Quincy Darden. Robert—”

The pharmaceutical baron imposed his girth and gaudy green patterned doublet between Daniel and Victoria. “Edmunn Weir, artist. I’m a big fan. O why’s everyone grinning? I’ll admit I look most forward to the dinner, apart from your showing.”

“I appreciate it, Rober—”

“O please, my father, his father...” His eyes flicked quickly to Miss Lusk. “All fathers are Robert.” In under a millisecond they were there and back again. “Call me Quin. Now...” He slipped over to Daniel’s other side and slapped a jovial hand on the host’s shoulder. “Where’s this dinner I was told about?”

“I’ll announce it now,” Phineas said. “I’m spinning with introductions.”

Everyone began filing into the dining room and taking their respective seats along the table lined with candles. Placed beside the entry, Weir did his best to look bored while greeting each one of the thirty-three distinguished guests and potential friends, warding them off like a totem of shrunken skulls on a lost exotic island. Royal blue and Tyrian purple, the oceanic evening was fading into the smooth black details of Victoria's dress, and the points of her skin through the holes of the lace were the stars emerging from the darkening sky.

Wearied by thoughts of greater weight than the curtains, Daniel was one of the last to enter.

The dinner was in full progression: lamb, yams, cherry brie with biscuits, Burgundy wines and potatoes seared in thyme, gingered carrots served on boiled, buttered beds of spinach and asparagus with a raspberry finish were all borne to the table by maybe seven servants beneath the Mont Blanc *massif* depicted on the ceiling, reflected in a lake to be upright from either angle; but all Victoria could wonder at was why Mr. Wright had been seated beside her. Had her father *also* conspired with Mr. Obren? Were there others involved in the plot?

Quin, thankfully, was who was left of her, practically a pressureless beacon of pleasure. His exclusive events included all the right people—such wonderful people—from famous to fortunate, philanthropic philosophers and certainly never philistines. The two of them were good friends, to be true, though he was many years her senior. She noticed he never tired of the company of youth, and they could often be found in conference, exchanging whispered witticisms once the wider discussions had become besiegingly lofty.

Across from him sat Mrs. Darden, for that was as well as Victoria knew her. A recluse via her social elitism, Quin's wife spent several hours a day sequestered in their aviary, abating seclusion to join her husband in the glamour of formal gatherings. There she glared at impropriety, or spoke entirely to Mr. Obren, as she was doing currently, seated to the left of the head of the table, perfect posture bastioned by a peacock plumage crinolette construction. Her constant, conscious contraction of muscles appeared almost as painful as Dr. Parles' entrance—immediately after the "last" guest had taken their seat and abruptly followed by abundant apologies. This false final member, the guest of honor, Edmunn sat across from her.

It would be misleading to call him a "dark artist," she thought. Regardless of the gnarled mass of black hair billowing from the top of his head—she imagined all the branching shapes as rogue ideas escaping the skull—his work was predominantly colorful. Even death he displayed in a spectrum of truths, without the apparently omnipresent gray-scale of viciousness, valiance, or vindictive religiosity. Any stylistic elucidations were hopeless however. As soon as the supper had started he and Mr. Wright began a blistering discussion on the topic of perspective, which, it seemed, both believed to boil down to strictly financial stimuli and strata.

Edmunn's interlaced phalanges popped as he pushed both palms outward. Above them, the artist's narrowed eyes, copper in the candlelight,

could have carved the lamb below them. “Did your father earn your fortune?”

Already Daniel’s dinner had been sliced with surgical precision. UMBER eyes unwavering and at the same time all aflame, he said, “I came into a generous sum of money with his passing.”

Mr. Weir, relaxed and righteous: “You were born into this life, then.”

An after-life, on the heels of death.

The conspicuous coil of chestnut hair above the brow of Mr. Wright was still, upright, and proudly prominent. “As were you.”

“How can you possibly say that?” Edmunn asked, his voluminous laughter luring listeners.

All within three seats were silent.

His foe’s face was set and steady, soft and subtle.

Serving himself spinach, Daniel spoke illustratively. “Being born with strongly connected brain hemispheres and higher dopamine levels, you were pre-programmed to be naturally creative. This isn’t your *fault*, simply the way you are. If you were able to give away some of your creativity to those less fortunate than you, would you? Surely you can live a happy, satisfied life without it all to yourself.”

“Hold just a mo—”

“Furthermore, your tone of *this life* implies that we are not currently participating in the selfsame act, while your own use of *this* admits the truth: that we have both—histories aside—been invited here by the gracious Phineas to enjoy the company of friends and the phenomenal food...”

“You’re comple—”

Daniel Wright paid no heed, turning instead towards the head of the table. “...Which, if I may say, is the most delectable dinner I have had here or elsewhere.”

Raucous applause from billionaire bysitters.

Victoria caught herself clapping, though examining Edmunn.

Brooding bitterly, he smeared brie to biscuit.

Mr. Obren’s gray eyes glittered. “Hm/hm, perhaps it will be a bildungsroman yet.” He whispered something to a servant, who left the room with spacious strides.

Consciously coy, Mr. Wright beamed nonetheless.

Culinary conversations ensued, with much agreement and second samplings, until a slender, simple girl came from the kitchen and crossed the room to stand beside the honored host.

Tink Tink Tink, and Mr. Obren was afoot. “As some may know, but most do not, this is the lovely Anastasia. And I must say, with humble honesty, that it was she—not I—who facilitated the feast.” In what Victoria considered uncharacteristic empathy, he faced her emphatically. “Our exceptional chef.”

A standing ovation after the oration turned Anastasia’s cheeks to plums. Fog formed on the girl’s glasses, and she seemed to think that all applause had come from Mr. Obren, like a conduit of appreciation. She stood as long as she could stand it, then, in a polite profusion of curtsies, exited the dining hall.

It was gestured for the guests to reseal themselves. Excited mentions of Edmunn’s paintings circumscribed the talking table. Everyone was speaking of the work to be so shortly shown. Fostering the forming fervor, Mr. Weir

began to field questions from the curious. Notably negating inspiration as his genesis, he said instead that his was a simple impetus of intellect.

Mr. Wright, having kept quiet, could now no longer be self-sedated:

“Apart from the realistic forms and their chaotic configurations—of which there can be no doubt, you have a talented technique—have you lent consideration to the expressions of your images?”

Edmunn sat in silent thought, amusement all across his face. “Do you mean...to paint them poorly?”

“I mean to reflect emotional states of—”

“Emotion exists within abstraction. I paint in *concrete* unrealities.”

“But do you feel—”

“Yes.”

She heard Quin suppress a snicker.

Most likely in light of interruptions, Daniel adopted a stoic approach.

Mr. Weir, guessing no more cues would come, decided to illuminate. “With a crisp cloud and blurry blade, the objects, not their qualities, are what define the difference.”

“But what if both of them were blades?”

“Then it would be a witless fool who made them both identical. If I wanted a blunted blade I’d have it bent beneath a flower, but clear, clean, and painted properly. It’s not the likeness of the thing which lends it meaning. It is the symbol.”

Daniel halted hefting his drink. “What if the symbol cannot be clear?”

“There is always clarity, of *what* is unsure.” Edmunn swirled a spoon in circles, then jabbed it at his judge. “*There* lies the abstraction.”

Victoria felt a pinpoint pressure rubbing at her ribcage. Looking left, she saw that Quin was listed to the right, his lively eyes insinuating that she might mirror the motion. She leaned near and placed her ear close beside his whispered words.

“Mr. Wright and Mr. Weir...” Some cinnamon-glazed sweet yam caused his pause, vitalized by viciously enthusiastic chewing. “*Mmb...* such a dichotomy.”

Victoria’s neck tightened as she tried to straighten herself subtly. He had an inclination towards implication, and that she had not detected any unsettled her. But before she could inquire further he had risen to surrounding sound waves.

“...and art needn’t be oppressed by historicity,” Mr. Weir was saying.

To her right, Daniel’s fork stabbed a piece of potato. “*Or* contained within a truthful chronology.” Inverted, the fork ticked side to side. “It is a twofold knowledge, if even a glimpse.”

“A *chronology* originating from our continuation. Dependent on it.” Edmunn ceased slouching and leant on the lacquer. “Don’t tell me you believe in the Zeus II?”

Despite shifting shadows, Daniel’s face remained resolute. “Who knows what the probe will find.”

Hoisting high his opaque green glass, Mr. Obren said, “To an arctic Atlantis.”

And everyone, out of obligation, toasted to the possibility of mythical, displaceable, extraterrestrial life.

Victoria pondered how long he had listened.

“Now,” Quin started, “Alice remarked while we rode over that Europa had some big significance, hm?”

Mrs. Darden spied her husband with her icy empty eyes. “*Really*, Robert.”

“O now why wouldn’t I rather talk about it?” he asked, sending Victoria a smile that signaled the momentary impenetrability of his demeanor.

Looking at no one in particular, Mr. Wright placed his palms on the table. “Ah, Europa, the daughter of Phoenix...”

Mother to Hades’ personal court.

“How perfect,” Edmunn started saying, spearing mint leaves for his meat. “Humanity’s dream of a fiery rebirth given the cold shoulder.”

“Perhaps you mean *The Iliad’s* Phoenix.”

“You see...” With one of her standard oratory tactics—speaking to someone other than she was addressing—Mrs. Darden turned to Edmunn. “He’s saying our future lies with the daughter of a sterile, senile tutor of war.”

Oceanus—all rivers flow from him and end there. Father of fire. Son of the tyrannous sky.

Chuckling, Quin said, “He doesn’t *see* what you’re saying, Alice.”

The artist suddenly was somber. “All I do is see it, sir.” Here Mr. Weir lost sight of the table. “A celestial clock, an inferno of gears, burning...boiling in its own heat, spinning at the speed of light.” Was he watching the flame between them? Pupils pulsed and pierced right through her. “But the face is frozen, barely inching...”

“Midnight’s the event horizon. Never achieved and already there.”

Those who had heard turned directly to her, and then she knew it was she who had spoken.

Stupid, she told herself, still flushed fully moments later, meandering through the mazy halls. An expeditious excuse to the washroom had saved her from embarrassment, but her heart still thumped and thundered while the lighting glared like eyes of Gorgons. Where was that room, anyways? Bah, it merely mattered that she was no longer with the others. *Stupid* to think that she might mumble something Edmunn found intriguing. But she had become bewitched by his description—all she studied, celestial speeds. A white dwarf at dinner with gaseous giant geniuses. What had Quin meant when he called them a dichotomy? Was it a right here or no up ahead. Keeping course, she found the door and slipped inside the sanctuary. Her first act was opening the bag which she was clutching closely.

Victoria placed the pale tablet on her tongue and chewed briefly before downing it with a sip of water from the faucet. It tasted bitter and chalky, but not unbearably so.

She looked up from the sink to notice the tasteful gold leaf bordering the oval washroom mirror. It flowed with a particular grace and ease; the frame was etched as though the glass was cast into a stormy sea, a tempest tossing all about. Waves crashed into each other, rising up to meet her and receding from the rim.

It’s starting to work, she thought. She fell from the frame to the mirror itself and examined the deep brown-black curls of the reflection. The lamb was tender tonight. I must have Anastasia cook for guests sometime. Is lamb in fashion, now? The pheasant last week, but no. Her curls accented her fair skin nicely and the color was a strong contrast to her eyes, which glinted in the lighting. A shame that no one can be here to see me the way I see myself, so calm...observant. A painted statue. She made unflinching eye

contact with the illusory caricature before her, watching its pupils erratically dilate, creating a void in the two virescent wildflowers.

Who are you.

“What are you?”

Although really I’m looking at an image—and a backwards one, at that.

Just then, a pleasant, suffusive odor drew her attention to the corner of the washroom. In a small, violet vase a delicate flower rose on a tall stalk out of the soil and sagged from the weight of the large white petals, proudly displaying their yellow treasures.

Victoria smiled, then went out to rejoin the others.

The Port Hall was thronged with all thirty-three guests migrating westward to the gallery. They were a cavalcade of clashing colors, but Daniel felt alone among them. Nervously, he smoothed a crumple in his crimson cummerbund. Had his expression of astonishment forced Victoria to flee? Indeed she was distressed this evening—but brilliantly beautiful. She had flitted from the room before he could compliment her imagery, and now he feared she would not near him. Perhaps it was that wanton Weir, inconsolable when interrupted. For now, neither could be seen below the baubles and the buns of others; both were relatively short. The crowd continued, like a viscous liquid, and Daniel, distracted, was taken by the tide.

Just what did Weir intend to do? Enchant these titans of technology with espousals of the enigmatic? He had himself even admitted: his was an aimless artistry. Alice already was under his aura, if only by a category cohered through common enemies. Her husband was maybe more resilient, but undesired as an ally. Daniel deemed Robert disconcertingly carefree, a quality ascribed by his creation of Euphetamin. Neither concerned him, coincidentally. Recalling her quizzical reaction, he knew Victoria needed protection from Weir’s puppetry perception.

The conscious current drained down the steps and flowed into the western wing. Phineas was at the forefront, flanked on either side by Dardens. Daniel desired to listen in, to learn what they were saying, but the congregation was cluttered about him, confining and constrictive.

“Daniel,” someone shouted.

“Daniel!” It was Simon.

Behind him, a blonde head bobbed up briefly. Then weaving waiflike through the throng, Simon Parles soon stood beside him. He caught his breath for the first few seconds while patting down his parted hair, split succinctly down the center. “Hello, chum.” His wispy mustache bristled brightly. “Croquet tomorrow? Noon?”

“I’m meeting Mr. Robbendry at noon.” The financial advisor had demanded to dine with him.

Adjusting his azure ascot while Daniel had answered, Simon seemed assured of the outcome. “A shame, I will have to tell Miss Lusk you are unable to—”

“Miss Lusk will be there?” A confluence of influence. “I didn’t know she played,” he added after.

“O, most certainly not,” said Simon. “But I’ve convinced her to take a little promenade about the lawn pending our sport.” He straightened an

ashen suit sleeve and tilted his head towards the back of the pack. “It’s why I was so far behind. I waited for her to return from the washroom.”

Daniel cursed his confounded chance for a quiet conversation with her.

Simon, somehow, still was speaking. “As I might have mentioned, she was dreadfully drawn to the dinner discussion, and—”

“She was?” How had he not noticed?

“My word, there were several times when I—anyway, I thought it could be beneficial, or at least beneficent, to include her in our little intrigues.”

“I’ll tell Robbendry to reschedule.”

Snapping his fingers, Simon said, “Magnanimous, my good man. I will see you in the sunlight.” He stopped walking and was swept away in a swell of shuffling bodies.

So it would be the three of them...Simon a suitable third party. The doctor was desirably unobtrusive, while cheerful enough to ripen the mood. Miss Lusk may ask to test her stroke, and Daniel was undoubtedly the better player. Show her how to hold the mallet. Establish oneself as an exciting enthusiast. He wished he could hurl forward the hands of time, to reach into tomorrow, to feel out the situation and come forth in the most felicitous manner. Finance could flounder for a few extra hours. Mr. Robbendry was rescheduled regularly.

Coming around a corner, Daniel saw the preceding party pouring through the gallery doors. Like a wizened sentry beside the entry, Phineas greeted each guest as they entered.

Daniel would have drifted deliriously past him, but his host’s hard hand hooked under his arm. “My thanks, Daniel, for the culinary courtesy. I was waiting for a time to toast to Ana. You afforded me the opportunity.”

Such sympathy! “Of course, Phineas. It was a simple sincerity.”

“Truth is one of your common qualities.”

Overwhelmed by Mr. Obren’s overt appreciation, Daniel—as dumb as Anastasia—made to move into the room...but the grip remained viselike about his bicep.

“While I have you caught here, there is a business matter we might discuss. Say, tomorrow at twelve?” Phineas’ mouth formed a friendly, conspiratorial crescent. “Just us.”

Business with Obren Energy—the contract could bring billions. Thoughtless besides this, he agreed and was released.

Only after the whole group had gathered, with Phineas and Victoria along a single line of sight, did he realize the inconvenient convergence of coincidence. If only people could permit impunctuality.... He knew this was no option. The broad room buzzed and brimmed with action, but his was a personal pursuit. Running through random reckless scenarios, he was brought back to being when Weir approached the curtain.

He gripped a golden cord, intoning, “*The Six Births of Matrimony.*”

And the veil before Daniel began to move violently.

A new nexus of sensations sprung to life within his person. He saw the rippling fabric roll back slowly. It must have been milliseconds, but time had no tethers. Something slept behind the barrier, but it was a cold unconsciousness—a puppetry perception. Destroying its designs, Daniel clamped his eyelids closed. It had no hold in non-visual dimensions. Auditory allusions acted as armor.

Sbbbt. The curtain must be open.

Silence.

Barely breath.

“Heavens,” someone said.

Reactions rent the air.

“The eye is the Sun.”

“No, it’s the eye.”

“Why would you marry someone there?”

“A flock of tongues.”

“At least it wouldn’t rain.”

“That one, there, it seems like a hawk.”

“But what is the fruit for?”

“Don’t you see the bud near the base of the bowl?”

“Goblet.”

“Is it bleeding?”

“Venus de Milo has no head and it’s only David’s lower half.”

“They’re both headless.”

“It’s clearly a symbolic representation of the sexist portrayal of beautiful women and the domineering, phallic aggression of the patriarchy.”

“Actually, Venus *is* half as high as David.”

“I like to think of it as a problem of logistics.”

“All of the sand is outside the hourglass.”

“It’s not a desert...a wasteland.”

“Calm and quiet.”

“But the tongues?”

“Well, they don’t have mouths.”

“Who’s this one here?”

“A woman.”

“A man.”

“Maybe it’s you,” Phineas said.

Daniel opened his eyes. It was...it was...everything that had been described. A nonsensical nonentity. Physically, an enormous eyeball hovered half-covered by the horizon, overlooking a flock of tongues flying five feet across the canvas, over an empty hourglass and a goblet full of rotting fruit. A bud bloomed at the apex of atrophy while, to the left, a shade of Man fled the shattered shadow of Art. The scene was painted with no small set of skill, but to induce an intellectual idea from the image was as much a waste as the earth within it: anyone could say anything and be absolutely right. It was terrible, it was terror.

He looked to Victoria. She was rapt by the painting. Admiring her way of becoming completely encapsulated in the present moment, he asked, “I would like to know what you think, Miss Lusk.”

She seemed startled. “O...what I think? I don’t know if I can. There’s so much to feel.”

Weir was near them. “What is it that you feel?”

“Dripping warmth. The remoteness of a fixed point in an open desert. Expectation and disillusionment—not necessarily from or of the same thing. All life, all death, all love.”

Both men grinned.

“It awaits abstraction,” Daniel said. “It has no intention but for us to mistake one.”

“Your studies slight you,” Weir was saying, “Not everything can be cataloged and analyzed.”

The Dardens declared they liked it.

“It is mental manipulation of the most magnificent kind,” Phineas proclaimed. “The purpose is personal.”

Weir seemed to smell something sour.

The rest—save Victoria, still staring—applauded Phineas’ findings, and turned to throw their adoration at the artist.

What are they doing? Daniel wondered. Had no one heard what he had said? Why would Phineas even invite him if the host would replace his role as critic? Why were they mystified by this mundane misdirection? Who were these people? Why was he here? And *why* was Victoria still staring at his painting?

Phineas Obren suggested the guests could adjourn to the Evening Room for coffee and desserts.

Victoria did not partake in the exodus. Remaining in the gallery, she gazed ever on. No one needed her, and the canvas was captivating. Many people had had hypotheses, but to her it was only an interesting image, something unseen in the subtleties of life. She felt for the shadowed figure of the foreground: overpowered by the past, and terrorized by twisting tongues. The sheer size of the thing was also impressive. She stepped forward. Almost enough empty space for one who was willing to slip inside. Her fingertips tingled. Could she reach through reality?

“I enjoyed your addition to my description at dinner.”

Taut, she turned.

Mr. Weir shimmered out of the shadows. “I never would have thought of that.”

“Eventually gravity will gather the light.” Her face was on fire. “It’s no place for painters.”

“Precisely.” He proceeded across the checkered floor. Black. White. Black. White. Then they stood beside each other, facing his creation. “In there, my strokes would hold no sway.” Though his eyes were outward, his thoughts trudged along a timeline. “A little like they did tonight.”

“How can you think that? Did you hear the discussion?”

“No.” He loosened his dirty, dusk-colored Windsor. “I saw their thoughts.”

She waited wildly.

“Minions of Obren and his false philosophies.”

“I believe he was trying—”

“To tell them they were all correct. Each one said what they thought was smart, what they thought was right. Theirs was not a statement of the piece, but of something personal, an attempted self-assertion. They had to defeat it. To answer this thing which wasn’t a question or discount it for not being so.” He turned to her, away from his art. “I think you made the boldest statement.”

“How?”

“You were not proving yourself or disproving another, but interacting with the image. Also, it came from somewhere deeper than the mind’s designs.” He stepped to the midpoint between the bud and her breast, holding his hands out, barely before both. “This, to this, is instantaneous. It cannot be helped. The bud becomes you.” Raising his right arm to her head, he added, “But this to this is a conscious action. By using your logic,

you presuppose truth.” The artist’s arms were dropped, and dangled.
 “Obren told them they were true...my painting merely a mechanism.”

She shivered and said, “I don’t believe him.”

“I know...I’d like to show you something.” He stepped to the side.
 “Do you see anything special in the veins of the eye?”

“Besides the lightning?”

“Letters...maybe...”

“...I...I can’t see anything.”

“Here...” His hand rose up slowly in front of her face. Closer. An inch away. “Are you focusing on my hand?”

Four calluses, all raised and raw. Life and love lines intersecting. Fuchsia paint stuck in fingerprint spirals. A scar along the lower thumb. Dry, dirty, full of feeling. “Yes.”

“Keep focusing.”

It vanished. Within the blurred image, the minor lines of the sclera were obscured into nothingness, while the larger bled together, linking where they had almost touched. Symbols appeared in the fading eye.

“It says matrimony!” She burst with delight. “The lightning forms a little T.”

Smiling, he said, “Call it that.”

Plup.

Slumped on the end of a bench by a fountain, Daniel was tossing change into the water. The guests had been guided through the garden on their way across the grounds, and, not noticing Victoria, he had waited for her to follow. But she had not come—she would never come, now—and his woeful wanderings had left him exhausted.

Plup.

Surely, she did not like Weir’s work. Commented on its contradictions. What did it matter? He was only an artist. Attempts to achieve actuality without it. He focused on the cool coin in his palm. *Concrete unrealities.* Please. A canvas could never be this cold. The clouds had cleared for an obsidian sky. Pinpoint starlight lit his languish. The nights neared freezing...almost October. Especially at this elevation.

Out of little less than want of warmth, he cast the coin away from him.

Splip. It skipped across the water’s surface and into a shrub on the opposite side.

Someone coughed behind the bush.

Daniel stood. “Hello? Is everything all right?”

Fss. “Yes,” a familiar voice said shortly. “Believe me, everything’s—” Weir stumbled out from behind the barrier. “O.” He loosed a laugh. “Hello, Mr. Wright.”

Anyone but this man. “Mr. Weir.” Not now.

“Also out here for a joy—” He coughed. “—ful jaunt around the garden?”

“Have you happened to see Miss Lusk recently?”

“In the gallery.”

“Recently?”

Smiling wryly, Weir withheld his answer.

Daniel’s distaste doubled. “What are your intentions?”

“Forgive me, Father.” He genuflected.

Had he seen her? “...What is it that you plan to do?”

The bushes burned with mottled moonlight.

Weir watched him a while—he didn’t know. “O.K. You beat me. I will tell you my secret. I plan to paint. I will paint and paint and paint and paint. It doesn’t matter what I paint, so long as I paint my opinions and paint many of them. Then, after I’m done painting, I will kill myself, and my paintings and opinions will be famous forever. And there will be nothing that you can critique to change that.”

Disturbed and disgusted, Daniel left him at the fountain.

Making his way through the midnight garden, he heard Weir’s voice cry over the trees, mashing against a murmuring susurrus of leaves:

“Run, Wright! Fear the mighty mortal artist.”

Well, Daniel thought, I can discount him as deranged—though all the more dangerous. He knew no truth lay in Weir’s words, but feared the mind which would fabricate such fiction. Must find Victoria. Realizing he had started off in the direction of the gallery, he decided a maniac’s memory was as stable as any. He blundered through the weaving pathways, trying to unravel the events of the evening. Was he alone in his opinion of Weir? He had to head over early to Simon’s estate, to see what sentiments had sprouted there. Then, this mysterious business with Phineas. But the sun’s zenith would sweep away uncertainty, and a clarity would fall all over—

He laughed aloud, remembering the acid. The dinner had even distracted *him*. It was a refreshing recollection that, in other locations, different lives were being lived. Things were passing unperceived around the Earth. No longer would he linger in this lugubrious garden. There were no cosmic creatures controlling his will. After bidding Victoria goodnight, he would go. She had shown a special side of herself, though he was unsure how much he had seen. He yearned to learn from her, and knew he had. Of everyone, she had not praised Obren’s pointless proclamation. Perhaps it was perplexity...but still a satisfying sign. Something clung to her consciousness, and he hoped he could help.

There, through tree limbs, isolated in a first floor window: a female form. A soft silhouette of similar height, bordered on both sides by long limpid light. She was in one of Phineas’ hidden garden galleries. Weir had told him the truth.

Matching his pulse, his feet pounded the earth. He ducked beneath branches and flew over flowers, diving directly for the door. Then stopped, and stared, at the statue of stone. An unwanted Venus uncovered in Rome.

It was not even the shadow of Victoria.

Edmunn glowered glumly beneath the bourgeois glow of the Evening Room. Espressos and éclairs had been arranged across a crystal bar, capped at one end by a veritable port of ports, towards which no one harbored ill will. Fainting sofas were strewn all around the room in geometric patterns with armchairs and lounge chairs of varying forms. Walls of arching, pointed windows peered into abyssal space. Like a stage crew swapping the set, the musicians had moved downstairs while the guests had viewed his painting; an impressive timeframe, considering it took Quin twice as long to choose his liqueur.

Barely six minutes, he thought. A blinding birth rate. None of them really seeing it, either—listening to all the others. Miss Lusk, the only one who stayed once Obren whistled. Lapdogs of luxury. Fed on verificational self-aggrandizement. Wright, the prude, trying to tell me we're both privileged. Them, again, eating it up. Glad I scared him well off. *What is it that you plan to do?* Finish this port and sail on back.

He was seated in an armchair along the length of a rectangle, facing in towards the rest of the guests. Behind him, the black void bubbled, spinning silently. His thoughts were stardust scattered by supernovas.

They all came to congratulate him, naturally. But their words were without praise. It seemed as if they were giving him permission to reside in their society. He had passed their application: be outwardly bizarre, but do not disrupt the pattern. An aspiration towards tessellation. Wanting to make them feel, he had only made them feel comfortable. *What is it that you plan to do?*

Miss Lusk was parallel to him, sitting on a sofa. Staring at her sherry like an oracle of alcohol. Above her, business men were boasting bountifully, comparing egos to superegos, ids and I.Q.s. At least she has a thirst for thought. What if he could have her see this through his eyes? What if they could *all* see themselves through his eyes? Through his art...

What is it that you plan to do? What are your intentions?

Show these people their reflections. Reveal the revolving revelry. Pointless parties. Murdered money. *Then* what will they think of me? Not just some punk Picasso knock-off. Why reside in society when I can *revise* the society? Truth by mental manipulation, you say? One by one, painting by painting, they'll ponder my perspective. Shake the ship—a paradigm shift. I'll have them hating their hypocrisy.

Veiled by a languorous blink, Victoria's eyes flickered up to his while he watched her. He started, giving away a subconscious sign of surprise, but she made no visible show of acknowledgement. It was as if she was gazing through and beyond him, out the high-vaulted window to the distant stars above the garden. With her melancholy so enframed by all the golden, gilded things about them, she called upon his conscious depths, bringing to mind a certain girl Modigliani must have known.

It begins with her, he thought.

IV

The percussive *Pock* of croquet mallets was surprisingly serene. Each one the final chime of intent's mutation into action, a *Pick* and silence as the scene unfolds like undone ornate origami.

For them, then, there was only the masked and muffled *shbbb* of a sphere slipping wetly through long distances of grass.

Hazy, steepening sunlight filtered down through cirrus clouds and dried the dew which shimmered on the lawn. Squinting from the glaring grass, Daniel read his hands of time. It was ten forty-seven. Per the plan, he had advanced his afternoon appointment into morning to allow for Obren's meeting, and had for a dour quarter-hour been playing an increasingly defensive Dr. Parles.

Victoria was absent.

"You love to leave me nothing, Simon." Pressing a palm upon the head of his handle, Daniel felt his mass almost compress into a coin, reflexively supportive.

A sougled scoff across the field: "If I could *be* so fortunate."

Though audibly amiable, it was impossible to guess the face that accompanied the comment. Simon stood between him and the Sun, an emotional eclipse, silhouetted sentiment—*pangful* visions of shadowed statues pierced perception of the present: Victoria's profile, always athwart him, lingering in last night's lifeless doppelganger, its direct darkness pervading the garden, a dim and depthless tunnel of hope, ever etched from effulgence with adzes and with awls.

Daniel gripped the mallet's hilt, his tightening knuckles whitening, attempting to press like particles together...perforce more pressure...but the matter at last remained unchanged. His hand alone evinced exertion.

As if a few altered atoms would affect his existence. Victoria need not come today; their lives were long, subatomically slow.

Bolstered by bereft convictions, he drew up the device of his present play, obscuring his object by other foci. "How am I to work with this?"

He and Simon were switching positions.

"Would you say *work* if it wasn't so?"

The four primary colors all lay in play, and Daniel, as the guest, had opted to be black and blue. Six wickets stretched along the lawn, split evenly to three and three, the two groups' separation twice the typical. Simon often quoted that this promoted ball control, but Daniel knew it was due to his opponent's desire to extend the game the length of his home.

The house itself, if one could say such, was a dreadful distraction during competitive croquet. Sided with Phineas' photovoltaic panels—the selfsame patent which procured his prodigal wealth—all the walls ascended the awkward asymmetry to an unsloped roof simply smothered in mirrors, capped by the hapless master bedroom: a radical, rotating, right-triangular prism; the exposed leg face was a single wide window, and the hypotenuse a hydraulic base for the behemoth paneled pinnacle, with powerful pistons which aligned it to light, while simultaneously obstructing all other lines of sight. The inflaming fact that Simon was the one who saw the least of his house was perhaps what was most perplexing. By sheer geometry, throughout the entirety of the day, Simon faced the entirely opposite way,

instead inspecting the sunshine passing over everything save the shade of his bedroom.

In essence, the many external reflections caused bright beams to gleam in his eyes and his vision, lightly disruptive to Daniel's decisions.

He could not have it harass him out of victory—a pressing upon him...his psyche.

Due to a slight softness of attack and his temporary enemy's impish placements, Daniel's balls were not where he wanted. Though not back by the beginning, it was difficult to delineate where that ended or the middle began, and Simon's strategy of spatial control indicated his intuition that their play was still in infancy, with relations of dominance or impotence yet to be ratified. Through thoughtful and thoroughly perturbing positioning, Simon had made offensive moves infeasible for fear of furthering spheres of opposed influence. He had feigned to fall behind with his backward ball, wickedly blocking Daniel's next wicket: any roquet would delay an advance, but the preordained order afforded no other option.

Simon's skill had soared above before; Daniel no longer predicted where the mallet's *Puck* would send his intended machinations, or—more harrowing—*what* those were, shifting with their situations. He seemed intensely focused yet dually distracted: a covert sign of recalled coaching?

That was it then. He had been tutored on croquet tact in secret. His guarded, inward attendance. Slyness of smile. Demeanor deceitfully light in conjunction with attention taken. An exile of all habitual style, with motions quite mechanical. Confirming the form. Yet Simon still speaking, but an unknown opponent's play. Social shell of self—truthfully: the Tutor. Though not extant to full extent. The dualism of didacticism, professing spirit split with student—always applicable...an epistemological conflict. Streams, currents of antiparallel directions. Not whole, but halved, and two cannot become the one.

Simon, with a hand above his eyes for shade before them, jocularly: “Good man, do you plan to strike, or stare the spheres into submission?”

Always the same exterior, but who—this new inhabitant? A vestige of the visage must manifest in play.

It would be good to face new foes.

His mind descending to his gaze, the ball fell into Daniel's focus. The obsidian orb, flawless, floated on the grass, awaiting action. His head hovered beside it—for “in front of” was temporally, he figured—swinging soundlessly in air. Resistances were registered, and timelines drawn to the maroon marble shape which blocked his way, and others.

Packsbhhh.

Roquet red, feather touch. Croquet stroke to send the bloody backward ball behind him. Black *clicks* blue on continuation. An inspirational long Irish peel. Opposing sun then struck by black. The ensuing colossal croquet sent Simon's shining forward ball back towards the A-baulk by the trapezoidal walls of the polygonal porch solarium, encased in inward-slanted sliding glass. One last *pick* had Daniel's darkness fill the jaws of his next wicket goal.

“I see we have begun,” Simon said. “My apologies if I have offended.”

“Merely returning favors rendered.”

“And doubling the deposit.”

“An exponential match could arise.”

“To raise my spirits.... Perhaps we have the power.”

“You won’t fall short, pen-point accuracy.”
 “I thought our level of play had surpassed linearity?”
 “Apparently chaotically. Was that improper English?”
 “The dew drug it off-track.”
 “Should you be used to that by now?”
 “What? You use that now?”
 “I said it seems you should be aware of the misty morning phenomenon already.”
 “O...we both should.”
 “We both?”
 “It’s a consistent condition, and you *have* been here before.”
 “I never noticed.”
 “You know now. We will soon see how you handle.”
 “Hardly. I’m horribly wired. First, to finish this.”
 “Rejuvenated?”
 “As if it were the font of life. Such undertones...”
 “The secret is the pear.”
 “But of course, I was admiring its manifestations.”
 “The clouds almost complete a veil...”
 “Si, would you chuck me that ball please.”
 “It appears I’m on strike. Here you are, chum.”
 “My thanks.”
 “Rather defensive today.”
 “You chose my choice. I must defend from your defense.”
 “No offense taken.”
 “*Hm*—have you happened upon Mrs. Darden’s new chapbook?”
 “Not yet, though I have confidence it will happen upon *us*.”
 “Akin to your turn.”
 “Back to business.”
 “While on such, any new developments?”
 “My caloric-intake supplemental tablets are being contracted to supply all federal penitentiaries.”
 “That’s quite a few.”
 “It’s a riot. *Truly* tips CIST’s scales.”
 “A breakout deal. Congratulations.”
 “Combined with our military distributions, I might have found my foothold.”
 “*Must* I watch you peel away?”
 “If this trend continues—”
 “Then I beseech some quality for chaos.”
 “...If this trend continues, CIST could grow into essentially my sole profit.”
 “But what of Astral Astrobio?”
 “Blast it, I’ve broken down. Your play.”
 “Broken down with a beautiful tice, you mean. But, what of Astral Astrobio?”
 “Her future lies undetermined.”
 “As you must be—...”
 “Yes?”
 “As these balls do.”
 “It is left for you to find their purchase, then.”
 “Fear not, *mon ami*. I shall.”

“And as we pass, how does it pass with you?”
 “Any reports could be misleading till I’ve met with my man.”
 “But of course.”
 “What were your thoughts on the artist’s painting?”
 “Stirring, so I heard.”
 “*Heard?*”
 “Don’t you rush me.”
 “You say you somehow missed it.”
 “My presence elsewhere had been proclaimed a necessity.”
 “I heard nothing of it.”
 “*Proclaimed* may be ill-fitting.”
 “Not tailored to the situation.”
 “*Impressed with*, rather.”
 “Unlike myself with that last...punt, practically.”
 “Now you are an *ami* to me, as well.”
 “Impressive split.”
 “We are becoming better, I believe.”
 “Depends what one believes *better* to be.”
 “As in full definition?”
 “I would define belief as such.”
 “With all the intersecting aspects?”
 “Everything has essences, granted, but those ratios of emergence are of probable import.”
 “I see: the tactician and victorious man will dictate the play. By forcibly creating the desired opposition, all chance of upset is eliminated—knowing—or, directing—the whole of the motions.”
 “How pedagogically croquet. Don’t *balk* at me.... The truth is you are a learned player.”
 “With you for a near-nemesis, I must be. Our respective styles may be more disrespectful, I fear.”
 “Hence the attempted *cour à trois*.”
 “So sorry, chum. I’ve not a clue where she got off to.”
 “...Let’s hope she has simply to arrive.”
 “Before we run the rover.”
 “Fair point.”
 “You’re certain?”
 “Not your fault.”
 “It is.”
 “You hardly pushed it—if then, only shifting it several degrees.”
 “I confess: I didn’t want to damage the upright.”
 “Seems to me there’s no visible damage. If there *was* contact, I commend your finesse.”
 “It does travel for a while after initial adjustments, but since I cannot precisely reverse the event, or you obstinately refuse it, I feel the present must pass to you.”
 “As always and eventually.”
 “In that case, I’ll take a break while you make yours. Jackets just don’t flex in accordance, and I’m bathed in light delirium.”
 “The weather *is* exemplary this morning.”
 Sealing his lids, Daniel turned directly to the Sun.
 What had warmed his face was beginning, it felt, to liquefy his eyes, as if without their consistent closure—the lids were now unfelt white walls of

fire—his sight would seep through slits of light and leak out dribbling into the puddle of his being.

The sound of Simon's voice, rising: "*Victoria.*"

Light poured into a world dimmer than when there was no vision.

Across the artificial chasm, a figure wreathed in white was walking, emerging from a stretch of stilted cypresses. They trailed behind her with striated shade. A milky disk hovered above her head, darkening her upper half, now consuming her completely as it was elevated in greeting. Contours and colors began to clarify themselves. Her dress was sleeveless and the hem was dirty.

"I felt compelled to walk," she called, brushing one of the griffons at the bridge's beginning—a final, simple symbol of the older manor, now no longer.

"None can resist the feeling of a high sunlit morning." Dr. Parles, jacketless, returned to the court as he rolled up his cuffs.

The man's bright head was as blinding as his visually boisterous building.

Victoria was now on the island with them. "How has the *tête-à-tête* been coming?" Behind her, the bridge's shadow fell from view.

"A fanciful dance, so far." Simon spun his mallet in longitudinal circles.

She scanned the scene. "Who has the lead?"

"We've been exchanging it in steps," said Daniel, dying for a word in edgewise. He hoped he had not said it sharply. In compensation for any tentative negativity, he added, "I adore your umbra-lender, Miss Lusk."

Amid an airy release of laughter, the parasol twirled as a carousel. "Ever the etymologist," she said. Transverse shade lay below her nose, but the smile was in sunlight.

"I'm glad the gist got through to you."

Her chiffon-shrouded shoulders were little invisible clouds.

"We won't with this game until your turn is taken." Simon's narrowed eyes were fixed afield.

"Yes—don't mind me," she said. "You two return to your match."

Both players watched her migrate to the periphery and once it was evident after several seconds of silence that she was waiting the game began again.

The gentlemen had taken some tense turns before—for Daniel—the game took one for the worse, all while Victoria circled with propitious observance and with the sun wheeling higher into the sky, bearing down like Phaethon's burning chariot ripping ruts of heat through a deep blue desert.

Parles was a hoop ahead and striking when their spectator said, "Simon, your house is acute."

He looked up. "A cute one? Thank you. I believe it is the angles which—"

Victoria eyed Daniel with mischievous mirth.

"—draw one's eyes along the outline." He waited. His guests said nothing. "The solarium is a beheaded pentahedron."

Fingers fidgeting with a waistcoat button, Daniel said, "Illuminating." Interplays of light held his attention across the court.

Rays punctured her dress's thin threadwork, and the backlit sunshade—a half-opaque halo broken only by her body—radiated an unforeseen energy. She glanced at the doctor. "With one face hidden within the house."

Bright battled black for control of her form, and where the two fell tangled in gray to the earth Victoria's penumbra resembled a foreshortening flower.

Daniel gazed at the glass goliath. "The last lost plane may *be* the house, distorted into three dimensions."

"An asinine face I'd have cast for myself." Parles chuckled. "Despite common conceptions, I have *some* providence." He struck out and was now two ahead. "Though, for sake of truth, I admit it was Phineas who described the excellent views such a design would yield."

"Your humility is bottomless," Daniel said dryly, half distracted. So Phineas had helped build a house he hated...

Victoria was watching the twisting top, almost motionless in its slow uniformity. She had ceased strolling, seeming to have absorbed some of the pinnacle's tranquil process, and in the emblematic and sudden stillness her stark fixity alone revealed the quotidian revolutions. "The slant of the façade is rather pronounced."

Simon nicked his last wicket with a curse.

More humor, maybe, Daniel thought. "It must be, for us to discuss it." He advanced to the three-back near where both his spheres were lying.

Dr. Parles gave a sheepish grin. "It's possible, chum, you could have caught me here."

But the non-combatant—their observer—was more pensive. He realized he could not read her.

She examined the dark dense lines in the lawn which were attached to and formed from each of their being's more corporeal qualities. "Is explicit mention the prerequisite of existence?"

Quitting the alignment of an impending shot, Daniel said, "My mythos, no." And he believed it to be true. Then, for the further formulation of thought, he illustrated insubstantial figures above the dew with the chestnut head he held. "Consider our parents. They existed before I said such. But until now they did not inhabit the intellectual link *between* us." Drawing us together. "Their mention conveys their existence to others."

"The chains of verification." Simon nodded to himself.

Faint words faltered from afar. Victoria must have muttered something, but all he heard was "platinum" and "Plato."

Sunk in the shame of his inattention, he politely prompted a repetition.

"No time, now," she said, "a triviality. But better: how can you both act in this with such clarity? I see the penultimate objective, but neither the means nor methods."

The exact time envisioned, he thought. An eager explanation needed. Yet a greater impression through demonstration or inclusion? Demands of demonstrative success. Is then the image increased in all, or only for the victor? Merciless immersion. A dainty defeat. Thoughtful. Carefree. Victory as loss.

Parles began to flutter forward.

In a selfish manner, Daniel decided to act selfless.

He extended his mallet towards Victoria. "Venture onto the court, and see." For some small reason it seemed a portentous offer.

With a loosened grip she let the sunshade fall behind her; then she drew up her dress: and her bared feet slipping from out those shoes as swift and deft as swords unsheathing. They made minute, sensitive adjustments in the dew.

Simon said there were leaves of grass between her toes.

The wit of a man reinstating the obvious, thought Daniel—but then heard himself saying, “Too many to count.”

Looking down, she shrugged, and gave them both the offhand comment: “Trampled underfoot.” The toes then tensed, flexing inward, bending and beheading the green blades between them.

She strode up to him, past his head, and took hold of the handle but also—briefly—his hand. One light brush before the seizure of power. “I believe,” she said, “that this is the proper end?”

Parles belched out a short peal of laughter.

Her pupils, sharply defined in black and dilated, awaited a response. Any easy answer would be self-entrapment in her sarcasm.

Daniel said, “Whatever end that *maybe leaves* you most comfortable.”

Simon spoke before her. “The victorious end, constructionwise.”

“But by definition Victoria’s end.”

“Yet neither of you have given me the means to combine them.” She made a false show of pouting: arms crossed, pink lower lip extended, creases between her eyes on the bridge of her nose.

Interaction imminent—you must. *You must*. She has prompted it and *you must* now or never. Do it.

Daniel’s handle was pinned within her folded extremities, dangling from those pale limbs like a pendulum.

Simon was watching him take his time—no, now he had turned to *her*.

Speak, fool.

He mustered a small seed of courage.

“Straddle a little behind the...spheres, with the mallet between your legs.”

She hiked her hem higher, and did so, laughing. “Now what?”

Her shins, her knees: for so long the phantom limbs of his imagination. “Usually, you need to be more forward...perfect.” Stiffly, he came up also. “Now, create a line with your eyes from the goal—that one, yes: the four-back—to the peelee—the blue ball, pardon—and a line from there to the one before you. Rather than hitting it off in a random direction, I find it easiest to begin with the end in mind, then make sure everything leads me on back to it. Like navigating a maze in reverse.”

Her torso twisted towards him and he saw she was amused. “Amazing.” The word was whispered. Wide-eyed.

Minx. “Fine turn of phrase.”

“I fear I’ve lost you,” Simon started. He had been tamping the earth with his head. “What if that is not the end, as it isn’t? Let us”—addressing only Victoria now—“also consider how you leave yourself. Any openings to others, if not left protected, will forfeit your...will, per se, pending what becomes their play. You *must* discover from his bedlam of actions those future moves wherein the wolfish player would steal your stakes. Which is to say hit it first.”

“She’s on my side, Simon.”

“Hm? Ah, yes, well, you may play her soon enough.” He quickly checked for the manor behind him. “We’ll all play each other, with time.”

“Not before noon.” Daniel paused to see his watch: eleven twenty-four. He might be late. How could he bear it? Mr. Obren would blame him for it. Maybe it was all his fault. It was. He needed to work on his both-term memory. Phineas and he were both adults. What did it matter if one

had to wait a bit on the other. He would have this out to the end. Couldn't appear a hypocrite after his bit about the end in mind. It would look like he'd planned to flee—an infantile social commitment or capacity. Either one displeasable. All progress this morning would disappear. As for Phineas...actions cannot be undone, but emotions were transient and instantaneous. Open to alteration. Humanity's altar to affect. Satisfied solution.

But, where was his progress now then? Had he been thinking long? His mind's eye—its lacking plurality; the phrase always reminded him of Odin and the *völva*—with which he was preoccupied, clenched shut. And he felt the core of his real eyes—a shun of that mental image: tracking clouds, vapor trails. Everything inverted. Re-righted, again. Distrails, also, cut the thick cirrus film.

Muggy; or about to get so. Slick sweat slid inside his shirtsleeves.

Silence since he'd spoken last? Not to him. Torrents in here: inner ear. Where were others? On the lawn, all along. Victoria was gazing at it. Had he been thinking for too long? She was, in his peripheral vision, still eleven twenty-four. Absorbing their respective professions? Parles had demanded that she predivine the present. Might as well stake her to the pillory. So spritely and immediate, let her right the wrongs she will rather than hem in and pen in her aerial emotions with prescribed portents and imposed notions.

Her timeless youth is somehow bound inside all this arcane prosperity.

Instantly, the thought unsettled him. Had he meant it? Impossible. Did not even know what *it* meant. A subconscious perception—like interpreting inkblots. But then where did those thoughts come from? The ink itself? Inherence of the design? No one person had molded this morning. It was not preposed beforehand. He, Simon, Victoria: their ontic aspects were manifest momentarily. Lucky to be where all actions could prosper—O! to be alive...

These skylands afforded them that freedom. Was it so bad to be bound within a boundless realm? His lot had been cast in the very structure of the space. All their lots had. Staring at the surrounding grounds, the modest manors with their preternatural gardens, the not-too-distant and perhaps nearing cloud cover, the ethereal mist always flowing below them, sensations of limitlessness were laid over Daniel. He could feel in the muscles of his cheeks that he was smiling.

As was she, askance, at him.

Behold—*so green*—viridian embers; hard to maintain contact with.

His watch face read eleven twenty-six, and, still, no one had spoken. Seconds crawled across their arc. Each one quivered under every thing that could ever happen.

Looking up, he noticed that her eyes were now downcast.

Simon was frowning back and forth at both of them. But he did not understand this overhanging exuberance, this state where the very air held hidden hints of possibility.

Indeed, Parles put forth the “capital idea” that their game go on.

Yet Daniel barely heard him. In accord with his mental preoccupations, Victoria had blossomed to encompass his sight: once-nonexistent details—freckles mounting the rotating peak of a shoulder blade; an unraised mole nestled in the base of her hairline, updone, above the widowed nape—took on a planetary measure.

Yes, he thought, I am—no: *we are*—so close as to distinguish their difference.

“Care to give it a shot?” he asked her.

She jerked, like those jolts that come just before sleep, reminding one that they’re alive. Muscles tautened beneath a dress which was beginning to turn his way.

So she had been lost in thought as well...deeper, maybe...where the springs of inspiration lie awaiting, cloaked in pale shadows.

She visibly relaxed upon the instant of recognition. Her gears of reality were grinding again.

Grinning, she said, “Of course, your courtship.”

She knows.

“Rock your pelvis down then forward once you do it.”

Had *those* just come from *his* mouth?

Simon’s was agape.

A gusty breeze blew on the lawn. Helical hairs were disturbed beside her ear. It seemed she had not noticed.

Until she did just that at the moment of contact with the backswung mallet peeling dress from thigh and a *Puck* then the sphere was off and running rolling rather knocking into blue and sending it head over heels before the darkness like night to no avail and slowing through the four-back with black passing on and on and onward before ending with a *cruck* against the frosted glass railing surrounding the grounds.

The spell was broken with Simon saying, “That was the best pass roll I’ve ever seen.”

A...natural, Daniel conceded.

“I *have* studied kinematics,” Victoria said. The mallet was twirled like her parasol previously.

Simon stared. “But how did you force the blue to curve to the left?”

Blue ball left *behind*, even; she’s grasped beyond my words.

Shrugging, she smiled. “Luck of the lawn? I could see that the grain of the mowing went that way.”

“Would you say that your skill is ingrained then?” asked Daniel.

Her eyebrows dipped above a spreading smirk. “Are you trying to be wry with me?”

“I would point out that the ball almost dropped, and we’re nowhere near December.”

Victoria laughed—but it was not at that. He knew this. Her eyes were glossed.

After inspecting the fracture, she patted the barrier. “It might have achieved its terminal velocity.”

“Is the terminal ever something to be *achieved*?” chimed Simon.

Daniel wanted to say, “Perhaps the one at Perpignan,” but, then again, Weir was not here.

What was he *saying*? O. Nothing.

For a while the wind bore their three thoughts away into obscurity.

Something—his head—was being held out to him in offering. Victoria was at the other end. The mallet made a line from him to her...or her to him; eternally reversible. Dare he traverse it?

Foggily, he gripped the end with which he was presented. “Are you sure?” No ends: merely sides. Like a grotesquely thickened coin.

“*Mhm*,” was all she said, its timbre wrought with frailty.

The mallet still was held by both. It hovered horizontally. In her eyes there was something he did not know. *You must*, it told him, *for I cannot. Take it. Take this from me.* The handle began to droop. *You must.*

*You were—*are—*superb*, his told hers.

It is not me.

Is there another?

“Running from the gauntlet?” Simon asked; it split their silence.

Whatever had been within her submerged through a cordial, social surface. “Merely ensuring that the quantum chaos of my skill does not disrupt the gentleman’s game.” Said surface smiled.

Then there *is* something—the key—it lurks behind closed doorways to the soul. Is Miss Socialite a private person? Is anyone? Must we be observed to be known? I feel—*you must*—I must observe to know. All else: unknown, un-noun, is faith. Books. Tutors. Parents. Lovers. *You must.* But the business venture. *Demonstrative success.*

“I find ‘luck’ a little too constant for denials saying it’s simply so...” Simon eyed her. He was teasing. “...And my croquet titan sirens are ringing.”

Blaring, rather. Disruptive ruptures of our disquiet.

She was walking towards her parasol, unblinking.

He tugged on his shirt like it might stay where he placed it and his chest might swell to fit the space. “Well, Daniel: a ball-in-hand is worth two in the bush, mm?”

“Your grounds are bushless.” He stooped to scoop the striker up. Fire was thrown onto him from the midmorning star.

The sunshade cast an expanding emanation of shadow upon Victoria.

Black and blue were back together—yet not for the last. They faced the penult as a silence most unserene arose on the lawn. Tension sizzled on Daniel’s neck.

“What is your opinion of Mr. Weir?”

Run, Wright.

Victoria had said it.

Pick. He struck the head to stone—sliding *shbbb* through the penult—while contemplating an appropriate answer.

“He’s certainly a character,” Daniel said.

Simon spied his play. “We may not have known him if he wasn’t. Phin—...” The men made eye contact. “Phineas is so particular about whom he associates with.”

Within him is contained the universal. “Aye: at least one of them.” *Pock* marked Daniel’s striker’s run to a roquet, rolling over after only once, like an hour hand. *You’ll be late.* No. Victory.

She had said it. Now waiting, shrouded in sunlack.

He asked her what she thought of it.

“He is...*bizarre.*”

“Indeed.” *Pack:* blue blew through but that blasted black slowed, halting just before the rover. “...Indeed.”

“I mean...”

Damned—“Yes?”—striker.

“One cannot say his work is not evocative.”

“It *is* his vocation.” Why can’t I pass as well as her? *I have studied kinematics.* Something about the ground’s grade or oriented grass? May be much ado about nothing. *There, there, Danny boy.* Emotional springboard.

Naught to do but have it out. Suppose I gain a second continuation from that *stupid* near stop shot...

"A little bird told me also his central vocalization." Parles was not paying attention.

"Gods, man." The ball, hit far too hard, waltzed past its intended partner, so smoothly did it glide away from where he wanted. "Hph. You attended Obren's dinner, yes?"

"Right you are."

That idiotic idiom. How many times now? He crossed towards his fresh mistake. Joy. Couldn't they just write their own? Constant thorns in his pride. And too boring to bear. Well...sometimes. Parles was fairly clever, when he wanted to be. Not exactly a word economist. Chatting with her downcourt. She: sunlit locks at all the right angles; arms gone gray in shade to that nice peachy pinkish once sunless is given the slip. Never dull. Would bear her forever. Must wrap this up to erupt in her rapture. Facing forward. Coiled, spring-like. Feet with shoulders. Pull back and...

About to go, he heard her:

"No? Then we just *must* go see it again. I find *Matrimony*—"

Enough of—

O.

Good.

Great, really.

In indisputable fact, Alexander the Magnanimous. Alexander the Swell. High-horsed, leading on his whole army. And robed head to toe in piss purple, at that.

Too light on the striker. Blue ball barely moved. Some knavish trick of the sun caused constriction in his nape. Nonexistent upper heavens were obfuscated by clouds.

"Just crucify me."

"Say what, chum?"

Way out: a low, lone, noumenal cumulonimbus.

"Just cruising speed."

"*Ab*—shame."

"Turns out I've struck a knave less ironically than I'd like."

"At least you can embrace the whole croquet spirit." That mustache bowed upwards and teeth were bared.

Or perchance my handle will embrace your facehole. "Whatever our grand founding fathers would find agreeable."

Too few shots left. Literally. Perfection necessary. Could croquet into peg out then continue to win, should. *You must*. Time of alignment. More to my right. Not enough...a little...there. Grass stains on the pinstripes? None save the dew. *Excellack!*

Rising, Mr. Wright's eyes were hit by a momentarily blinding glint which glanced off Simon's gold-rimmed glasses. The cause being his obtuse angle of observance.

Now, though, Parles beheld him intently. And bloody Circean circles of light spun throughout his vision. In horseshoe fashion they wrapped elliptically about the stake—closer—closed and dissolving. Daniel found they formed a frantic bullseye.

He reared back his head to bring it down with a—

Laughter, hauntingly hollow: "Those Finding Fathers."

—but the balls were already rolling and what was she getting at without even looking while they made out and away towards the stakes of the game with Parles holding his breath but *no* crookedly going now banking left slowing with blue to the right and abjectly adjacent though he thought he'd hit them straight.

Demonstrative success.

He could rip up the wickets...

“So slightly off-kilter. Tough break, my good man.” Parles’ sick pupils were ebon pools of pride.

Might strike this Narcissus right in the nose. “Yes. *Most* unfortunate for you...” No? Ease embodied. Bring fast fist to face. Never see it coming through the oceanic ego. No, no: too poor a cause to break up Victoria’s spectacle. For there she is, beside the four-back. And I, stuck in this simply horrid setup. “Once more, I suppose, however the weather.”

“Nearly ninety degrees,” Parles blathered. “I’m intrigued.”

Victoria perked up. “But what pie are we having?”

Both their brows furrowed before turning towards her.

Blushing, she said, “Never mind,” then nodded at the sky and smiled. “Radiant weather we’re having this noontime.” A giggled was freed after neither man added anything.

Was she *drunk*? He maybe more than anyone savored the euphoria of a morning mimosa—or two, to be fair—particularly during those post-party dawns when tawny light claws round the Tower Library windows with sour grapefruit segments and bitter black coffee and his eyes swimming among their newfangled memories inasmuch as he could not read the poorly lit paper and saying *Yes, Mather—and a water—and keep all three drinks coming*; yes...yes: those were the fine times before the days’ downward trends, all uninteresting abstractions. Yet *this* mysterious situation would let no stock be taken for she was fully lucid one second then—no, beyond lucidity—unintelligible another. Where were her thoughts wandering? Did she not like croquet?

Impossible. The basis of Simon’s invitation. A burgeoning future interest. Assuredly a natural talent—*mais en français?...un talent naturel*. Swiping the tongue tip across his incisors’ backsides, he saw no other reason. But she was not always watching. Was he? With knifelike wit she had no need to. Always expanding, as a building bloom, with manifold petals unfolding self lovelily. That not a word but who dared to care when it was good and true and fair to love the *Lilium* which were her heart. Yes. It was.

He could not win. No matter: ephemeral effects on unknown esteem. One memorable shot was more mentally penetrating than countless couples of unimpressive others. Even the second-to-worst player will still win one game. Distinction lies in style. And this—soft listing kiss to port: a tactful aside from what was now his gallant defeat via some certain *felo de se*. Yet two spheres must touch within one fractured and momentous point of impulse, perhaps harmless for the forceful first, but in that second an intensely divergent direction must be undertaken, a delicate deviation from her eternal inertial rest—what signs, what angels could guide his angles of—

Of course. He swept through a daze of degrees unto Victoria. “Whichever pie it may be, it is bewitched, for we can only halve it into quarters.”

Radiance arced across her darkened physiognomy. “That paradoxical dichotomy.” But then, again, shades fell like soundless knells about her. She regarded the ground. “Never achieved but already there...”

Strange, these phantasmal affections. Mood-lightening in short supply. Tall order. Yank out joke from yon heady life-force organ? “I doubt many pilgrims *halve* had the fortune to reach Elea.”

“Or grasp it. Diluted.”

“Deluded by a twinge of Zenophobia, I think.” Like so: nervous system’s suavity.

Simon studied them. “The personage of a thinker should not affect their thoughts’ receptions.”

He is lost; intellectual rock bottom, ferrying ideas to the surface. Watery thought-bursts on foaming crests of waves. Though the winner. Nay, exterior only. Undermine with gleaming gem of skill, unmatched. Now. No more thought.

Remember relative size. Striker shall strike right side. Almost a miss. Power aplenty. Gilded opportunity. Aye: time is nigh.

Packsbhhhticklocksbbbb.

His blue ball was coozied against the stake; the darker matter, the while, lay lurking at the penult.

Parles’ eyebrows arose aroused. Acting as an extension of his and hidden limbs, his mallet motioned towards the scene. “A masterstroke.” With what was left he stroked that mustache, twisting the fairly curled tips.

His wingtips: pointed, fine. Fine? fine. Green background and grass glare gone: burned up. “Shame it came at the tail end.” Exemplary execution. And Victorino no she’s not watching god damn it. Instead over extended—the edge—but not me too—casting wide shadows over that shitty city.

Parles checking on my reactions. Restrained again. Unnerving lack of exposed emotion. Sees my seething—temporary. Gone. Like glare. He knows, why not be chumming it up? Thinking. On? Couldn’t make one like mine. His own victory. My would-be winnings unrecorded. Rather making a case study of me now, staring. I too but he first. Stop. Drag your eyes and unsmiling grin out of my eyesight. Get those—

“Dewdrops evaporated.” She approached; head, shade downcast. “The antumbra-lender’s less useful on the low clouds. Too far down for an eclipse due to relative size.”

A soft silhouette of similar...

Her flesh-bared feet, arching, caress each lonely patch of grass: rough-rubbing, smooth-squeezing.

“Your light is too bright and shines always upon them.” Did I...? Odd. What does it even mean?

“Excuse me?” the other asked.

Simon was not seen by her before she said, “Nothing.” Eyelids open, on him. The Chandelier Ballroom refracted through two tangential points, quivering shivering and yet unmoving. “Nothing et al.” Expressionlessness broken by known sex smirk smiling.

“Suppose I’ll will myself to wrap this up,” some Simon said.

Daniel laughed. Who cared.

Twirling, she understood the spread. “You made it: O, *bravo*. Higher skill a myth of the eyeth order.”

Swells welled up within his soul. Gracious, grand, he bowed theatrically affront his foe, sweeping up the staked-out sphere.

Mr. Parles' attempt at a stoic face was invisibly contorted by contempt and boredom. Plain as day. He wordlessly advanced upon his means to an end. Back toward them.

A voiceless Victorian whisper quite close beside himself—Daniel: *The photons do not distinguish between our minds.*

Her light lithe lustrous bicep brushed his—with lips a foot away—as it draped to the ground's direction. *One body*, she uttered.

There and there: two forms; two-dimensional; lackluster color: the grass—her eyes—last lettuce—her eyes—*ses pieds* (*Puck*) at rest abreast, within both; Rembrant's remnants of a dark duet, merging. One amorphous amalgamated corpus of no light and Wright and Lusk and lust. "We to I."

Puck...lack. Simon sighed.

She drifted out.

Starstruck stake: the sun against it.

"*Hem. Victoria,*"—yes in his dead Latin accent and *she pays him mind* as he collects half his winnings—"reverting back to what I spoke of beforehand: while my aim is unimpeded, his is likewise"—yes yes just end it—"a simple straightaway. This miss would yield to him the whole. My designs unraveled as a long string. My play's tapestrylike trappings all discohered." Glancing at me now, her, now, her. "You must insure these moves by ushering the opponent into affected actions." He's turned to sight in my sphere—but away in regard to what's at stake and a harder, pointless shot... "Control, or"—*Puck*—"create, their opt"—*shbbb*—"ions." My orb receding needlessly—no: purposeful on his part—backing up past the penult...stopped. Of course Parles plucks up his rage-red rover to *calmly* carry to mine and *point away from the point again* I'm being made an example of! "Wiring up our player here will impair ability and benefit from previous stake-not-stock investments." Alone, as any unhumorous host, giddy Parles began to giggle before choking it off. One more throat-wrenching clearance cough and then *puck* knocked Daniel's shameful finale left behind the penult's wires. No point save embarrassment belittlement antagonization and worthlessness. Delphi: why? At what cross-purposes? Here he starts to end it with I so low—don't watch, don't watch—as a shriveled withered husk who can only bear to hear its fear: defeat: *Pick...*

He *missed*.

Miss Lusk doubled over, cheeks higher than ever.

Hot air was forcibly expelled through Simon's nose. "Well...it appears I've bottomed out."

Indeed you have. *Rôle drôle*. And in such an asinine monologue.

"O"—gasp—"Simon, it's really"—laughter—"not so bad as"—laughter—"that." She reset a newfound wavelong bang up in her bun. "You've your assured insurance, as you said."

"*Ushered* insurance," he promptly—*you'll be late*—amended. "But, yes. This is true."

Victoria recomposed herself. "All right, Mr. Wright: are you square—squared away?" A rising scarletish color dappled her page-white cheeks like subsurface begonias.

Are you square? are you square? "...Seeing we've come full circle, I daresay I am."

Femininity's fingertips touching the top of her spine; eyes averted.

Too harsh. Quick: another: “Two pi, or not two pi?” To pine? or not two pines. Leaves. Invite her to the forest—*you must*—sometime.

Iris lamps rekindled, kindred again. At me yet her head nods to my play’s pre-positioning: “That depends on the length and alignment of your arc.”

It does. Will do. But wicketly wired and two cannot become the one, shotwise. Dead on red. A single strike permitted after Simon saying *I thought our level of play had surpassed linearity*, but he will see. That grass grade is a mystery but gravity is easy, yes: vertical curvature leaping it thoughtlessly, a chance to avoid altogether the penult. Kinematics. Does she study me? Never mind that now; of course a yes as I sight the last and without much to do but strike down ruthless and true—straight as the arrows of Eros—*you must O must must*. Here goes nothing and everything together: *Black!*

Through breathlessness the sphere that had sung its color sailed then failed *adroitement* behind or before—via perspective—the penult and now unimpeded after the fall ran rightly up to his stake to lightly *kap* it quite nicely.

Just then he thought of Weir—bizarre—but the painter could not make that shot yes nor could he paint it; an infinite series of still lives comprised each moment: how could one suspended image represent time? least of all this titillating *arc de triomphe*—clever in conjunction with her nippy quip; must say it.

Three concurrent exhalations contained relaxatedeflation.

Miss Lusk had leapt—at...? no; for joy, at least?—when his shot had.

“*Dan*, that was...*hab*...I’ve never seen a verticurlve—O,” she said.

“Never had the pleasure of the Arc de Triomphe?” *Le plaisir de l’arc*. Lark. Birdshit. Wait: “What was that last bit?”

“A jump shot, vertical croquet, I’d never witnessed it so sly before and yours was just simply fantastic that I—liked it very much.”

She said something about new memories and mental images as he thought she thought he was fantastic. As a fantasy? From out of one? There could e’er be magic here. But *would you be a fan of*...must disallow, indirectly. For to her he was her *Dan* and he would be damn well sure that that did not change. “Thank you, Victoria: my only fan.”

Then she blushed because of what he’d said and looked away.

Dr. Parles smiled all the humble while. There’s a good sport.

“The natural order’s made amends,” he said. “And by the by: *proper* azure bowtie, chum.”

Colorblind? Daniel considered, straightening the cerulean butterfly. Knows his proper place though. His post-loss dialogue adjusted to—last night’s azure ascot—O of all people to *follow*: him! The...*hubris!* Half-assed fashionismo trying to wear Weir’s disheveled look from rough-rolled cuffs. Doesn’t deserve the time of *you’ll be late*.

“I’m a fan of going to bed with more memories than one had in the morning,” Victoria said.

She goes to bed.

But also ugh well we all do.

Standing, waiting, staring for my statement must say something ignoring Parles and clever as a cleaver. “Then may I endeavor to never disappoint until you refuse.” O how bilious.

The doctor’s eyes spun in circles.

She said, “You may,” as her big toe dove into the earth.

“*Mister Wright,*” a faraway voice—*you’ll be late*—shouted.

An attendant, bulging-tuxedo-clad, intruded across the solar cell patio tiles towards the court. “Shall he be detained, sir?”

“O.” Daniel shielded his vision for half an instant. “No. It’s my accountant.”

Mr. Robbendry, shuffling between griffons and closing, bore as usual his probabilistically boring dossier. “Mr. Wright, we *must* discuss—”

“Please pardon my all too immediate exit,” he told Victoria and Simon’s general direction. “I’ve another engagement and, it seems, one sneaking in between them.”

“Very good,” Simon said. “Your aid in the morning’s distractions is much appreciated. O don’t worry about those things.” His fingers snapped for the suit retreating into the house. “My man will take them to your estate.”

Doorstep service for the victor? Rather agreeable. Wish I could stay to revel in it for a minute but no this is better: win and gone: the victorious ghost. Tinge of mystique—*you must*.

Allowing the ungripped handle to go to ground he proceeded watchful *you’ll be late* passed Victoria so close as to hear her breath—just there—and with her saying “Until I’m refusal-less again” heaving her warmth into his ear as he approached the skywalk in a way that even out over the eerie medieval stucco expanse he could feel parts of the lobe still excited by what had come from her insides and when he met Robbendry halfway without stopping yet turning to see them, Victoria and the doctor were already headed in under the shortening shadow of the house.

She had not put her shoes back on.

Rock your pelvis down then forward my word, a little forward *once you do it* much?

Victoria followed Dr. Parles across the tinglingly Sun-warmed float glass overlaying the patio. Slanted solarium windows reached out to her, waiting.

Must be wearing off. Like those horrid vices-for-shoes. Like them, though: equine, to the point, tongueless, with laced up lips like two big white breasts resting on the bridge of the foot, tied together by the body, pale, nacre-buttoned and low for the slip, reflecting diamond-born dispersions all around the edges, run ragged with enough energy quanta to span the visible human spectrum. They do help with the glints in their eyes.

Was he better earlier, or? *umbra-lender*—how awkward. Certainly later, then. Now? Not *now* in the sense of perception. Which is?

Olfactory sterility as we transcend the threshold. The solarium greets with lavender, oil, and rose petals. Daniel’s rite, surely. Air achingly thick; motes flow slowly, as in oil. Room bordered by three sliding sides of light, and I inside the shade. For now. Nice low fainting—feinting?—sofa sitting inanimate in the dying Sun’s discharge.

“So...a refill?” Parles said at last once she was seated. “The Dardens’ should be an event.”

Had he said it as an expectation or obligation? Mayhap—that awkward word—even *he* did not know. A great, square, tiered depression lay centrally set in the Genetic Synthetics arctic fox pelt carpet. Fathered by her father.

The synthetic fox, that is. O *when* would he have that prescription? Each of the four hollow quadrangular steps were hemmed by the larger, the last by the room, that by the house, and that by the building the house was built on. This fact did not elevate her.

Suffocating on the thinner upper air, and the airs they...I...

“The *Euphetamin*.”

Dr. Parles had been descending the southern side of his inverted dais, shadow cast forward by drastically refracted noonlight to where the antique teak desk rested in the bottom of the artificial vale. Yet at her words the headless umbra—fixed and swelling upon the drawers—promptly sprouted a mind: Simon had straightened his neck. “Yes...your only prescription, ri—correct?”

“That’s right.”

“*Hm*, of course.” Upon achieving the base—and desk by extension—he slid a drawer open through their solar silence: quiet as The Vacuum. Slow. Selective. Metered.

Why was it *The Vacuum* to her rather than *a vacuum*? Dipolar opposites. And the infinitesimal space between the lines contains all instances of chance and will and human history as pertains to her and her father’s—for she of all things knew there was no *Father’s*—quantum state, unchanging within its random determinations. His probabilistic consistencies. Yet after enough trials a rock will roll uphill, once. Sisyphus’ lunch hour. Each moment a trial—particularly within her personal patriarchy—a chance for whatever everyone called The Universe to say, “No: that’s not how that happens.” A chance for a...*miracle*? Blasphemous in the face of The Universe’s entropic heat death before then.

Or my own before that. It all would follow from my lacking perception. I, he, we are all Mr. or Ms. Universe. That preposterous competition; glad I declined. They wouldn’t understand. Especially the ones who wanted to stand under—too *stupid* to finish, despite Dryden being wrong. Grammar school. Ugh. And an older—relatively, younger really—Wrightypants incessantly correcting me. Didn’t he get that it didn’t matter? The boson. O and those quarky fellows that think entropy is uniformity. While we grow closer together we grow further apart. You know it’s true *à cause de* what’s happening. Galactic collapse. Gravity isn’t affected by our input, even though electromagnetism’s so much stronger. Until the singularity when the weirs are broken and it all comes rushing forth or in and—O. Forth second: the Big Bang. Not *the*, but *a*. If a dimension—not one of the ten but one from science fiction—vanishes in The Vacuum and no one’s around to hear it, does it make a sound? Stories thought of but untold. On the third α it rose again, like rose petals.

Maybe her creation was the—

“There you are.” Simon’s hand was before her face.

How long had it been there? In energy, spirit, or in flesh? Joints locked loosely, in offering, he cradled her next container.

She took it while touching his palm’s center of mass: below the fold and above the ball.

“Th-that should last you throughout the...week?”

“About.”

“Are your symptoms unchanged?”

“Sudden irritability and insecurity; lack of trust;”—though my fund is ample—“feelings of insignificance; alienation.” Weren’t these everyone’s symptoms? “The pills help...though—”

“Good. Good.”

Why wouldn’t he make eye contact?

She chased one with the champagne left by the girl leaving.

“One of its better aspects, I’d agree,” he said.

Sun fell, hot starlight through this transparent wall. Radiant. Glowing. Exciting her atoms. “The Dardens’ *will* be an event, I’m positive.”

“I’m glad you changed your mind.”

But she hadn’t.

Thermal radiation stretched dissipating across the faux fur carpet like a thick hot sheet. And under those covers she felt the heated treated pelage of the thought-beast that was soft smooth and singular as each strange white strand stood independently connected akin to the gray-hairs of Man that had come and gone: ideas dead before and for this thing’s creation.

“O my. But, yes, cultivating the simpler pleasures could be just—”

“*Hm?* Wh—O. O.”

Her doctor discontinued as she rose.

When did I get on the ground? Some film overcast the will’s memory. *Vicky, come speak with me.* A rotoscoped life. “Forgive me.”

Simon smiled. “I’d rather give you four more.”

Hunched, she came in further now fully erect to where the uneven glass ceiling was higher. “One might do me.” *We two: I.*

“*Hm.* Indeed.” The ensuing silence was punctuated only by the second pill’s crackling almost cackling dissolution in her alcohol. He was watching her. “You know, Victoria, had it been me...I would have passed y—”

“I know, Si.” Let this one sit a bit. Small sips. Their delusions of emotional dilution. Xenophobes. The relativistic arrow: different flights for different sights. Then where or when was my reference frame?

The doctor calmed considerably, tilting his brandy ever so continuously towards her within that magnified moment of present. Each angle a new mnemonic image like countless carousel horses turned beams of light rotating about the prismatic tumbler. But then it stopped and leveled and time went on.

No: not countless. Planck had destroyed the infinite. Quantized space. Each horse was numbered and known by name, and all their names were integers. Merely factors. Past some point there were no more half steps—Daniel’s Zenophobia.

Had he liked me today, then, trying to show off like a playground schoolboy? Yes quite endearing and a fine job of it, the courter, except—*Indeed*—O he’d had his share of pomp and hoard of pride and those glacial eyes when I asked if he was squared away thinking about how square his sapphire bowtie was not supposed to be and he knew it or something of that nature (“Vict—Miss Lusk, listen...”) but he of the two came around to the joke though Flighty Parley not quite a contender: a little too fair, unlike Edmunn’s deep tangles or Daniel’s glossed varnish. Were they really a dichotomy, spin up and down, respectively? (“...reason I wanted...”) Why not a dialectic, with evolution over time or under magnetic influence? Holding themselves in spacetime. Men will be boys. (“...today...”) But what of her father? Was he spin up? or down? or none? Terrifying he was so singularly focused as to seem an individual particle, his state of mind not

fixed at any time but fixated upon the variable itself, content with the non-resolution of simplification into constants. But she was no letter within the algorithm for she was a person (“...not only the you f—”) who had been how consistent compared to her expected value? Did others see her similarly to how she saw herself? At optical face value, never: always in mirrored opposition. Misinterpretations of what was not language. (“...speak with you...”) Her unspoken but all too known physical code, misread through attention to minute details, with hours and years of social input forgotten: a synthesized collection hence construction of experience, outsiders knowing at most half of the blueprint. Immediacy simply the instantaneous form, like each successive—*your life has been my best success, but there are questions of succession*—word in an autobio—no: a biography. How many had had hands in rewriting their conceptions of her? Father wrote the prologue and the semi-eponymous title. What had he envisioned her as? What motifs? What grand symbolism? To what greater acts was she as of yet unapprised? (“...reason I was...”) How far was she from Tara? What role did others have her playing in their lives? Did how they conceive of her exterior alter her interior at *all*? Was there *any* correlation to such an impersonal mind? Some inherent—*some issues with your inheritance, my dear*—flaw in the design? Maybe she cared too much (“...Mr. Obren’s *soirée*...”) or too much about how much others cared, like an anxious actress stuck on stage. The (“...preoccupied...”) morning’s unwitting performance. Had she been seen as hypocritically polite? her meanderings as untoward? A tangential vector tracing circles about her focus. Her origin. Each life suffering from path independence, despite the everchanging mid-arc-length’s trite scheme. No. No. No more mental fist-shaking: what will her will shape her short path into? (“...your father.”)

“What about him?”

“He’s...well—”

“Improving: good.”

Dr. Parles pressed several pads against the base of his temple. “I’m sorry to say that I think your father is dying.”

Yet the will was not hers.

“I never see the purpose in all these compiled papers, Ernest.” Returning the three pound dossier, Daniel felt slightly lightheaded.

Maybe Phineas could also mix me up—

Robbendry readjusted his frames midstride. “They’re for when you take an interest in how much interest you’re taking in. And could we pl—”

“No, no. Places to be.” *You’re late.*

Noon: height of the star: the shadows had steepened with the light, now almost under everything—a properly proportional aspect, beneath and as the base of all. There were no dark, distended figures. *One body.*

“Besides,” he added, “don’t I pay *you* to take interest in my interest?”

“I do, trust me.” The little man loosened his Fair Isle tie against its sweaty silk backdrop. “But why I must chase you down every time w—”

“*Chase?* We’re out for a stroll, friend.”

“Well I’m glad you can take it so lightly wh—”

And they were: currently making passage through the deftly crafted Rosebud cherry byway of Mr. Rathchilde’s Neoclassical estate, encouraging

foot and hoof traffic—perhaps in-carriaging the latter—away from the manor (though his was distastefully well-guarded) and along the dead-hyacinth-flanked walk laid with cobbles from the catacombs. *The Winged Victoria*. “Cherries blossom above us yet. What were you...?”

“Higans, yes...I was saying that, given the ebb and flow of today’s global market—”

“You mean *the* Global Market.” For The Name throughout time signals its...*presence*. Just there.

“Whichever way you want to call it,” again adjusting his glasses, “in *our* global market, you’re not doing well.”

“I’m a billionaire, Ernest. What is *well*? How deep is it?”

“After your most recent acidic expenditure, you—”

“How do you know that?”

“How could I *not* hear about the sailboat you bought for one hundred and fifty million dollars?”

“O, the yacht: quite tasteful, carbon neutral, First Folio in the library, it doesn’t even *use*—”

“You don’t *sail*.”

“Nor am I my own accountant.”

“Quite. With this wanton new...liquidation, you will now spend more money per annum than the algorithms suggest you’ll make.”

It was always the will. “Don’t feed me the tea leaf mathematics you drink all day. Move some things around. Further *my* interests.”

“Need I remind—”

“More towards reprimand.”

“—that what we wanted to emphasize was *stabil*—”

“My memory extends those twenty years, and *then* some.” *There, there, Danny boy*, with biscuit and bended knee.

“Right. Apologies. No one wants to feel patronized.”

“The past has passed.” Blades always trying to push me over. *Wooooozzb-Wooooozzb-Wooooozzb*.

Up at the quasi-memorial manor, a vague figure swathed in a morning coat exited the entrance, passing away from them, and settled into the awaiting landau.

“Daniel, shall we...?”

“Yes. Took it in a moment.”

They were walking again before the landau had left.

“What you need to take in is the belt on your expenditures.”

“Or, *you* need to make me money. I can cut costs right now if your only advice is ‘Spend less.’” Mr. Rob-em-dry, certainly.

“I see.” It was a spectacle to watch his glasses slip farther and farther down his diminutive nose. “You might be keen to invest yourself in your interests, but as we’ve discussed...in the past...I doubt the wisdom of putting your wealth on paper.”

“It’s *already* paper, Robbendry. It’s paper.”

“Cotton and linen, but—”

“The yacht wouldn’t even *be* mine if it wasn’t on paper.”

“Don’t twist my words. You know the expression.”

“Your words did not have to be changed at all.”

The skyway to Xanadu was now fully extended. Opaque clouds greyly obfuscated the underworld.

“I’m late for this meeting.”

“Yes. Well, be aware of the well, yes?”

“I will.”

Crossing Obren’s bridge that hovered over the air, with its warning lights washed out by the procession of the Sun, Daniel heard in the wind Robbendry’s ragged voice again:

“Don’t fall in...”

He could not tell whether that was all.

The northern façade of Mr. Obren’s home was almost perfectly symmetrical in its bands of light and dark, the former creating the latter, crisscrossing like plaid, with the great frontal Corinthian columns gleaming in protective support of the pediments. There was no one visible.

“Daniel, my lad. Good to see you.” Phineas’ voice washed over him, emitted between all balustrades of an anonymous upper balcony. “Come, come: inside with you.”

Bathed in brilliance from the focused crystal dome, blind, he entered.

The oval entry began resolving itself into shades of colors other than white. Scintillating, rotating patches of green could be seen on the walls and the ceiling. There was gold brocade of indecipherable patterns on the pine-colored couches surrounding the space. And someone shrouded in an oxblood surtout was atop the stairs.

“Slightly disorienting at first inward glance, I’m afraid.”

“Phineas.”

“Aye.”

“Thank you f—”

“Not at all. Shall we have a drink in the garden?”

“Certainly, I’ve be—”

“O, watch the steps.”

“Yes.”

“A bit shallower than you—”

“I’m fine. Things are clearing up.”

“Ah, let’s hope so. Say, you wouldn’t mind if an old fool employed his cane today, would you?” Obren’s walking stick spiraled at him lazily. “Last night decided to take its toll this morning, as always. One might think we could come to expect this.”

“I would be offended if you thought that I ever minded, sir.”

“The noblest of businessmen. And an *inspiring* bowtie.”

Neatening it with two confident hands, he said, “Th—”

“Come along.”

They branched southwest across the cobweb glow of the Port Hall, caused by its clear yet camed circular window (a three meter diameter): the same route as before, towards the gallery, as if high banks had carved out a marble riverbed. How it aches to owe. This time, however, there was no throng. Alone, Phineas with Daniel beside him created crisp and dually resonant echoes that spun helices of sound down the hall as their vanguard, past portals that Daniel would never open, spilling at its delta through the double doors thrown wide, to where many men in white shuffled this way and that across the chessboard floor. They bore *his* images. Bore them into Daniel’s brain.

In an iron stance as though the head of a vast warhost, Mr. Obren indicated with his lifted stick that the guest was to enter first. “Ignore the bustle, lad. I’m having the pieces repositioned.”

Bearing himself across the titanic threshold Daniel had to halt abruptly when several men carrying *The Six Births of Matrimony* by its golden frame emerged from behind the inward-opening doors, bringing the thing perpendicularly through his intended path and momentarily blocking his passage. So borne, in motion, the tongue flock flew before his vision.

“A more thoroughly surprising viewing than the last,” Phineas said.

“Unexpected, is all. I nearly burst straight through *David*.”

“He’s more of a Goliath anyway.”

“Though gutless, this one is.”

“Rather weird, no?”

It was. “Terro—rible.” Why had Phineas not voiced his hesitation the evening prior?

“Odd that it—a little up, please—contains—a bit left, more, too much—so much—no not you—so much—tilt the right side down slightly, altogether up more, perfect, mark it there—contains so much disunity for its theme.”

“O, yes: everything singular or in more than pairs.”

“No two fruits are ever the same. Fine work, boys. Put up that last one and I’ll fix it later. Into the out-of-doors with us, Mr. Wright?”

Passing beneath the trefoil arch of the gallery’s spiral stairwell, Phineas ahead of him, Daniel glanced back briefly, behind himself, where—*there*—a team of ten men had begun...had hung...

He stopped. “My word.”

Obren’s disembodied head appeared around the lower corner. “O?”

“Is that...? That’s...”

“Ah. His *Magnum Corpus*, yes.”

“How did you even...”

“*Very* carefully.” And then only the airy, rising disturbances from his struck vocal chords remained. “Well? Down and out with you. We busy businessmen must get to talking.”

Plummeting past the staggered sets of narrow lancet windows Daniel ducked just in time below an unlit candelabrum set into the stairwell’s twisting spine but did not stop and thought of how his hands were doing their embarrassing run-quickly-on-the-stairs thing and then was out in the profundity of Obren’s speckled garden with the intermittent waving shadows like all his half-hatched schemes or hole-hearted dreams of ways to chip away at the family nest egg for he had made nothing unlike the unrelated brothers or organic handyman of Fallingwater and the Wrightful reign might well be over if he did not find something other to do than *criticize the form* for even Weir could smear oils around and be called a master but no he was not yet Daniel’s opinions did not seem to matter even though that was his job.

I: the non-Wright. Primordial to nothing.

That selfsame breeze wove through the depths of the arbors, reaching him here, and there. Just there. It blew from the exposed realm below the gazebo, where Phineas laughed with a rather familiar girl in liver—the chef: Anastasia. Both cheeks rose, the girl’s in silence, their host’s with a tenor chuckle Daniel hadn’t heard before.

Then they saw him.

“Ah, you finally found your way.”

“A morning bout of croquet finds me enjoying the shadows: lingered in your lovely shade a bit too long.”

Anastasia, seeming fairly distracted, curtsied curtly toward Daniel and began to leave. When Obren turned his happy narrowed eyes her direction and thanked her saying Ana she did not stop so much as spin about while walking smiling and seeing he had already refaced the guest she nodded and did not look back again.

Phineas sighed contentedly with five fully extended fingers playing an unknown tune against his chest—or as close as they could get with garb. “A little lamb in the belly just might make one a lion.”

“Indeed.”

“Arnold Palmer and bourbon?”

“Two holes in one.”

“Precisely. Ice? or no?”

“I’ll take not-ice, thank you.”

“I’d thought you might not. There you go.”

“Appreciated. So, wh—”

“You said you played a little six wicket this morning?”

“Well, yes. S—...Parles’ place.”

“Ah.” Obren sipped some bourbon.

“I...had the fortune of admiring your additions. Bright ideas, really.”

“Using witchcraft to turn his house invisible wasn’t panning out. The least I could do was remove his and his servants’ and his servants’ children’s carbon footprints. That was before he threw the Cyclopean nightmare up top. Impossible to say what engineer would—”

Father, what’s a engineer?

An engineer.

...?

Someone who designs...builds things.

She will build things?

Ab: the opposite. Verb, in her case. Past participle. She is the object, Danny b—

“Wright.”

“Hm? Wh—yes?”

“Are you all right?”

“Am I not?”

“You tell me.”

“I—yes, sorry—was...eying the...horizon. You were saying...?”

“I asked if you defeated our plucky mutual friend.”

“O, I did. A close game. He seemed...rather confident.”

“Did he? I might have gathered something about his CIST’s envelopment of the justice system. Elegant. He is a little...linear with his investments, wouldn’t you say?”

“Better words were never chosen.”

“*Hm.* Tell me, did he happen to mention the Astral Astrobiology Corporation?”

“Scantly. I’m not sure he remembers that the probe is en route to Europa.”

“But you...?”

“Said nothing.”

“Wise play. Did you know, Mr. Wright, that the Zeus II hardly strikes that man’s fancy? Let alone his interest.”

“You know, I had detected some—”

“He is no...visionary, such as yourself.”

“You really think so?”

“*Heavens*, with full conviction. The sheer refreshment of speaking with you compared—which reminds me: another?”

“Magnificent suggestion.”

“Say when.”

“...When? When.”

“Parles may be a good fellow, to be true, but he has no grasp of this mission’s cosmic significance.”

“I—”

“Think of it, Daniel: the two of us working together, the world’s eyes upon us, heralds of an age that resets the zero year of Man.”

“Are you...?”

“O, I am. He does not want it. He does not need it.” Phineas examined his handle before looking back up. “Seize control of the double-A.B.C.”

All the birds of the garden were silent while unforeseen possibilities slithered into Daniel’s brain like new life forms. “Would he relinquish the organization so willingly?”

“There is no doubt of it. Now that the philistine has had his first taste of terrestrial wealth, all higher ideals will be recklessly abandoned. His new contracts require an exponential increase in production, which in turn requires an investment on his part. *You* are simply the concerned friend, who will offer to give him what he wants for what you do.”

“And should he refuse?”

“This will not happen.”

“Why?”

“Have I wrongly assessed your good judgment of character?”

“N—”

“Name a time he was not nearsighted. You shall aid his immediate endeavors, while claiming for yourself his place in history.”

“The cost...it might...my finances are precarious currently.”

Sighing, Mr. Obren turned away, regarding his garden. “At certain times, when met with momentous circumstance, I consider, ‘What would Jupiter do?’ And always, I find the answer astronomically apparent: *nothing*—new, at least.”

“Bu—”

“Brace, for this negligence to newness is as observed by the self. Decisions derived from molten cores remain contained within the body, spontaneous prominences their actuations, confounding those unaware of coronas, such coronets of consciousness. Others will wonder with what primordial power one seems to even surpass the Sun. Incorporation of external objects will not be quest, but gravitation. Systems, bodies: they congregate about him due solely to what he exudes. Witness them orbit your vortical facets. Do not deny your convections. This magical self-motivation, this internal energy: it cannot work against inertial intentions, for the one, the two, and the three are the same. Take up the mantle you have always borne inside yourself. I see how, so unfulfilled, it burns and boils against your crust.”

“I...yes.”

“It is a great red stain upon the face of our race: alone among the heavenly bodies, humans have faculty for force of will, yet most will shudder under Jovian thunder. Be one of the few to realize it is *you*: everything you want to be, everything that you are not.” Still, Phineas faced with scene without. “Have you been beyond our atmosphere, Daniel? Some

say it makes one feel small, the omnipresent vacancy..." He swirled his drink with underhanded rotations of his wrist, thoughts overturning like the *clinking* ice. "They are wrong. It is expansive, overflowing and limitless, a place of infinite incorporeal ink like all our letters atomized and cast into the sky."

"Let us discover life."

"Quite right. Quite right indeed. To some form of life beyond our own."

"Some form of life beyond our own..."

"What a personally profitable morning. I must see to other things, but none of Darden's pageantry could improve this, wouldn't you say?"

"How do you mean?"

"O? Intriguing. There is to be some gala this even—"

"Tonight?"

"...In Mr. Weir's hon—"

"When were you told?"

"I don't need to be *told*."

"Why wasn't I—maybe there's—"

"I do believe it is very apparent that you and I were not invited."

V

I feel like an idle idol.

VI

One of *these* again.

Edmunn tugged at the shoulders of the only suit he owned.

At least they had living lawn flamingos; a properly pompous touch, all the lords and ladies probably tickled pink. Shallow shrimp pools for them along the entrance and everything. The Dardens' mansion—a none-too-chiseled limestone block with what they thought was a redeeming three-story cylindrical birdhouse through the center—was constructed linearly, logically, with everything in simple planes. He hated it.

His crepuscular passage toward the party, however...something resonated soundlessly against the bloody bruises of the buildings that only shone once the Sun no longer blinded the world. The westerly wailings of the ochre and then umber and then violet walls seemed to speak with mouths that had never been beyond the clouds. Purity reigned. And silence.

Silence, yes: the cause for his tardiness in the first place. Didn't want to stand there like a doorman—though they did have doormen—greeting all the guests again, guessing their names. Faces were what he was good with. Nameless lumps of all too sensitive clay. Once you had their shadows, their blemishes, the grade of their nose, that hidden pimple above their chin and where their ears colored, you had them.

Didn't want to be a doorman what a slimy worthless...everyone's least favorite thing is a hypocrite; we all are one.

And his temporal evasion was all for naught for as he neared the glass-faced entrance—dolloped up as a Fabergé egg—beastly waves of million-dollar merriment burst out past the silent doormen to confront him.

"*Mister Weir*, damn fine to see you. Welcome. Welcome." Quin sauntered out from underneath the semicircle porch, crooked arms orthogonal to his sizable torso in a double-breasted plum jacket. He was wearing a ruff. A wide one. "Was the Phaeton we sent over not to your liking?"

"I wanted to see the sun set on my own terms."

"O, a rather burning desire? Ha ha come now you're electric, my boy. Everyone is inside."

"Your lawn ornaments are quite—"

"You've seen nothing."

Quin shooed away a doorman to be Edmunn's himself and then they were in past the fire breathers and up one of two swooping wing-themed staircases and tracing the aviary's outer wall counter-clockwise with *Thought* and other Rodins in the left-hand alcoves and a long hall leading away to louder regions on the right; two women in sheer lace floor-length dresses were coiled about a man in a cream frock coat like a caduceus, whispering into his ears about *Andromeda* while Quin proceeded towards them as if to make the first of many laborious introductions.

"This will be Mr. and Mrs. and Mrs. Cunningham, who—"

"Robert." Alice Darden was striding their direction from the hall. "You don't really mean to introduce him to everyone he'll never hear from again, do you? Hello, Edmunn."

"Good evening, and...what are those?"

"O." Quin slid in. "Our mating pair of Green Peafowl, Leopold an—"

“Penelope.” Alice faced him with eyes unpiercing like a convex impersonal sky. “Do you like our house?”

“It’s better than your neighbor’s. No number of your cypresses could drown out that leviathan.”

Quin sipped his red beverage. “We are haunted.”

“You let them strut around the halls?”

Alice set her head aslant. “What else would we do with our children?”

Saying nothing, he followed them into the dining hall where a double-headed table had twelve face twelve and two ponderous mirrors framed in verdigris backed both sides until exactly the edges, creating in their walls two tunnels of receding reflections.

“How fancy.”

“Our *Eternal Supper*.”

They ate and drank for an eternity while she could not stop thinking of the impending Dead Father and how every other distant image of her was what the others saw, her face fleeing the table into infinitesimals.

Oysters.

Perfectly normal strawberries plugged up with heady cheeses unknown to him and slathered in bitter chocolate.

Seared something: gamey.

The main course was omelets. Actually omelets.

And the whole time he had to sit across from this “Archbishop Archibald Whistler Fest” while the endless font that was the man’s mouth kept on about Momentism with unending details of his homemade popular godless religion: “One cannot generate new actions inside the past or act from the future. The current moment is all that allows us to be, think, influence the physical world and the separate realities of other conscious beings...” et cetera, ad nauseam.

Quin was a savior, though. He and Alice were the table’s bookends, with Edmunn in his corner—the right-hand man, in fact—and while his wife was reciting a poem to her friends at the other end he had leant in and said, “I like to play a game at dinner.”

“I’m game.”

“Pick the person who you think will look at him- or herself the most.”

“Who’s that?—there.”

“Mm, good choice: Miss Ruby Hunt, prolific—”

“The pop star?”

“One and the same.”

“Hard to beat.”

With a sidelong smile Quin had leant so low that his ruff touched the table when he had whispered, “I choose...*her*.”

“Victoria?” Simon alone separated her from the Archbishop, all of them opposite Edmunn. But she was not—

“One.”

So now at 15—now 16—while they served the dessert Edmunn had given up on Miss Hunt for their ratio was laughable and stuck to watching Vict—17—oria; it may be that she was not who he thought.

Archbishop Fest had, of course, been talking this whole time: “You must accept The Moment as your vehicle of perception, do—”

“What of memory?” someone said.

“Nothing without the perception of it. We Momentists believe that—mind you: *believe*—that the universe is tragically experienced by each individual”—18—“through only their own perpetual input interface. Surroundings given genesis by the observations of them...”

“Solipsism.” Edmunn’s entire party turned to face him for the first time, though the archbishop always was: crow’s feet lurking in the recesses of his eyes as if the fading footprints of so many scavengers picking the bones of those he had tricked into thinking their Old Ways were over yet somehow Order still existed. “It’s solipsism.”

“Humor us with your explanation, Mr. Weir.”

“You can’t just champion the obviously improvable nature of experience and extrapolate its simplest aspect into a universal quality. It’s guarded and too easy like saying ‘Food is Life is Community is God.’”

“Such divine sustenance that it is: granting chances for new Nows, allowing the miracle of continuity to trudge on.”

“It trudges on without y—”

“Mrs. Darden, *please* give my compliments to your chef parfait.”—oos and ahs abounded, oddly—“He has assured it to be a Now never forgotten.” And then the pale polished hands of the rich went *clip clip clap* for him.

19.

Even from this far away Edmunn saw the skies were unenthused. “I will. Simon has some...food news of his own.”

“You flatter me.” Once Dr. Pearls spoke those closer to the hostess turned away; he swept back to Edmunn’s end. “As you lot may now, my product has seen some success, and *now* it is going to be introduced to prisoners as an optional replacement for meals or even on a rewar—”

“What’s all this?” Let’s just axe the exposition.

“My caloric-intake supplemental tablets: C.I.S.T. Yes?”

“The cyst pill? The caloric cannonball? What a monster.”

“A bit bulky now, but newer—”

“Kissed.” Victoria’s eyes left themselves for a moment, meeting his. “It’s pronounced with a hard C.”

Nope: 20.

Pearls grinned and twirled his embossed gold buttons. “Yes: it’s a calorie supplement, not a salary supplement.”

“It is for some,” he said.

And so their side of the table was quiet for a while (21-24 and an excusal) long enough for him to notice that there were many people going many times to many bathrooms and returning much more talkative than before.

Can’t blow my smoke in their eyes over it—the aviary.

He was constructing an exit strategy when Alice addressed him:

“Edmunn,” with her high dry voice silencing the congregation, “wasn’t there something you were forming before the archbishop interrupted you? Solidify it for us.”

Right then was a Now the scowling Archibald might not forget.

“Hm? All right: I love the fanatical honesty of real—no offense—religious institutions: the courage to preach and practice something you *knew* the majority of the world disagreed with. For if we had one thing with which to cohere them, wouldn’t it be that they are all global minorities? The assertion of difference, of ‘That’s not how I feel.’ The manifestation of the desire for the sacred, the personal reinforced by the masses. Verification through blind faith of a Time that extends before and beyond all record of us and is colored with shadows of each region’s subconscious.”

Alice set her drink down. “Plenty of past tense in there. What were you raised as?”

25.

“I always followed the path of non observium.”

“In fact,” the archbishop started, smoothing his uncrossed stole, “the Latin is—”

“It was a homophonic pun. Jesus.”

An unnamed personage cleared their throat and leaned on the table before saying, “Eel a bow coo day spree.”

“Two come luh day’s ess pear eh,” Fest replied.

As if on cue, everyone but Edmunn started speaking.

“Say dare near pawn tour some play tell mon.”

“May lob Shea a Sean Shea.”

“Sue Shea.”

“We, come on compare a view say zuvruh ray sonz a *Magnum Corpus*?”

“Own a pupa.”

“Shack pawn tour a tease oh lay.”

“Eel sue bee duh grond trance form mass yawn.”

“Come lop loss,” Victoria said.

“Kell ploss?”

Laughter.

26.

“What’s the joke?” he asked her.

“Nothing important.”

“Son are a toss sea om belly come luh pal lay due Ra so lay.”

“I *am* a fan of bourbon,” Quin said, nudging him.

“Your French is lost on me.”

The spectral archbishop uttered, “Just refined discourse.”

“Forgive me; I wasn’t grown in the Garden of Eton. How’s making money through demystifying life?”

“I thought it rather opt to—”

“Apt.”

“Yes.”

“No. Apt.”

“Yes. Opt.”

“Apt.”

“Opt.”

“Listen, jacka—”

“Edmunn.” Quin’s clockwork pleasantries were gone beneath a rigid, flat face. “He is saying apt. It’s his accent...”

The silver-blue hairtide washed way out the bald beach under the archbishop’s weathered fingers. “It seems English is lost on you as well.”

Yup. That one’s gonna simmer real good. Real. Good.

With supper over at last and guests dispersed throughout the mansion there was considerably less pressure to be felt by Edmunn who was now drifting through their soft bank of noise as he and Quin—both bearing cherry-bourbons—followed the “mating pair of Green Peafowl” from floor to door to corridor.

“What do you know of Obren?” Edmunn finally asked while they watched Leopold display his train.

Quin grinned. “Much less than he knows of me—the seer. Originally born Finn O’Brien, but he decided to lose his I before entering college at age fifteen. Bachelor’s at eighteen. Ph.D. at twenty-one. Signed on to the early stages of the Solar Sahara project, but wasn’t rising to his liking, so he went directly to the financiers and showed them the designs he hadn’t shared with the other researchers, at which point the operation gets turned over mostly to him and then fully when the old head kills himself for these seemingly small reasons. Under Obren, Solar Sahara septuples in size its first year, acquiring great swaths from landowners—occasionally nations—initially adamant against selling. He waits until everything is developed to reveal that the new lands are in his name, rather than the company’s: bars all access and begins rerouting the harvested power. By the time litigation ends Obren has made enough to both win the suit and buy out the rest of the company at an unprecedentedly low price compared to estimates. He dissociates from the financiers and makes Solar Sahara a subsidiary of his then-new organization: Obren Energy. After that it’s all smoke and mirrors and flawless books as to how he made his billions.” He drank deeply and looked at his male’s long tail. “They’re the covert feathers, you know.”

“You’ve had him investigated.”

“With good reason: any reasonable person should.”

Two tall girls Edmunn knew but could not name skipped topless down the hall past the peacock and peahen, ghostlike, unlaughing.

“I want what they’ve got,” he said.

“Dear Mr. Weir...” Quin looked hurt. “Why didn’t you ask?”

“You misunderstand. I want what they *have*.”

“The eye always does, though it does nothing.”

“You’re fine with the intense recreational use of your antidepressant?”

“*Antidepressant*: how depressing. Euphetamin’s a stimulant. And refusing to admit that all our life is recreation would be a horrid misunderstanding. Might I fix you up with just a little something?”

“No. I prefer...biopharmaceuticals.”

“All smoke no mirrors for you, then. Careful someone doesn’t blow you out.”

“I’ve told myself to watch out.”

“Mm, yes, but stay leeward of that man. I see you butting heads with him in your mind. Do not let him allow you to construct yourself as a sheep: bighorn, black, or other.” Quin’s unbourboned hand rested on the top of his gut.

In limestone silence Penelope circled Leopold while their father put two pills on the tip of his tongue.

“Why all this advice?”

Prefaced with a slurp to gulp: "...It's easier to swallow knowledge—of any kind, mind you—than gasp on the choking sands of everyday mystery. Life seems rather alien and unexplained without them, d—"

"Them?"

"Vices—isn't that what we're?"

"O—we—"

"O."

"—could: advice though."

"O, I thought you were playing a philosopher for a m—"

"Yes but go on."

"Well apart from feeling as giddy as those girls in my own sociopolitical toplessness, I'm fond of your presence, Mr. Weir: your work, your gumption, your gusto—what you create moment to moment amuses me; let's keep it around, mm? You've soared past the artistic tiers of your peers, as if fired from a cannon."

"Never wanted to have anything to do with a canon."

"But how else do we fly these days?"

The preening peafowl were leading them back to the aviary.

At the entrance opposite their preliminary dinner exit, Quin halted, turned, and skipped back slightly. "I'll perhaps meander up to the Athens Bath on the third floor now. Time for a little sigil magic in the forest of beauties."

"A what?"

"Chemognosticism? Excitatory gnosis? No? O it's grand time when we paint symbols on each other's bodies and chant and roll around and see what happens."

"Ah..."

"Your facial horror is enough of a sign. Could be good for your material, but no matter; I'll give you over to Miss Hunt—*O Miss Hunt*—for convincing."

The redheaded pop star looked up from where she stared at *Andromeda*, slouching against the curved wall in ripped fishnets and priceless gems.

Raising his voice as he backed away, Quin was swaying while saying, "I'll leave the two artistic types alone to discuss amongst each other."

Then she was staring at the sculpture again with that stem of smoking purple liquid in her hands and there was not much to do but walk on over.

"You're not Perseus," she said as he got closer. Her eyes and pupils were cartoon large with thin lips somewhere far away.

Neither one looked at the other.

"You think I'd want to be?"

"You don't." She sipped with high hands and exhaled often, emphasized breaths pressing down the cold vapors.

"We'll cover subtext sometime later." His ice had melted.

"Later's over. Now there's now."

"Riveting."

"Miss, my song."

"There's no one here."

"You missed my song. Before the...*festivities*."

"Darn."

She snorted. "This would be you. Playing at brilliance once a month, but you're just a...snarky boy."

"How's being teenage humanity's choice for apotheosis?"

“I get your work. I do.”

“Let’s hear—”

“Obliterating the subjectivity of our observer. Viewer in your case. Listener in mine. You reject symbolism as, like, universally groundless and hate when people use *their* lives to evaluate *your* like *artistry* as I’m sure you’d call it, so you—”

“I call them what they are.”

“How objective”—*what is it that you plan to*—“of you. So you construct these unseen symbols from yourself and try to imbue them with *very specific* emotional weight in hopes of jarring whoever’s looking into losing themselves along your lines and colors for one just moment, wherein you are the, like, craftsman of their universe. Daedalus of the visual labyrinth.”

“...You seemed depressed at the Awards this year, performing for the world’s most *beautiful, talented*, mainstream meat bags.”

“I was.”

“Clearly your only reason for taking Euphetamin, right?”

“We’re all subjects of prescription. You just don’t get it.”

“No, I don’t take Quin’s happy pill.”

“O my god you are hopeless. Prescriptions of the mind. You want your work to blast people into another direction—probably *yours*—but sadly you still don’t see that all your efforts are bound within one moment of their experience, your months of labor tethered to a single set of memories, framed on either side by a life you’ll never know and which, to them, is infinitely more important. They’ll chain you to whatever rocky emotions they are set on. You don’t want to be a tool even though that’s all you are because you can’t see that, like, the tool dictates how it’s used. I could write metaphysical treatises on the ambiguity of experience, but do you know why I don’t?”

“And why is that, Miss Ruby Hunt? if that’s even your name.”

“My true name doesn’t matter: you and everyone have already constructed me as Ruby Hunt and whether or not that was my name that would be who I was to you. I don’t write that shit because whenever I sing some simple drivel about why we should love or leave our boyfriends, millions of people you and I will never know use those not to change but to *reinforce* their lives, to perform actions they had always planned. I am their cosmic nudge, the go-ahead, the—what did you say: *manifestation of desire*?”

“...for the sacred.”

“Love is, like, the single sacred act, the only concrete abstract concept.”

“That’s fucking stupid.”

“Pff. I see you, read you like a picture book: all attitude, all analysis”—*and there will be nothing*—“all pessimism, no action. What are you even gonna do, *hub*?”

“I’ll tell you what it is I plan to—”

“I really don’t care.”

The Archbishop’s singsong chords sent waves out to greet her through the door to the Athens Bath, which was ajar. “Miss Lusk: what a pleasure. Join us, won’t you?”

Passing the jamb into heat she then looked up to see flitting claws of smoke and steam crawling beyond the threshold via the ceiling. The room

was a square and circular affair: high-backed benches cushioned the walls, isolated from their own interior by eleven slender columns; seven round ottomans were a step inside, each separated by a burning incense brazier; all these accents were constructed about the bath—a ten-by-ten inset square tub, into whose opaque creamy depths the barely rippled limestone floor fell suddenly (she could see and smell it had been filled with now-warm milk and honey); there was a wide bay window on the opposite wall, but it was fogged over by mist and sweat and the black iron braziers' thick musky discharge. Everything else was white.

Most people from the party were here. Through the swirling air's non-equilibrium she could not find Edmunn, Quin, her doctor or Mrs. Darden. The redheaded girl from dinner was gone, along with one or two of Alice's friends. Those here were shades and tracers of themselves amidst their unclear medium and the six small fires which lit the room alone. Everyone but her was wearing nothing but towels, with some not wearing that.

A few humans writhed in the shadowed outskirts. Two women in the water laughed together at an inside joke. Many were seated about the center, beside each other, on stools, stones, or laps. Archbishop Fest, toga-toweled, sat someone with long hair across his legs, them occupying the only ottoman opposite the door. Strange red runes were written—drawn?—upon his empirical imperial face.

“Have you finally found your way to us, or are you lost, my lovely little lamb?”

The two in the tub thought this or something else was great fun.

“I'm...not su—”

Tidal upheaval: birthed in blooming whitewater pouring all directions dripping with ripples in ripples within bound molecules while the liquidome crumbling recollects itself swiftly from the forever lost and so-formed sheets of dihydrogen monoxide as they rushed onto the women and limestone from the pearl-like naked body of one Robert Quincy Darden.

He was touched not there by both and, taking the goblet she had not noticed at the edge of the unreflective pool, he dunked it deep into the bath.

Red wine slipped out of it into the...

Victoria saw lightening pink for half a memory.

Darden sloshed the contents all over his face, then onto the breasts and into the thrapples of his tubmates. “Absurd no one tells kids they can bathe like th—”

Turning while speaking such that a hip-spawned Milky Way of aftershocks emerged he came upon her visually before the fruity spirit shriveled and his revolution was shown a revulsion when just then all the green in his widening hazel eyes died—told her *no* that something was wrong *wrong* *WRONG* and the Iye was never meant to see.

Everyone else in the world was laughing.

The Cunnington triune intervened unintentionally by disrobing between him and her and easing into another corner of the bath; at this stage of them slinking into the admixture Quin had already hidden most of his pear undersubstance. Useless male nipples remained.

“H—I...” The ocean which was language drowned her. Coughing, she choked on air.

Attempting nonchalance, Quin beheld each smoking, burning brazier, yet it was plain that she dominated his peripheral sight.

“Yes,” the Archbishop began, “a bit thick here, but let it waft in. You may feel better without that tight satin skin.”

The Mmes. Cunnington threw their unused towels at the feet of Victoria’s black gown, disturbing swirling dreamlike currents.

“She only need do what she’s comfortable with.” Quin’s eyes averted.

He did not want her here.

“Untrue on a fundamental level, Robert.” Fest tried his hand at an inclusive gesture, indicating her body. “The need is mandatory, but the *desire* is free will uninhibited in orgiastic possibilities.”

“Look how uncomfortable she is in that thing,” said Mrs. Cunnington.

The other Mrs. Cunnington pushed off from the bath wall nearest Victoria and glided arch-backed over to Quin’s acquaintances, watching her watch everyone watch her. Their present was Victoria. “Take it off.”

“A shrug of the shoulders.”

“Slip into the Now.”

Quin was saying, “She doesn’t *have*—”

“Now, now, pupils...” as the Archbishop’s grew, “can you not see that she is both the white *and* black sheep? There is coaxing to be completed.”

Mr. Cunnington raked his amber eyes all over her. “I want to see the epitome of Woman.”

A Mrs. Cunnington hit him playfully, then bit the point of impact.

“So statuesque,” the shadows said.

“Are we not to your liking?”

Someone extended to her a silver platter of powder.

“Victoria...” Darden stood alone in the center of the water, unromantically impassioned. “You’re not obligated to—”

“Come, Robert: this is unlike you.” Archibald’s voice had lost some clerical qualities. “More akin to that dullard Daniel Wright.”

My only fan if I did.

For some reason Darden was abhorred by this sentence.

“Is that it, then?” the far Mrs. Cunnington asked. “She wants us to scatter roses and candles and recite lines of Shakespeare?”

The selfsame platter bearer snorted some up. “That oaf surely writes out his seductions beforehand.”

A man stood from his ottoman, bumped briefly while his towel fell, and then holding his hair all too high like a comedic coif he bowed in dramatic imitation her direction. “O my pulchritudinous love, shall we commence in osculation?”

Darden drooped while the room became raucous.

“I’ll Shakespeare at her,” Mr. Cunnington said. He reached out a wet arm to finger her hem.

She backed from the scene cloaked in sexual shame, and fled into the empty manor: untouched, unloved.

Nearly double-jointed, Edmunn’s mental state was swimming. Of course he had had to get out about the grounds after that one. She just wouldn’t stop talking and like, like, like, annoying him with her analysis. Same as all the others—brings it back to her in the end. Not *all* the others, though he hadn’t seen her since dinner. Indifference. She wouldn’t understand him standing underneath this rhododendron in the non-utterly

pleasing trunklike and darkish human quiet. It would be quite a different drag to her.

But to say that the aviary in its entirety was anything similar to silent would be hellacious simplification. Countless wings hummed like so many foreign tongues. He could interpret all their callings, or thought he could. For music had to have come from somewhere and if not birds then name just one more chance. Nothing. So he stood smoking and listening to the folksongs of other species. What the World made their callings were mostly simple and shrill but richly beautiful in every quavering tone and maybe they were singing of loving or leaving their others but no probably gloving or leaving their others but did birds love but did humans maybe it was biological.

Above and behind him like the godevil on one's shoulder a functional replica of *The Gates of Hell* opened from the second story onto a quaint and Haussmann-fashioned wrought iron rail. From that platform whoever was there oversaw the whole of the glass-domed moonlit silo. The whole except for Edmunn, out of his as well as their context.

Quin's voice, achy: "I don't appreciate being pulled out o—"

"We needed to speak in private." Pearls was the other.

"Do you understand—"

I do.

"—that I was *in* private—"

"This is serious."

Iron creaked beneath Quincy's rested bulk. "Go on."

"Is anyone...?"

"...What happened?"

Bronze doors scraped closed.

"I would consider myself a rather thorough doctor."

"How thorough?"

"And, while the Hippocratic Oath is a sacred vow, information has come to light that, in light of other information, I feel it would be best for all parties considered to—"

"Get on with it."

"*Hem.* Yes. All right. Here goes: Victor Lazarus Lusk is dying."

"..."

"Now I know—"

"You sold me out."

"Excuse me?"

"*Don't* even *think* about playing your worn and overused idiot card against me you slimy scheming—"

"It might be best to focus on what you're fee—"

"This *is* what I'm feeling you incompetent imp! You sold me up the River Styx to *him* you leechlike little f—"

"The emotions can be overwhelm—"

"Your moral depravity is overwhelming you scum-sucking carrion feeder just tell me how patients—"

"I was being *black*mailed."

"I'm *being* blackmailed!"

Birds took trapped flight while the balcony railing groaned and shrieked and started wailing shaken by cataclysmic frenzy and "Mr. Darden!" ripping at the bolts in the walls with the grinding "Robert!" grating sounds of saws through skulls and one more slow moan before then Quin was crying.

His high and hopeless human warbling was drowned out by birdcalls of survival warnings.

“O...Robert...”

“*Iyub—I’mub—*” Shuddered breaths. “I’m—I’m fine. You know I hate you, but I’m fine. Did you tell...her?”

“Understandable...and I absolutely told yo—”

“Don’t: Alice and I have a lyrebird.”

“Does she—?”

“No.”

“Well, I’m sorry for your future loss.”

“Your future gain.”

“*Why* would you say that.”

“How much do you want.”

“Mr. Darden I am verily offended at this juncture. Did I not just explain that I myself was coerced and conned into this me—”

The ground floor doors of the aviary swung wide while *The Gates of Hell* were wrenched momentarily free. With a *clung* one of the two bronze giants was closed, and then there was simply the *clock, clock, clock, clock* of pointed heels along the limestone walk before they stopped and Edmunn could swear he heard someone remove their shoes.

“Anything juicy for me?” It was Alice. “Edmunnnnn.”

? He pushed through the rhododendron, coming in a *clcklcklcklcklck* out onto the serpentine path of the Dardens’ in-home biodome larger than anywhere he had ever lived—till yesterday. Unextinguished by her presence, he thought he might not put out purposefully the burning fuzziness within himself, building breath by breath.

For there she was, emergent about a mysterious tree with vines of hanging violet flowers which was situated at the bend in the way, her blonde body clad in Adele Bloch-Bauer’s robe of eyes. “There you are.”

“How did you know?”

“Poor boy—”

“*Exc—*”

“—you think you are stealthy burning senses in the dark, but your own light betrayed you yester-eve in Obren’s garden.”

“Why not ‘*Phineas*’ garden?”

“Because Obren’s who he is. Give me some of that.”

“You wouldn’t like—”

She snatched it.

“You are nonplussed as to what I like.” Returning it, she passed her hand through their thinning cloud of sacrificed emotion. “Easy to take: your hands have a...gentle...balanced manner to them. Sometimes.”

“Sometimes?”

“Miss Hunt went home, probably taking the elevator now. I heard you were O so mean to our little red Ruby.”

“So that’s how she spins things.”

“Honestly: did you really call her...‘fucking stupid?’”

“*Ugh*. No, I called her philosophy ‘fucking stupid.’ Will I never live this down?”

“We all live everything down. Besides, she’s not that bright—was on Robert’s side of the table, after all. He was probably hoping she would join them in the *Athens B—*”

“O, so you...?”

“The mere tip of his lecherous proclivities. But I have known of those too long; they bore me. Back to Ruby.”

“O.K.”

“Tell me what you thought of her.”

“If you insis—”

“And how you reflect upon her now.”

“...It seems like she feels trapped.”

“O?” Thin lips helped her take it into herself again.

“She kept talking about being some sort of tool or device and how we were it despite all our desires. She places too much agency on her audience, I think.”

Nature’s nightlights fell through the rising smoke of Mrs. Darden’s exhalation. “Enlightening.”

Farther up the path—along which they weren’t walking—Leopold flashed and fanned his wall of iridescence.

Alice said what an idiot.

“Come again?”

She laughed. “He’s always showing off or trying to ward away danger—you *were* rather close to their nest—but he will never realize that the circumstances of our world place him out of harm’s way and without the opportunity for other mates.”

“Would he rather not be in this world?”

“And be what: lost in the abyss of the unknown and unspoken? No, this is what he wants, whether or not he knows it: to show his lonely beautiful tail to real people more important than him.”

“What does Penelope want?”

Mrs. Darden reached out and down through the semi-darkness between them, rubbing an inquisitive palm heavily along his thigh. She said bafflingly flatly, “Children.”

He took one step backwards.

She laughed again, unfazed. “You’re boring.”

“What the f—”

They both heard someone enter the aviary.

“Hide,” she said.

Clack, lock.

“No. Why?”

Clock, lack.

“Because you clearly won’t excite whatever conversation I’m about to have *alone*. Do it.”

Clack, clock, lack, lock.

“No.”

Clack lock lack clock.

At once, a terrible, impressive solemnity overcame Alice’s expression; and each new word—hushed but pointed—was another, sharper dagger:

“Hide behind that god-damned bush.”

Finally, some isolation for her disquiet.

In the starlight but also the sunlight reflected off of what was once part of proto-Earth, Victoria’s gown swept like a sable river over stone.

Sbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbb, It said.

Who was Theia? What was she now? Into what oblivions has she passed since birthing her daughter Moon in magmatic blood?

Arcing around a wisteria-strangled willow, Victoria found Mrs. Darden seated on a backless marble bench in one of her ever-immaculate poses, hands cupping each other at rest in her lap; the hostess was watching one of her peafowl, with her ear turned towards the entrance. A bloomless rhododendron was behind her.

“O, Mrs. Darden...I’m sorry, I can—”

The woman smiled wider than Victoria had ever seen. “Nonsense, girl.” She patted the unused half of her seat. “Linger with me. And please: Alice.”

Miss Lusk: what a pleasure.

“Thank you...Alice, but it might—”

“Would you refuse me in my own home?”

“I—suppose not.”

“You’re very generous,”—*I adore you, my*—“unlike certain other mannerless buffoons.”

Curling her onyx train about her legs, Victoria sat.

“Take off your heels.” Alice kicked her bare feet out before them like a child at play. “Give the real heels a rest.”

She did so, feeling the rock’s cool imperfections. Thinking of what to say was a long time coming before she blurted, “Dinner was good.”

“Do you remember what we had? You seemed a tad preoccupied.”

Your father. “Remind me.”

Alice held aloft her long hooked hand and forefinger with the austerity of Cronus’ scythe in the direction of the peacock. “Leopold’s and Penelope’s children: seared peafowl breast, caramelized, and peafowl egg omelettes with kale, pine nuts and gruyere.”

“You name them and you eat their children?”

“Well we don’t name *them*.” Her hostess’ entire spine made a half-pi angle with respect to the horizontal. “Are you all right dear? You’re slouching.”

Victoria tried, but had not the heart to straighten herself out. “My posture’s not as good as yours.”

“Ridiculous. That simply means you’re burdened by more important things; I’ve discovered that people have good posture when they’re too bored to concentrate on anything else.”

“Are you bored often, then?”

“Almost always.”

“Why?”

“Well darling our universe has decided to make me a rather minor character.”

“That’s horrible and untrue.”

“Isn’t it? My poetry is my grand enjoyment, but I...I want to say *fear* but that’s not quite the right word—*dread* has some of the proper inevitable qualities or tones or what-have-you but I think could be misconstrued—though I do *loathe* it’s probably an extrapolation or projection of the anger I feel towards myself over this emotion and my inability to conjure it—*sense* has a bit of the primal I’m looking for but is goodness so vague we’re almost back onto *feel*—I certainly don’t *accept* it so just scratch that from the record...as you can maybe tell it’s all quite confusing for me and to you but perhaps we’ll just say that I’m *aware* of the fact that for some reason the things I write which please me greatly are disliked by the unkins of people

who count—not those who *matter* mind you but those who, at whenever the present is, physically perform the counting of humanity and by such agency choose the order and the Order with a capital O of the numbers hence humans thereby creating the lines of society. You’ll have to forgive me I’m incredibly lit. Did that make any—”

“I know exactly what you’re talking about. I saw a tumbler of brandy turn—”

“Simon then.”

“—*clearly*, in the sunshine today, and it was like each new angle and altered wavelength was another hour or possible eon or dimension or place very different and far away we could have lived in and when it stopped it was like something very visceral and magical yet fundamental and...deific had stopped spinning, like Atlas had finished performing pirouettes.”

“Victoria that’s beautiful. You can be very charming, you know.”

“It was. But then I realized it had stopped.”

“And then what?”

“And then it was over. We were here.”

“O my god I want to *cry*.”

“You can. I don’t mind.”

“You should always *mind*, whether it’s good or bad or apathy or empathy, always mind everything.”

“...”

“Promise me you will.”

“Promise, but I want to keep talking about your poems.”

Fragile irises like pre-twilight were poised sadly suspended over Alice’s smile. “No...; like we’ve said, whatever greater forces may lurk in the past of the Dark have seen fit to silence me for the Now. Who knows? Maybe I’ll be a Dickinson.”

“Then do you believe in what...” *Coaxing to be completed*. “. . .he—”

“*Fes?* That hack; the fact that he tries to trademark a few choice words or capitalizations bears no causality as to how little I respect him.”

“*Causality*, that’s a good one.”

“I thought you’d like that. But I’ve been horribly rude: we were about to discuss what’s been burdening your back so? and my *word* it is ravishing in that deep lacy V. You are unutterably exquisite.”

“...I wish I was ugly.”

“That’s an ugly thing to say; come now: what’s behind all this?”

“All anyone ever *sees* of me is my outside.” Victoria didn’t want to be crying. “They *look* and *judge* and *leer* at me with those gross contemptuous sexual stares and I can *feel* their brains humming like sadistic scientists *studying* me and *no one* wants to be my friend they only want to have *chatted* with *oooo* ‘Victoria Lusk’ the—”

“You’re as real as I am.” Alice, slouched, placed her palm on Victoria’s upper spine, unfelt phalanges tickling her nape’s neck hairs. “All anyone sees of *anyone* is the outside. We’ll never know or comprehend each other. That’s why it takes so much courage to wear your emotions visibly (god knows I haven’t mastered it, or even have an inkling for it): they will always be at least slightly misinterpreted, like translations of books. But once you *see* someone seeing you and truly wanting to know you, not know *about* you but know you as you do...maybe knowing they can’t, but having such a deep and desperate...*desire* to attain what they never can—and only for you, because your mysteries are the only ones they would die to know or to keep

alive—once you see that...that's it. All I know is that this has been if a little one-sided but you know what I mean the best conversation I've had in years so I'd suppose that makes us damn fine friends. There now, see? it's O.K. Shall we continue on this intellectual vein or be girls for the rest of the evening?"

"Can't we just be girls."

"What we're best at apart from being human." Alice's feet drew up onto the bench, between them, raising as well her shimmering and geometric golden robe. "I'm forced to say I really do fancy your dress—your taste has *secretly* been my envious delight ever since everyone (my husband included) started dressing like they were in some sort of period piece."

Victoria snickered. "And you never said anything? Sometimes I feel lost in a coattail kelp forest."

"Um...you're *intimidating* I wish you could see yourself like we do. When you're even just looking at someone you're like...*the* archetype."

"Of what?"

"I don't know but you're it."

"I bet it's nothing like the look you described."

"No one has ever looked at me that way."

"Not even—?"

"Kind of. Sometimes." She looked at Leopold, his plumage down. "We have our walls."

"Alice, I think I need to tell you something..."

"The Athens Bath."

"...Y—"

"Everyone seems to think tonight that I have any concern for what my husband does sexually."

"But...you're married."

"Isn't it sweet to say. We are. Yet he's riddled with impotence while I've become profoundly asexual."

"Um, but..."

"He puts on a fine show, doesn't he? Always trying to please the world. That worked O.K. for a while. I really believe that somewhere very far inside himself he would do what he does even if it didn't make him billions. There's a sort of primordial melancholy to him I haven't deciphered, and despite it he simply wants everyone around him to be *incredibly* satisfied. Maybe one of his faults is that he doesn't care by what."

"Have you considered that there could be other lives out there?"

"Who hasn't? I've always wondered, but this is *my* life. Each successive moment whether success or no brings me always to where I am: *here*. What memories would I be willing to exchange for ones I am as of yet unsure of? And in what alternate universe would I ever be given the choice?"

"Perhaps one outside rather than parallel our own, where all truths are visible, including unimaginable colors we aren't even made of."

Alice ruminated.

"You clearly care for him."

"I do, not being of the kind who stays if they don't. We're close, as humans come. Especially when he lets me into that sad spot. Being there together as two beings is serene."

Selene looked down upon this scene and on all as Earth, her rotating viewing gallery, spun on.

“He never *had* to work, you know. Some in his position choose not to. But that he chose to invest his father’s money in an *ideal*, however human and potentially erred...I admire his passion, though I have never known the source.” She laughed. “This was the last place I ever tried to make him finish.”

“O, my...”

“Do you masturbate?”

“Owow. Um. That feels a little private.”

“No, then. And it’s ‘private’ by definition. But as you’ve inferred I think that private’s boring.”

“I’m not quite sure what to s—”

“*Very* mechanical.” *My painting just a mechanism.* “Ups and downs, ins and outs. A fairly linear affair.”

Tell her don’t tell her don’t tell her don’t tell her. “It is.”

“I get distracted by the repetition. My mind wanders, always coming to the same conclusion: my brain is bored. I think I’d enjoy astral projection pending coitus, but can’t muster up the effort to practice.”

“I...don’t know what that is.”

“An out-of-body experience at the climax? I’ve never had one so I suppose I don’t know either. Maybe you zoom forever severed through space where the Sun is always rising on no tomorrow but O the Sun shone indifferent to us the last day we lied to ourselves beside these rhododendrons as I gave him head. It seemed so alien fleshy and gross and he proposed I get over on him we’d done it before but for some reason I knew right then it would never happen again, physically feeling his emotional self-distrust and projected desire to please me in ways I no longer wanted. I saw we were both shells and fell more in love with him but haven’t touched it since.”

“It would be weird to do anything with The Gates looming over you.”

“O, that wasn’t there at the time.” Alice’s twilight hair swayed truly fair as she arched her smooth neck over both their shoulders and gazed at the sepulchral sculpture. “Something’s gotten him into Rodin during this chapter of his life.”

“I forgot to add this earlier, but you’ve always commanded a...mystique, in my mind. How you stylize yourself is breathtaking; this is a copy of the Klimt?” She felt the thick gold fabric’s threads.

“It *is*. How nice of you to notice.”

Both saw the other.

“Th-this is—”

“I know.” Leopold’s calls rose into the oncoming night. “Goodness,” Alice said; with her right index on the jaw line, her thumb brushed away most of Victoria’s mascara. “Look at you: emerald-eyed...” She toyed with the curls near Victoria’s temples. “Raven-haired. A little like Robert’s, but better.” One was tugged lightly down to bounce back up. “Perfect helices. How could they forget you.” Alice laid her thin warm fingers for the first time along the chill of Victoria’s nape, extending them from her left-hand which had never been removed.

Edmunn had forgotten he’d been smoking until his lips had burned and he’d had to smother it quietly beneath the bush’s canopy.

It had been a glorious evening for overheard emotional schisms.

But he had been incorrectly annoyed. They were just similes and he didn't use as many.

Whoever Alice Alusia Darden was had encouraged Victoria homeward.

When he crashed out of the bush again she turned upon him instantly:

"If you ever speak to her of this, or look at her in any way that could even have a quantum chance of *implying* that you overheard this..."

"You'll what?"

"I will ruin you."

VII

Terror dreams! Terror dreams!

Daniel woke soaked with night-sweats, remembering nothing.

VIII

You're back early.

Deepest midnight was upon them.

Ana, like something out of Austen, had set her personal silver candelabrum on the windowsill betwixt them, overlooking Obren's garden. In their shared firelight's undulations her already long and slanted handwriting—replete with dashes (her favorite punctuation)—took on chaotic new aspects as if the letters had shadows.

“Has my reputation been so sealed?”

She smiled.

The stuff had begun wearing off during the dark walk...home? and Edmunn could feel his consciousness being strained through a silken sieve. Memories of the evening hung spinning descending like spiders weaving the first tethers of their diurnal duskwebs.

“Ana, have you ever met Archbishop—”

Eyes of overcast seas rolled while she wrote:

He's pontificated at a few of Mr. Obren's dinners.

“Hosted him? So Obren's fond of the pope of Present.”

Anastasia gazed through her flames' reflection on the black glass—out into that nocturnal arboretum which for lack of familiarity Edmunn could not picture.

Her imagination within this moment is better than mine, he thought.

It's difficult to tell how he feels about anyone.

“...Is he a good person?”

Nightdress-shrouded, her body said, “?”

“A fair boss? He never...takes advantage?”

Paling pupils flashed into every lower corner.

“O,” with a reassuring brush of her arm. “Not like that.”

To me?—always. I owe him my life—but everyone else...

“Please: go on—sorry, I don't want to like force you to write a novel or something if you're going to bed.”

Content with half-closed lids she shook her head easily side to side, replacing her thus disordered hair behind ears with the right while the left scribbled on sill-borne pages.

They call him “O Baron”—when he's absent, obviously.

“Why?”

He is

She thought of what to say.

exacting—and they hold themselves on pedestals.

His face felt as though it had become the image of bafflement, and she—seeing this—wrote on:

Most of those Mr. Obren employs are overqualified.

They were standing abreast, both watching the flickering notebook. Edmunn tried to look outside but saw instead the luminary duplicity of the candelabrum and high in the Stygian sky what could be mistaken for stars. “Meaning?”

Physicians. Engineers. Doctoral students.

“Why would they be his servants?”

Her creasing brow told him he had been insensitive. She rubbed the tips of her index and middle fingers against the pad of her thumb.

“Sorry.”

Shoulders shrugged.

“He treats you better than that.”

I’m his majordomo—they all work for me.

The base of her E was flourished with a small hanging vortex; she looked at it a while.

“Your whole life here...beneath him.”

With him—Phineas is my sole champion.

“And your...”

My mother fell from a bridge four days after she had me.

“O...I’m—and...?”

Father is an enigma.

For several millimeters of the candles they embraced this silence together.

The Moon set, a waxing crescent.

She was pulled unscreaming from a doomed womb, he thought.

Ana kept glancing at the ceiling’s painting, though her light was too soft to make it anything beyond indistinct. It was the Cliffs of Moher during a storm, and Edmunn remembered from his tour that the details in the clouds—presently too dark to distinguish—were supposed to symbolize every action that had led to the birth of Aphrodite.

“Is...it...hard?”

Her eyes returned to human heights while a small right hand rose to silence his sight—then there was nothing but his own rising.

Edmunn felt at the knobs of her fingers—her pointed hand—the length and form of her arm—the cotton straps across her collarbone—her

stately neck—a burning cheek; he pressed his lips hard to hers and felt the yielding and yet unopened nature of two *Homo sapiens* souls who had no ties to greater powers save for that which was birthed between them at all instants of compliance communication and knowledge.

A palm upon his chest politely pushed him away—her left hand was writing.

His eyes had been closed.

There is an Other.

And only the night knew who.

IX

The Great Dead God lay across the clouds. Fourteen feet long and fourteen-footed It bled red rain onto the realms of Man—for it was them, so seared and scarred by their kill's discharge, who had fired the world in one hundred thousand splintered arrows high along the Star Arch which overshot all seven heavenly footholds of reality: the inklike writhing viper pits of language, the opalescent ocean of pandemonium, the unpainted canvas-colored greater plain of absence, the interlacing tubiform forests of existence, the ever-dissimilar azure æther of thought, the unchanging uncaring gem halls of time, the starless singularity of the void; over all these truths flew the Earthly volley, and those selfsame arrows who had gained sentience in flight now wept wailing while piercing Its billowing body or if missing falling through the thunder upon the disfigured heads of the beasts who had shot them—the planet was a mirror which bore no reflection of this horror and each insidious monstrous archer stared enthralled toward the ground where all were shown as handsome devils—humans—with parades in their honor through some gleaming golden city on account of their slaying what they saw as the Cyclops, whereupon each guilty warrior was gifted one million years of life and these played out over seconds before their yearning eyes in the shallows of the liquid mirror on the shores of Loch Vanity which told Man they were heroes while just inches above what was not water ball lightning roiled from burnt brain to brain and acid reigned in the smoking temples of the godfathers and the Great Dead God lay upside-down—Its chest a pincushion for the unshown Sewer of Lies—with one arm overhung such that Its index touched the Loch wherein unto the edge of this disturbance It saw Man's goodness and their showers of adoration as they recast the world in Its more specific image while bestowing upon It two pure crimson wine-ribbons which streamed forth from both downturned corners of Its holy smile. The Great Dead God was happy: Its children loved It.

X

Miss Lusk, I would be honored if no. Miss Lusk, would you do me the favor of no the great favor of worse. Miss Lusk, would you do me...

The courtesy no.

The honor no.

The privilege no.

Miss Lusk, would you give me the pleasure of accompano.

Daniel sighed; the wording would have to wait. He could pace himself and in this hall no longer. Day was failing. Mather—the good sport—had informed him was it yes an hour ago now that she was to spend the afternoon visiting Mr. Obren and his gardens and his galleries and but none of that now for beyond these two closed white and gilt-trimmed doors lay his sole chance see her alone and he was *Dan* to her and *you must* maintain momentum lest the plot cease to thicken. But something itched at his conscious conscience yes: the dream that he did not know. What was it? What darkness? What penultimate fate? What was this dread ecstasy?

Victoriyes.

Sun began to slide into the grandeur of the Evening Room. The orb rolled over the western wing imperceptibly and short shadows of mullions evolved on the floor. Placidity.

You are stalling.

Drawing breath as he entered Daniel was blasted by a gust of air from the ensuing alteration of drafts.

Victoria lounged lengthwise along the divan. French windows ten-feet-tall were open to the ground tier terrace, and through them a breeze blew sheer curtains into brushing the lean leg of the table, upon which a bowl of grapes and book sat squatly. As he traversed the room she raised her right arm from rest across her abdomen and with a precise *plck* simultaneously separated two grapes from the cluster.

“Hello, Daniel.” Her grin grew inversely to his distance from the divan. Once he had arrived at the foot of the couch she set the grapes in either side of her mouth and bit them both cleanly in half.

“...Victoria.” He sat on the end of the sloped velvet arm. *Would you be interest—*

“That can’t be enjoyable.” Her feet bounced twice on his side of the couch cushion, then pulled back towards her.

Settling deeper, he kicked her unused shoes farther under the table; they were sharing the divan: his chest faced the window and hers faced him.

She nudged his thigh with her big toe and he felt his leg melt at the boiling point of pressure. “Who were you talking to?”

“Pardon?”

“Footsteps and voices for fourteen minutes?”

“O.” Had he talked aloud? “...I was conversing with the landscaper.”

“How thoughtful; he did such fine work with the pergola.”

“Well there *was* a fine for it.”

Laughing at something doubly humorous, she kicked his leg. “*See?*”

“Where?”

“It’s not so hard to be lighthearted.”

Are you square? are you square? His thoughts darkened over the never seen parts of the past wherein all evil lurked as observed by the self for it would not could not should not be known unspoken to One by the Many a new taboo and *it was what they thought but would not tell you* stage cues which were to the actors ungiven and had he basically been in the wrong book all along?

Her head was over her left shoulder into the oncoming draft with thin irises roaming the garden and its avian crown; her right index tapped at unstuck lips.

She had not caught him brooding.

"I've decided we've cause to be more casual..."

He made sure when she looked back that his bewildered eyes said he adored her.

"Agreed?"

He said agreed. Could this be true? Two planets passing in orbits which circumnavigated Time. "I always thought we would be better closer."

She shaped a face of mock surprise bearing a subsurface grin. "And yet you said nothing to me of the sort!—why?"

Shackles of propriety.

"I...m not sure." A great weight sloughed off. "I've no idea. Everything worse than talking to you."

"So you were..."

"I was."

Elated eyes of shrinking verdancy dilated. "Implying..."

Daniel chuckled, self-discovered. "It's true," while wrapping a hand almost entirely around her ankle, his thumb beneath the knob. "It's *true*."

"Better this than—"

"Always this."

Victoria seemed touched. "Be closer to me."

It was what they thought but would not tell you. "Two nights ago—"

"Mr. Obren's party."

"The beginning: when I greeted you: something was the matter."

The psychic tunnel for her train of thought which was their current environment's reflection in her pupils widened and deepened then spilled into day: "My father tried to set me up with you just before I left."

The heavenly bodies were aligning like her toes into his lap.

They both watched them, wriggling beside themselves in the half-open air.

"You never," she looked up into him, "talked to Victor, about me, did you?"

My twenties recycled unto now. "With such schemes in mind? Never."

"That makes me feel better."

Obren's wing turned touching the edge of this System's plasma core, beckoning the solar egg back to Ra's roost.

"What were you reading?" he asked at last, once both were bathed in marigold and almost all the grapes were gone.

She was reminded of something. "O, *Antony and Cleopatra*, but I haven't opened it in hours."

"...Tell me, Victoria."

"Haven't you rea—"

"Not about the play."

Hers saw what his were saying: *Let me in. Let this One—this Wright—in.*

Fragility became her. "I saw the *Magnum Corpus* today..."

“O.”

“...and vomited in the gallery’s washroom.”

“It’s a loveless thing.”

“It made me think of my *father*.”

And then he recognized it all within her.

With biscuit and bended knee *Wooz̄h-Wooz̄h-Wooz̄h*.

Share—your whole self.

“We can’t focus on only the darkness, Victoria.” Each utterance of it reduced the imposing eldritch outline. “There is much to be found in the brighter parts of our lives. Look at those and realize that none of the darker matters—but I guess that means something else to you—”

The young Lusk laughed.

“—of the mind are connected. Even slivers of if nothing else the absence of the Dark are found.” He was holding her ankle harder. “We are...starlit in night as well as day. Beauty must be made.”

“Thank you,” she whispered with a palm on the crook of his arm.

Birds sang in the dying light.

“This music...” She saw him. “Were you ever in a choir?”

“Octaves and I never got along—you?”

“He always told me I had the voice of a writer. *Très français*.”

“I think you have the voice of a queen.”

Victoria gave him a glance he had not seen. “Would you like to see me be one?”

“You are one, but yes.”

Taking the picked-at cluster from out the bowl, she leant back on the divan such that her bending knees rose to his chin. Then, dramatically, with her audience under scrutiny, the cluster dipped into her open and awaiting humored mouth, after every pass rising missing the lowest-hanging fruit.

“Come to my woodland, with me.”

She sat up, knees bent, body closer to his than it had ever been before. “I will: two days’ time.”

There was only the watching of the other while gravity bent the last light towards them.

Looking at the shadow of her nose, he remembered: “The photons do not distinguish between our minds.”

Her soul sung visually. “Kiss your queen?”

“Yes.” Uncallused fingers anchored two tips behind her lobeless ears; it was infeasible to describe their mouths as any distance away save with units of time. “But you must tell me: why now?”

“Because it will always be now hence if not now then never.”

So in the silhouette of a reading room when day waltzed with night amid the surfacing stars two lost people shared unspeaking the utter secrets of their being which emerged from deep inside themselves to manifest in skins and cells that let no medium come between them like opposite oceans whose tops were touching and who to all others would seem a single body of water but Daniel knew he finally felt the flawless lips of Victoria Ophelia Lusk.

XI

and the flying starlings composed themselves like so many particles whose paths could be predicted by some unsolved cousin of the Schrödinger equation but yet never known for unlike the fatalistic chaos of the nonliving Universe these happy agents chose their motions and drastic changes of direction and—

“How’s the heroine today?”

Mr. Weir’s slow-forming figure strode toward her through the morning mists that clouded the wet lawns leading up to blurry Xanadu. He wore a white cotton button-down smeared with myriad paints and no pants.

“Don’t answer that. I know how you’re doing if you’re up and out and listening to me.”

Victoria leant against the rail at the edge of this building one could not see the base of, waiting for the artist’s arrival.

City lights beneath the clouds caused them all to glow with a surreal luminescence that permeated up to the thinnest, topmost wisps. Blinking bland oranges and blues underlit the mist about them but were sheared off any higher as was the fog by encroaching dawn, of which the starlings and fading stars were harbingers.

There was a cigarette of some sort in his mouth and he stopped five feet away to indicate her with just his forearm. “Maybe I will start calling you Vicky”—*come speak with me*—“from now on if that’s not weird.”

“My father called me that until I was twelve.”

“Vic it is then.” He approached the rail. “You’re not a Tori.”

She refused to respond while he produced fire from his breast pocket and the Earth spun into the last day before she left with Daniel.

It was *not* tobacco.

“O come off it, nose-wrinkler,” with a mouthful of smoke. “Don’t tell me you’re not all hopped up on—”

“My prescription.”

Edmunn’s rusted eyes were the avatars of boredom as his hands joined to make a symbol: □

“Did pearls prescribe the borders of your box as well?”

Pearls? Nacre-buttoned and low for the “Parles: Dr. Parles.”

“O well.” Disinterested, he gazed at the plunging clouds that shed themselves all over the unseen city only alluded to. “Either way...”

She would see him tomorrow.

“The fairy’s doctored you up quite nicely, hasn’t he?”

“You’re nasty, and it’s my unwanted medicinal regimen.”

“*Unwanted?* Don’t lie. I’m sure it says to take two shoeless at dawn right on the bottle.”

“And *you?* with your lack of trousers like some rebuff of the only society that spoils you.”

“See? *Now* we’re making progress.”

“Don’t emulate the archbitchop.”

His expression altered. “I would never; weren’t you at that dinner?”

“No.”

Edmunn observed her unobtrusively for many moments before offering up the misused censer, bobbing it into its own discharge such that

an undisturbed O rose through the colored mist between them. “All right Vic: what gives?”

“Not that. No thank you.”

He dragged himself back to basics. “Says the drug-laced girl.”

“It helps me be who I *am*.”

“As does everything by the definition of actions. Name one thing that would not become you.”

While she thought, he seemed to also about some unanticipated angle of his sentence.

“I can’t,” she answered.

He exhaled harshly. “Why is everyone so—”

“No.” She took it, this time unoffered. “I can’t name anything,” inbreath pending.

“Nor can I. Deeper. Hold.”

Amist the outbreadth Victoria felt her two selves shivering and saw Edmunn see her, bearing concern.

“It worked.” Some say the basis of energy.

“Now that that’s done, let us discuss.” He touched her fingers taking it. “I only came outside once I saw you here, but that doesn’t explain *your* presence.”

“The night didn’t sleep.”

“Why not?”

“Your *Magnum Corpus*, yesterday.”

“And?”

“I’m terrified.”

“Of?”

“Myself.”

“No one else would say that to me.”

“I don’t want to be a beast.”

“We are the mirror.”

Aqueous vapor clung to them, invisibly known. Everything seemed rather far away.

“The lights are pale, pulsing petals.”

Letting her speak, he stepped closer to listen.

“Sometimes, I like to look at the air near my fingers; you can see the barest disturbance of a cloud—an ocular trick but I like to imagine them as electron clouds, like macroscopic realizations of the Truth nobody will ever see or feel—hovering and shifting around, almost an aura, or radiance of being.”

She saw she was the atoms’ apple of Edmunn’s eye.

“So much empty space...” Vic pressed his buttons. “You could almost push your whole self into it.”

His hands lay on either trapezius. “This world wasn’t made for people like us.”

“The world was not made for anyone.”

He pulled her into him.

“There’s ano—”

“I don’t care.”

XII

His bridge extended—the second one.

She stood beside him.

They had just made a past about the newly antiquated Wright Cathedral and its restrained Gothic glory: flying buttresses forming grounded arcades, high tracery windows keystoneed by oculi (he merely mentioned the inner ogives), majestic window-walls of the Tower Library supporting the spire, and of course the hedge maze that had been planted over the landing pad.

“It is the locus of my life,” he had decided to say.

She must have thought the groundskeeper—hired by Mather—was incredibly apt, for often on the tour she had admired the lawn, the maze, and the ashes.

Daniel wrote a mental note to tip him.

KLUNG was steel’s statement when the skyway was done, both locks fastened. Thick snarls of every tree like Edmunn’s unkempt hair her color made it hard to see just a few feet in passed the snaking ferrous fence and the berry bushes as they two alone crossed the bridge into Daniel Wright’s nurtured nature that bore no birds of paradise but was populated instead by mammals and what insects or songbirds had found their way there.

“I’m glad you wore your riding clothes,” her host said. “There are no paths once we’re inside.”

Over roots and moss-drunk grass beneath the canopy and more muffled sounds of the city they came quickly to one of those “quaint log cabins”—she would be told later there were nine and two-halves rooms—whose timbers were not too old but too plentiful to have been grown here, for the cabin was a vertical thing with graven cantilevers holding a jettied second story into which a deck was set below the odd third floor gable, its façade flush with the deck’s missing fourth wall but its back sliding away at forty-five degrees into the rest of the rusticity.

It was where they were staying.

After their luggage had been deposited in the main area that overlooked the pond and he had told her not to worry about picking which room was hers just yet, Victoria mentioned she might walk in the woods.

O—how he wanted to go, but knew he had to give her space.

Daniel acquiesced and out she went.

More time for me, he thought, with She disappearing into the foliage through these diamond muntins as I stand at the sink where Father cleaned the little ones red running into drains while Mom read me *Redwall* and *Watership Down* in the Longboat Loft behind yes there it is above those windows where daylight slunk in underneath me all those mornings like when they were out and I played by myself setting sail to release my seamen raiders on the world or many years before when I carved “D + V” unknowing the meaning save being told we would be friends Mom got mad

or not long afterward after the *Woozb-Woozb-Woozb* when I lay in the bow with his bow for days while Earth's colors slid by and Mather was the spectre that kept me alive through the Dark Ages as in the beginning making sure the "Viking Prince" ate his stew always was a good sport with every sport I tried to play and They never came together on how to "bring him up" but gave me heads and tails of a single coin with vertigo as you transcend a side and just before it was too late to hate concealing the feeling that I was neither side rather the narrow edge of it all rolling on command and wonder how She feels on the only side of Victor's seal but there are perks to being a goddess amongst men like no man's ever stood before the flowers deciding how much She was worth for She owned the flower shop or her father did does the florist while She was *is* the flower the offering the aspect the avatar.

He thought a lot while she was gone.

Cardinals deliberated in the bushes.

Why haven't you said anything?

Victoria wandered somewhere through this miniature forest semi-pleased to be alone with her prescription, trying to engorge the minor details so as not to remember.

Because, my dear, these words are useless.

Blueberries grew beside the brook, barren.

They matter to me.

How much of Earth had been set atop this skyscalpel? What did it look like to the Otherworldly Observers? Had the metal fingers of Man punched from out this hollow globe overnight, with what small traces of natural order remained simply the debris too insignificant to be shrugged off of fingertips? The unclean fingernails of technology. Or had the bacteria cultures of humanity built slowly year by year, shaping its own passage into greatness and at the end of such period unsettling but rather cultivating ancient laurels for our fastigia?

They may impact you now, but all courses remain unchanged.

Either way (she had to see him tonight), this sliver of Nature-in-Man's-image contained only one and a half humans who for some lacking reverberations within the All felt slightly less than that to her.

You didn't want your daughter to know?

To live in a world where the trees in eternal stead were sentient...

This is all very presumptuous. I didn't know.

Sung-spoken, the unintelligible language of the cardinals sounded akin to crying.

You knew.

And each lit leaf of the forest was a different green dome under which their stories could have thrived so many stories above the planet's surface.

Just like you knew they would not accept me.

The water was a distorted mirror and through the unliving image of her twisting flowing face she saw the pebbles of the bottom.

What am I to say to that? You applied under two different names.

Fish too small to eat swam in the liquid world they could not see.

The names I use are useless since you published my genetic code.

With copyrights.

She closed the cap on the Euphetamin.

But why did you have to make me into your publicity?

Because, my dear, I made you.

Then she saw the water: not the photons which passed through them or the objects they bore but each singular molecule that held no sway in the way it was carried unto its recycled end like all its other brothers beside it and each one was not unique but their arrangement in motion and what they left for the one behind them like the energies inherent were what made them a thing, a brook, a stream.

It all just floated by, still floating. Each momentous particle was Just and True and floated by.

She was unsure how long she'd sat there, but now a fawn downstream broke through the bracken and settled on its knees to quench its thirst within an eddy.

Victoria wanted to commune with it, this real creature that held her image of almost black and white inside the corner of its eye.

When she stood it stopped drinking, watching her with a timeless mind.

Boots broke the surface and caused razorlike ripples to disrupt her reflection.

She approached and it fled hence led her onward and she could not lose it—not this too—so picked up speed across the bushes and brambles which ripped her clothes and she heard soft punches in the moss with it bounding away like a pen being pushed too hard through parchment so she was sprinting at the thing and running after but what she thought was with it and all the unnamed distinct shades of green from differing angles toward the Sun were a blend a wash like an emerald river with waves that reflected the intangibility of light for it flowed too fast as she forgot herself feeling the fight-or-flight of her quarry but she was not the hunter—the hunted—and within this soul transference she began to fear what it was that was not chasing them like a carnivorous god-hand with teeth of nails absent-mindedly allowing their panic to do circles on its closing palm and then they both were out of the woods in the open swath before the fence as high as she was here they would *no* for the fawn did not stop in mortal terror and to it she was the hand of Man as it bounded unbound over the iron circumference and in this monolithic mortification the wingless creature that had fled her soared while the ever-present clouds somehow aware of these happenings reached up their curling tendrils to accept what was her unwitting offering amidst the gravity of their opacity and then the fawn was gone.

She could not bring herself to return for hours.

“O, hello. Nap in th—what happened?”

“I...”

“Here: it’s tea. Now tell me Truth.”

“I...”

“Was someone here?—*Weir?*”

“Wh—No please put down your bow.”

“But look at you.”

“We’re not endangered.”

“Then tell me Truth.”

“It was me. I did it.”
 “To yourself?”
 “I was running chasing it and and and—”
 “There there, you’re in shock with thorns in your side and your blouse
 in ribbons.”
 “Red-handed.”
 “O did you yes some cuts there too I’ll draw some water while you
 change.”
 “...”
 “All right, here we—...”
 “...”
 “Where are your other clothes?”
 “I don’t want them.”
 “Nonsense, we must clean you up.”
 “Please, Daniel: I don’t want any—”
 “Shhhh.”
 “Ow.”
 “Yes the soap might sting. Roll up those sleeves.”
 “Ow. Ouch.”
 “Heavens: you have them all over. We might need to...here, sit up.”
 “...”
 “Are you all right with this?”
 “Yes.”
 “Raise those arms. There you are.”
 “Ow ow not so hard.”
 “All right. Take off your boots. How are your legs?”
 “Weary.”
 “Yes some cuts across those too. I don’t want to make you do—”
 “...”
 “...”
 “This one hurts.”
 “All right. Can you roll on your side?”
 “There are cuts on the other.”
 “Then just lie down. Yes. Just like that.”
 “Ow ow owow.”
 “Hey. Hey. It’s all right.”
 “I’m so sorry just a *stupid* girl and—”
 “You’re nothing of the sort.”
 “...”
 “More like first last rays of day.”
 “...”
 “This water’s murky. I’ll—”
 “Let it lie.”
 “...”
 “Please just watch the sunset with me.”
 “All right. Here. Lift up your legs.”
 “You can hold my hand if you don’t touch the cuts.”
 “...”
 “It casts their shadows far across us.”
 “Like it does these buildings.”
 “Tell me something as real as those colors?”
 “...Even before you were born, I knew we’d be together.”

“Don’t lie.”
 “Certainly not. Here. Up they go.”
 “...”
 “I’m not mad. Up.”
 “Where are you—”
 “Just up there. Can you climb?”
 “You may need to help me.”
 “Here: take my hand. There you are.”
 “This is cozy.”
 “It’s the Longboat Loft.”
 “O yes: the mast.”
 “But look: right here.”
 “So worn away...”
 “I wrote that with my father’s knife when I was seven.”
 “Dan...”
 “...”
 “...”
 “Now *you* must tell me something.”
 “I...my AsCan application was declined, twice.”
 “Let me help you.”
 “You can’t. It’s part of who I am, or am not.”
 “I purchased Astral Astrobio yesterday.”
 “What?”
 “I own it. Let me give you Space.”
 “O—...”
 “...”
 “Take this—”
 “Yes.”
 “Ow, watch—”
 “Of course, sorry.”
 “...”
 “Here; trade me.”
 “...”
 “...”
 “...”
 “Your eyes. This hair.”
 “I’m comfortable here.”
 “...”
 “...”
 “*Victoria*, I—”
 “No. Don’t speak it.”
 “I must.”
 “You mustn’t.”
 “Language is all I have...all I am.”
 “You have me also. Are me also.”
 “*Yes*.”
 “No.”
 “You are so very dear to me.”
 “...”
 “...”
 “No no please no.”
 “All right.... All right.”

The rest was carefully controlled breaths dying away in sound amidst the suddenness of sleep.

She woke at noon to distant shouting. He was sleeping.
Daniel's butler stood at the unextended bridge. His tuxedo was disheveled. He began to cross before the thing was finished.
"Mather! what are you doing?"
"Apologies, sir. I have grave news for the lady."
She knew—O, she knew: "Then he is..."
The grimmest of visages confirmed this.
"Was it his heart?"
"It was...another's."
"...?"
Daniel scowled. "What the hell is this about?"
"*Sir*... Victor Lazarus Lusk has been shot in the head."
Her world spun in

II

I

Still awake without thought, Victoria watched the great globe itself rotate again into dawn.

Rising.

Arisen.

A swallow flew into the hollow hearth-heart of its tree, mornlit.

It was after noon.

Strangers would come to console her consigned soul soon, of course—they had to.

But she did not want them.

This would be the she did not know what day in a row of condolences.

Only Tara, who had wept for three days before returning to work, was welcome.

Phineas Obren was always first, and had not yet worn the same black suit. Today's was jet, double-breasted with a peaked lapel.

"He deserved to die a violent death,' how...melodramatic—and unknowledgeable—that David Machin is." Obren stood at the window, his back to her. "A distraught father, true—tragedies all around—but an utter philosophical kumquat." He checked his nails. "The world is better with him in custody. Justice shall be served in time."

"Two eyes have already been taken: someone's blind."

"I side with you, dear: let justice serve him *with* time."

"Time his daughter will never have..."

"O hush about that. A horrendous misfortune that some suicidal fawn landed on her head—yes—but she could have been struck by lightning or—"

If I was Zeus.

"—hit by a taxi. Who would Machin have killed then, *hmm?* Someone. That much is certain. You mustn't eat your own children over it."

She hadn't eaten anything over it.

"Regardless, I dropped by—sorry—to let you know as the executor of Victor's estate that things are coming together. It is a little like you said: the man made some bountifully obscure donations, but he *did* leave you this fine brownstone, the grounds—"

"I don't want them."

"*These* grounds, dear (which happen to implicate the building, also). He returned that half of the Wright estate to the family—Daniel, rather."

"O." Let me seduce you with your property.

"He's a squishy little boy, Victoria: be easy on him."

"I'm sure."

"I am."

He liberated an apple from one of the untouched gift baskets, which were starting to look like the central study of *The Six Births of Matrimony*.

Every day, at varying times, Edmunn August Weir kept her silent company for the duration of his cigarette.

She did not ask and he did not offer.

Then he would muss her hair, say, “Life is Death,” and leave.

Daniel Wright was sobbing. Again.

“You m-m-must understand my humiliation and sh-*shame*”—groping at her dress—“but Victor was so kind and good like a second well third after Mather father to m-me—”

“It’s all right.”

“*No* he only bought the building at my b-behest and I was just too proud to tell anyone like a spoilt—”

“Stop. Just...no.”

He stood.

“I’m sorry if my grief and guilt offends you.”

“It’s all right.”

“Perhaps I’m remembering too vividly when my own father—”

“Everyone already knows his story with the helicopter.”

“Well my unmentioned mother suffered the same awful fate.”

“...I never had a mother, Daniel.”

After a few more minutes he went away.

“How’s the dosage?”

Simon Parles was diligently comparing the pulses of her wrist and jugular, while checking her pupils over the tops of his half-moons.

“Adequate.”

“You mean mediocre.”

“Can’t you—”

“Circumstance alone makes people rejoice at the dead.”

Why was death the cue for platitudes?

“And Victor was much better than that.”

Perhaps to other humans.

“At least he was prepared—if for a different reason. He seemed to know he was reaching the end of something.” The doctor dropped her hand into her lap and removed his fingers from her neck. Maintaining eye contact, however, he seemed to consider something within himself. “Come to the after-launch party at Mr. Wright’s tomorrow evening?”

She snorted. “I’ll pass.”

“Society as a whole would dearly love it. *I*—”

The clouds’ curling tendrils. “Didn’t you sell that company to him? Why are *you* even going? You made your money.”

“Because I wish him well.”

“I don’t.”

Parles checked his new gold watch. “While I can see such, it is my suspicion that, within other contexts, you do.”

“What could I possibly gain by going back to *Wright Cathedral*?”

“Fresh air, for one. You could give Tara a chance to clear away these tasteless spoils.” A hand rested on her knee. “You could see your *friends*, Victoria, outside this...poisonous prison of sorrow.”

She did not add her expected response.

Patting the cap, Simon rose like a tardy October flower. He gave her another look beneath the open mahogany portal, and placed the container of tomorrow’s Euphetamin on a dresser.

Dusk: Alice was holding her hand.

The world darkened, and in this currently candleless bedroom Victoria could hear her lone guest sniffing.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into him.”

Robert Quincy Darden had not visited her once.

And something which didn’t feel like it aligned with reality was telling her she very much wanted to see him.

There were lips on her forehead.

II

Everyone was sitting beneath the grandiose and overarching structure of the nave; it had been converted into a dining hall.

How many dress-up dinners was he going to have to go to?

She'd come too: surprising—kind of.

Wright was about to give some speech regarding a company he'd bought, so Edmunn, knowing they were in for a long haul—O, ha—had repositioned the caviar closer to himself.

This being Wright's party, he was nowhere near the head of the table.

"Friends and colleagues..."

Christ: conventional.

"...today is not a celebration of my success—"

Uh-huh.

"—or even of Mr. Parles' and my collaboration. It is a day of contemplation..."

How much is too much caviar? it all fits on the bread so *mmm*.

"...a day for considering the lengths that Man will go—the trials that he will endure—"

Isn't Zeus II a robot?

"—to protect and ensure his bounteous continuum—"

There must always be a middleman.

"—in the face of the infinite dark which we have, as of yet—as a species—"

What about other species?

"—foiled."

O like leftovers.

"It falls to us..."

Stepping on Vic's orphaned toes.

"Not just Man as a race alone with the...technological force of will to explore the deeper heavens, but to us as a gathering—those here with the financial and social faculty to *motivate* humanity—to exude from within ourselves what *will* push people forward, what *will* make the masses realize what matters, what—"

And Wright went on in this manner for far too long to listen.

The oratorical appetizer was a monstrous success.

Phineas, particularly, seemed as though he had never heard better: gleaming insides rapt with smiles.

Seated at the head of his table, with Miss Lusk to his right and Mr. Obren to his left, and with the cognac-glazed *foie gras* in fig reduction being set before his guests, Daniel felt...harmonious.

Weir was being a...sport, at least, seated far enough down so as to not inculcate any misconception about this being the umpteenth meal in his honor. A curiously off-put version of Mr. Robbendry was opposite him.

No matter: this was Daniel's eve. The Wright time.

He had even had the sophrosyne to invite the Dardens. Yes. Show them they're welcome.

Considerate host that he was, they had been placed such that the Mr. sat beside Miss Lusk, and the Mrs. beside him—across from Simon, who had brought a quite tall and untalkative date.

Mrs. Robert Darden destabilized her eyebrows above the plate. “Um. Is this...?”

Breath, breath; gallantry: “Indeed, Alice—but ruffle no feathers over it: these livers are from Genetic Synthetics, the steatosis chemically induced.”

“I feared so.”

“It is all in good taste, I assure you. In fact, y—Robert helped the flavor chemists ensure similar effects to that of corn feeding.”

“It’s true.” Mr. Darden’s fork struck straight out of the *entrée*—he was staring at it.

The man’s inexplicable gloom was surpassed only by Victoria, who had not yet touched her utensils.

Hostly horror: the Unfun.

Quick, with an undercutting philosophical fundament: “Though I may propose—*propose*, that we can never convey within our ways any experiential sensations to others. The taste of a goose’s liver especially.”

Phineas Alice and Victoria all looked at him.

“Forever misinterpreted,” said this list’s terminus: most Pythic of the seers. “The glancing unknown—unpenetrated.”

“Forever in good faith,” he replied. Mr. Wright—he was so, here—balanced his knife keenly on an open palm. “Don’t you see, Victoria, that it would be a futile endeavor for me to attempt any verification that what you perceive here and call *knife* is, in fact, that same thing which I observe?” For I am trapped within your deciduous soul rings. “Color is probably the best example. Take greens:—” Weir snickered. “—only the word, and those things which are, can describe it. In this way Green is similar to Good.” Yes. It was.

“I see it before my eyes,” Phineas said. He swept both arms—palms forward—outwardly before his face. “*The Ethics of Color: Painting a Metaphysical World.*”

Weir made an unheard comment.

“I may have to use that in my next essay.” Daniel’s head spun left to right, his attention tethered to Victoria. *We to I.*

Her Green orbs hovered over the thing, unblinking. “Don’t let it slith—”

“Hm?” He realized he couldn’t remember what she had started saying.

“Don’t let it slip—a sharp blade like that...”

To think he *actually* couldn’t control a single object...

“Forever in *self*-faith,” Weir said.

Everyone turned to him, away from their host.

Twirling an erect knife longitudinally between his index and the reduction, the poor painter went on: “We cannot know what others sense, or even know whether there is some silent race outside our own that sees this world in some light doubly unimaginable.”

Phineas tightened his ascot.

“The premise and pretense that all our perceptions are similar only ensures that each individual won’t feel as though they’re drowning in an isolated insanity.”

Hems and *has* began to circulate throughout his guests. They were forgetting him while Weir fabricated his curtain of lies. It was a

confrontation. Fight or plight. He must say something—no, *the* thing: to rise above.

“Nothing is constructed negatively, Mr. Weir. Not even the ebon reaches of outer spacetime.”

Victoria Lusk and meaningless others returned to his eyes.

“I find cynicism breeds narcissism. How could one not consider themselves the ultimate if everything else is unworthy, impure, or unknown to them?”

“It’s not so simple,” said the artist.

My eyebrows feel as though they’re making the most critical of shapes.

“I have here but a merely half-full glass of wine.”

They all glanced at their drinks but no a fast misdirection must be made yes guide it all and them away from *him*.

Daniel leant on his left elbow, exuding disinterest in Weir’s statement. “Phineas, your rise has been triumphant: tell us a little of your success?”

Thinking, before speaking, Mr. Obren realigned his hawk’s-head cane so as never to fall over where it was propped against his seat. “Victoria, you’re a bright girl; do you think we could receive a formal definition of energy?”

She was engaged. “A scalar quantity of the ability to affect and change matter: what is altered and transferred by work.”

Phineas Obren held up his hands, indicating everyone. “You see? It cannot be seen. It cannot be lost—simply...*appropriated*.”

Victoria’s moving lips and tongue without the addition of her vocal chords mouthed “Paths to the reals...”

Alone, Daniel thought he heard her.

Obren went on: “It cannot be felt. Its results and conversions alone are observable. It binds everything. It *is* everything. Our unknowable and omnipresent from which, through its shapes and arrangements, constitutes being.”

There was a hallowed pause.

“And there you have it. Well, there I do.”

Dinner was over; thank whomever-this-imitation-cathedral-called-god.

Others had gone up to the galleries—tribunes, whathaveyou—and their additional stories or passages, while a few had stepped outside the scene, to the grounds.

Silent servants cleared the table. Their noiseless collection of plates, etcetera, left the not-quite-*so*-high ribbed vaulting wanting for echoes.

Within the ambulatory—a gallery in and of itself—Edmunn meandered quietly with Quin.

The plump pharmacologist removed a Euphetamin capsule from his platinum pill case, and ingested.

Edmunn’s mind was heavy with *Victor Lazarus Lusk is dying* and *blackmailed* and *sold me up the River Styx* and everything Quin would not share.

“We are nearing the end,” this morose billionaire said.

“Of only this passage.”

Quin half laughed. “It’s all a gimmick—a façade—you know.”

“I know.”

“How much?”

Victor Lazarus Lusk is blackmailed up the River Styx. “At your party...”

“Yes, when I told you of Obren.”

“I—”

“But did I *also* tell you of the refined Mr. Daniel Wright, and *his* heritage?”

“I...no.”

Quin gazed down the entire length of the nave, then pulled Edmunn into an apsidal chapel. “Our world—or one before our own—has seen fit to favor the Wrights. Daniel’s great-great-grandfather was the sole winner of a lottery of some eight hundred million dollars.”

“And...”

“And that’s the story. Five—well, four—generations of good investments later, here they are.”

Edmunn could feel his face of disgust.

“It is not so uncommon or profane, Mr. Weir. My own father, R. R. Darden, has put billions into Euphetamin. I owe him everything.”

Quin would not share. “Listen: I overheard you and Parles at *The Gates of Hell*. I—”

Robert Darden began to leave him: “You will never speak to me of that or ever mention it again.”

Tall were the ashes.

Outside the maze, they swayed slowly in the wind.

Victoria watched them.

Infinitely vectored, each branch and limb took different paths over the course of its life back into the soil.

She might like her remains to be scattered in a lunar crater.

The grass where she sat at a maze mouth was smooth, almost bladeless, trimmed short by many people she did not know the names of.

Her dress and the hedge were nearly identical. Some of her hair had been caught in the leaves.

She just wanted to go *home*. Maybe she—

Someone appeared from beneath the archivolt: Mr. Obren, with his ashplant, in a terra cotta three-piece and paisley ascot.

Perhaps she would greet him, or at least call him over.

No: he was headed toward the bridge, inobservant, where a shadow—who was that?—approached across.

O, Anastasia.

She held a missive.

Beneath the right of the two sentrees she presented it to him, and after the reading Obren set the letter in his inner pocket and dotingly kissed Ana’s cheek.

But then both her hands were on his face as was her face in a lovelike flurry and the hawk head hit the ground while he tried to resist her and she pulled at his lapels despite him being stronger with a single hand high upon her breastbone fingertips on either collarbone and now his elbow was unbent as he completely unsettled scanned wildly about the grounds for anyone who saw but did not notice Victoria and so with a moving mouth spoke unheard words while Anastasia touched his stomach and brushed away her tears amid the last blue light of Today.

“Everything is in order, sir.”

The man’s face was a calm wash of bearded planes and unworried concern, assuring Daniel that the mansion and the evening were secure.

“Thank you, Mather—truly.”

“Of course, Mr. Wright. Would you wish I call your guests?”

The Sacristy Lounge was empty, save for the two of them.

Desserts were melting.

“No, I believe they are fairly dispersed. Have these cooled until we reconvene?”

“Certainly.”

“I may go to the Tower Library: see who’s there, who’s not.”

“Fine idea.”

Daniel picked himself up from a silken settee, and left the r—

“Sir...”

“Yes?”

“It is my estimation that all your guests have had an excellent evening.”

Dust from the air stung at his eye. “Thank you, Mather.”

Climbing the spiraling steps of the Tower some slow minutes later he wondered why it had all been so unfair for him: the deer, Machin, Victor’s murder; Victoria had stopped loving him if she ever had at that exact moment she found out everything had always been hers, including the Loft where they had almost and he had lain for days after the final *Danny boy* and most likely yes this grief was changing her and he should be more sympathetic not often asking how she was though *a fan if I did* the last time he tried to but just a coincidence on account of Phineas being there and it could very well all be a matter of Daniel’s insensitivity.

Impulse visited the recesses of his mind.

Stopping briefly on these stairs, Daniel Wright removed his shoes.

Socks, also? Yes socks also.

And the stone was hard yet imperceptibly yielding and not exactly cold but cool on his soles which felt where they were worn away by those culprits of the past who had probably been his earlier shoes that had rarely been taken off inside from so many years in so many stone homes.

The shadow of an unknown pleasure floated in mid-spiral his way. Sound waves. Voices.

His guess as to which guests were as good as any.

Ascending with no sound of his own Daniel neared the Tower’s second story where was heard through the cracked door a font of mingling words—both carefully measured—from the light yet cavernous cadence of Phineas Obren and the more resonant and bubbling rhythms of Robert Darden. But both were strained.

“Come come, *Robert*.”

“Call me Darden.”

“On what grounds?”

“On every ground.”

“You are on none.”

“Then what is it you want this time?”

“To give you what is *yours*.”

“That’s a big bush you just beat around.”

“Very well. It is really the simplest thing: only a matter of writing it down. Let Obren Energy power your factories.”

“...”

“This business collaboration will make any transfer of funds between our subsidiaries—particularly large ones—much more innocuous.”

“Then you will give me what is mine?”

“Then I will give you what was his, among other things I won’t do.”

“That you could even use a father’s death this way...”

A dramatic gasp. “*Sir!* Your father is alive and well. And anyone *could*, I believe *would* is what you were—”

“You devil.”

“...Alas, I am only human—and not a lass, at that. Perhaps I am even less than this, and am merely a universal result—or consequence as you might see it—caused by your years of inaction. I am the effect. *You* were the one who chose to make and perceive it negatively. I might also point out that I am ensuring your...back alley inheritance.”

“You’re insuring something. That much is true.”

“Do not antagonize those who would be your allies. It is the nature of relationships for both involved parties to seek something, and it is the nature of humanity that those two somethings will never be one thing.”

“If you ever harm my sister...”

“Your half-sister, Robert. Let’s cultivate precision.”

“Regardless—”

“Or with much regard.”

“Just leave Victoria *alone*.”

As Daniel Wright slunk upward past this sliver-thin door crack into the higher regions of the Tower, he thought of how the vacuum seal over whatever misshapen foreboding and bilious jar that had held the Reality of the Past was ripped wide open.

At the center of the maze, smoke-shrouded, Edmunn contemplated everything yet nothing in particular: how to best represent a hedge, what a hedge could represent, the concept of a maze, why humans would want one, what types of clouds those were with us above the ones below, why there wasn’t a gazebo or some other folly as the rat cheese here at the center hence end, what to do in a follyless hedge maze if it rained, what path he’d taken in, if he’d have to take the same path out, if he was even talking to himself about the same non-metaphorical paths anymore, if he was even talking to only himself—

“Edmunn, hi.”

“O, Vic. Hey.” She wore a dark sage knee-length with all those lacy distractions they apparently like, and gold trim. “What’s your story?”

“I was lost.”

“Not lost now.”

“No.”

“I’m—you know—glad you got out.”

“We’re in the middle of it.”

“O, I mean—”

“O. No philosophy for me this time?”

“Mmm...here?”

“O.K.”

“Good.” Day began to divest its spectrum upon the mansion and the tower and the sky. They had no shadows. “So...anything interesting happen for you tonight?”

“I saw Anastasia try to kiss Mr. Obren.”

“What.”

There is an Other.

“I said I—”

“No: more details.”

“We won’t go into it if—”

“O. No, I meant *more details*.”

“O.” Vic chuckled? “She gave him a note and when he went to kiss her cheek—”

“He did that?”

“Yes when he did that she grabbed his face and started kissing him but he seemed terrified of her or of her doing that and pushed her away then she cried a little. It was sad.”

“What else?”

“They kept touching afterwards, which I was confused by.”

“What kind of touching?”

Victoria took Edmunn’s hand and placed it just above her chest, with his thumb in her suprasternal notch. “Hold there.” Then she put her hands on his abdomen. “This kind of touching.”

They stood just like this in the place where either a gazebo or folly could have easily been set by more romantic hands and minds until he kissed her for the second excellent time.

Why was Daniel the One who had to have seen them?

He threw a two hundred-year-old book across the room.

It broke its spine.

In the highest eye of the Tower Library with dusk as his reading light it was *him* who had to see them: had to see her place his hands and hers and the stupid way he just stepped forwards without leaning being a short little wretch and grabbing at her carefully updone locks as if his passionless lust wanted anything more than to dishevel them and how her hands went around his neck like they had wrapped round mine and how when he picked her up she was taller than him like some romantic farce and how and how and how I’m *forced* to remember *exactly* all the sickly sinister angles of their arms and legs yet hers unlifting perhaps there’s something there but every tainted possibility was now colored by this memory that I cannot force myself to cease making out like a triple carousel of nightmare steeds that will not stop spinning going faster and faster with their black fire blending into a single hideous frozen image that makes me want to

His vomit flowed down the stone spiral stairwell.

Would it be better not to know?

To see or not to see.

But ignorance is this.

Having let Vic go home, Edmunn sat completely contented by his unlonely lonesome on a bench in one of the maze's dead ends.

There was some feistiness within her.

Especially on the tip of her tongue; O, that tongue.

The way she—

“There you are.”

Wright stood at Edmunn's only exit. Fists clenched. Back straight. In his fuming eyes there was never any love to be lost in the—

O, then he had seen.

How interesting.

“Daniel. Judging from yo—”

“I'm the judge here.”

“...I take it you were in your glass *Tower* a while ago, and now want to throw some stones? But bad news: I've already been—”

“What did you do, promise to paint her portrait?”

“I don't think Vic—” Use her whole name. “—toria would like how I envision her. But continue the chase; she may just turn into your laurels.”

“That's appalling.”

“I thought it was a...daft knee slapper.”

Wright glared at him while he finished his ample cigarette—slowly—and then left Edmunn well enough alone.

Victoria walked home through the glimmer-fading ember-glowing twilight on fire reminiscing of her Weir's soft but concentrated contemplative kisses and each one a new angelic angle like when he was letting her be above him and getting to feel with both his more pointed upper lip and with just barely open mouths rubbing their ribbed and rocky tips against each other with gradually more force directly along the dot product with so much thought in them they made her wonder what he was thinking as in a plan or a rehearsal and over such a small surface area unlike Wright's sweeping plunging physical gestures that left no flux mistaken all along her hot neck and ears his tongue running from Marathon to Athens and how he bends her over backwards a controlling handle on her jaw with his whole arm supporting her spine and when mouths came apart like floodgates sometimes even upside-down tops and bottoms and tops and tops and spinning circles knowing it was the last thing that manboy wanted to do before he O father who can't come back for tonight was a ruse of forgetfulness like a happy dream but now at dusk it is morning.

She saw the Dardens.

Alice began speaking to Quin—who had simply been courteously unengaging with Victoria at dinner—before he said a single phrase to her and started walking over.

She wondered what it would be about but when he neared she saw Quin's cheeks were wet and he would not look away from seeing her really like Alice had said but why her with her breathing ragged and a sticky stinging throat.

He grasped her hand. “Vicky.” Tears were on his.

They were together a tremulous and rainy night. “Rob.”

“There are...no words.”

III

He had one hour; sixty minutes; three thousand five hundred and ninety nine eight seven six five four three seconds.

Edmunn had less than an hour and his precursory letter gets returned with some *the lady does not wish to be disturbed* bull—I'll disturb her.

The world needs a good disturbing.

Now *hub* this sure might be a good time to *text* Vic. A simple *tap tap tap* before satellite relays beam it at her like a god-fingered word gun and each keystroke is ready to be knowledge alive though if she even chose to own a word-of-god receiver would she leave it on and with her? I suppose these footmen *do* get paid. By the world's wealthiest. Perhaps a bit of privacy without who knows whose satellite relays and a bit of intimate persistency with a well-paid lackey banging on the door all day. But some doors simply need to be opened. Propriety has these people running laps like chained cats. Let them roam. Unchain the animals. Open the doors.

All the trees were made of gold.

As was she, or felt so. Her arms in the sun like molten gold.

What would she do without Dr. P—

“Miss Lusk I couldn't—”

“*Thank* you, Tara.” Edmunn swept into the room. “And I didn't have to open a one...”

“What didn't you have t—”

“Mr. Weir *please* vacate the premise—”

“It's O.K. Tara.”

“I *am* the premise, by the way.”

“I was going to finish saying *p*—”

“Premises yes I know it was just convenient and I'm sorry for interrupting you again Tara it *is* nice to meet you but I have very urgent business with Vic here so if you would please...” He turned her way, dark eyes wide with excitement and something else. “Good, you're wearing clothes. We're going.”

Victoria rose. “Where are w—”

“We're going there.”

Dust did not seem to exist on the third story of the eastern wing; Obren's hallway floor was spotless.

This hall's wall—parallel to yet facing the one before Edmunn's study—was said to rotate theme based on Obren's whims and guests.

In diffracted noonlight sat two rosewood writing desks on either end, their seats and quills unused. Inside those stood a pair of ancient etched suits of armor, sword sides gleaming in even indirect light. A reproduction of Goya's unnamed *Saturn Devouring His Son* was painted directly onto the marble in the middle of the wall.

They had forty minutes.

“Why am I the one going in?” she asked for basically the second time—her concerned looks said as much during his explanation earlier.

“Look Vic it’s not that this the action must be done—” Though he is the *Other* and who knows what else. “—it’s that *you* must do it. This is your moment to play a hand that was never in the cards. Be the bad girl, a snoop sleuth. This world will have never seen you coming. And if I go in there with you apart from breaking something due to my bourboned nerves I’ll be holding your hand for the whole course of this odyssey.”

“That might be—”

“Which *cannot* happen. It is a time for personal growth, Miss Lusk,” shoving her shoulder playfully down the hall, “so get in there and find us something...juicy.”

With a smile at him and herself she walked right in without ever pausing.

The door closed behind her.

There’s a good girl; breaking a few rules and minor laws now and then aids the mental state. Wonder what Obren’s bedroom looks like. What he’s like behind doors he thinks are closed. Maybe from my rooms I could see her in there over the Dardenesque gardens *time for a little sigil magic in the forest of you’re boring* yes we have just under thirty-nine minutes suppose I’ll run over running these windows are all *quite nice, to be sure* yes maybe I’ll paint something to *re-always mind everything* him and why do I have to have just the six jade thought-golems sort of a minimalism or simplicity or complicity in them yes here we are in my subjectless study O.K. I’ll start making something for my ringleader host later today but focus she’s in there with the shades drawn—what is it that I see?

Through Obren’s thin personal curtains of some undetermined material Edmunn saw the vague outline of a feminine form moving to and fro in the private place, hunching over desks or tables he had to presume were there, then transitioning back out of sight onto the balcony and into Xanadu’s utmost nether regions—perhaps Quin’s River Styx it could very well be—but Edmunn stopped contemplating anything or thinking at all when the gray wraith of Finn O’Brien appeared across the opposite I of the U descending with no change in elevation upon his chambers.

He paused to watch *Saturn Devouring His Son*, but then O yes with his head snapping like that he had heard something damn it Vic why so loud and now he had *drawn out* one of the incorporeal knights’ real swords spun in flashing gleaming blinding circles casually as he neared portals which should never have been opened.

But they had had...

Victoria was in the maroon and gold bedroom with its cast bronze statues when the latch that she had closed was turned.

“Ana?”

It was Obren.

She was out on the balcony and threw her shoes three stories down onto the lawn but could not likewise take the plunge and to her left with seven empty feet of possible deaths between them another balcony clung to the side of the building as soles struck stone in his preliminary workspace while something metal was tapping things with *Cling Cling Cling* and she had

to raise her skirts above her waist then the pads and balls took a few strong steps and her feet had left the balustrade.

He had gone inside and not come out.

No one had come out.

Edmunn chain smoked in his empty study stamping out often half-done ifs ands and butts about it having been so many minutes with the sunlight slipping through his smoke-screened windows with all their gilding and yes one more bourbon for his burdened nerves seeing Victoria in red ribbons like the *Magnum Corpus* and—

“Edmunn.” Shoeless, flushed, she stared straight at him.

He grabbed her lips with his then both her hands were snarling in his hair and she was a different person jumping up into him so as to force him to catch her and she pressed his face into her chest and Vic was laughing.

“How did you—? No one—”

“I leapt onto the neighboring balcony.”

Shit she was hot.

“Did you find an—”

“He called ‘Ana’ when he came in and has her birth certificate with some files in his bedroom but it wasn’t much help.”

“Why?”

“The line for the father is blank.”

He had never made himself...

IV

“There is a single stork among the cranes,” said Parles.

Everyone was at the viewing.

How much did it cost to bring them up?

Phineas must be displeased.

Daniel was as well in all honesty: Weir having blazingly created this *Replanting of Olympus Mons* within the one week after the party—and with such detail: all the sloping Himalayas with Everest at the Martian mountain’s feet with a thick flock of Demoiselles and a few other birds carrying Yggdrasil and skyscrapers up to the cratered crown while hawks—not eagles—circled overhead before a starry dark expanse.

They all praised it before he had said anything.

Fine, considering his comments would be mostly about how obvious this was to him, the artist, and their host—who had not come to the public showing on account of some business. A direct attack on Mr. Obren’s naturalistic sensibilities. Nothing more.

Were then the Wrights and Lusks also at fault for planting the seeds of their ashes and oaks in attempts to make a metal world more beautiful?

Daniel supposed that Weir blamed everyone who was not himself for something.

And then he thought of his Seeing: those frozen nightmares with their dusklit flame-lips like a burning lake that bore no reflections save *your half-sister, Robert* that it was better to never know for the knowing was the showing when what was shrouded became weaponized like blades of shade and all he wanted was to give her light.

Daniel left them then knowing everything was not all right.

But O, it would be.

Edmunn liked his *Replanting of Olympus Mons*.

They’d all gone home.

The thing was not as universal, he thought, as some of his other works, but there was much more truth in this one, if evidenced only by the fact that Obren could not look at it in public, like a strange social version of *The Picture of Dorian Grey*.

Speak of the devil.

“A success, you think?” Obren stood with one foot in each lacking color of the gallery floor. He approached the painting reproachfully.

“So Obren, I see that Ana is your—”

“Yes.”—in a ravenous and ominous sigh—“Now we’re nearing somewhere—so calm—so *bold*—I knew at once,” with the C prolonged as a python. “Never before have you even shown the slightest ignescence of relaxation—not one spark of comfort—save now.”

“That must be a mighty conundrum for you, O’Brien.”

“Hm/m. It is nothing of the sort.”

“With her all over you and fawning at your O shall we say *familiar* charms...”

“Inconvenient, but we will get past that.”

“I can’t prove you killed her mother, of course.”

“Nor can I—a terrible tragedy.”

“But I must say that I mightily enjoy the position this puts me in.”

“And what position is that, Edmunn August Weir?”

“Well, it—”

“Yes, Mr. Weir? Go on. Share your intentions. Tell me: *What is it that you plan to do?*”

“...”

“Will you tell Ana? Ah. *Fine* plan, that one. Tell her that the man she refused you for—O, Mr. Weir thinks he has secrets? And *I* might guess you figure ‘Vic’s’ shoes a subtlety—tell her he is her genetic guardian. That will turn out very well indeed. Like mother like daughter. She would cast her unfortunately mentally incestuous self into the clouds so quick as to make your eyes spin.”

“B—”

“You will tell others? Remember, Mr. Weir: I am *the* Other. Something as big as you *clearly* think it is cannot be constrained, particularly not from an unwittingly involved party. And then we are back to our former example. The question our universe is putting to you now seems to be: Is it worth it? Ah, but of what two *Its* do we speak?”

“I...”

“It *is* magical to watch your brain turn, I must say.”

“...How can you hold this power?”

“As you said: it’s Obren Energy. Power is what I sell per unit time.”

“You...you...”

“Something rather nasty? Your lack of self-conceptualization is shameful. We’re more alike than you may ever know, lad. I am Oberon. I am Gatsby. I am the shadows on the wall and the light outside the cave.”

“I think Lusk’s a little more Gatsby, yeah?”

“But to *give* life? To have *created* Daisy?”

“If you’re Gatsby then she’s not—”

“*Really*, Mr. Weir...I expected an artist to have more vision.”

V

Mr. Wright had demanded an audience with her.

Victoria willed it so.

Descending her front steps, she spotted him at the end of the grounds, standing as straight as one of the balusters *her feet had left the balustrade* in a chalk-striped silk suit with a double-breasted waistcoat and a solid necktie like *the last blue light of Today*.

He called her name, but did not come to her.

“Daniel,” she finally said, having passed every rusting oak.

Distance lurked in those lofty eyes of burnt umber. “Watch this sun set with me.”

How he had cleaned my wounds and only wanted to feel others and pulling me up into the longboat where we slept together and where he had slept with me even before I was born our initials carved into something that may linger once we’re dead and only he the Dardens and Tara crying with me over father but I rebuked him yet he was not quite feeling something but his and my emotions always slightly misinterpreted or yes in good faith and how he holds me by the base of my skull and—

“I saw you and Mr. Weir. In my maze.”

Victoria threw her arms around him.

And now with the unseen Sun so bent by gravitation casting its fire upon *them* as a single unit Daniel divulged his whole self to her no longer the One but one of the Two with I to We and no he did not mind what she had done or had been complicit in doing for her past indecision was now of no concern to him as she had chosen and chosen Wright by leaning fully into his grip with her head on his chest and their eyes to the sky.

A passenger jet flew overhead at high altitude.

He pointed to it. “See the contrail: the one becomes the two become the new one.”

“Tracking its path: a vaporous tailcoat.”

They watched it a while.

“I wonder what we look like to them,” Daniel said.

“We see it for so much time because of the...”

“Yes? Tell me.”

“The great arc length it inscribes across the heavens.”

L’Arc de Triomphe. “Then let it write as long as is possible, for the larks and planes all fly for you.”

“O...how I love to observe slow processes: sunsets, high planes in flight, celestial bodies progressing at night. Things that allow our minds to move much faster than they appear to. That’s why long, slow kisses are all kinds of ways better.”

“Victoria.” He bent her backward over the railing, holding her half-hovering above a flowing river of fog on fire.

Many minutes later, when the plane was past and the entire atmosphere was blushing, her hand guided his head toward the dangling gibbous Moon, nearly fully waxed, observant. “We are nearing a syzygy.”

Daniel lifted Victoria lightly with both limbs clasped about her lumbar region, pulling her as close possible, then let her fall softly such that her feet were atop his own. "We are within one."

All four eyes were fixed upon the reddening haze.

"To live on such blessed isles as these..." he said.

And the supernal sunset scorched the sky.

Edmunn had also watched the setting Sun. It cast horizontal light and shadow through Obren's immaculate lawn, illuminating the edges of the blades of grass like it irradiated the smog of the city. But this late luminance fell red and wretched in the hanging fog of the buildings, down into darkness, drowning all other colors in...

A keen awareness overcame him. It was as if some transcendent being had with a knife cut cleanly the lines of the world, as from a cake. Edmunn saw their forms in unalterable clarity. He surveyed the scene for several more moments, each one a revelation of form, and then began on his way back to the house. His hands were tracing frantic figures in the air.

VI

Victoria stood in Edmunn's hall with what had been a plan to speak with him. Yet she had taken not one step inside.

Something...*foul* hung from all the air.

Unspeakably odious.

Vile.

But she must speak with him.

Discuss the—*ugh* so awful—events of last night.

Her feet moved toward the doors. She tried to hold her breath beneath the thick and rank and clawing—she was choking.

Sounds unlike the man she knew and had shared unspoken words with came rolling past the six jade columns. It struck some similar chords and scrape-raked many others.

Crashing against her in rasping, roaring waves: “The hawk...the falcon... Ethereal falcon!”

What was th—

“Bird of prey and fog!” Wet sounds lapped behind the doors. “Words for talons! wings of confusion!”

No...

“Soars on swordlike currents of conundrum!”

No, this was not right.

“His beak! drip dripping lapping running with *molten gold!*”

No.

“Eyes which *pierce* the ninth dimension! Feathers of fortune!”

No no this was no one she knew!

“A diet of will! and *BLOOD.*”

Salt streaming from her unseeing eyes, Victoria fled fearing for her life.

“*Out* you devil! *Out* you demon! I *cast* you from this room!”

VII

Robbendry burst through the western doors of Wright Cathedral, his bellowing voice carrying to where Daniel read in the axial chapel:

“*Fine* work, Mr. Wright! Fine work indeed. Invite me for the first time to one of these *dinners* only to spring on me that you had purchased a *multibillion* dollar corporation! Your pomposity is fathomless and I *will* have *no more* of it!”

“Ernest!” The whole mansion could hear them. “Calm yourself.” He strode posthaste towards his accountant.

“I shall do no such thing.” They met beneath the nave. “Whatever veneer you hold in such high regard has *no* meaning to me.”

“This is absurd.”

“*You* are absurd, utterly ignoring your financial advisor like some—”

“Hold your tongue.”

“*Never* tell me what to do again, you *boy*.”

“You are fired. Leave at—”

“*Imbecile*: did you not catch that I quit upon entering?”

“Get ou—”

“*Now* I presume you’ll tell me you don’t know your precious *probe* has stopped transmitting data.”

“...What.”

Ernest Robbendry laughed right at him, arms thrown up into the air. “Your idiocy is *truly* a brilliant sight. Zeus II is no longer transmitting to Earth.”

“What is th—”

“Power failure.”

“When w—”

“No one knows.”

“But *when* will—”

“*No—one—knows*.”

“*Someone must* know something!”

“I have told you what few facts of the matter there are to know. Now *you* must live with them. For that *will* be all; I hold no more interest in you. One last counsel—if you will even listen: ask your *neighbor*, who owns Obren Energy.” Robbendry produced his wallet, and then threw a handful of small bills in Daniel’s face. “Now buy a phone.”

Obren received him in the Evening Room, seated on a sea green velvet fainting sofa—gilded trim, obviously—in his same oxblood surtout and cane with penstripe trousers two shades of not quite gray, facing his garden.

He beamed. “Daniel, *please*—come in. Don’t simply stand in the jamb, though it does become you.”

Bearing himself quickly across the intricate geometric carpet, Daniel stood directly blocking his host’s view. “We are going to discuss Zeus II.”

“Ah.” Obren examined his nails. “A minor hiccough, probably.”

“Machines don’t get the hiccoughs.”

“Why shouldn’t they?”

“You don’t seem very concerned.”

“Well, I’m not.”

“This was no accident.”

“Mr. Wright, I *assure* you that th—”

“Enough of your assurances. Out with it, Obren; I know about you and Robert Quincy *Lusk*.”

Phineas Obren sat up straight. “O? He does also.”

“Well now *I* do and things are going to go my way because of it.”

“There’s only ever one way they go, lad.”

“...”

“This whole plot you think *I’ve* hatched up seems to be perplexing you, so we will stay in your perspective, for now.” Obren sighed, gazing over Daniel’s shoulder. “How did you see this conversation ending?”

“With Zeus II coming back on line.”

“*Hmm*. My guess is that won’t happen.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“I’m not doing anything.”

“Why would you *not* do this?”

“It will not matter; I’ve already *done* something.”

“*What?*”

“That is the nature of *something*, Daniel—the mystery.”

“Well that’s not good enough!”

“Our world is impartial as to what you think is Good.”

“You’re impartial to it.”

“I *am* part of our world.”

“...This is what happened to Zeus.”

“Not *this*, but—”

“You. You happened to it.”

“In a way—all right in *the* way.”

“Your way.”

“No, no. You give me too much credit for being able to swim.”

“You would quench our search for life...”

“Not so much that as I don’t think we’ll find it *there*. Besides, I like to tell myself I’m eking out some living of my own right now.”

“And you will tell me nothing. Ask for nothing.”

“I’ve told you *everything*, Daniel. What could we give each other we haven’t already?”

“The Truth.”

“O—with a capital T? Here, write this down: our universe is full of somethings we—*you*—will never know. You just and justly *will not* know them. They will be many. They will loom. They will *never* be known to you. To put it poetically they are the unmet multitudes beyond the Door, the unseen photons we call the Dark, the unknown mind of the omnipresent Not-Me; come to terms with your new trinity, Mr. Wright.”

“My turn: *you* will never be thought of positively again, *we* will no longer do busin—”

“You’re tarnishing my monologue. And you *do* know we have a ten year contract, right?”

“We...”

“O my, really? It was all over the papers, lad. The sole reason I gave you that teamwork speech or whatever you thought that was.”

“You are evil.”

“See, this is just the kind of thought process that confuses people into believing I’m evil. I’ve not a moment ago shown you your enemy: *yourself*, but, feeling no evil—with good reason—inside your brain, you immediately lash out at others with this dualism everyone seems to want to latch on to. I’m not entirely sure *why* but I suspect it has to do with this implanted Good-Evil split which is just so silly because it is clearly good and bad, which are not ideas or ideals at all but statements of quality. Something—O look even Obren doesn’t know—about my knowledge that no one is ‘Good’ or ‘Evil’ makes others feel they need to brand me the latter. But no matter, for they are the ladder, and we shall continue to climb the dualistic rungs of those who would call us *enemy*.”

“We? Us?”

“The Other, Daniel. Have you been listening?”

Now you are an ami to me. “Parles...”

“*Ab*—a not altogether useless chess piece. Somewhat like a pawn whom one can trade for the opposing king.”

“I will *expose* you.”

“I am exposed. You do realize that, after our respective stories are told, it no longer matters what we believe? Truth lies in the eye beholden.”

“No—you will suffer.”

“I do: fools gladly. Look, Mr. Wright...” Gripping the hawk head, Obren indicated with his cane the western wing. “I am *not* a fan of delivering hypothetical play-by-plays twice in one week. Consult your comrade-in-opposed-arms if you *must* seek more expository remarks as to why you two are unwise with your words.”

“...Why me, Obren? Why must I be your victim?”

“You chose yourself, Mr. Wright. And being inept in your attempts to manipulate others *hardly* makes you a victim.”

“Cease this evasion, I want to know!”

This host leant back against the sofa. “Frankly, I could tell you all sorts of stories. Interesting ones. Ones utterly tangential to our conversation’s current arc. Ones about when *you* were one, or two, or three. But, that is simply *not* the nature or extent of our relationship. Nor will it be. I am not your bedtime storyteller. This seems to frustrate you. Here is my final morsel: sometimes, all we can know of the past is what two humans once told each other.” Withdrawing a golden pocketwatch, he added, “Now, my day is rather full, so I will kindly offer you the agency of choice: either turn over a new leaf by leaving, or be thrown *right* out.”

At the threshold, Daniel Wright looked back over his shoulder.

Phineas Obren was still savoring his garden.

VIII

“Miss Lusk, I—”
 “You’re supposed to say *my* name when I enter, Tara.”
 “O, Edmunn...”
 “Well it’s not *your* job.”
 “...”
 “You’ll need to change. We’re going again.”
 “I don’t think—”
 “Into the city.”

“M—Miss Lusk?”
 “Ground floor, please.”
 “I’ll take my orders from the l—”
 “Ground floor, please, Karen.”
 “Your name’s *Karen*?”
 “What of it?”
 “Nothing, nothing.”
 “...”
 “...”
 “...”
 “O: stop on eighty-seven, would you?”
 “...”
 “Do as he says.”

“*Ulkgh*. W-what is this?”
 “One of Genetic Synthetics’—so I suppose now *your* (sorry)—meat plants. Well, meat *labs*. That’s lamb. That’s beef. That’s venison. I’m not sure where Wright found the fwah grawss, but this is a small lab meant more for *your* use, up—”
 “They’re...twitching.”
 “Simulated exercise, for the cells.”
 “I...I want to go.”
 “Don’t you want to know how th—”
 “I want to *go*.”
 “O.K., we’re going.”

“You ready, Vic?”
 “I think so.”
 “There’ll be a lot of people...”
 “I know what a city is.”
 “And here we—”
 “Miss *Lusk*?”
 “O. Wear these: you’re a *little* famous.”

“Ed...what’s *he* doing?”
 “I believe they call those *convulsions*.”
 “And no one...?”
 “Mmm, nope.”

“How do I...”
 “Just put the token in.”
 “Where?”
 “Right there. Walk through. Vic...have you never ridden the—?”
 “...”
 “Um...O.K. it is going to get a bit crowded.”
 “...”
 “Here, take my hand.”
 “...”
 “Let’s stand over...”
 “Excuse me. Pardon me. Sorry. Sorry.”
 “Vic—”
 “Sorry. Pardon. Exc—”
 “*Vic*. Just...here stand here. Get a little—”
 “O! Pardon me. Sorry. Sir, could y—”
 “He can’t give you any more space.”
 “...”
 “...”
 “...”
 “The next batch is coming in so just...”
 “*Oof*. O. Edmunn, I—”
 “Here. Just stand inside my arms.”
 “I can’t—”
 “It’s fine. We’ll be off soon. Yeah take some more Euphetamin.”
 “Breathing...hot. O. I—”
 “You’re fine. It’s fine. Hey, sir, listen. Could you just—”
 “Fuck off.”
 “Fuck you *man* she—”
 “Edm—”
 “—has a nervous condi—”
 “Not my problem.”
 “...”

“Sorry about that back there.”
 “Where are we g—”
 “A concert.”
 “I want to ask you something.”
 “I might not know the answer.”
 “Yesterday...I tried to see you, but...”
 “O—you were the shoes? Thought you were someone else.”

“You *scared* me...”
 “O...sorry. I’d taken a minor psychedelic.”
 “Well it made you—”
 “They *make* me nothing. I was working with some darker subject matter. But now that’s done.”
 “Another painting?”
 “I’ll be showing it soon. You should see it.”
 “And what you took...”
 “Only got me into a mindset I already had. In fact...”
 “O, no. I—”
 “It’s O.K. We would just be listening to music.”
 “But I’ve already—”
 “Now so have I.”
 “Give that back.”
 “Oops. Now you must reciprocate.”
 “...”
 “It will only be what we make it.”
 “...”
 “I’m like your guide. O. Your stuff comes on strong.”
 “...”
 “...”
 “Don’t make that symbol at me.”
 “Fine. Here are your anti-depressants.”
 “...”
 “We can go back up *top* if Miss Lusk would like to return to her natural setting. Come on.”
 “Wait...”
 “...”
 “Only what we make it?”
 “Only what *we* make it.”

“My hands brought us some tasty bubbly.”
 “Why thank you, hands. Where did they—”
 “*Where?* That’s a question.”
 “Are you an answer?”
 “O no no no.”
 “Will It start soon? I feel time in no time.”
 “You mean It hasn’t—”
 “*Music*, paint-face.”
 “They need to be their states of mind first.”
 “But I’m their states of...”
 “No you’re you.”
 “*Me?*”
 “It seems so.”
 “*Me* is me and you is who?”
 “No, *me* is me. Too...”
 “Two *mes* and no one knows who’s *you*.”
 “No *me*’s me *too*. An unknown new *you* who’s not you too.”
 “Then...*we*...are *me!*”
 “*Woah*. Do me—do we?”

IX

A dark road with many eyes. Steel trees and a man. Violent man. Lovely violence. A violent boat on a blood-red sea. Sea of blood—my blood? Bloody blood. It laps on the sides of the boat. Slides on sides slowly. Leaves legs—my legs? Wine legs. A red wine sea with champagne whitecaps whitecaps. Sky the color of the hottest part of the fire and getting brighter.

A piece of the Sun was on her face.

She saw Tara's.

"O Miss Lusk, you're awake—it relieves me so..."

"We are me."

"What? Under these circumstances, it may be better that you're about to miss Mr. Weir's showing. Just rest n—"

The covers exploded off Victoria via a hand she then realized was her own. "Edmunn's showing is *now*? Why didn't you wake me?" She leapt from the bed.

"I've tried for no Miss Lusk please don't go."

Tara was grabbing at her arm but Victoria pushed her away to slip into an amber shift dress and put up her hair.

"I'll do what I will." Was there even time for makeup?

"But you're unwell!"

While applying eyeliner she told Tara's backwards image, "I will be very well indeed now that I'm awake, no thanks to you." Some lipstick there or no no time where are—"Where are my diamond flats?"

"But..."

"Tara: *where* are they?"

"Right here." The servant girl held them up.

Victoria snatched them and ran barefoot out the door.

O: how the cold Sun shone on this October afternoon—*just* nippy enough to enliven the spirit.

Birds in flight...

His painting hung and ready to be unveiled...

Victoria's *tight* voluptuousness forever in his mind...

Ever since then every cigarette had always been *the* cigarette and so it was with this one now on Obren's grounds outside the garden—even *he* could not ruin this—like an infinitely faceted prism roll-romping around the full length of that evening revealing every knob and hollow of *all* their delightful interactions.

The one that Edmunn liked the best was the feeling of the first time his hand had run from her ankle up to her—

"Weir!"

Poor Mr. Wright came—well not *really*—stomping his way all unkindly (he had liked Alice's usage) of ways across the dewy grass and thankfully his was not so wet but yes back to Wright who was barreling down upon him *certainly* having thought of some injurious sentence to wave Edmunn's way but it was pointless for he had lost and now Edmunn the victor got to "Daniel..." kiss him with kindness in all the manners most perturbing to

the prude who offered no response and closed quickly with thin lips that were less than a line and in his eyes was O:

Wright's fat fist struck Edmunn's eye socket and then his cigarette was gone and his ass was on the other grass.

He expected to get hit again but Daniel did nothing afterwards save for standing there heaving and panting like a simpleton.

"So that's it then," Edmunn said. "You've proved you're strong? A man? Was that your righteous fury? I must say I'm underwhelmed."

Wright just stood there silent and stupid and eventually stumbled past him to lean against the guardrail.

Edmunn left him there and headed back in to his showing.

Something in Phineas Obren's main gallery smelt *bad*: dissolving rusted pipes, exotic flowers far too sickeningly sour, rough verdigris forcefully scraped against your tongue; whatever it was, it lingered in the nostrils and minds and eventually eyes that belonged to every one of what had become the fifty guests; while the artist took a moment to as he said smoke and think outside, it was the onus of all those who had come for him to Obren's home to intermingle with each Other and with the Scent, as its olfactory asperity crept inside them, worsened by the fact that all visual reprieve had been removed: his *Magnum Corpus*, *The Six Births of Matrimony*, *Replanting of Olympus Mons*: all were gone, and the lone ten-foot-tall canvas hung covered by a cloth on the westernmost wall; therefore until the artist returned every important individual had to bear this underlying Scent otherwise unstimulated, for each Other also wore the same sickly expression, and everyone scowled upon initial instinct during eye contact; soon, they began to wonder: what if it was no feature of the place, what if it was One of them, what if it was all of Them, who among this gathering could hide a thing so foul upon or within their person; suspicions bubbled, and broiled; rumors started; and all the while the fifty fortunate guests did social circles around the checkerboard floor: black, and white, black, and white, each One distrusting the Other.

Victoria nearly skidded into the gallery but *ugh* there it was again *drip dripping lapping running with molten* madness and each person she knew that had to smell it also was grimacing and why did her body ache that was a large canvas she wanted to talk to Edmunn *yes yes we do me two* but the hallery began to be buzzing and all hive and there we was, passing buy everyyou.

"Vic, where have you *been?*"

He clasped her hand.

She withdrew it.

He scoffed. "Everyone's been talking about you—what were you doing during the Dardens' party last night? Don't tell me Wr—"

"We went to the concert last night."

"Um...? Four nights ago, maybe."

"No, we went to the concert last night."

Disbelief hung from his face; patronization: "Yester-eve I went to the Dardens' party. The night before that I took L.S.D. with Alice. The night

before that I finished this”—he pointed at his shrouded work—“painting. The night before *that*—the fourth night—was when we...” Weir smiled.

“...”

“...”

“Four nights ago was when we went to the concert?”

“I’ve been trying to get in touch with you. Are you O.K.?” Laughing, he tried to touch her hand again and she withdrew it. “Um...sorry for my concern? You told me *we* were a temple and had to be intimate. I can leave you alone though.”

“When did I say that?”

“Victoria...” Edmunn’s bruising right eye bore real emotional injury as he leant forward into her ear and whispered: *when we fucked.*

It smelt as horrid as Daniel felt.

Why was it Parles who had to have told him?

The reptile had been put off indeed; Daniel had been about to confront him as to *a not altogether useless chess piece* when he flew into a tirade on what no no no could should would *not* be true or good or fair and *her deathlike heart-hole was walking over.*

“Dan I was just told a dreadful nasty evil rumor and I and I...”

She was on the verge of tears. Good.

“I as well.”

“Say it isn’t true.”

“It isn’t true,” or good or fair why would *she* do this to me *now*?

“O my goodness it feels so nice to hear you s—”

“Of *course* it’s true, you...” Her and all her *unseen multitudes beyond the Door.* “*Harlot.*”

Victoria’s mouth opened.

A natural position.

“I have no clue what you could possibly hope to achieve with this”—and how he picked her up—“*farce* but I am morally repulsed that you could say and see such things to me *both* before and after the act as if my love scorned the *second* time would have me running after you into”—*please just watch*—“the *sunset* or”—yes just say it—“*something* else *dromantic* that will now *never* happen.”

Victoria’s viridian embers were hard to maintain contact with while they silent-streaming quenched themselves and that *disgusting* sick-sweet-iron stench stabbed Daniel’s wilting irises.

“B-but I...I *don’t* remember.”

“That’s a classy excuse, Miss Lust.”

“*Please* Daniel I’m alone and awash with regret and miss and love your way way more and—”

Only ever one way they—“Stop. Just...no.”

She choked. *Remonstrative success.*

“You persist after I tell you off; it’s like you’re not even *real.*” *No no please no.* “Go seek Robert Quincy *Darden* for your comforting.”

“W-why?”

But ignorance is this.

“He’s your half-brother.” *Everyone already knows his story.* “Victor Lazarus Lusk’s bastard. And he knows it.”

You're not even real not even real.

She wasn't.

"Quin I need to talk to you."

"*Victoria* O my god are you—"

"It's all right"—*not even real*—"Alice dear"—*I adore you*—"I'll talk to her in private for a moment thank you darling." *My darling a minor character.*
"Vicky..." His hand was on her shoulder. "What's going on?"

"I know. I know I know."

Quin's eyes widened all the way for one just instant and then reduced to darting points detecting whether there were listeners.

"This isn't the place," said her half-brother who was as full as any brother would ever be to her.

You're not even real. "This is the time."

"This is *not*"—*even real*—"th—"

"This *is* the time Rob please please please just hug me hold me and be my—"

"*Sbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbb.*"

"..."

"We can be best of friends but we are *not*"—*even real*—"related. Do you understand?"

We two: I.

"We *are*."

"We aren't."

"But..."

"Tell *them* we aren't."

Her sole secret suppressed. "...all for money?"

"For the love of my *living* father."

You're not even real not even real not even real.

"We...we aren't."

A hand left her shoulder.

"*Thank* you, Vicky." *Come speak with me.* "I look forward to seeing you soon," is what Quin said as he broke eye contact to the Ith order.

Someone knocked right into her as she staggered backwards. "O, hello *Vic.*" Not Edmunn but Obren—*he* knew *too?*—stare-smiling madly at Quin while giving her no visual acknowledgement. "I didn't see you there."

He walked away.

Crowds had gathered, facing west.

Didn't *see* me here? *not even real* eyes passing over me, myself within his mind, contained in neurons *not even real* didn't *see* me? was I not even part of the brain function? I don't exist in his reality or realities of others *not even*—

Edmunn's voice: "You wanted me to have *more vision* Obren? Here it is: *A Vision of Dusk and Dawn.*"

Two raven inky rectangles seven-feet-high lay vertically in both bottom corners, lengthwise against the canvas walls to form a capital T in the spectrum of Death: what was colored akin to fire and crimson magma atop the letter's crossbar faded darkly down its stem through viscera into deep

dead brown like graveyard earth but had once been a liquid for dried rivulets drizzled like stopped chthonic fonts hanging drooping almost reaching the base of the painting where the bottom of the letter's stem was utterly black; at the acrylic lines' intersection there was the shadow of the Sun: a grand golden circle that had been slathered over and over by all the intermixing reds, blaring redly and deadly through the skeletal silhouettes of two lonely mansions which perched like ghosts of prey atop the oblivious rectangular buildings—for so they were: each one supporting a manor overlooking this scene at greater heights than most humans and whose thin scratched slashes of ink in the sunset were representative of the murder that had made this painting, as the guests were then informed the paint was colored by deer blood; contrary to what the artist wanted, however, this revelation settled rather than disturbed his observers, who were now—despite his well-meaning metaphorical and artistic intentions—able to ascribe the blame for what was once this great Unknown to them, and the blame fell to him, the artist, who had *such* poor taste and *no* sense of propriety or even human decency and this was *surely* cruelty to animals or at least a waste of *real* venison and all the world's wealthiest people frowned upon him with great disregard; perhaps the most obvious of signs that his epoch was closed was when, immediately after the unveiling, the recently-orphaned Miss Victoria Ophelia Lusk fled the gallery in tears.

BLOOD blood yes blood there was blood last night or four nights ago depending on the unmoving yet still relativistic spectrums of *BLOOD* that my father surely bled and *BLOOD* that girl and *BLOOD* that deer no both deer (It to they.) *BLOOD* I we bled and O *We to I. More like first last rays of day* then *A Vision of Dusk and BLOOD* and *we are me but not even real* O *have me also are me also but you're not even real.*

"Vic, *woah.*" Edmunn's *do me do we?* well *me's me too* and *We to I* but *you're not even real.* "Hey. Wait." A hand on my elbow and *only what we make it* in the spider's webbed rose window of the Port Hall.

"You *stupid*"—*first last rays of day*—"jerk!"

"Ow. Stop." *Stop just no* and how I never had a mother.

"Deer blood? I wouldn't have cared if you'd used *human* you—"

"Ow." *Heavens: you have them all over.*

"—demon! you devil!"

"O *come on*"—*me* and *BLOOD*—"as if the fact they're both *deer*"—*I made you not even real*—"is of any significance. A coincidental convenience. Ow damn it *stop that,*" with him bounding up before me to the top of those snaking marble stairs in this entry. "Ow."

"It's fairly fucking"—*BLOOD*—"significant to *me*, Edmunn!"

"Well *you're*"—*not even real*—"misreading it."

"You said something would 'help me' at the concert: what was it?"

"It's called *water* and I see where this is going and *hate* it."

"O you hate *everything.*"

"What's with this sudden rebuke, *hub?* I had good intentions with you. Did you realize you're a lesbian for Alice or something?"

You're as real as I am and *we are* and Wright's index on my jaw and *a little like Robert's but wrong wrong WRONG* with *my painting just a mechanism* or *can't we just be girls with perfect helices* that are *not even real* but *how could they forget you*

darling and the fire I thought I'd imagined in the bloomless rhododendron: that bodiless Athena will have to do or not to doooooomph.

Victoria, astride the threshold between Obren's entry and the Port Hall, seized the nearest marble bust and with a capably designed body cranked herself into a vortex like an Olympic discus thrower and releasing true and fair she beamed the solid stone object at Edmunn's skull.

Yet her gallant albeit exponentially lethal warning had given him time to duck so that Athena's displaced head instead flew as straight as a strikethrough into Phineas Obren's hanging hundred-emerald chandelier.

The great grand mass of light and gems and optical illusions swung back only once with a croaking groaning *ReeeeeeeeeeeKTSH* as every hook then buckled as in snapped before this priceless item of interior design which weighed hundreds of pounds fell two stories to the floor, whereupon the entire structure disintegrated sending for a moment that only the two culprits witnessed thousands of pieces of emerald and glass and gold in unchartable directions with each minute piece catching the Sun's illumination of this act in new ways every different picosecond and it was as though all the entry hall was underwater in the clearest green lake until as always things settled and the lights which were waves washed forever off the walls and Victoria started to see what she'd done.

Over broken glass and scattered gemstones and utter *humiliation and sb-shame* Victoria ran—allowing the shards to slice her shoes—right out the double doors wanting to only ever be alone again and never come back.

Edmunn August Weir was laughing.

“Obren, I have the *most* wonderful news,” he intoned jollily upon reentering the gallery. His was a state of plump pleasure indeed. Everyone else was still all scrunch-faced. O, happy day!

All fifty of Edmunn's guests and Finn O'Brien stared at where he'd come from the entry.

“I'm fairly certain we all heard,” he remarked offhandedly. “Just a few million dollars: no matter.” Tapping the end of his ashplant twice theatrically upon the floor, Obren swept the hawk's silver beak into the air. “I have exciting news for you as well.”

Forty-nine billionaires were listening to them.

“Let's hear it.”

“You will be burdened no more by our *uncultured* society. Go, Mr. Weir: be free, we release you.”

“O dear me, you don't like my painting. A shame then that the message is larger than y—”

“I don't like it—true—but that is beside the point. I think it is *bad art*. Some colors and a manifesto? You've done better. There is no compositional philosophy. Replacing ink with blood does not make the message eloquent.”

“*You*, Mr. Obren, are incorrect.” Wright cleft a path to the front of the throng. “This painting describes in its tonality, topical subject matter, and multiple media everything wrong with *our* world.”

“Mr. *Wright*, how *good* of you to enter the...*discussion*.”

“...”

“If Mr. Weir is in fact attacking *our* world, it seems as though he thinks it consists of only”—the hawk’s head pecked untouched at first the left-hand macabre mansion—“*you*”—then the right—“and *me*.”

“Now hold on Obren, the meaning is much broader than that.”

“O Mr. Weir? Where is it then. Even the blood you took from one of Mr. Wright’s deer, I have no doubt.”

“...”

“Perhaps you figure the breaking of my chandelier symbolic? *Once* again, you propagate your destructive animosity toward only one of two people. Where are your sweeping Truths? Where is your insight? How do *you* relate at all to these other forty-five fine individuals? As far as I am willing to tell, you have spent your time here taking psychoactive substances and seeking sexual favors from *my* servants.”

Anastasia, who had been watching from the gallery stairwell, spun away and swiftly descended. Edmunn and Obren were the only ones to see her go. All the Others were too busy voicing disapproving murmurs.

“That *is* his message to them, Obren.” Daniel Wright faced Edmunn’s audience, a raised finger indicating their host’s slick blondish crown. “This man is *not* who he seems and appears to be.”

“In Lou of a disguise, everyone is who they appear to be.”

Laughter.

But Daniel carried onward: “He has woven the silk and chiffon across your eyes. He has revealed to me his plans of sabotaging the Zeus II, our trusting business venture, and humanity’s quest for life beyond our own.”

“*Mister* Wright,” Obren’s face wore confusion but the gray eyes glittered. “Less than one week after our probe malfunctions, and I am accused publicly of sabotage? Do not be so brash, Danny bo—”

“*Never* call me that, you wordworm.”

“...What are *your* words worth *anyways*, hm? Squandering your fortunate standing. Not taking responsibility for Emilia Machin’s tragic death, thereby ensuring David Machin’s wrongful murder of the esteemed late Victor Lusk, whose grieving daughter you—combined with—” The tip of the ashplant stabbed Edmunn’s way. “—*this* specimen—drove from the gallery some moments ago, calling her a ‘harlot’ among other things so infantile as poking fun at her name...”

Shockwaves of indignation rippled through the crowd erratically.

“In fact, I had the deep displeasure of observing the two of you engaged in fisticuffs out on my lawn within the hour. It would very well seem that *you* are the two vagabonds who cannot be trusted—the Unpredictables—the Danger. Furthermore, I could barely guess as to why you two *insist* upon shaping me into your villain or your antagonist as if every artwork needed one. And that you would *slander* me in my own home in attempts to improve one painting’s initial reception? That is something I must outright disallow. You are both welcome to leave.”

Edmunn Weir and Daniel Wright escorted themselves off the premises while more than one trillion dollars applauded the actions and sensibilities of one Phineas Obren.

X

It was a good painting, but you had to see it.
What it *did* to them: each One suspecting the Other—mistrusting.
Weir had a breakthrough, there, for a *while*. Don't you think?
O, the guests? Simple misdirection.
People believe what they will.
You may learn to use it someday.

The chandelier is a shame; that much is true, but is it not in the nature of those things we can contain within our brains to repair themselves before we have even returned to them? Before we even realize that we never went anywhere? *Something* in there wants them whole. *Something* wants them—these things—the way there *were*, not the way they *are*. Our minds yearn for the past, for in each person's past is each person's reality. And the real reality of *our* world is much too large to live with. So turn back: once, twice, or thrice around, and see the chandelier rebuilt—perhaps of rubies—perhaps of diamonds—and how it hangs in the hall, casting those prisms into the minds of *all* who would wish or will themselves to see.

But you had to see it.

XI

Did you realize you're a not even real darling for Alice or something? as I come on me inside and there's no Tara just rest the empty air but you're as real as we aren't and go seek Robert Quincy Darden for your we aren't we aren't but everything could work out unwell I just rest need to find my prescription for this silly impressionistic depression not even real like unknown words scribbled menacing as the strange red runes on his face and mine forever backwards in the planet was a mirror with little black lines around my Iyes that were never meant to see wrong wrong WRONG can't we just be girls yes focus on my amber eye want to see the epitome of Woman like first last rays of BLOOD no no Now take it off and Weir saw we're uncomfortable but everything could just rest work out unwell for there they to Iye are there you are and We to I'm comfortable herelot O we are a temple but we aren't even as real as I am with we are me and perfect helices that aren't even real but it's O.K. in the vocabulary I thought was hers and she knew too à cause de took L.S.D. with please: Alice can't we are me just rest be girls I'm just rest a stupid first last rays of stop everyone already knows his story hence not even real so maybe just rest a few more yes for fast effect for how could they to Iye forget it was all just rest an act to make 0000 'Victoria Lusk' feel better without that tight satin skin my not even real immortal coil and I'll Shakespeare at her so just rest yes a handful more since you're not even the ability to affect and change something was the matter and we are me to I all bosons like a crumbling mountain of not even real letters' peak so why should I ever feel better without that tight satin bad again yes yes we do me two one long happiness that was not even real and O everything would work out well for look at you my darling minor character so Iye will just rest take the rest with it's called water and there you are they're gone now what to do that is not even real like first last rays of day and O the outside through the inside on father's mother's eye made you rocking chair with meye not even real grand symbolism mother bearing half meye humiliation D.N.A. O how could they forget you're not even real with perfect helices and her left-hand which had never been removed all-knowing that we're uncomfortable was lurking in the past of the Dark of that godless bush burning boiling in its own did you realize you're not even real?

The oaks wept frosted tears of fire in the alllight, passing through windowpanes, reflecting off her Pallas face to hang her image in the glass. Between shadows, a single vertical shaft of luminescence rocked across her likeness, and each time she escaped illumination her face returned a stranger aspect of the die. It covered her body in its rolling, incorporeal inquisition; a shroud of truth. Gradually, the reflections of unfelt emotions seemed more auditions to her psyche, and each expression as it passed away a spinning mask before the mind. The hollow, hallowed eyes maintained their calm observance, revealing Its soul: a conscious candleflame, flickering alone above ichorous wax.

Falling back upon the bed, she saw a gracious gulp of swallows eclipse the hidden Moon.

And then the Moon swept down upon her—or she to It—with an immensity immeasurable, domineering and dimpled by collisions cataclysmic to Earth: a gaping waning gibbous face of sadness and surprise.

Then she felt it rising in her—not outside but inside. She felt her body without feeling and cast off dreaming with the reeling of the waves

careening off her winding temple; she felt the tightness and the lightness bite soft kisses with their golden silken lips all on the hills and valleys that were never in the æther of desire and cool rivers running freely down the sunny plains in all directions to the sea. She was borne from the Sun and flew out into a twilit ocean where she passed them quickly without looking at their pockmarks or their swirlings, coming down from the eternal blue she then swooped low and long along the rivers running all directions stretching fingers finding trails out and to and from each other to the other back again until she flew so low she gulped the crystal water of the plains and it was clean *à cause de* green glass bending glowing in the wind until she plunged her frigid form into the burning water of the shore.

Then it *happened*. And *happened* again.

Again it *happened* and *now it was always happening* and there was Only the *happening* of perhaps some Other *happening* but no it was *still happening* and *happening all the time now. again, again, again* something *happened now again* and *this time it was really HAPPENING* and all that HAPPENED HAPPENED *now in a thousand moments during One long blink of tight-squeezing HAPPENINGS* with HAPPENED *lifetimes wrapped and rapt aroundroundround the HAPPENINGS of HAPPENED things still HAPPENING* and all she knew was happiness.

XII

Thinking nothing of what he wore, Daniel Wright despised himself ascending the stairs.

Ignorance is this.

A young woman who introduced herself as Tara led him into Victoria's bedroom behind closed doorways to the soul where he had only ever (*There, there, Danny boy.*) and where Victoria sat gleamingly radiating unseeing in a rocking chair at her window.

Weir sat slumped in the corner, a brush and easel borne in hand and canvas Daniel could not yet make out before him.

"Daniel."

"Edmunn."

"Is Daniel here?" Victoria's eyes were on the oaks, whose leaves were falling. "Edmunn?"

"Yes he's here. Vic, over here."

"Daniel!" Singular starlight twinkled in the voids of her pupils.

"*Victoria...* how do you feel today, my love?"

"O, simply wonderful. I'm just resting." She craned her smooth neck back towards the window, with no interest in either of them. "Wonderful."

"..." Drawn by Edmunn's half-broken gaze, Daniel approached his painting; it was her portrait.

A black background was composed of faint, arcing lines coming together behind Victoria's head. Daniel could not tell if they were supposed to be erupting from her mind, like drained and colorless solar energy, or if they converged upon it from the recesses of the room, a past which pushed into her psyche. Alone, a vertical bar of light fell like an immense weight across Victoria's face through the narrow rectangle of the window. Her calm, observant expression blazed with ardent passivity near the center of the canvas, lips drawn into an imperceptible smile; so much paint had been used to create that face that it rose out in almost lifelike contours from the image's plane. Daniel wondered how long Edmunn had been here before he arrived. Strangely separated from her body by clear lines, her dark hair melded with the shadows of the scene, and the oscillating curtains bent the lonely light, evacuating its warmth before it passed her frame to detail the room beyond.

Tara entered, bearing a trayed bowl of yogurt on which a napkin and spoon lay crossed. She seemed an incredibly solemn sentry, regarding her hostess with pensive love. "Good day, Miss Lusk."

Victoria beamed. "It truly is."

"Would you like to take any breakfast now?"

Daniel chuckled. "Breakfast, still? Why it's alrea—"

Edmunn's stoicism stopped him from continuing.

"O no but *thank* you," Victoria said, eyes outside her house. "It's simply too wonderful here."

Tara set the tray down gently and maneuvered a chair quite too close for comfort to Victoria. She then returned to the tray, and sat down next to Miss Lusk with it across her lap. Her eyes pleaded. "You might like it."

But Victoria did not see the look; her face had not moved from the window. "I couldn't even *think* about eating on a day as wonderful as this."

He could crush the windpipe, but this was more interesting: to see the full spectrum of Truth and Death all pass away slowly before his vision; the suffusion of lifeblood spread across in color and underneath in form but no matter for it was only the ichor of *him*.

Victoria smiled at the sky.

Simon Parles was turning purple: “Dabhlgh!”

Tyrian; pansy; Byzantium; eminence.

Tara’s frail fists were striking his skull.

Unimportant words were uttered or implored: whathaveyou.

Edmunn no longer restrained him.

Victoria smiled at the sky.

Simon Parles was becoming midnight itself when *PRSHK* a sound and feeling of their universe’s fabric ripping down across his crown and when Daniel, stiff-necked, opened his eyes, he was looking at the tatters of Victoria’s portrait about his shoulders, his head through where her face once was.

He rotated it about his neck to obtain a better view.

“Hhbbulgh,” said Parles’ first breath in minutes. “YOU—*hablgh*—are—*hooolhgh*—OVER. Consider, *sir*, your reputation in ruins! and *assuredly* not the Roman sort. I will *give* you a moment to flee in order to avoid a scandal at this lady’s house, but know that the *law* shall *soon* hook its claws in you!”

and *have me also are me also* as Weir ripped him from the room with Victoria saying “Farewell, Daniel!” while he was drug from the *you’re not even real* domicile and they were out in the stinging sunlight where *be closer to me* he saw his entire *what are your words worth* worthless future stretched out *only ever* one-dimensionally *way they go* before him a life of shackles and *real* chains no longer of propriety for his doom loomed eternal in a codified list of *not even real* worthless words and they—he and me—*We to I* not even the shadow passed on across the lawn to where the supernal Sun had set the eversky within her eyes ablaze to *the eyeth* order her *only ever one* way with words *I love your way way more* but there was no meaningful crepuscular *first last rays of day* only the light blue indifference of the *omnipresent Not-Me* that foretold of his future-arisen monochromatic prison the All-White where his only agency was little vertical scratches of the Dark that would do nothing but agelessly mark his wasted years and there were no more chapters of Daniel’s life and even *not even real* this Moment was a ruse and it was stupid it was pointless he was simply going on as if some book with no end and Weir O Weir was rambling spewing gooing forth some plebeian academia on the Proles and Rand but also ceilings and curtains of all constructions and top-down versus bottom-up societies O yes *no no please no* let’s *We to I* all bottoms-up with cyanide for *there’s only ever one way they go* while gravity bent the last light towards us and life should *not be quest but gravitation* have more ways to end than this yet *there’s only ever one way they go* and that was down down down into the *Unknown* and the *Not-Me* and *the multitudes beyond the Door not even real* and yes how they drift within the canyons of our creation yes the obfuscated everwhite and *there’s only ever one way way more* but *you’re not even real* so *be closer to me* and as a final sick slick joke that for some unknown reason he felt he *had* to ask Daniel turned to Edmunn August Weir and said, “What happens now?”

What happens now? shit I don't know for I don't feel like the Holder of the Answers rather the Caster of the Questions with Wright so glum leaning over the edge I wonder what he sees in the clouds and perhaps a little *pick-me's-me-too-up* for *we are me* and He loved She and *what are your intentions?* I can't quite say I ever did blinded by some something the Iye never saw or what It chose instead to see yes *yes we do me two* Alice's *see someone seeing you* and maybe They had that but I'll never know and I'm not quite sure what happens now I'll have to leave and where do *we are me* go when each passage is over? perhaps the Great In-Between where the Sun is ever-arisen on no tomorrow and each sun like our One shines for Its own local special universe wherein each Other is the center.

"Now? The same thing that's always happened."

Looking at Edmunn look at him and trying to see through streaming Iyes Daniel stepped back from the guardrailed edge of the these titanium towers that Man had built above the lowest clouds. "Her mind was a razor within the willow roots of a mid-autumn night's dream."

Mightily and Wrightily poetic but now a lighthearted counter-example:

"And in Her memory shall spin the quasars, and the Sun shall slash hot streaks unto the night from mirror Moon which—searing—spins ad...infimum."

"Infinitum."