

S.1 – The Performance

Mr. George could hear them breathing. Twenty-four pairs of lungs, perfectly synchronized--maybe the reason they were audible. Or it was he, like the murderous protagonist of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” super-sensitive to sounds. Mr. George’s mind drifted during his performances because he’d done them so many times.

Then he could neither see his audience nor hear them.

*“‘Wretch!’ I cried, ‘thy God hath lent thee--by these angels he hath sent thee
Respite--respite and nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore;
Quaff! O quaff this kind nepenthe, and forget this lost Lenore!’
Quoth the raven, ‘Nevermore.’”*

He cried, his voice again surprising him. It filled the large room, perhaps because he was used to practising in his small bathroom. Not only the volume, the passion. He wasn’t a passionate person. He didn’t believe in the word, especially as it was used increasingly to mean little more than ‘enthusiasm.’ Or it meant the opposite, which Mr. George liked even less, the students snickering, thinking of last night in the back seats of cars, or, more likely nowadays, on divans after school. He’d explained to his students the true meaning was from the Latin, *pati, passus*, to suffer.

Poe had suffered. Look at him, Mr. George instructed and his students dutifully turned toward the bulletin board, where Mr. George had affixed Poe’s portrait. The huge forehead shone in the badly lighted old classroom and Mr. George looked to it for solace if not strength during difficult classes.

He couldn’t see Poe now. He couldn’t see anything.

And that was good for letting loose again.

*“‘Prophet!’ said I, ‘thing of evil!--prophet still! if bird or devil!
Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore!’”*

His voice projected to the back of the room, unabsorbed by heavy curtains drawn across

the windows. He wasn't an actor. But then Poe hadn't been either, although he came from a theatrical family. Mr. George sometimes thought David and Eliza Poe's talent had muted in Edgar, muted again in Mr. George before emerging unexpectedly here in the classroom. Mr. George fancied he had Poe's eyes--sensitive, smouldering.

*“Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!” I shrieked upstarting.
‘Get thee back into the tempest and the night’s Plutonian shore!’”*

The students giggled. Nervously. They'd tittered earlier with anticipation as he'd begun dimming the lights--the classroom having been fitted with a dimmer switch at his own expense. He'd heard the rustle of clothes as the students looked around, no longer able to read. He'd heard little cries of delight. He'd read, or rather he'd pretended to read in his most sepulchral voice and soon there was perfect darkness and perfect silence except for his voice and the shallow, excited breathing.

*“And the Raven never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door ...”*

When the lights came up again, he had to refrain from looking too obviously to the row by the door, where Martha's face came out of the gloom like the moon in "Ulalume." Martha's face was broad--Malaysian--and white, whiter than usual, and, set against her black hair--her raven hair-- it outshone the others, who were mostly blonde and still tanned from the summer or from attending tanning salons-- where Mr. George knew they tanned everything because he saw down their low-rise jeans.

The bell rang for the end of the period. The students filed out before they saw his fingers tremble on his books and papers. In the old, steadier days, when he'd just been getting wound up, the students had gathered round him asking what this or that meant--Night's Plutonian shore, balm in Gilead. Nowadays children were less spontaneous. Less innocent.

When he got home in the late afternoon, after picking up some fish sticks for supper, he was too excited to eat. Too excited to sit. He had a stiff drink from the bottle he kept in the closet. He appreciated a drink before supper because he hadn't eaten lunch--because he disliked

eating in the staff room.

The vodka hit immediately and he was ready for more dramatics. He donned his black cape and turned to the bathroom mirror. He'd bought the cape from a theatre supplies store, along with a heavy walking stick, but found he was too shy to make them part of his class performance. He recited the poem again and again, especially his favourite passage:

*“And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming
And the lamplight o’er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor ...”*

He tapped the floor with the heavy walking stick in accompaniment of the lines:

*“While I nodded nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.”*

He had a few more drinks--kind nepenthe!-- and played to his left profile in the mirror because it was better than his right, and Martha sat on that side of the room. He paced and gesticulated until he started forgetting his lines. That was the reminder tomorrow was a school day. He would have another go on the weekend. He found that the more he drank the more he was able to step out of himself and imagine the effect he was having on others.

The next morning he noted immediately Martha's empty desk. He was trying to think of some excuse to postpone the second reading--he couldn't read the long poem a third time, and even then she might be absent--when he saw her on the other side of the room. She'd always sat at the front. Now she was next to Josh the Bounder, in a clump of barely respectful jocks. She was a keener. She got the best marks. Could it be she'd taken up with the Devil--the Tempter? Old Josh with his enormous thighs? They said sex drained people. Could it be her increasing pallor was due to drugs?

The reading did not go as well as yesterday's. The second reading never did, but in addition Mr. George sensed some resistance. When he finished, and dared look directly, her face appeared even more ghostly and more frightened than moved.

Good. A little fear was not unwelcome. And good compared to the others, who looked a little blase. None more than the jocks, of course, who sat back in their chairs. They were still

resentful from September when Mr. George had put them in their place--places, he corrected himself because he was a stickler for grammar. In addition to being his only theatrical emotion, anger was his most effective disciplinary tool.

Next class was a spare and he sat at his desk eating a cheese sandwich. The cheese was stale and he'd forgotten to butter the bread. His mouth was dry from the vodka. He looked around the old classroom--the heavy oak moldings around the high windows and doors and ceiling gathering the dark from this dreariest time of the year--and thought what his life had come to. He studied the pictures of Poe and his young wife, Virginia, affixed not by accident to the bulletin board just above where Martha sat--had sat, he corrected himself with some irritation. Over the years he'd told his classes the portrait of Virginia Clemm had been drawn immediately after her death. She looked propped up. He suggested her eyes had all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming.

There was a noise outside the door. He looked up and there she was. Her. She. He put away his sandwich.

"Yes, Martha," he asked, "what can I do for you?"

She looked whiter and more anxious than ever. She got right to the point. "Sir, you said Poe and..." She looked apprehensively toward the bulletin board. "...His wife..."

"...Virginia..." Mr. George prompted.

"...Yes...Virginia. You said she was thirteen and he was in his forties..."

"That's right. Girls--women married much younger than today. Men that were much--"

"Well, that's not true. What I mean is-- I looked it up..." Here she freed a book from under her arm, where it had rested against her breast. She leafed through the pages, her fingers trembling.

He marvelled at the minority students looking up things, taking to their new western culture while Josh and the Jocks, whose families had been here generations, were indifferent.

"...Yes...Here..." she said, holding the book open for him to see. "She--Virginia-- was thirteen...but...he was in his twenties ..." she pointed defiantly to the word, 'thirteen.' She turned the page, presumably to Poe's age. When she couldn't find it, she pulled the book to her, studied it near-sightedly.

He studied the part in her hair, more grey than white. With flecks of dead skin. He tried to think how he would react to being corrected. If she was correct. He knew the number thirteen

but was unsure what Poe's age had been exactly. He'd been telling the story for a quarter of a century, along with that of the summer pilgrimage he'd made as a young teacher to Poe's various homes and museums in New York, Richmond, Philadelphia and Baltimore.

She turned the pages with growing impatience. "Oh-h-h!" she said.

High-spirited. She might've flushed, but then girls didn't flush anymore.

"You might've misunderstood me--" he began, only to be interrupted.

"Well, it couldn't have been his forties because he was forty when he died!" she said and pointed to Poe's dates. 1809-1849.

Mr. George looked closely, distracted by her blunt finger. The nail looked cloudy. But he was comforted by its not being slathered with red or purple paint.

"I see," he said, genuinely surprised. He hadn't looked Poe up in decades. "But, would *you* go out with some one in his twenties?" he asked playfully and immediately regretted it. Quickly he went on. "I think what I said was Virginia was thirteen when they met, Poe was forty when he died and it was common for men in their forties or older to marry young girls...women... That's what I think I said..." Then he climbed on his high teacher's horse. "...That's what I *know* I said because I've been saying it for..." And he stopped. He didn't want to say how many years. Longer than she'd been alive.

He joked to dispel the tension, "Too many numbers, Martha!"

She didn't laugh. She closed the book and reprimanded him, "Well, I think you should've made yourself clearer."

He was stung.

"And I don't think Poe would've done such a thing!" she said and walked out.

After school he went home and drank himself into a stupor. He didn't put on his cape, didn't declaim and gesticulate in front of the mirror, didn't eat his fish sticks. He drank. Why not? Poe had. Many times Mr. George had told his students about the plaque he'd seen on the outside wall of Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, where Poe had fallen in the street for the last time. Mr. George had fallen in the hall and the students knew about his drinking. He'd bowed his head in a kind of contrition and told his classes it had not been that Poe was an alcoholic; he was said not to drink very much; he might have been a diabetic, undiagnosed at the time because no one knew about diabetes; and drink went to his head. At this point Mr. George

had looked up to see the girls' eyes shining, especially Martha's, although some of the boys smirked. Tonight he sipped and muttered into the night, *"Till I scarcely more than muttered, 'Other friends have flown before ..."*

The next morning he went to the closet and put on the cape. He brushed his hair back and twirled imaginary moustaches. He pirouetted trying to twirl the cape. He recited:

"Ah! distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December ..."

He set off out the door with the heavy walking stick even though he was driving. He gave the stick a twirl as he entered the school, made his way through the halls bringing it smartly down with each step. He greeted students he didn't teach.

He arrived late to class. He was never late. The students were already seated. He smiled, held out his cape dramatically, explained he'd taken longer to dress this morning. He joked he'd put the thing on back-to-front, hadn't been able to find the armholes, had stuffed it down his pants when he'd got up from the toilet! A little bathroom humour, that he knew was fashionable.

Soon he succeeded in putting the class, especially Josh and the jocks, at ease. They laughed and talked among themselves while he spoke. Usually a no-no.

He thought the atmosphere was so cordial--as relaxed as young Mr. Phillips next door, who played rap music--he would favour the class with another reading. If only he could think of an excuse to do so.

And then he could. He went to the storage cabinet, retrieved an old record player. He blew the dust off the sleeve of an old vinyl record. Simon and Garfunkel. He plugged in the boxy machine and set the needle to "I am a Rock." After bumps and scratches and hisses, the voices, sounding young and innocent, harmonized:

Winter's day
In a deep and dark December
I am alone!
Alone within my room
I touch no one and no one touches me!

When the song finished, he joked some more, “At least they can sing!” in reference to his well known dislike of rappers. He fumbled the needle across the record, creating a painful scratching noise--not unlike, it occurred to him, what he heard from next door.

“Now, class,” he said, when he’d restored the album to its sleeve, “what I want you to do is compare and contrast what you just heard with ‘The Raven’.”

And he took his position beside the dimmer switch.

“Ah ‘The Raven’!” he sighed, hand mock-heroically to his heart.

“Evermore!” someone yelled, and he laughed again.

*“Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore
While I nodded nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
‘Tis some visitor,’ I muttered, ‘tapping at my chamber door--
Only this and nothing more.’”*

He tapped his walking stick, only slightly less vigorously than in his bathroom.

Even before there was complete darkness, there were the little outcries. More numerous than before.

He kept on dimming and tapping and reading,

*“‘Sir,’ said I, ‘or madam, truly your forgiveness I implore!
But the fact is, I was napping, and so gently you came rapping
And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door,
That I scarce was sure I heard you!’”*

He wished he could execute a pirouette or two. Twirl the cape. But he had to operate the switch. And his balance wasn’t the best. He turned the lights off-- earlier than usual because of course the drama was gone of the students not knowing he’d memorized the poem. But when he got the lights out, he realized no one would be able to see him.

*“Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering, fearing
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before— “*

More outcries. Nervous laughter.

*“Then methought the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer
Swung by seraphim whose footfalls tinkled on the tufted floor.”*

Funny noises: scurrying, scraping. A croak.

A smell. Noxious.

“Phew!” someone said.

*“‘Wretch!’ I cried, “thy God hath lent thee--by these angels he hath sent thee
Respite--respite and nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore!
Quaff! O quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!’
Quoth the Raven, ‘Nevermore.’”*

“Ugh!”

Then a cry. Not appreciative. Distressed.

Mr. George turned on the lights.

Martha, hurrying towards him. Aghast. The others laughing. Josh sliding back into his desk. Mr. George held out his arms to protect her. But she swept past. Not before he saw the miracle of a rose in her cheek. And the sacrilege of her disarrayed blouse.

She was out the door when Mr. George realized what had happened. Saw the knowing smirks on the students’ faces. Even the girls’. None more so than Josh the Bounder, upon whom Mr. George descended with his heavy walking stick.

S. 2 – Georgia Coffee Star

That night might have rocked them a lullaby, had they been more secure. Tucked into twin beds even though they'd booked a double, but they'd been travelling long enough not to take any beds for granted. And these ones had such soft mattresses, made up with good linen. A room with a private bath, a nice hotel because they'd had it with hostels. Not realizing they were too old for such accommodation, that they were the problem and the hostels were exactly what they were supposed to be.

Thomas was sitting up against his pillows, laptop propped upon his knees. The last two days' photographs transferring from his camera one-by-one, appearing on the screen to cast his face in various hues. Mo watching him, curled up on her own bed, on her side of the room. The two of them not usually so territorial, but here it was a matter of symmetry. Thomas turning blue in the light, red, then blue again. He'd angled his screen so Mo couldn't see.

That he was looking at a picture of a girl: Transfer Completed. The photo was from the Peace Museum yesterday, the first one he'd taken that morning. A photo of a photo, the woman in sepia tones with her back to the camera, displaying the floral print of a kimono burned onto her skin. That incalculable horror could be represented so uncannily. As contrasted with the mushroom cloud, an iconicity as obscuring as the dust had been, but this woman's back obscured nothing. The imprint of truth here, a photo in a photo. Which was distance, but tangible-- Thomas was partial to truths he could hold in his hand.

But he wouldn't show Mo. Six weeks of travelling had made for well over four thousand photos-- of various sunsets, vistas, temples and pagodas-- but they seemed personal now. Though Mo had been with him the whole time, even appearing in half the shots, but here was the world

through his eyes. He didn't want to chance what she might reduce it to.

Thomas himself was rarely seen in the pictures, and he'd still been photographer in the ones where he was. With his arm outstretched to hold the camera, his head dipped into a double chin. But even at the best of times Thomas photographed badly, light glaring off his glasses, his jaw stiff and aching when he smiled. Thomas found his comfort behind the lens instead; of all the roles in his life, he liked this one the best. Something formidable had been achieved these last few weeks, and he reported, "Four thousand, three hundred and thirty seven," without even thinking. For he was of the type that thought sheer volume might constitute an oeuvre.

It was a sticking point. Thomas had viewed so much of their six weeks in Asia through his lenses, he might as well have watched it on television. He was utterly incapable of experience, preoccupied with documentation at a level that was disconcerting. Frustrating. Even when his seascapes all just blended into one, he'd argue memories did the same. Which memories didn't do, Mo was sure. Or at least when they did, they were supposed to, fading and blending all part of a memory's design.

She was sitting up in bed now. The light from the computer was distracting, the tap tap of the keyboard annoying. Illuminated letters spelling *Georgia Coffee Star* were secured to the roof next door, dousing their room in flossy pink, thin curtains shutting out none of the brilliance.

"Almost five thousand photos," said Thomas, who liked his numbers round.

"But not quite," said Mo. "There won't be time for that." Because there wouldn't be. Not for seven hundred and whatever other photos during the thirty six hours they had left. And now Thomas was exhaling through his nose, a rubber tire and she the rusty nail. "But you've got so many already," she said. Thomas was too sensitive. Lying back down, and there it was, almost.

Mo closed her eyes. Could it really be that easy?

But there it was, thought Thomas, his camera disconnecting from his laptop with a click. The noise would disturb her. And no matter what she said, it was a triumph, these four thousand, three hundred and twenty seven photos that proved not only Thomas Whittock Lives, but that There Are Places He Has Been. The whole wide world, if only so far, contained on a hard drive. Chaos, grit and ecstasy shrunk into bytes more mega than mere.

Outside the wind was blowing fierce, storm's stirring. A lagging warm front about to clash with its adversary, the first typhoon of the season descending, and Mo and Thomas hadn't realized. Neither one of them noticing the currents in the air, for they thought they'd seem storms before. Thomas was organizing his photos into albums, and Mo still had her eyes shut but then she opened them again.

"Are you going to be long?" she asked.

"Don't know."

Mo sat back up, turned on the lamp. "Anything good?"

Thomas shrugged. He created a brand new file, "Hiroshima Tuesday". There won't be time, she'd said, like the decision was hers, and now it felt like it was.

He continued sorting, and Mo got out of bed. Treading carefully, because the room was dark. In spite of the bedside lamp, the glow from the computer, and the pink light across the way. Too bright to sleep, too dark to walk, up here in this bizarre room eighteen stories into the empyrean and Mo was looking for something to read. There was only the travel guide, battered from weeks of use, from being stuffed into her backpack. Some pages dog-eared, whole sections

torn out from day-trips when they didn't want to haul the continent. But there were chapters they hadn't cracked yet, still places they hadn't been.

Then at the crash: they looked up together. A tile had come loose from a roof across the street, coasting up on the window and plunging down against their window. The view obscured as the rain started falling. Georgia Coffee Star had turned electric blur.

Thomas said, "What was that?"

Mo said, "How would I know?" She had resolved to be kinder, but Thomas made it hard. Behind his screen his head was bowed, shoulders slouched. And now, only now, did she want to push the computer away, the camera too, and crawl into that narrow bed beside him. Only when he wanted nothing to do with her at all.

Because he was reading his emails, using his access to the wireless world, but there was nothing urgent. Junior Associates with their massive quandaries, problems he could solve out of habit. These could wait a day or two. A note from his boss, but just an update, nothing had changed and Thomas clicked the email window shut.

Thunder rumbled far away, the rain falling louder, but neither of them remarked upon the weather. They were tired of weather. They were tired full stop, having had enough of such remarks, of observations lately. Of each other. Even the things they thought but never said seemed so dwelled upon.

Mo skimming a summary of Tibetan customs, and she was thinking about all they would be taking back with them. Bits and pieces picked up along the way-- sarongs, and thongs, and ethnic handicraft.

Thomas was looking at the photos again, beginning a slide show of the whole collection

S. 5 – Remorse and the Post-Op Denver Convention

Perhaps it was the wine and the pill on the plane that sped the signal from his brain to his tongue and caused him to speak aloud that afternoon in the Denver hotel lounge.

“It’s not your goddam life,” he said.

The two men seated at the bar turned toward him. The bartender at the till stopped and turned as well. They stared at him like alley dogs who had found an injured cat. He looked down at the tuna melt on the plate in front of him. What had he done? This wasn’t a crisis, really. Most crises weren’t crises, really.

Even after the surgery, what he remembered most was how his wife and daughters treated him like a wounded king, giving up their favourite television shows so he could lie on the sofa and watch as much as he wanted, day and night. Even the dread had only lasted a month or so after the diagnosis, though his imagination kept spasmodically producing scenarios that he would brush away. Perhaps if he died, Elaine would never be happy again or the girls might be scarred for life, but he was being vain and morbid. Besides, the statistics were in his favour. Thank you, statistics.

A voice in his mind, sounding like his late father, insistent as a chainsaw whine, was speaking: “What are you? A baby? You get this thing, the quacks cut it out and if they kill you or cure you, that’s it. We die like animals in the field. Why should you or I be any different?” His father believed that if you hadn’t seen war, you didn’t know toughness, or disappointment or fear. When his body looked like a bag of sticks and he was trembling on the gurney, he had whispered, “Get me a gun.”

“Sorry,” he said, patting his father’s hand. So useless.

His father never reached the recovery room but he did and when he came to, they gave him a morphine pump. Every two hours when the lights were turned on he felt as though he were being dragged up from the bottom of a well. Each time, the night nurse asked: “Can you rate your pain out of ten?”

“One” or “two,” he said to keep her happy. It was like making up sins to say Confession to the priest when he was a kid.

Later, there were the prescription pain-killers he took every four hours that gave him dreams like cheap horror movies, vivid and violent and crudely symbolic. The second night, he dreamed of a destroyed city and rows of railroad tracks like surgical stitches while he sat on a distant hill in a red convertible. Honestly, you would laugh if you saw it on late night cable.

Once, he awoke feeling a sting near the incision site and he remembered the beginning of a poem: “Wynkin', Blynkin', and Nod, one night sailed off in a wooden shoe/ Sailed off on a river of crystal light into a sea of dew.” He had read the poem to his daughters when they were little, turning it into a game. “You’re Wynkin’ and you’re Blynkin’ and I’m NOD...” and he would drop his head and pretend to snore loudly. They would laugh and yell, “No Daddy! Wake up!” and pummel him with their tiny fists.

He started taking slow daily walks while he healed that progressed to long slow jogs around the neighbourhood. One afternoon, when he was coming back to the house, the postman asked him, “So how are you doing, boss? Has your brush with mortality changed you?”

“I’m afraid I’m not that deep,” he said, and took the mail into the house.

In June, he returned to his job writing promotional copy for a sports marketing company. One night during his second week, the department head, Ted Pendrith, came over to his desk. “Feeling nice and rested?” he asked. Pendrith seemed to be under the impression he had been on vacation. He wanted to know if he could fly to Denver that weekend for a marketing convention. Stevens, their research man, had come down with shingles. Could he read Stevens’ speech and pass around some cards and brochures?

He decided to go down a day early and the following Friday he waited in the terminal for the Air Canada flight from Toronto to Denver. He had a carry-on bag and a briefcase, with Stevens’ paper and the pill bottle with the remaining painkillers in case he had trouble sleeping.

He had time to look at Stevens' paper called “Rethinking Buyer’s Remorse in Emerging Demographics.” He was drawn to a passage cited from an article about buyer’s remorse and perceptions of virility but Stevens had a weakness for demographic jargon like “no-frills affluents” and “suburban “boomer-rangers” and he had the meaning of “bleisure” wrong. It didn’t mean “black leisure”; it meant “business leisure.” He

scratched it out and pencilled in “black leisure consumers.” Everybody was in some category.

When his flight was finally called, he got the aisle seat next to a woman in her mid-thirties with bright blonde hair and Western clothing. She winked at him.

“You visiting Denver?” she asked.

She was returning from seeing her younger sister’s new baby in Deep River, Ontario. She and her husband ran a guest ranch near the town of Cathedral, Colorado and last year she got kicked in the head by one of the horses. The MRI scan didn’t show anything but she was left with this eye twitch. Hadn’t he noticed it?

When the flight attendant came along to take lunch orders, he ordered a glass of wine. He explained it was his first drink since his own medical scan. She stared at him open-mouthed.

“You mean you’re a survivor?”

The word sounded like something she’d heard on daytime television: “Well, I don’t think like that but I guess I don’t find myself saying, ‘I hate my life’ anymore.”

“You hated your life?” she said.

Perhaps “hate” was too strong. What he had meant to say was that he didn’t feel so angry. Nowadays, he was making things up as he went along.

“You know what I think?” said the woman. “I think our mistake is thinking our lives ever belong to us. They don’t. They belong to everyone we meet, because we all come from the Cr’ator. Time is a gift and that’s why we call it the present. May I say a little prayer for you?”

After the prayer, he decided he was tired of her craziness, so he popped a pain-killer and washed it down with the last of his wine. He closed his eyes and drifted into swirling thoughts and then sleep.

Shortly after 4 p.m., he was sitting in the lounge at the Lowes Denver Hotel. He had imagined manly wood and stone and mountain views but the hotel had an exuberantly gaudy Italian Renaissance theme, including marble floors, arches and columns and red velveteen couches.

He was on Stevens’ expense account, eating a late lunch and listening to two men who were sitting at the bar. The younger man had a dark suit with a blue-shadow of a

beard like a priest or a thug. The older man, slimmer and closer to his own age, had receding grey hair and a moustache like Mr. Moody from “The Beverly Hillbillies.” A cell phone played the theme from “The Entertainer” and the older man reached into his pocket and held it to his ear.

“What’s up? Well, that’s a shame. We’ll work around it then. Goodbye.” The man slipped the phone back into his pocket and shook his head. “Pullman’s not coming until tomorrow. Story of my goddam life.”

That’s when he said: “It’s not your goddam life”

Some moments were ice-breakers, some were ice-makers; this one felt as though it had been immersed into liquid nitrogen that might shatter at any moment. Were concealed weapons legal in Colorado? “I beg your pardon,” he said. “I was thinking aloud.”

The dark younger man seemed to glower. The older man had hard little blue eyes and a wet lip under his moustache. “I believe you were commenting on my conversation.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I just finished a long flight and I’m on medication because of a recent surgery and, you know, I thought aloud that your life isn’t yours or dammed. Like my dad used to say, ‘Life’s a present.’”

The man raised his eyebrows and shrugged theatrically. “Listen, friend. I’m a Baptist deacon, myself,” he said. “What I said was an expression of my momentary exasperation, but not really your concern. Please enjoy your stay in Denver and keep a handle on that medication.” He gave him a formal nod to indicate the discussion was over, before turning back to his drink and his friend.

Back in Stevens’ room, he decided he needed to clear his head. He splashed his face and changed into his t-shirt, shorts and running shoes and headed west on wide flat streets, lined with trees and bungalows. He made a running rhythm out of the names of the sports teams – Broncos, Rockies, Avalanche, and Nuggets – but he was gasping after a few minutes. The mile-high city took your breath away. Denver – home of John Denver’s spiritual awakening, but then, this wasn’t exactly Saul to St Paul: Who wouldn’t change his name from Henry John Deuschendorf Jr.? This was also the city of Warren Zevon’s “Things to Do in Denver When You’re Dead.”

He saw a park ahead of him and it was splendid with massive flower gardens and tennis courts and running tracks. After a few gasping minutes more jogging, he came upon a tour group gathered around a white cottage next to a pond. He took a brochure from a young woman in a green parks' t-shirt. As he read the words on the brown paper, he felt a current of joy run through him. The cottage belonged to Eugene Field, a 19th century Denver journalist who had written the poem about Wynkin', Blinkin' and Nod, who "sailed off on a river of crystal light." In the pond there was a fountain statue of the three children in a shoe, adrift but frozen in stone, with streams of water playing over them.

Before he died at 45, Field had once impersonated Oscar Wilde, dressing up in a wig to gloves, waving to the crowd as he drove through the town in a carriage. When the real Wilde showed up at Union Station hours later, only a handful of stragglers were on hand to see him. As one Denver imposter to another, he felt a kind of love for Eugene Fields, and he dipped his fingers in the pool and touched them to his sweating forehead.

Back at his Stevens' room again, he wanted to call home but Elaine and the girls were downtown at a concert. He emailed them a picture of the statue on the internet with a note about the poet. "And now," he wrote, "I think it's time for daddy to nod."

He lay on the bed listening to the hum of the air conditioner before he slipped away. He was in a dark auditorium with rows of men sitting at metal tables writing exams. Soldiers in leather boots and rifles leaned on walls around the room, watching. He looked at the page in front of him. The question was: "What do you know and how do you know it?" He remembered from school that introductions were important. He would outline categories of thought and lists of things known. He would include illustrations with captions and refer to all the old debates. He would . . .

"Put down your pencils," said a man from the stage.

He had written nothing. Unless he could put down a sentence or two, he would surely fail, but the guards were attentive now, watching the tables closely, their guns in their hands. A telephone rang. One of the guards marched over to the corner of the room and picked it up. He placed it on top of the telephone box and marched until he stood behind his chair and whispered.

"For you," he said.

No one looked at him as he went to the phone. He picked up the receiver. "Yes?"

The voice sounded like his father: "Tell me what this means: "Remorse is absolute failure."

Was it a famous quotation? "If you give me a couple of minutes I can find it," he said. He put the phone back on the box and walked out the exit door. There must be a computer terminal around here somewhere. He was in an arched hallway that surrounded the auditorium. A door was partially ajar. He saw sunlight and outside a field strewn with rocks and bomb crater shells. "What am I doing?" he thought, "I'm going to get killed" but he walked quickly toward the exit.

The phone rang again. This time it was Elaine. She liked to give him wake-up calls when he travelled. Her voice was muffled, as though she were speaking through folds of dark, velvet.

"Are you awake?" she asked.

"Not yet," he said. "But I will be soon."

S. 7 – Holiday Justice

So you come downtown on the bus in the bright Saturday morning cuz you man he done call you sudden and say he being transported from the city copshop precinct for a rainment to where the slave pens is alive and well and located down to the Courthouse even if they did name it after a black man but they got ankle-chains and handcuffs and U.S. Marshal muscle pushing people around with nobody allowed to find out nothing about no a rainment if you ain't a lawyer or ain't rented one and cain't nobody talk to they families if they ain't lawyers or Marshals or cops and if you look at you boyfriend wrong the police gonna yell at you and put you out of Court even if you only mouthing 'I love you' and not even making any tiny li'l noise it still too much for the fragile egos of the Court and the police no matter how decent the Judge be still and yet the machine that surrounds him sharp and rough so's you might as well be in front of the King or the Headsman and you wait and part of the Court Sprocket or whatever they call it is printed so you can see them dragged in in chains and judged and sent back or let out but part of the Court Sprocket is made up as they go along and if you boyfriend in jail for bad plates and a bad license and some parking tickets and you don't know if you have to go find a thousand dollars to get the tickets paid before they let him out like debtors prison cuz they ain't no Court Sprocket list for Traffic just for felons but you cain't even find out if they gonna keep him and he lose his job which if he a bus driver or delivery and he cain't make his shift they fire him so then he cain't pay the tickets which if he could have paid them in the first place while he had a job he would have but now how can he pay them when he don't have one and they impound his pickup truck so that's another five hundred dollars which he didn't never have in the first place and he sure don't have it now so you sit on the outside Courtroom bench with the fat people and the stinky people and the bad hair people and the lawyers jump up and down but they never tell you nothing and you cain't ask the police cuz they put you out and the runners in and out with the files and papers laugh and talk with they friends up behind the barrier but you cain't ask 'em nothing cuz they look at you like you dirt if you don't have no lawyer and sit down and shut up it's all about the Judge and who's propping him up with guns and sticks and little rubber gloves like they cain't stand to touch the prisoners except with gloves on and some of they cops got black gloves that maybe don't leave no mark when they hit you outside the Court where the Judge don't see and he don't even know or care what they do down the hall and all these U.S. Marshal cops like John Hoostruck or Pal Gorrey with jut jaws and clean chins and you wanna know where's Wild Fred Hicktown when you need him with all these cops standing behind the prisoner like he gonna bust out at any minute and they drag some crazy lady in off her meds and she all upset when they touch her so they take her down the hall screaming and after while the screaming stop and you look when the cops come back in to see if any blood on they gloves but they maybe wash it off or use they black gloves where it don't show none and of course they keeps the Traffics till last so they got to miss a day of work and sit around the jail all day just to remind 'em not to be poor with a vehicle and tickets and git you tags right away even if you have to pay all the parking tickets for parking in the neighborhood you got cuz you couldn't get the permanent sticker till you paid the license which you couldn't cuz you had the tickets so when you license expire you cain't renew it neither cuz you couldn't pay no tickets so you better not need no truck to git you kid to school and you to you job or they take it

away even if you got insurance too which it don't cost enough to need no insurance anyhow and they don't let no prisoners even look at other prisoners or out into the seats or else the Marshals push 'em and make 'em move like they wasn't even people or nothing and they all got chains on 'em like cattle like slaves like dehumans like deathsmen like lynched people and these athletes to push 'em around like the Judge he was King Sollermun or something except ain't no Princess Bathsheeba in no bathing bikini made outta chains but some fourteen year old girl with four children been having sex since she was eight with her father's brother and her own brother and she don't even know it's molestment except she crying in the corridor about she want her mama which who don't at times like these in places like this where the holding pen bench is bright orange and maybe they Marshals don't even mean to hurt nobody and maybe they even be nice sometimes them handsome men with they muscles and they guns and they beepers and they gloves and they two pairs of handcuffs and they all be smiling at each other but don't you be looking at nobody in no Court or they shove you around like you was cattle or postal boxes at Christmastime on a big conveyer belt and now they got this rule the Judge say that cain't let nobody out from jail direct on no work release cuz you got to go to a halfway house which should oughtta be two days for a placement except now it take ten-fifteen days to get into a halfway house and meantime you lose you job if you cain't show up for the Christmas rush and drive the truck so you can pay for the pickup truck and the insurance and the license and the tickets and the plates or maybe they let him out after dark after all you don't know cuz you cain't find out nothing without a lawyer and you cain't leave cuz what if they call his case and he need some bail and you gone and he don't have it and you don't know so you wait and wait and wait and wait and wait and wait and wait on into the night because what you gonna do anyway like sitting around the emergency room when somebody been bad hurt in a accident in a old rattly pickup truck that wouldn't nobody want anyways...

S. 9 – What I Know About the Production of Bubblegum

Everyday my father comes home from work smelling like bubblegum. It wafts from his jacket, Trident flavour and sugar and red food colour number 40, coming to puddle on the floor and sink into our balding carpet.

His socks are pink at the toes, sometimes at the heels from where synthetic food flavours have spilled. I never get to see his work shoes—he leaves them in his locker at the plant.

There are permanent red undertones to my father's fingernails, even though at the plant all the workers wear gloves. He'll sit in his chair and pick at them, diligently, as if anything he did could actually remove all that dye.

People don't understand why I don't like gum. They offer me sticks of the stuff, and all I can think is, my father made that. My father made that for eight-fifty an hour. My father's hands mixed that dye and that sugar, and now his work is in your mouth, squelching away into nothing.

Sometimes my father comes home with his hands burned; with big, soft welts cushioning his knuckles. This is where the hot sugar has stuck and peeled. He runs his hands under cold water in the kitchen sink and I watch, ready to bring him the band-aids he always asks for.

My mother, weathered and clinging to the stove, brings him dinner—potatoes and meatloaf, sometimes fried fish. Her hands are thin and knobby, her skin stretching over her knuckles like wet tissue paper even though she's barely forty years old. She smiles, and the effort of it distorts her face.

While he eats dinner my father has a beer. Sometimes he has two. On a really bad

day, or if he's feeling sentimental, my father has three. He eats in silence, stopping only to lift his glass. I sit in the living room and hunch over my books, making notes on the Quebec Act of 1774 and trying to ignore the thunk of heavy glass on the wooden table. I am studying hard. I am studying hard because I have to get a scholarship and move out of this house.

When my father is finished dinner he comes to sit with me in the living room, sometimes placing his beer stein on my history homework where it leaves sloppy wet rings which smudge my blue ink. He turns on the television, and when I complain he helps himself to another beer. This is when I usually leave, taking my books and papers and half-baked ideas with me.

While I lie on my bed and think about the significance of the War of 1812 for Quebec, I'll tap my pen loudly. This way I can't hear my mother in the other room.

I can hear my father's silence, though. That and his aura of pink sugar, which somehow manages to creep into my clothes.

My father was a history professor once, I think. In Poland, where his fingernails were still clean and he kept his alcohol intake to two tallboys a night. He talks about it some nights while he stands on the balcony, leaning into the rusty railing with a glass mug in one hand.

"I wrote the best thesis in my year," he'll say. "The professor thought I had copied it from somewhere, except that the grammar was so bad."

And of his students: "They loved me. I would have to extend class because they wouldn't stop asking questions." All in Polish, of course. My father's English is broken,

crooked. He uses it when scheduling his shifts at the plant, or when arguing with bank card companies over the spelling of his name.

“*A-n-d*—no no, *r-z*. The *r* come before the *z*. Yes. No, no space.” The credit statements come wrongly addressed anyway, usually to someone called Andrea. As if the prefix of Mr. couldn’t tip them off.

I looked it up once. I spent an hour trying to find the site of the university he had worked for, tripping over my computer’s inability to properly display Polish characters. Fourteen major papers—I don’t know why I was so surprised. My father’s name typed in under grand titles, under dissertations about the most obscure events the little country sidling up to Germany had ever seen. Recent political movements, Polish participation in the USSR army, names of historical figures I didn’t even know.

Like his scarred hands and his leaning into the humid night and that mug, that persistent glass mug. It was all there.

The saddest, saddest story I know: my father, taking my mother out to dinner for the first time in Canada, both of them dressed up with something like four words of English between them. My mother’s floral dress, those pearls she still keeps in her dresser. Probably that musty perfume I remember from early, early days.

The two of them sitting down at a table, ordering their meal in stunted syllables, injured words. Smiling at each other, maybe, feeling capable. And when the waiter asked what they’d like to drink, my father scanned the menu and found that one crucial word, the one he had bothered to learn. “Root beer,” he said, pointing at the text. Probably smiling, probably satisfied.

And when it was brought to him, all foam and sugar and sticky glass, he realized his mistake.

I think my father cried. I think that as he sat there, lifting the glass to his lips until it was empty, thinking about how unlike beer the brown fizz he'd asked for was, he wept. Because the price on the menu said three-fifty, and that winter when I was born everything I wore came from the Salvation Army. Because that winter my parents slept on a mattress on the living room floor.

Three-fifty for brown sugar in a glass, but my father drank it all.

And one time my mother walked into a Subway restaurant asking where she could buy bus tickets.

I stare down at my textbook, which is blurry now. As far as tragedy goes, the Seven Years' War is nothing.

General Wolfe died on the field.

And General Montcalm.

So they died.

So we all die.

Sometimes it's hard to focus on Canadian history, because the apartment gets loud. My father will drink, and my mother will scream over him as he hunches in silence, his broad back absorbing her energy. The volume of it exhausts her until she becomes a scarecrow of a human being, thin and stretched and gaunt, leaning on the kitchen counter and grinding her teeth.

Why do you have to drink, why can't you talk to me, why are we living like this,

why and why and tell me—he takes it all in without ever turning around. And then she goes to her room and cries.

My mother told me once, as she was mashing potatoes over the stove, that my father had come to their wedding drunk. Besides them and the priest, only his friend had come to stand in as the best man. They honeymooned in Greece and spent most of their money on wine.

I think that people shouldn't marry at all. That is what I think.

Today I'm sitting curled up on the living room couch, my notes on my lap and my pen in my mouth, bobbing up and down as I chew. I am learning about something that happened in Quebec at some time or other before it was called that, at some point when the country was still so wide and empty that the distance swallowed people whole. I have only one lamp on, and the room is dark. When I close my eyes I can see the text pasted to the underside of my eyelids in bright red font.

When my father walks in I jump, because sometimes at three in the morning the silence takes on an oppressive, dulling quality. I expect him to be drunk, but he doesn't sway, just sits down on the floor in front of the television. He gives me a look that could be hostile but falls short.

“Father,” I say, because my study session is over.

He doesn't answer, proceeding to plug in the Playstation and unwrap one of the controllers.

“Father, what are you doing?”

He turns his head, stares at my notes. “History is a good discipline,” he says. And flicks on the TV.

“Father, I have to study. I have a test tomorrow.”

“It’s late. For tests you should sleep.”

“Father.” But it doesn’t really matter, because the video game is already on, and tonight is going to be one of those evenings my father avoids sleeping with his wife by undertaking six hours of Resident Evil until the morning light stings his eyes and sends him to bed.

I close my book to watch him play, watch his shoulders tense and his fingers move in response to the graphics.

On the screen is a man in a black jumpsuit wearing a gasmask, running back and forth with what could be an assault rifle. I’m not much on guns, even seventeenth-century ones, but I can see that he’s using it to attack dead people. Walking dead people, really. I do not understand the game. It has something to do with shooting zombies, and often there is a lot of blood. My father cringes and swears if he can’t push buttons quickly enough, but always quietly—it is late.

“What is this?” I ask him.

“It’s Hunk,” he says, his eyes not leaving the screen.

“Hunk?”

“The guy’s name,” he gestures with the controller, “is Hunk.”

“And?”

My father sits, quietly focussed. “He has to kill more than ninety of them. Before time runs out.”

“The zombies?”

“The zombies, yes.”

I place my books on the floor and cap my pen. This is what my father does in the early hours of the morning, I should say at school when they ask on career day. He kills zombies for points. Getting up, I raise my arms to pop out the concentrated pockets of stiffness in my spine. I smooth my wrinkled shorts with my palms from where they stick to my legs. The room is too hot.

Picking up my books, I get ready to leave.

“Wait.”

“Father?”

He puts down his controller, pauses the game. I have never seen him pause the game before. “I have a poem,” he says. “About Hunk.”

I sit back down.

“Do you want to see it?”

But he’s already up, all but running to the closet, coming back with his worn leather jacket that reeks of pink bubblegum. From one of the pockets he pulls a small black notebook, something that might be from Dollarama.

“You write poems, Daddy?” I ask.

He looks up from the book, though his fingers continue to flip ink-stained pages. “All the time. This one was inspired by the game.” My father hands me his little black notebook, his lips moving into what could be a smile.

On the page, written carefully between blue lines in my father’s looping scrawl, is this:

When I Play as a Hunk:

When I play as a Hunk,

I am so free.

When I play as a Hunk,

The world belongs to me.

When I play as a Hunk,

I am never scared.

When I play as a Hunk,

I can go anywhere.

Life is better to me when I play as a Hunk.

I read it again, just because I can't raise my head. I think I might be able to look up after I've read it a third time, but everything is still heavy and hot, so I study the way the words curve into each other, the way blots of black ink have come together between the rigid Dollarama lines.

"Do you like it?"

"Yes," and it's stammering. "Yes, yes."

"I have more," he says, jumping up to sit beside me on the couch. My father reaches over my lap and flips the lined sheets for me, opening up pages upon pages of stilted rhyming poetry. All of them so carefully printed, staked out in my father's broken English.

So, so many words.

“I used to write, you know, when I was your age. Mostly history-based things, but sometimes poems. I’m thinking of having them published.” He looks at me, meets my eyes and smiles. “What do you think? Just a few more and I’ll have them published somewhere.”

“They’re really good, Daddy,” I say. “They’re really good.”

“*When I Play as a Hunk*, is my favourite. The best one. Do you think so?”

I stare down at the page and concentrate on making my throat less tight. “Yes, I think so. It’s good.”

And I can’t tell my father that it’s wrong to put an article in front of a proper noun. Tomorrow he’ll put on his sugary leather coat and his red-stained socks and work ten hours for eight-fifty making pink chewing gum for people, and I just can’t.

“Show me another one, Daddy,” I say.