

# **Possible Words**

**By**

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A Thesis  
Submitted to the faculty of Graduate Studies  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS**

Department of English  
University of Manitoba  
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**SCOTT JAMES MONTGOMERY ©2001**

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## **Abstract**

The text that follows is a creative thesis. More than this, however, it is an investigation into the nature of the written word and language in general as a sign system, and an attempt to demonstrate, in the act of writing itself, the tendency of language to disseminate into vast possibilities of meaning rather than act as a narrow conduit of communication and authorial intent. Writing is thus viewed as always already both a creative and critical act, as the language itself is seen to carry within its very nature the possibility of its own critique. The form adopted for this thesis is the short story, and the afore mentioned investigation is carried out in the textual exploration of the nature, limits, and possibilities of the short story form. The result of this exploration is a highly varied collection of pieces which foregrounds its own plurality. Formal and linguistic play are privileged above all things within the text, and finally, this play is viewed as crucial to demonstrating that language, in the act of writing, operates as a system of illimitable possibilities of meaning.

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*Dedication:*

*For Garry, Kerry, Jack, and Mary.*

## Introduction: A Few Thoughts on Doing the Done

The statuesque figures of Donald Barthelme and Italo Calvino loom large before me, just as, surely, the figures of Stein and Joyce must have loomed for them. Whether in form or philosophy (supposing for a moment that they may be separated, which they may not, but more on that later) a writer is forced again and again to confront the fact that what she or he is writing has, to some extent, always already been written. To put it another way, one must face the *doneness* of what one is doing. The matter, then, becomes the business of touch-ups, of polishing. The cathedral has been built, we merely re-grout the tile. Nice and romantic that, images of cathedrals, a little grand perhaps, but the fact remains that without a decent re-working mildew will set in, tiles will crumble, the facade will teeter and we're left with one shabby looking church. Pessimistic? Maybe. Then again, it's only natural to grow a little sour when, having placed yourself in the postmodern "bag" as it were, you are continually reminded by scholastic colleagues with arched brows that there's nothing you can demonstrate that was not made abundantly clear in *Tristram Shandy*. So be it.

But where was I? Oh yes, doing the done. Part of the struggle any writer faces, whether in a critical or creative vein (assuming for the moment that they may be separated, which they may not, but more on that later), is in going over the well worn tracks of language in an attempt to write something, anything, that might pass for original. When I began to frame the stories that make up this body of work it was my hope that I could somehow, through an exercise in creative writing, find a new mode of critical discourse; postmodern stories that were, in effect, essays on some of the prevalent ideas in such

thinkers as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes. This would be my *thing*, as it were, the ever blurring lines between critical and creative modes. I would be making art that operated on both the level of language and critique of language. In another medium I might have been a painter who paints pictures of essays that are commentaries on his pictures of essays. This is what I set out to do and, hopefully, what I have accomplished. Still, it was my hope that this might be viewed as something original, or barring that, at least novel. Then I realized, of course, that it's been done.

Flashback to famous Gertrude Stein whose great gift to all the writers to come rolling down the literary pike after her was to place the *thingness* of the written word in the foreground. Stein makes art about the basic building blocks of her art, words. She stacks phrases and puts words on display, showcasing their small victories and their limitations. Art about art sure, but like many of her modernist contemporaries, Stein makes a religion of art, makes it something transcendent, a safe house for Truth. Alain Robbe-Grillet and his ilk, those of the Nouveau Roman crowd, did us all the favor of putting to rest traditional notions of character, story and the separation of form and content, at least officially (though Chaucer may have a thing or two to say on the matter). Unfortunately they too felt that they were engaged in the business of Truth, in the case of the Nouveau Roman the ontological status of the novel. Truth mongers one and all to be sure, but whether we're talking about Stein, Robbe-Grillet, or countless others too numerous to mention at present, literary writing that operates as both story and critique on the nature and limitations of form is hardly a thunderclap in the skies of originality. Form and philosophy are one and have been for quite some time.

After the second World War we see the emergence of schools of thought highly critical of any philosophy that relies on transcendentalism and truth, from Jean-Paul Sartre (in essence, beg your pardon, *in existence* a yes-man for Husserl and Heidegger) on down the line to poststructuralists like Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes. Enter writers like Donald Bartheleme, Italo Calvino, and other so-called postmodernists, whose fragmented and self referential prose operates as a kind of ongoing critical dialogue with the world that engenders their writing - the same world, in effect, inhabited by Foucault, Derrida, and Barthes. What separates the poststructuralists from their existentialist forerunner is their rigorous investigation of the systems that work to shape and define human life, of which language and writing are no exception. Whether they are conscious of each other or not, the aforementioned authors' and critics' ideas support and sustain one another in their rejection of totalization, their love of the fragmentary, their refusal of transcendental Truths, their rejection of genius, and their belief in textual play as an all important response to the sign systems we encounter each and every day.

These sign systems that make up a work, whether that work be an experimental novel, a short story, a school of architecture, a poem, an essay, a style of film, a sermon, a new break in philosophy - the list is inexhaustible, always constitute a text and, due to the very nature of the language required to form what one might call a text, each text contains within itself a discourse on the very building blocks necessary for its establishment.

Barthes and Derrida argue that this has always been the case with all sign systems and that may be true, but with Bartheleme, Calvino and most other writers in the postmodern canon these ideas are implicit in the act of textual creation itself. Such is also the case, I

hope, with the stories to follow.

I realize I am painting with very broad strokes here, but this is not meant to be a definitive work on any of the above mentioned writers, I'm merely trying to make a point about so-called critical and creative writing. I hear in Barthleme's combination of fragments of pop culture, "great" literature, and the basic scenes and structures of every day life, similar sounds to Derrida's forays into the nature of language and deferral, or Barthes' reading of the signs that surround us, from cereal boxes to strip-teases, and Foucault's notions of play within the structures that govern our existence. Echoes abound, so much so that for one to speak of creative and critical writing as separate things no longer seems relevant. Whether you view this as a relegation of art, or an elevation of criticism the point is this: the act of writing, of engaging in a sign system, whatever the mode, is always first and foremost a philosophical endeavor, and any philosophical endeavor is a reflection of and commentary on the nature of its subject, in the case of my thesis both the limitations and the possibilities of language, postmodern play, and the short story form.

To declare myself unoriginal, to suggest that what I have set out to do is always already there, seems the perfect jumping off point for a thesis that both is an act of and is about language and postmodern play. Such being the case it seems useful at this point to cite some of the thinkers that have influenced (indeed created) the ideas behind the stories to follow. Ah Citation, that necessity of any critical discourse worth its salt, which for any writer serves the paradoxical role of crediting/discrediting by enhancing a writer's philosophical position while exposing her/his basic unoriginality, I turn to you now for

validation! What follows, then, is a collage of quotations (the sort you might find skillfully inserted into a more traditional bit of scholastic rhetoric), laid out to demonstrate not only *where I'm at* in terms of the short stories that constitute this text, but also where the world of narrative discourse is at. Enjoy!

Jacques Derrida:

Every sign, linguistic or non linguistic, spoken or written... in a small or large unit can be cited, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. This does not imply that a mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center or absolute anchoring [ancrage]. This citationality, this duplication or duplicity, this iterability of the mark is neither an accident or an anomaly, it is that (normal/abnormal) without which a mark could not have a function called "normal." ("Signature, Event, Context," 12)

Michel Foucault:

First of all we can say that today's writing has freed itself from the dimension of expression. Referring only to itself, but without being restricted to the confines of its interiority, writing is identified with its own unfolded exteriority. This means that it is an interplay of signs arranged less according to its signified content than according to its signifier. Writing unfolds like a game (jeu) that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits. ("What is an Author," 102)

Donald Barthelme:

We like books that have a lot of *dreck* in them, matter which presents itself as not wholly relevant (or indeed, at all relevant) but which, carefully attended to, can supply a kind of "sense" of what is going on. This "sense" is not to be obtained by reading between the lines (for there is nothing there in those white spaces) but by reading the lines themselves - looking at them and so arriving at a feeling not of satisfaction exactly, that is too much to expect, but of having read them, of having completed them. (Snow White, 106)

Roland Barthes:

The discourse on the Text should itself be nothing other than text... since the Text is that *social* space which leaves no language safe, outside, nor any subject of the enunciation in position as judge, master analyst, confessor, decoder. The theory of the Text can coincide only with a practice of writing. ("From Work to Text," 1010)

Italo Calvino:

... there is a thing that is there, a thing made of writing, a solid, materiel object, which cannot be changed, and through this thing we measure ourselves against something else that is not present, something else that belongs to the immaterial, invisible world, because it can only be thought, imagined...

(If On a Winter's Night a Traveller, 72)

Jean-Francois Lyotard:

The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements - narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. (The Postmodern Condition, xxiv)

Jacques Derrida (again):

...language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique.  
("Structure, Sign and Play ...," 964)

Roland Barthes (again):

The Text is Plural. Which is not simply to say that it has several meanings, but that it accomplishes the very plural of meaning: an irreducible (and not merely acceptable) plural. The Text is not a co-existence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing; thus it answers not to an interpretation, even a liberal one, but to an explosion, a dissemination. ("From Work to Text," 1007)

Donald Bartheleme(again):

We read signs as promises. Miss Mandible understands by my great height, by my resonant vowels, that I will one day carry her off to bed. Sue Ann interprets these same signs to mean that I am unique among her male acquaintances, therefore most desirable...

I myself, in my former existence, read the company motto ("Here to Help in Time of Need") as a description of the duty of the adjuster, drastically mislocating the company's deepest concerns. I believed that because I had obtained a wife made up of wife-signs (beauty, charm, softness, perfume, cookery) I had found love. Brenda, reading the same signs that have now mislead Miss Mandible and Sue Ann Brownly, felt that she would never be bored again... But I say, looking about me in this Incubator of future citizens, that signs are signs, and some of them are lies. ("Me and Miss Mandible," 33-34)

(Still more)Roland Barthes:

What is a language situation? A configuration of words likely to engender what *at first glance* seem to be psychological relations, not so much false as frozen in the compromise of a previous language. And it is this paralysis which, finally, annihilates psychology. (The Eiffel Tower & Other Mythologies, 56)

(Yet again) Jacques Derrida:

If totalization no longer has any meaning it is not because the infinity of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field -that is, language and a finite language-excludes totalization. This field is in fact that of freeplay, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble. ("Structure, Sign & Play...," 967)

Italo Calvino (once more):

Once you've succeeded in dispensing with something you thought essential, you realize you can also do without many other things. So here I am walking along this empty surface that is the world. (If on a Winter's..., 248)

This is by no means an exhaustive list of the ideas that have gone into the formulation of my thesis, it is merely a highlight reel of sorts. Postmodernism and poststructuralism (bed pals if ever there were) are often associated by their detractors with death, with apocalypse: the death of the author, the end of History, the end of philosophy, the death of character, of plot, of form, of structure -the list rolls on. Yet the fragments cited above are suggestive not of death and finality, but of possibility. Indeed, both these isms are openly resistant to closure; think of Calvino's If On a Winter's Night a Traveller, a book of departures without a clear originary moment in its opening lines ("You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel *If on a winter's night a traveller*"[3]) or a final closure in its last ("I've almost finished *If on a winter's night a traveller* by Italo Calvino,"[260]). Much of the history of Western philosophy has privileged origins and answers over questions and has valued buried truths and depth over signs and surfaces . It is from this tradition, call it the tyranny of transcendentalism, that postmodernism and poststructuralism break. What is at stake in refusing to play the death game that final truths rely on? What does it mean to focus on the unfolding exteriority of a discourse, rather than the illusion of a singular meaning *behind* the signifiers themselves? What if language is not a passive window to things, but rather a thing itself, active with an irreducible plurality of possible meanings? The stories that make up Possible Words are, to no small extent, investigations of and elaborations on these sorts of questions.

Saying too much about the stories in question sort of undermines the point of what

I am trying to achieve, so consider this a primer that you may use or disregard at your leisure. What I have set out to do throughout the text to follow is explore some of the questions raised above through different exercises in short story writing. Some of the stories break with traditional modes of linear story telling in favor of a postmodern formal break-down if you will. Others privilege pure dialogue over plot as characters are constituted and re-constituted in the (written) act of speaking. Others still build off of traditional notions of realistic character, establishing “psychological” egos that ultimately break down in favor of playful narrative elements. The stories also reflect both the good and bad, the ups and downs of a world without final answers, heroes, and guarantees. There is a play, throughout the text, with notions of surface and depth, signs and symbols that tease the reader with so-called deeper meanings, but are, finally, both elusive and allusive. Ultimately, the pieces affirm the possibilities created when viewing language and life with a postmodern eye, but they are possibilities tinged with melancholy, in a play on the traditional yearning for answers and truths; call it a longing for something unspecified, unspoken and always just out of reach.

Bearing all this in mind, what follows should be viewed as an exercise in a kind of postmodern formalism; an investigation of the form of the short story as well as the language that comes to constitute it. By no means is every story a sermon on the emptiness/fullness of written language. Hopefully the stories function successfully as stories. Besides, the deferral of meaning, the ongoing chain of signification, the plurality of the text, etc.; all these things are part and parcel of all language, not simply language that is self consciously part of a postmodern tradition of writing. These things happen anyway,

that's the point. So what, then, am I doing? Hopefully through an exploration of different modes of writing and different types of language I am exploring effects of meaning, seen here not as essential truths, but as avenues into the wide open possibilities of language and the irreducible plurality of postmodern life, language, and the imagination.

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## **The End Of The Book**

The book is finished. Don't panic. Put it down. Put it down and breathe in the gap. Reflect, if you want to. Do not think too hard on the What-was-it-really-all-about factor, don't worry about the I'm-not-sure-I-really-understood-this-thing sentiment. Let the details go if that is what you are inclined to do. It is finished. You've done pretty well so allow yourself a moment of pride. You finished a whole book. Think it's easy? How many people do you know (excluding those who are professionally obligated to do so), that actually read books? Furthermore, among the readers you know, how many are of the Start-but-never-finish variety? It's hard to know for sure, as these types tend to be liars. Not you though, you finished. Good for you.

You're no doubt feeling a tinge of melancholy. That's alright, it's perfectly natural. Let that feeling wash over you, it's part of the experience. You were a part of a very special world for a while, a place of signs directing you into the vast recesses of your own experience. A place both contained and wide open, referring to itself, but also part of an ongoing chain of worlds that constantly call to mind all the worlds that have ever been, or could possibly ever be. The book was a fragment made up of fragments, bits and pieces suggesting the entire spectrum of everything ever known, everything to be known, of infinite possibilities. I know that at the time of actually reading the book you probably weren't aware that you were a part of such a complex web of signs, but, trust me, you were, so give yourself a break if you're feeling a little worn out. Above all, allow yourself some time to grieve. Something unique has passed on, gone forever. Even if you read the book again it will never be the same, the collection of moments that made up your reading

have disappeared, they can never happen again. How could you ever recreate, to the smallest detail, your mind set, the position you sat in, the time of day, how things were at work, your feelings about the love of your life, the pain in your leg, the weather, what you were doing later in the day, earlier in the day, what you had for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, how much you had to drink the night before, whether or not you had laundry on, a fight with a friend, the book you read before the book in question, the philosophical trend you were into at the time, exact music you listened to at the exact moments, the movies you'd seen recently and the ones you were planning on seeing, your self image, a fleeting sense of impending doom, of impending greatness? You couldn't, and even if you could the knowledge that you had worked so hard to recreate the exact same reading experience would change your reading experience. So give it up if that's what you were planning. Just relax.

This sadness, the mourning, is natural. Particularly if you loved the book. If you didn't love the book shame on you. Shame, not because you didn't like it, that's a matter of taste, but shame because, as far as I know, we only go around once, and life is short, too short to finish books we hate. So I'm going to assume you loved the book and that you're sad that it's finished. Don't feel obligated to rush off and start reading something new. Give yourself time, and read again when your ready. Just because friends of your's were able to finish a book then move on and immediately strike up a meaningful relationship with a new text, doesn't mean you have to. Books read on the rebound usually end up unfinished, and you'll probably end up full of resentment and confusion, so take it easy. Some find it useful to glance through a magazine article, or maybe a short

story, or a poem. It is perfectly natural that you feel the adult urge to read, and if you can spend a night here and there indulging in a quicky or two without getting too involved more power to you.

At the same time, don't allow your love of the book to lead you into total despondency. Don't swear off books forever. You will read again I promise. Many's the person who thought the book they finished could never be topped, that they had enjoyed the ultimate reading experience, and there was no point in going on, only to find, sometimes years later, that they could enjoy another book just as much, but in a totally new and exciting way. The great despair of the addict attempting to overcome an addiction is accepting the notion of "never again." That they will never again know the joys (and the horrors, true, but can a person become addicted to something with no visceral upside, however shortsighted or unhealthy?) of that thing, whatever it may be, that has become so ingrained in them. There is no need for you to feel this despair as you don't have to deal with "never again," though it may, in darker moments, feel like you do.

The most profound melancholy is usually felt when concluding so called "works of genius." Perhaps you feel your book was such a book? This might lead you to develop a standard that you fear is unattainable by any other text. Well let me just say that while it is important to have high standards, it is also important to allow yourself to be surprised from time to time. In other words, don't allow yourself to become a snob or a cynic, open yourself to the possibility of a new book. On genius I will say only this, greatness is the product of the ideals of a time, nothing more. Genius equals consensus, and a pretty musty one at that. The standards by which one measures, say, the beauty of a contemporary

super model are arbitrary to say the least. The same models would look anywhere from common to absurd under the light of a different standard. Genius is the very same I suspect. Don't get all caught up in it, it's fleeting at best, at worst, fascist. Do not let the specter of a writer, however noble or insightful, loom over you in your future endeavors. Remember them fondly to be sure, visit them again if you like, but having finished the book, prepare to move on.

Also, when reflecting on the book don't fret for too long about it's meaning. Grant yourself the luxury of seeing the forest for the trees, the lilies of the valley and all that blah-blah- blah. In other words, think about words. You may find it takes the sting out of your sense of loss. Words, when they are written down, become part of the world forever. They are a bit like plastic containers, the properties that constitute them are more or less permanent. And like plastic containers they can be re-used and re-filled again and again for completely different reasons, in totally different ways. Consider the fact that the words from the book, rearranged just so, would form an entirely new book. By no means do I mean to suggest that what you've done in finishing the book is insignificant, it isn't. I'm merely pointing out that the profound nature of your experience has had a great deal to do with your own "filling of the containers," so to speak, and that the feelings you are feeling will be available to you again when you are ready. Become a lover of the word, an aesthete, and, above all, respect those slippery little devils. Is any of this helping?

When the time is right to begin a new book give some thought to a change of genre, or style. There are some who, having loved a book, immediately run out and devour everything by the same author, and sometimes similar authors in the same canon.

This type of reading makes acolytes out of otherwise reasonable people, and we are not in the business of reading to become zealots. True, there is nothing expressly wrong with appreciating a certain author's body of work, there are many writers who are consistently brilliant. However, to devour an oeuvre all at once diminishes the impact of each work individually and you end up trying to "read" the author as it were, to discover something about the mind behind the text. Well if you want to study people's minds there are plenty of opportunities in the field of psychology you might consider pursuing. Besides, by reading all of his-or-her books at once you may end up doing a disservice to the writer you so admire, as you will certainly read each new piece using the first, the one you loved so dearly, as a template, a key if you will, thus diminishing the uniqueness of each individual work. So if you've just finished a mystery novel follow it up with a book of short stories, if you just finished a western try reading a Nouveau Roman, if it was an Anti-Novel read a sprawling Victorian Epic. Grant yourself some variety, explore new possibilities, you may surprise and delight yourself.

A few words now on discussing the completed book with others. This is fine, to a point. You may have loved the book so much that you want to run out and tell all your friends about it. That's great, but for heaven's sake do not insist that they read it! Allow them to make their own decisions about what they should read. If your enthusiasm is genuine and your taste respected then they may pick up the book on their own. By suggesting that someone *simply must* read it you run a double risk. First, that they will hate it and consequently respect, both your's for them and their's for you, will diminish. Second, that they will love it and you will, in spite of yourself, become jealous and

possessive of your esteem for the book. Another thing, don't go on and on to your friends about how, having finished the book, you feel unable to carry on with your reading life, that you will never again have such powerful feelings for a piece of writing. At first they will express empathy and, as they are your friends, humor you, but carry on too long and the topic will become tedious and you will find yourself the subject of many groans and much eye rolling.

The book is finished. Over. Done. You want it to go on, but it doesn't, it can't. The end is the inevitability lying hidden in every beginning. Maybe somewhere near the middle of the book you caught your first whiff of that eventual death, that inescapable ending. You felt the first real pang of awareness that the strange little world you have been a part of, indeed, helped create, would simply stop. No writer, no matter how elegant, can adequately prepare you for this moment, the moment it all comes to a halt. There can be a satisfaction, that of a book well read, a life well lived, but it is a maudlin satisfaction at best. You will remember the book fondly, like a time in your life when you may have felt happy, loved, and understood. You will remember and smile from your position there at the end of the page, at the end of the world, waiting to be pulled in by the orbit of the rotating spheres, all the possible worlds you hope exist somewhere, far away.

## The Mystery Writer

The Mystery Writer is famous. Of all the mystery writers in all the countries in all the world he is the most respected and widely read. His books have sold millions of copies in over fifty languages around the globe. His work can be found on the metal wire book racks of the most remote gas stations in the middle of the Australian Outback, or on the night-stands of presidents, kings and dictators alike. Several of his novels have been turned into movies which, though varying in quality, have been box office sensations one and all. In a recent poll conducted by *Esquire* magazine his name was found to be more recognizable than Shakespeare, Keats, and Tolstoy. *Forbes* has him listed at one-hundred-eightieth among the entertainment world's most wealthy (first among writers). His style has been described as a blend of Joyce, Mallarme, Gogol, Proust, the Venerable Bede, and Agatha Christie. He is considered by all to be unsurpassed in the field of mystery. The Mystery Writer considers himself to be a total fraud.

He speaks to a group of young creative writing students. The topic: How to be a Successful Mystery Writer. At the conclusion of his lecture one of the students asks him what he considers to be the most important element of a good mystery. He is about to say suspense and strong characters, but changes his mind.

"Possibility," says the Mystery Writer.

At a gala evening celebrating a special edition hard cover release of several of his novellas he was heard to remark to a colleague, after indulging, perhaps too liberally, in a

decanter of brandy:

“It’s a sham and a shame and you know it. This business of the so-called mystery novel. Ha! There’s no mysteries in my books worth solving, just a bunch of whodunit clap-trap!”

He was escorted from the party to his room at the Royal Crown, and when it came time for his speech he was said to have taken ill.

At night he dreams. He is in a large country manor investigating the disappearance and suspected murder of a wealthy dowager. Everyone is a suspect, the estranged husband; who feels cheated out of her vast fortune, the gadabout brother; who claims he was in Peru on a nude mountain climbing excursion with a French Baroness, the seemingly innocent cousin and his new bride who have just come back from a polo tournament in Monaco; they had nothing to gain (or did they?). Not to be forgotten are the dowager’s much younger lover with the spotty past, who stands to inherit the whole fortune; the family lawyer, who controls her estate; and the sullen gardener, a disquieting loner with a secret. The final suspect is, of course, the butler, who can never be counted out in matters such as these. The mystery writer weighs the evidence against them all, he pours over the details of the case, but he is unable to make any headway. That is, until he receives a note, hastily shoved under the door to his room at the manor. The note is from the timid maid, a constant observer of the family’s goings on. She assures him that the evidence he needs is to be found in an old run down boathouse on the misty lake adjacent to the estate. The Mystery Writer drives to the boathouse in the middle of the night, races to its entrance and

attempts to pry open the locked door. He pushes and pushes until, finally, it gives. Slowly the door creaks open, he steps into the murky darkness within... and wakes up, terrified.

He was in love once. He did everything he could to win the attention of the most brilliant and beautiful human being he had ever met. She had romantic baggage, he didn't care. Indeed, he saw it as a challenge to meet. At the time he was neither rich, nor famous, but he dedicated himself to making her life easier in every way he possibly could (at least according to his version of events). He had one novel published, which she hated. She wrote poetry he didn't understand. They spent several years together and never stopped fighting. He proposed, she said no and a year later married some jerk who described himself as a metaphysical playwright, whatever that means. He spent the next few years drunk, and in love, and empty, which he felt was a very writer-ly thing to do. Everything about their relationship was lousy, he tells himself, and yet every time he writes a female character into one of his books (which, incidentally, he does very well), it is an attempt to capture her, over and over again. Why?

Lately he's been suffering from writer's block. He sits at his word processor, and... nothing. He talks to his publisher, who suggests he begin at the ending and work his way backwards. The Mystery Writer explains, with a grimace, that the endings are the problem, that he no longer feels comfortable with them. The publisher mutters something about a teleological crisis and then assures him that it is just temporary, and that all the greats hit dry spells from time to time.

“Christ,” growls the Mystery Writer, “what makes you think you’d know a damn thing about it?”

His heart is broken, and these days the mystery that most concerns the Mystery Writer is the question of when it will end.

At night he dreams again. It is the same case, he’s read the maid’s note and is once again speeding to the boathouse to force his way in. Again the door creaks open and he enters the murky darkness within... only to discover a vast library. The shelves of the room are lined with novels, which on closer inspection turn out to be all the mystery novels ever written. The Mystery Writer checks the titles in search of his own. As he glances around he notices a large pile of books in one corner of the room. For some reason he feels compelled to approach them and, to his surprise, makes the discovery that the novels on the floor are all his. He picks one up and leaps back with a gasp. Staring up at him, from beneath the pile, is the cold dead face of the wealthy dowager! Crushed, he thinks, by the weight of my prose! Great minds are not above self flattery, even in dreams. He begins to pull the volumes off the corpse... and wakes up, terrified.

A knock against some of his earlier work is that it is said to have certain plot inconsistencies, and an almost puerile joy in gallows humor. An early review (harshly) called his writing “juvenile” and “pointless.” Most critics feel that this early review went too far, but can agree that as a writer of mysteries the Mystery Writer was yet to find his

instrument. Details like characters who appear crucial to the plot then simply disappear, or murderers without motives are the sort of things they cite. The Mystery Writer worked hard to curb those problems as his career progressed, but secretly he longed for a time in his life before reviews, when he didn't know, and didn't care.

He is reading a book called *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People*. It is a rumination on the mystery of evil. He finds it compelling, but one thing nags him: People, he feels, are consumed by a need to unlock this mystery, and yet perfectly happy to leave the mystery of good alone. The Mystery Writer contemplates a new book, *Why Do Good Things Happen To Anyone*. It will be a rumination on the mystery of laughter, kindness, beauty and hope.

Another dream. It is the same scenario. He pushes his way into the murky boathouse, but this time finds it empty, at least at a glance. He squints into the darkness, and eventually makes out the shape of a person, standing amid the shadows.

"Who's there?" he says. The silent form steps towards him and a faint light comes into the dark room.

"Hullo," says the wealthy dowager.

"Uh... hi," says the Mystery Writer, "you know, lots of people think you're dead."

"Is that so? Well here I am, alive and well."

"I can see that," and the Mystery Writer notices that she is proud, and lovely.

"Well I'd best get back to the manor and tell the others you're alright. You've caused

quite a fuss.”

“Why bother with that? Can’t we let this one go unsolved?”

The Mystery Writer feels his heart about to burst. He begins to sob. The dowager continues, “Why don’t we sit here, and see what we see?”

“I’d like that,” says the Mystery Writer, “very much.”

The Mystery Writer opens his eyes. The light bouncing off his bedroom wall tells him it is early in the morning. He gets up and walks to the window. Another day, and anything, anything, anything is possible.

## **Brave Captain**

*Recently I was lucky enough to be handed the opportunity to conduct an interview with famed space adventurer, Captain Jack DiSalvo. Knowing the great man's reputation as a recluse, I accepted the assignment with pride. Still, the thought of picking the brain of a man who had discovered so many new worlds, new creatures, and peered off the edge of the known universe was, to say the least, overwhelming. We agreed through our people to meet in the lobby of the Delta Suites where he was staying, and conduct the interview over lunch at a restaurant of my choosing. Again I was struck by the impossibility of selecting a place whose menu would not bore a man who had sampled the exotic fruits of the galaxy. I decided, cleverly I felt, given their history of exploration and discovery, on a quiet Spanish place I know. Once we had arrived at the restaurant and seated ourselves I was afforded my first good look at this man who has seen so much. What struck me was how little he resembled what I imagined a great explorer ought to look like. Of course I had seen pictures of him when he was much younger, accepting awards, acting as an honorary parade marshal, and so forth. In his present capacity he seemed somewhat diminished from the way he appeared in those photos. His stature was small, and he tended to slouch. His eyes, which I assumed would be clear, bright, and far seeing, were actually quite squinty, no doubt from starring at countless star charts and interstellar maps, and he tended to glance uneasily around the room. His manner was a strange combination of accommodation and belligerence, as if he was happy to be talking to me, but untrusting of my motives for desiring the interview. What follows is, for the most part, an exact transcript of our conversation.*

Me: Mr. DiSalvo... Sir... Captain... Jack... ahem... I'm sorry, I'm not exactly sure how to address you.

Cpt: Captain will do, if you don't feel that it's too formal.

Me: Not at all, not at all. So, Captain, what brings you to this little neck of the woods? Are you in town for business, or pleasure? Is the old wanderlust kicking in?

Cpt: Wanderlust? Ha...ahem... no, no, no. The University's astronomy department has asked to name a wing after me, I'm just here to make sure it's a quality facility before I agree to lend my name to it. A person must be very protective of his name. As far as wanderlust goes, well, I have a somewhat different perspective on the subject...

Me: Of course...

Cpt: When most people get wanderlust they go to Prague, or Costa Rica. I go to Alpha-Centauri.

Me: Yes, yes, I was just making a joke.

Cpt: Whenever I hear jokes I am reminded of the Pnings of Caius Four.

Me: Oh? How so?

Cpt: They were an interesting people, they regarded nothing as worthy of being taken seriously. They were, as far as me or any of my crew could tell, without seriousness. When we first encountered them my officers and I put on our finest uniforms, and prepared many gifts for them. At our first meeting we presented them with these gifts, and, though they seemed grateful enough, my officers and I couldn't shake the feeling that we were being laughed at.

Me: Is it not possible that what you perceived as laughter was merely a species related linguistic or cultural quirk?

Cpt: Believe me we considered it. One does not travel hundreds upon thousands of light years to be made the subject of fun. I had my people make a study of the Pnings, we watched them very closely (and they were all too ready to welcome us into their cities), and gathered information from some of the surrounding species on Caius Four. What we learned is that some time deep in their past the Pnings had been a people inclined to take everything far too seriously, and that, for some reason, during this period they pushed themselves to the brink of extinction. No one was sure how or why, but in the midst of all this high seriousness the Pnings began to evolve. They became unwilling, or perhaps unable, to view anything without mirth. Consequently, many of the problems that besieged them as a people began to disappear, and their numbers increased exponentially. In any case, they have come to view the time of great seriousness as quite funny.

Me: They sound wonderful.

Cpt: Only someone who had never met them could feel that way. It was damned annoying being laughed at all the time.

Me: Yes, but if what you and your crew observed was true then the laughter of the Pnings could hardly be considered mean spirited. Inasmuch as they were incapable of taking you seriously were they not equally unable to take themselves seriously?

Cpt: That's correct, they definitely did not take themselves seriously. That didn't make their jabbering any less irritating. There is such a thing as serious issue you know.

Take trade, we wanted to discuss trade, but they refused to view anything we might offer them for what they had as being worthy of consideration. They felt the whole process was silly, as they were a self sustaining race.

Me: If they were self sustaining, then wouldn't it be true to suggest that trade with you, or, pardon me, with us I should say, would indeed be, well, silly?

Cpt: Possibly, but when a person attempts to discuss the foundations of his culture a person wishes to be treated with respect.

Me: Yes but doesn't your notion of being "treated with respect" by a certain being presume that the being in question be capable of comprehending what your notion entails? Clearly through a process of evolution the Pnings had been rendered incapable of such comprehension. Is asking them to "show respect," in your sense of the word, not akin to asking a human being to leap into the air and fly? Isn't it possible that the Pnings were showing you respect the only way they were capable of?

Cpt: You weren't there. Besides, we conquered them in relatively short order.

Me: Oh.

Cpt: It was a lot tougher than you might think. One thing I'll give the Pnings, they were utterly fearless, and their spirits, even under extreme duress, were always high. Still are I imagine, even with an Earth garrison stationed in every one of their cities. You almost have to respect that.

Me: Indeed. Would you say they were the most interesting of all the people you encountered?

Cpt: They were the most something, that's for sure. As far as interesting goes, it's hard for me to say. I suppose all the worlds I've seen were interesting in their way but...

Me: Care to give me some more examples?

Cpt: Well, one people who you might find interesting are the Bjerums of Cyrus Two. They treat their entire lives as if they are part of a constantly evolving game.

Me: They sound a bit like the Pnings that way.

Cpt: Not a bit. The Bjerums can be quite serious about things. The game is not always fun for a Bjerum, because it can never be sure it is winning.

Me: Is that important to them?

Cpt: In a way yes. They are happy when they feel that they are in control of the game, and they accept that the times they aren't in control are part of the nature of the game itself, but they don't necessarily like it. They are, however, always comforted by the thought that the tide of the game can change, that alliances within the game must shift in order for it to continue.

Me: You said they have a sense that they are occasionally winning. Can there ever be a winner?

Cpt: That is what constitutes their religion, the belief that one day someone will finally figure out how to win the game and it will end.

Me: What will happen then?

Cpt: They don't know, but they're very curious. It is the central mystery of their faith.

Me: And death?

Cpt: They consider it to be a rather drastic rule change.

Me: It sounds as though they were quite open with you about their ways?

Cpt: Why not? They viewed me as another player, even as I rained fire upon them.

Me: You conquered them?

Cpt: I had to. Cyrus Two is an invaluable source of fossil fuels, not dissimilar to the ones we find at home, which are, as you know, quite depleted.

Me: Yes, but if they view life as a constantly evolving game have they really been conquered? Wouldn't they view it as a rule change and go on playing? Indeed, I wonder if you really conquered the Pnings as well. Wouldn't they view your, er, *our* presence as a profound joke?

Cpt: As far as I'm concerned to Pnings and Bjerums can *think* they haven't been conquered all they like. Who's in charge of their nations? We are.

Me: I'm merely suggesting that, though we *think* we are, they perhaps don't see it that way, in which case they are, in a sense, unconquerable.

Cpt: They aren't. They're conquered. You want to talk about a race that is unconquerable, and believe me we tried, the people of Eurydyce-Beta, the Btlfxpl. They are tough.

Me: How so?

Cpt: They exist on a completely different time-line than we do. They move in a different temporal dimension.

Me: I'm not sure I follow?

Cpt: Quite, I've met them and I'm not sure I follow. I'll try to explain. The Btlfxpl exist on the same spatial plane as we do, but they move in a different time pattern. You

see, our conception of time, though conventional and, by my lights, true, is fairly arbitrary. It is our way of making sense of our planet's progress through its solar system. Okay? Well, in other galaxies, other worlds progress differently through different solar systems at different speeds, yet you are only ever able to process that planet's temporal reality in terms of your own understanding of time. Those goddamned Btfxpl would bivouac in some hidden valley and stay their for the entire duration of a human life, yet to them half a day had passed. And that's not the worst of it. Sometimes we'd fly out to meet them head on in battle, only to find that they had already been attacking us for hours, even though we watched them approach only seconds before, so we were, in a sense, ambushed though, technically, no ambush had been laid. It wasn't so much that they defeated us, they just frustrated us to the point where we gave up.

Me: Would it not have been easier to simply bomb them from space?

Cpt: Maybe, but it would have seriously damaged the topology of the planet.

Me: I don't mean to sound antagonistic, but so what if it did?

Cpt: Ah, no one who had ever seen Eurydyce-Beta could ever ask such a question. It is a world unlike any other I've ever seen. The soil, which covers all the land on the planet, is jet black and at a glance seems very coarse, but to touch it... well silky is the only word I could use that would mean anything to you, but that's not what it is like... it is... beyond my cognitive capacity... unlike anything... the ground beneath the soil... glowing... reds and golds... burning from within... warm to touch... seas... turquoise and silver... night skies alive with shooting stars... vast

forests exploding with life... such greens...such bucolic splendor... volcanoes erupting purple lava... among all the worlds reeling through the cosmos none can compare... such terrible beauty... a dream... such terrible, terrible beauty...

Me: Uh... Captain?

Cpt: ...er... yes, yes... excuse me. Where were we?

Me: The Btfxpl.

Cpt: Yes, of course. We simply threw in the towel, so to speak.

Me: I find it interesting that the main objective in all your years in space was conquest.

Cpt: I find it interesting that you find it interesting.

Me: I assumed that, this being the so-called future and all, things like colonialism would seem a little antiquated. I suppose I felt the future would be a more enlightened time.

Cpt: It was, very briefly, but we've become enlightened from enlightenment.

Me: It seems a shame to seek out new worlds only to take them over.

Cpt: You have to take it in stride, consider it within the context of the time. Look at the past, it is full of conquest, of "discovery" of new worlds. We accept the past, it may not have been perfect, but it was a different time. The Romans were great builders of roads, but they built them on the backs of the oppressed, those whom they presumed to "civilize." Is anybody mad at the Romans? No, we study them as a great civilization. Take Columbus, Cortez, and Magellan, bastards no doubt, but they embodied the spirit of an era and we marvel at them in spite of their cruelty. I too embody the spirit of an age. You think that the sort of ideas that inspired the

imperial urges of the past will never come again?

Me: I thought the world would progress beyond such ideas...

Cpt: The world does not progress, it merely is.

Me: I find that disheartening.

Cpt: Don't blame me, I wasn't the one who came up with the idea of progress. Take into account all the worlds, all the galaxies, all the stars, the entire Universe, the unfathomable infinity of life in the cosmos - and you believe human history moves forward? There is always harmony, and always unrest; always peace, and always war; there is no such thing as good or evil, there is merely the perception of these things. I accept that. I accept what I know to be true as truth, even though I know it to be untrue. This is what enables me to live. Your incredulity and, yes, disgust hinges upon your belief in systems that are absolutely true, yet I tell you the Universe will not tolerate absolute truths, it will not have easy answers.

Me: I think you're a cynic. If things never get any better, if we never grow, or learn, or change, then why carry on? How can you believe in what you do, if you believe what you do will have no ultimate consequences?

Cpt: I can believe in what I do, but not believe that what I do is the end of what can or should be done. Your thinking is rooted in finality. We grow, we change, we regress, we remain the same. It never ends. I have been among the stars, and let me tell you, systems collapse and are born every day. What's left is to find a place within your own system and choose from all the possible lives the one you want to live and try to live it.

Me: Then there is no hope, it is impossible, everything is meaningless.

Cpt: Meaningless? Impossible? I have heard the laughter of the Pnings, played the game of the Bjerums, and seen the glowing shores of Eurydyce-Beta and I tell you everything has meaning and anything, anything, anything is possible.

Me: I think I understand. I suppose I'm just troubled by the notion that a person of your education and experience would not choose a more accepting path than that of the conquistador. It disturbs me that one who has experienced the plurality of the heavens would be so willing to lump them all together under the heading of "Foe" and leave it at that.

Cpt: You are the sort of man who believes in a perfect life for everybody.

Me: I suppose.

Cpt: Me too. We merely differ in our notions of perfection. There are no absolutes in this Universe, there are just isms.

Me: Don't you worry that your actions have made a monster of you in the eyes of entire planets?

Cpt: I worry about what most people worry about. Is the me I imagine for myself the me people see? Who will love me? And yes, I suppose I feel guilt too, over some of my past actions, why not? I'm sure you can relate.

Me: At night, when I lie in bed, when I can't sleep, when I am most alone, I see the faces of everyone I have hurt, everyone I've wronged. I remember Jimmy Shannon, I beat him up in the first grade; I remember Jessica Ramsey, she loved me and I broke her heart; I remember acts of cruelty without motive, and all the

stupid selfish things I have ever done. Was I ever kind? Was I ever good? At these moments, these horrible wakeful moments, I can't recall. I always imagine that in the future I will make my peace with these moments, but then...

Cpt: There is no such thing as the future. There is only ever the present.

Me: So you think guilt is essentially a waste of time?

Cpt: Essentially? No. I'm merely suggesting that *you* may be wasting *your* time feeling guilty while you wait for some unnamed absolution floating *out there* in your vague notions of the future.

Me: I consider the problem of guilt to be a subsection of a much larger topic.

Cpt: You're talking about morality.

Me: Sure, ethics, morality, that sort of thing. I find myself, plagued by guilt as I am, to be an essentially ethical person. On the other hand I find you, who is less troubled by feelings of guilt, to be essentially unethical.

Cpt: I am not unethical, I simply have a different set of ethics.

Cpt: When you imagine the Universe, how do you picture it? Some people imagine it as a sort of corridor, very long and very wide, but basically straight. Some envision a big circle, contained by nothingness, almost like a snow globe. Still others imagine an unimaginable infinity, stretching beyond anything that could ever be conceived. I'll let you in on a little secret, it's folded, like a napkin, with each part touching every other part.

Cpt: I realized, too late in the game really, that my missions in space were not really about acquiring knowledge about other worlds insomuch as the acquisition of

knowledge relies on particular notions of certitude. I feel I have accomplished very little in my time, questing for certainty. Would you rather have certitude, or faith?

Cpt: The only real infinity is the infinity of the possible. You must remember that earthling. Remember that, and choose.

## **Brilliance**

### *Davis Exists!*

The exact year of his birth is a matter of some contention. Certainly some time in the late sixties or the first half of the nineteen seventies. This makes Davis a relatively young man, though to be sure, not as young as it used to. The specific year of birth is of lesser importance than the “era,” so to speak, as the man in question came into existence at the tail end of the so-called death of innocence, and grew to relative maturity (if indeed one can speak of Davis as *mature*) in a time when the ability to feel shocked by anything had more or less disappeared from the spectrum of human emotional response. It is also worth noting that Davis has two small forceps indentations on his head, a permanent reminder of his rather uncooperative participation in his own birth.

### *Davis on mortality, the future, and feelings of inertness.*

“I can confess to being a disbeliever in my own mortality. On a rational level I *know that* I, like all things living, will certainly die, but as a matter of faith I choose not to believe in it. I realize my belief runs contrary to all evidence, but is this not the what the business of faith is all about? So I have decided: I will not die. At the same time, I am unable to project myself into the future. This is a problem, as I can’t, for the life of me, imagine myself in five years. I have ‘seen someone’ about this problem, but was left with the rather unsatisfactory explanation that I’m possibly depressed. The fact is I feel fine, quite happy really, I just don’t see myself in the future. Any talk of plans beyond the coming weekend tends to baffle me. The world is full of people with terrible memories,

mine is fantastic, but I suffer from the exact opposite, I do not remember myself into the coming years as it were. Consequently I feel somewhat stuck, as if in a jelly, or a jar of formaldehyde. I feel like a preserved thing with a definite past, and a static presence that will go on unchanged while the world around me progresses. I alternate between loving this and hating it.”

*Davis the Great Man vs. Davis the man.*

True, much has been said of his considerable accomplishments, especially when one considers his years. Intelligent critical response has been, if not universally positive, abundant. He is often talked about and generally admired for his creative gifts and, what one writer called, his “indelible mark on the landscape of early twenty-first century visual-poetics, and post-industrial philosophy.” His work can be found in Canada, the United States and fashionable Europe with relative ease and most people in these places are at least familiar with his name. His opinions on art, architecture, history, and pop culture are rarely, if ever, dismissed as ludicrous and unsophisticated, and he has fashioned a comfortable life for himself based solely on the fruits of his artistic endeavors. Still, he is not special. He is preoccupied by the same questions we all are. How will it end? Am I getting the best possible deal on my long distance? Is there justice? Hope? Will I overcook the tofu? Do I appear attractive to others? Is this peanut sauce too spicy? Will gas prices ever go down? Will I ever feel loved? Is my work important? Am I important? Am I worthy of saving? By whom? From what?

*Davis waits to get a hair cut.*

The barber's name is Art. He is not Davis' regular guy, but our hero is feeling a little bushy today and this place is near to his house. Ordinarily Davis sees a stylist, an experience he is deeply fond of. He enjoys the smells of the salon: lavender-vanilla styling cremes, coconut aloe vera shampoos, rose petal honeycomb conditioners, Echinacea orange peel finishing rinse, chocolate mango hair licorice, sandalwood incense, all mingling in the air around him. He cherishes the feel of trained fingers rubbing his scalp as halos of warm water pour over him, head tilted back, eyes closed, smiling. He loves the sensation of deftly handled scissors around his ears, the warm buzz of clippers at the back of his neck, and the hypnotic voice of the stylist. The smell here is different: Barbasol, cigarettes, and a hint of sour mash. Art looks like Archie Bunker, and he's cutting the hair of a man who looks like Abe Vigoda, but is saddled with the unfortunate title Armo. Their conversation is a murk of accents, vaguely eastern European crossed with a hint of toothless Italian.

"How's it going Art."

"Ah... good and not so good."

"Oh?"

"My leg still hurts."

"Still?"

"I'm on a waiting list at the hospital though. When they can they're gonna give a bone scan." This is not a complaint, it is a statement of fact.

"Oh yeah?"

“Yeah, you?”

“Woozy still. It’s either the medicine or the beer, but I need them both to live you know.”

They laugh. Davis feels his stomach tighten up. He wants conversation about summer blockbusters, and who’s the best bartender in town. He does not want bone scans and vertigo inducing chemical combinations. He makes a vow never to return to this place. Still, the haircut, once finished, is exceptional.

*Davis and the BIG question.*

Is it possible to talk of love without sounding, well, pedestrian?

“I feel it is possible, yes.”

How?

“Well, the sensation of being in love comes first, and it is in no way pedestrian. A person in love does not speak of, say, the sky in the same way that a person who is not in love does because, to the person in love, the sky now *means* something. To say ‘I love you’ is plain and anyone, in love or not, can do it. To say ‘how lovely the moon is this evening’ is another matter entirely. To the person in love the lovely moon is a living embodiment of that love, a reflection of an aesthetic of joy, shining silver warmth over a beautiful world. To the person not in love it is merely a lifeless rock that happens to look pretty while reflecting the Sun’s light. Yet it is the same moon. Though a true and direct language of love is both illusive and allusive, the feeling itself fills up language, like water into an empty vessel. Love elevates things out of the realm of the ordinary. We are only

able to comprehend the world via language, when language has been enriched with the indescribable feeling of love, we comprehend the world in a different manner. So no, it is not pedestrian.”

Have you yourself ever been in love?

“Not as such.”

And yet you seem well acquainted with it.

“I am also well acquainted with the story of Daedalus and Icarus, yet I have never fallen to my death.”

*Davis: The abandonment anxiety.*

The small child awakes to find himself alone in the darkness. The door is open, but the hall light, which is to remain on at all times to fend off the creatures of the night, has been carelessly turned off. He calls out to his mother and father to turn the light on. Initially his tone more informative than terrified. There is no response. He tries again, but louder this time. Still no response. The child is confused, he has never called out in the night to no avail before. This is new. He peers over the edge of his bed into the snake filled pits below. He sees the eyes of hungry wolves in his closet. He hears the ghostly voice of an apparition floating over the bed. In a moment of absolute courage he leaps to the floor and sprints for the door, all the horrors of hell on his heels. He makes the familiar turn into his parents bedroom. They are not there. He checks the bathroom, the kitchen, the living room. He looks at the stairs leading to the basement, but this is simply too much to ask. He calls out. Nothing. He is alone. They have left him. Devastation sets in. He

leaves the house, crosses the lawn to the neighbors to inform them that he has been orphaned. He feels responsible, that he is obviously not worth sticking around for. He opens the door of the neighbors' house without knocking and walks into the living room where, to his surprise, he finds his mother and father listening to Air Supply and enjoying a drink with their friends. He begins to cry, and hugs his mother. Years later they will all laugh about this, about how that sort of thing was the sort of thing a person would do back then. Still, Davis will always doubt that he is worth sticking around for.

*Davis: Some thoughts.*

At an opening at a gallery in Germany someone asks Davis what most attracts him to language. He has given this question quite a going over in his mind on past occasions. He answers thoughtfully:

“Well I like little words. Not nouns or verbs so much, y’know. I mean, *I like* nouns and verbs, and adverbs and adjectives and all that stuff, but what I really like are the ifs, ands, or buts, all the throw away stuff. I like that a lot.”

The person explains that Davis has misunderstood the question, that what is being asked is what is it about the nature of language itself that he feels drawn to. The person then goes on to speak about the tendency of all language to deconstruct by undermining itself through a dispersal into infinite possibilities of signification, and that language functions merely through the effects of meaning, rather than through any inherent meaning found within the nature of language itself. Furthermore...

Davis drifts away. He is an infamous pirate, the one good cop in the bad town, a

svelte Lothario climbing the lattice into the chamber of a maiden fair...

*Davis has a dream that he falls in love and is typical.*

“I love her, but she will leave me, so I must destroy her. I must destroy her before she destroys me. This will prove to be very difficult, as my love for her prevents me from being able to destroy her or to see her harmed in any way. The answer: I must destroy myself. Since, presumably, she loves me, the sight of me destroying myself will no doubt destroy her. Thus I shall be doubly successful in that she will be destroyed, but I will not have to see it because I will have been pre-destroyed by myself.” Davis wakes up, mortified by himself.

*Davis, pondering.*

He thinks: When I am gone will someone look at what I have done and draw broad conclusions about my “Work?” Will the body of my “Work” mean more to people after I am dead than my actual body ever meant to a single person while I was alive? If my “Work” is talked about for years and years then the idea of “me” or at least the “I” of who I was during my time will live forever.

*The potential of Davis vs. Davis feeling fraudulent (to be read one of two ways)*

He is (not) a genius. He is (not) going to be famous. He is (not) funny. He is (not) a philosopher. He is (not) healthy. He has (not) kicked the habit. He is (not) selfless. He is (not) guilt free. He is (not) making the world a better place. He is (not) hard at work. He

is (not) financially stable. He is (not) sorry. He is (not) a good cook. He is (not) full of insight. He is (not) worth missing. He is (not) good looking. He is (not) beautiful on the inside. He is (not) impressed. He is (not) capable of changing his life. He is (not) just complicated. That's (not) all.

*Fast forward to the Death of the Great Man Davis.*

When you look back at your life, is there anything you wish you could have done?

“Found a cure for death.”

What do you feel has most eluded you during your time?

“Certainty.”

If you had not been what you were, excuse me, are, what would you most like to have been?

“Brilliant.”

*Davis: The Secret.*

Listen. The arrow, shot from the bow, does not move continually through space, but merely appears to do so in a collection of moments. And so it goes in all our little lives.

## Lobster

And so it goes. We grow older, and as we do we come no closer to achieving our dreams, and our hopes. Most, in the process of ageing, see that which they once aspired to be retreating, pulling away over the years, steadily adding space to the distance between the dreamer and the dream. The drawbridge closes, a fence springs up, with menacing looking guard towers and even more menacing looking guards, heavily armed and surly. We become lost in the act of pursuit, the chase leads us into new, strange territory. We find ourselves in places alien to the ones we started in. So it goes. We look around to find we have stared at the diminishing dot on the horizon for too long, and the ground beneath our feet is unfamiliar. This is when we are truly born, in that moment when we realize that the chase is hopeless, when the real world becomes the place we are and not the place we aspired to be. This is how we begin.

Who was I when I was who I thought I wanted to be, really? Full of promise, the promise of promise. Ha. Fool of promise is more accurate. A true believer in my own hype, a genius in waiting. The sap of brilliance was only beginning to flow from the mighty maple of potential when somehow, impossibly, everything changed. The world changed, not me. The people who love you forget you, they stop returning your calls, they stop caring. Love reveals itself to be ugly, spiteful, a trick of poetry, a profoundly unfunny joke. And truth? The truth is the Truth is a lie. Who was I really? I was the same nobody I am now, I just hadn't figured it out yet.

Don't misunderstand me. These aren't the ravings of some pseudo-Scorcesse protagonist imbued with a touch of Nietzsche reading, vermouth guzzling, black turtle-

necked nihilism. Hardly. I haven't been posing in front of any mirrors trying to look like an Iroquois bad ass, or posturing in crowded watering holes reading Camus and *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, all the while secretly hoping someone would notice me, and remark to themselves what a smart guy I must be. Those are the trappings of bitterness and pretension, and I don't have the time or the energy for them. I have to work for a living. I'm a commissionaire. That's right, the motherfucker you've cursed ten thousand times for that fiscal slip of municipal bad-will jammed unceremoniously between your windshield and its wipers, that's me. I write parking tickets.

Believe it or not, once upon a time, it was possible for me to believe in what I do. I felt as though I represented a kind of thin off-blue line between order and chaos. It's true. We all want to believe the best about human kind, that the majority of us would follow the rules that would best maintain a civilized culture whether or not there were laws in place that ensured we did. Well, if people's cavalier attitude towards parking is any indication, I can tell you this is not the case. So it never used to bother me, having people towed for parking illegally over-night on a snow route, or on the wrong side of the street between three-thirty and five thirty p.m. After all, snow must be removed and traffic must flow, or, before you know it, we're back in the trees bub. Still, it's tough to maintain a level of professional pride when you're routinely being called a cocksucker by representatives from all walks of life, over and over again, every day, year round. Now when I go to hockey games I cheer for the referee. He alone, I think, can commiserate.

I used to be happy at work because it never occurred to me that what I did had any correlation to who I was. If most waiters are really actors, is it not possible that people of

other professional categories have secret lives of their own? That was certainly the case with me. A golden dream ago I longed to be a children's entertainer. Children, it seemed, represented total human potential, they represented possibility. Now they are nothing more to me than future drivers who will one day park illegally and hate me for their own foolishness. There was a time though when things were different, when the chance for human contact was more than the cold sting of spit in my eye and a foul mouthed tirade about my parental lineage, but that was long ago, back when things mattered much more to me. Those were the days of the Lobster.

We pine for the strangest things. It never ceases to fascinate me, the things a person will pull from the genealogical grab bag of his or her past and dub the "Good Old Days." A drunken soiree at the tender age of fourteen, that first groping attempt at sex on a fold out couch in some dank suburban basement, graduations, graduation parties, bug infested camping trips, bagging that first moose, weddings, ecstasy jags, frat pranks, child birth, first car, first kiss, last night with the old gang, God help us all! We live as much in our past as we do in our future. I'm no exception, I have my own secret garden of historically grounded happiness. Years ago I worked part time as a mascot for Lawrence T. Lobster's, a theme-park/seafood restaurant chain. It was the sort of work some people might find demeaning, but I have never been happier. I was not just any mascot, I was Lawrence T. himself. The costume I wore was made of plastic and foam, and stood about seven feet in height, though it might well have been a hundred. When I put it on I became something altogether different than I had ever been, could ever be. I was, behind the beaming red face and padded claws, the very spirit of aesthetic joy. I would whirl and

caper, spinning nimbly around table after table of smiling guests. When I was sent to stand next to the highway to drum up business cars honked, people stopped and waved, and more than a few decided to stop in for a few spins on the tilt-a-whirl and some dinner. I embraced the young, the old, I kissed babies and newly weds alike. I loved, and was loved. I was dear to people, and they were dear to me, all of them, but especially the children. I am speaking here of the young, but not so young as to be unaware, yet not old enough to have become even the least bit cynical. These were my favorites, the ones who believed in the face value of Lawrence T. Lobster, who felt no need to see the man inside the fish, whose only care was the cavorting red rogue before them. Their faces beamed a pure joy, and it lit my life from within.

Then everything changed. Lawrence T. Lobster's came under new management. Greg Howard, I long for the day I find you parked for more than fifteen minutes in a loading zone. I will take you down. Howard was brought in by head office to maximize the potential of the restaurant and ensure corporate standards were being maintained. I, perhaps better than most, understand the importance of maintaining prescribed standards, however, this man was a buffoon. Short sleeves and a tie in the Summer, Cliff Huckstable era Bill Cosby sweaters in the winter, and not a visionary bone in his body. The only standard this man set and maintained was mediocrity. I long to have his head, and his size five shoes mounted on my wall as trophies.

Under Howard's initiative I was deemed unsuitable to be Lawrence, it was decided only women would be allowed to work as mascots, as their generally smaller stature would make the costume less intimidating. Howard and his ilk are the very emblem of

what is wrong with the western world. These are the people who assume that a thing must define itself based as much on what it is not as what it is. Everything must be one thing or another, but never both- good, or evil; accommodating, or intimidating; kind, or cruel; light or dark; male, or female; elation, or terror; Summer, or Winter. Is Shiva not both creator and destroyer? Do the yin and yang not bleed together? Is there no twilight? No dawn? Has Howard not known spring? Autumn? Evidently not. I was offered a position in another capacity at the restaurant. I explained to Howard that I had a day job, and that I wasn't there for the money, that Lawrence T. Lobster meant something altogether different to me. The look he gave me was indescribable, a sort of mixture of confusion and contempt, but not the sort I see daily while doling out parking tickets, as Howard substituted rage for pity. Pity!

So I was let go. I was let go into the waiting arms of the void.

For the first little while I felt alright. I continued my commissionaire work by day and on the weekends I attempted to carry on my work as an entertainer. I devised my own suit, Cecil B. Crab, not entirely original perhaps, but I was reeling a bit and had grown attached to the shell fish medium. The costume was not as well made as Lawrence, but the heart and soul were still there. Yet when I showed up at malls or children's festivals my appearance was met with indifference at best. It is a true testament to the commercialism of our times that a mascot need be affiliated to some corporation to be comprehended. Without the backing of a theme park, restaurant, radio station, television network, cell phone outlet, or shoe store I was a phrase without a context. People did not know what to make of me. The dream began to die slowly and painfully, but quietly, so quietly in fact

that, at the moment of its final passing, I hardly noticed it was gone.

All of this is old news. I subsist in myself now. Alone. I tell myself it doesn't matter, and maybe it doesn't. I have had to become shell-like, hard, callous, your scorn doesn't touch me, so save it. I walk my assigned beat, my face and hands are burned red by the cold, the wind, and the sun year round. My hands are clawlike and sore from writing tickets all day. At night my only solace comes from resting my tired body in a warm bath with Epsom salts. I have changed. I am something less than human. You look at me and see something ugly, and awful, something incomprehensible. Who could do such a thing as I do? Who could be what I am? Yet isn't there a hint of delight in your rage as you explode all over me for your own ignorance? I have seen the light in your eyes, the hunger. You long to get at the soft meat underneath my hard skin. You berate, you shout, you rip me apart, and I stare, silent, impassive, waiting for the world to devour me. Well go on then, devour.

## The Efficiency Expert

In general, the thing we find most troubling about him is his ability to carry on with his daily routines as though everything was alright, as though he was free of any guilt and responsibility for, what most consider to be, a gradual, but tangible deadening of the heart of the human spirit. We marvel that he can go on-line, get his car washed, make pancakes for his slumbering wife, take the kids to a ball game, watch television, love his parents, fear his in-laws, hate paying taxes, play bridge without cheating, and do all the everyday things we do too. It is a discomfort to think of him as being *like us* in any way. We like our monsters a little more well defined than this, whatever we are we want them to be the opposite. We know this is almost never the case, that more often than not evil fits in perfectly, but some part of us can't help but expect horns on the heads of those we would like to see blown off to hell.

Of course he *not* free of the usual guilt, nor is he unaware of our dislike. As he walks the halls of the office, passing through the maze of cubicles he knows he is something of a pariah. What can he do? Though he has made few attempts to make any real friends (and really, who would have him?) he is cordial with most of the staff, making the usual comments about the previous night's box scores, the weather, or a certain news article that has become a point of conversation. A few, most notably Iris and Bill, simply give him the cold shoulder, but most of us tolerate his attempts at chit-chat politely, and wait until he is out of ear shot to groan and gag. The politeness ends, of course, the moment one of us is downsized out of existence. Then comes the great storm of pent up contempt, of un-concealed hatred, of pure rage that we hide behind our smiles and nods.

Interestingly, after he lays off another soul, he invariably makes himself scarce for about a week. He still comes in, but nobody sees or speaks to him. Ned suspects he does this out of fear, while Alice, who is very good natured, thinks it is out of shame. I suspect something altogether different, I believe he does it out of consideration. I suggested this once in the lunch room and was stared down by Arlo, Bev and, Dean. I have made no mention of my theory since.

Does he have a poetics? What is his credo? Does he read Hemingway, or Raymond Carver? Does the concise nature of their prose appeal to him? Does he prefer short stories to novels? Has he heard of micro-fiction? When he watches t.v., is he more interested in the commercials than the programs? If he is in a restaurant and the Thai Pineapple and Papaya Pasta he orders has too much Lemongrass Vinaigrette does he send it back in disgust? Is he troubled more by the expanding global population than most people? Is it possible for him to imagine that he is the hero in the story of his life? If he does, is he kidding himself? Does he complain about unemployment insurance deductions on his paychecks, or does he view it as a fair trade? What does he tell his children he does? When he was a child, and the children around him dreamt of becoming doctors and lawyers and astronauts and adventurers, did he dream of the life he leads now? Does he go to movies for the previews?

The day Figgis introduced him a black cloud fell over the office. We knew we had been acquired and that certain changes were inevitable, but weren't sure exactly what to expect. It wasn't long before we realized how drastic things would get. Nicole was the first to go, then Rutgers. Shortly after that we lost Camille, Darren, and poor old Dwight.

Garland quit in solidarity when Fred was sacked, and Mark, Joseph, Ingmar, and Perry were gone soon after. The staff Christmas party, once a robust affair, became a poorly attended, quiet get together with a small cluster of management in one corner of the room and the rest of us staring at the floor through our drinks.

My cubicle has been expanded, as have a few others. I have been assured, repeatedly, that I am in no imminent danger, that I occupy an essential position within the company. I am advised to “keep up the good work.” No one blames me for this, though rifts have grown with Harold and one or two others whose positions are “under review.” I have never suffered the humiliation of having to explain why I fill an important role within the framework of the company. I have never, in five hundred words or less, had to describe what it is that I think that I do. So far I’m lucky, but I don’t kid myself. I know that eventually my number will be up, that he will call me into his office and explain that, as much as he regrets it, the position I occupy no longer makes sense under the new fiscal scheme, that it is nothing personal, but that they’ll have to let me go.

I wonder how I’ll react when my time comes? Some beg for their jobs, which is deeply disturbing. Mel threatened to kill him, Bella threw a few punches, and Arne got him with pepper spray. I am proud of my former co-workers who have not gone gently, so to speak, the ones who gave him something to think about. Still, the one I remember best is Liz. She threatened to take the company to court, and clients, big ones, rallied around her. This forced the company to keep her on a while, but no corporation will sit quietly with egg on its face. In the end the strain got to be too much for Liz. A place can become pretty unpleasant when you’re constantly reminded that you are no longer wanted. What I

remember though, is that she left with her head held high, she let them know she was no coward, that she was stronger than they are. She left with pride. Will I go with pride? Will he?

If it were up to him would he rather wall people up in the empty offices in the basement than lay them off? Wouldn't this be an efficient use of otherwise inefficient space? Wouldn't this save the company from having to confront its own previous inefficiency, made obvious by the perceived necessity of mass firings? If he tabled this idea, would he be promoted? Is this too draconian? Do keen, fitful gusts rack him in the middle of the night at the thought of inefficiency of things in general? What are his thoughts on the films of Truffaut? Does he consider his position a necessary evil, or just necessary? Does he need to believe in an ordered Universe to do his job? Does he feel that the Victorians are essentially correct in their dim view of the excesses of the Romantics? Does he prefer circles or straight lines? Is his general appreciation of William Carlos Williams marred by his reading of *Patterson*? Does he support the current government? What does he think of when he thinks of the good old days?

I keep a picture on the wall of my cubicle right above my desk. It's an ariel shot of the Amazon twisting its way through the forests of Peru. The picture was taken from high above some clouds, the soft, spacious, billowy, non-threatening kind. The kind of clouds you might imagine angels sitting on, if it were still possible to imagine angels. It reminds me that there is a world outside this office, a world untouched by the concerns of my daily life. I know that things are tough all over and Peru is certainly no exception, yet I find the picture inspiring anyway. One day I came back from lunch to find him standing just

outside my cubicle staring. I realized he was looking at my picture. I sneered, concluding that he probably viewed all that rainforest as a waste of potential farm land. He excused himself when he noticed me and headed off to his corner office. For a while after that he would find excuses to drop by my desk and then linger to chat. It got to the point where I began to worry that people would think we were in cahoots. He must have picked up on my feelings because he stopped his visits. Still, every so often I'll notice him sneaking a peek in my cubicle when I'm away from my desk, looking at my picture that gives one the illusion of seeing earth from heaven. I catch him there, from time to time.

## The Neighborhood Watch

The Neighborhood Watch is an utter sham. This is a secret, my secret, my terrible, true secret. There are many who are unaware of its failure, and many more who would become distraught at the slightest hint that the protective cabal overseeing the well being of their goods and property while they are asleep is a total fraud. It is though. Crime continues, malcontent festers, the deficit expands, a nation divides, nature revolts, suspicions grow, empires crumble, markets, computers and cars crash unabated, inflation inflates - and where is the Neighborhood Watch amidst all this chaos? I tell you it is nowhere! We of the neighborhood kid ourselves that our watch is both preventative and protective, when, in fact, its sole function is to fascilitate a collective turning of heads away from the nightmarish skid we find ourselves in. Indeed, to turn our eyes instead towards the sunny iconology of tiny stickers placed on our doors and windows that assure us that "yes, this community is *watched* by its own residents." Big deal. The whole damn thing is a sham.

Take the case of the Olsons and their graffiti problem. It began several months ago, just after Olson Sr. and his son Boyle had just finished painting their garage a pale yellow. Many in the neighborhood weren't crazy about the shade, myself included, but it was agreed upon years ago at a residential pow-wow that the community had no right to police the aesthetics of its inhabitants. So pale yellow it was. The day after Olson had finished his paint job, the entire street awoke to find a large red A painted over top of his handiwork. We were aghast. How could such a thing have happened right under our noses? Poor old Olson had to re-do the entire job, but no sooner had he finished then the

A appeared again. Again he re-painted, again the A, and it continued this way for weeks before an exhausted Olson simply gave up and let the letter stand. What happened to the watchful eye of the Watch? How could they be so powerless in the face of such a heinous act of vandalism upon one of our own?

When considering Olson's garage problem I can't help but recall a fight I once observed through my living room window, from behind my sofa where I crouch. Olson and his wife Brenda, I think, pulled into their driveway, which is directly across the street from my own. It looked like they were having quite a row. Olson's Lincoln Continental was practically shaking and from within I saw animated, exasperated gestures. Suddenly the driver's side door burst open and Olson, clad in evening wear ( a dapper and solemn gray), leapt out and began running up the street. Brenda, or whatever, jumped out after him and, clutching her heart melodramatically, called after him:

"Forgive me!" And she collapsed onto the hood of the car and wept.

It struck me as odd. Not the fight, such things (I assume) are wont to happen over the course of a marriage as lengthy as the Olson's. No, it was the use of the words "forgive me." Normally in the world we live in a simple "I'm sorry," said with sincerity, will suffice. "Forgive me," spoken, as it was, with such force and passion suggests the occurrence of wrongs beyond the everyday slip up. Did the Neighborhood Watch consider this event when investigating the mystery of the A on Olson's garage? I wonder.

My roommate is less cynical of the Neighborhood Watch than I. He feels it fills an essential function in the community.

"It keeps," he says, "a certain less desirable element at bay."

I know who he's talking about, this *element* he refers to. I know because we are taught right from the start about *them*, the ones *out there*. *They* want what we have, and *they'll* do anything to get it. Usually they just seize upon moments of weakness. However, occasionally, if left unchecked, *they* get it together and try to take what is ours en masse. It is the potential for this kind of uprising that causes people like my roommate to wake up screaming in the night. I am less concerned. I suspect that *they* are not really a *they* at all, and that *they* are more or less like the *us* my roommate would like to believe in. He is a confirmed UsAndThemist, which is why (I think) he has to believe in the Neighborhood Watch. What is most frightening of all to the UsAndThemist is not the so-called *they*, but the notion that there is no *they* at all, just people who are sad and destitute and angry. If there is no real enemy, what are we left to defend?

I ponder this problem with the Neighborhood Watch (among others), as I stand alone in my garage with my paint cans, my tools, and my growing fear that the sum total of what I amount to is a mathematically insignificant fractoid. I ponder and I ponder: Am I living the life I dreamed for myself? If not, why? Is this too not an issue for the Neighborhood Watch? I mean, if they are so concerned about the plight of all us neighbors, could they not look to the small but crucial issue of residential happiness? I suppose not. I suppose it's nobody's fault I can't run faster, jump higher, or do physics. It's nobody's fault, yet on and on I dream.

You might call me a fan of sentiment. Not sentimentality mind you, though I do admit to harboring a certain longing for far of days when a neighborhood such as my own would've had no need for a watch. The whole word - "watch," it calls to mind images of

battle weary soldiers forced to sit up at ungodly hours staring at some swelling forest, ready to burst with enemy fire. A fan of sentiment, and a romantic, capital R. I remember days on the edge of summer, that last ridge, peering ahead into the certainty of another autumn (“Season of mists, and mellow fruitfulness,” observes Keats, quite astutely). I felt those days, or (better still), I *felt* those days. Who didn’t? And who doesn’t sometimes long for that impossible possibility of looking to the future with teenaged indifference and a swashbuckler’s dream of untold adventure, plunder, and hope. And, in the midst of this looking back, Longing, ever clever, confuses me to the point where I question what is more poignant, the feeling, or the feeling about the feeling? I have no answers.

I have no answers for the fear that grips my community either, a fact that causes my roommate to snort and say, “Typical.” He has begun to attend the (secret?) meetings of the Neighborhood Watch, and has informed me that, in the face of the ongoing slide we find ourselves in, the Watch has decided to arm itself.

“And we’re not talking sawed off bats and socks with billiard balls in em either,” he says. “Pepper spray, billy clubs, nun-chuks, walkie-talkies, berets, there’s even a rumour of night-vision glasses! Night vision glasses!” He’s very excited.

Well I can’t say I entirely blame him. It might be kind of fun to be a part of something that feels, to borrow a favorite expression of the Neighborhood Watch, proactive. My main ambition as of late has been to finish *The Lord of the Rings* (my third time incidentally). Indeed they look quite sharp, those men and women of the Watch, as they run drills in the park next to my house. Their faces shine with pride, and hope. It comes from the feeling that something is being *done* about something. What would they

do if they knew, as I do, that it's all nothing more than a costume party? What if they shared my fear that nothing can be done about anything? I will not spoil their fun, for now. For the moment I will keep my terrible secret, and content myself with imaginary worlds, other than my own.

## Superman

Superman is something of a loner in super hero circles. It's not that he really *is* a prig, or a prude, but that he is *perceived* to be so by many of his more influential contemporaries, and among super heroes, as with all cliques and cadres, such a perception can, and usually does, lead to ones downfall. So we see the mighty son of Jor-el socially undone by envious whispering in the mighty halls of the Justice League of America.

The necessities of defending that which is both good and true have lead Superman to displays of superior speed, stamina, strength, agility, and ingenuity. That fact of the matter is he is equally superior in the categories of humor, social grace, critical responsibility, cooking, philosophical reflection, the so-called "french arts," and poetic insight. Most of these qualities, however, remain hidden as his superior sense of modesty prevents him from stealing the spotlight completely from we the wretched and ordinary.

- A few little known facts about Superman:
1. He is not a genius
  2. He is not a saint.
  3. He is without pity.
  4. He is an unflinching realist.
  5. He is not a hero.

All of the above stem from his knowledge that there is no ideal world, only the world that is.

I was once lucky enough to attend one of his infrequent lectures at the University of Waterloo. The topic was “The Responsibilities of Power” and on that matter he said the following:

“I suppose one might say that to be powerful one could, or should, display dominance. In this sense power is defined as control over the ‘other (he actually made those little quotation mark thingies with his hands). Truth be told, for myself, I have always fancied the opposite to be the case. In this sense power, true power mind you, comes from the knowledge that, though you may be stronger, faster, bigger, less confined by gravity, etc. than everyone else, you choose *not* to dominate. Thus we come to understand a more profound power, the power of self control.”

Once he was handed a pamphlet by a man on the street. It read: “Christ is Real! Jesus Saves!” Though usually not one for idle chit-chat, and far too courteous to be argumentative, Superman felt compelled to stop. He turned to the man and smirked,

“What is it in the nature of you people,” he said, “that you always need creatures of decidedly distant origins to come to earth and save you from yourselves?” The man stared back at Superman, shrugged and replied,

“Who’s to say, I’m just one of the poor schleps that needs saving.”

“Indeed,” said Superman, “indeed.”

As he strode away Superman felt that he had just experienced what we ordinary folk refer to as a moment of weakness.

Things Superman cannot do (for one reason or another):

1. Be impeded
2. "Progress" in the traditional narrative sense
3. Go home
4. Sing
5. Stop world hunger
6. Alter the equilibrium of planetary politics
7. Change

Where does Superman's civic virtue come from? Does the fact that he is spectacular in all ways necessitate a commitment to a righteous path? The very existence of super-villains suggests the answer must be no. To a large extent Superman is the product of his genetic make up and the empowering effects of an alien sun, however, those of us who sleep safely at night due to his protective and watchful eye must all pause at some point and give quiet thanks to the values of a simple mid-western farmer, his wife and the good old fashion values of Smallville , without which a great and terrible king may have been unleashed upon the unsuspecting world.

Most of us feel that protecting the world from evil is a burden for Superman, but one that he embraces with a puritan work ethic and a steely eyed commitment to a better, safer planet. Wrong. The burden of justice is a paltry thing to one so great. Solitude is another matter entirely. Despite all the praise, his chain heavy with the keys of every major

city and town on earth, despite the Wagnerian stance above the vanquished foe, despite all he has done and all he can do he is faced always with solitude. True to form he grins and bears it, lets no one know about the devastating emptiness of a heart that has nothing to aspire to, sad eyes that have seen the edge of the Universe, the curse of an artless life. Because he is unable to fail he is unable to dream. Across great plains of ice in a castle of glass, on the edge of the world we know, Superman waits and stares into space, alone, forever and ever, alone.

## Unremarkable

At the vanguard of yet another long, eternal Monday-morning wait-for-the-sixteen-downtown in the suburb of Acre's Ridge, when almost everybody sneaking in a late summer's tee-time, or a last jaunt to the cottage had headed off hours ago, and the small, powerless group of people whose vacation time was up moved through their morning rituals listlessly, numb with routine despite the sweet, low caffeine buzz, and here and there a woman or a man watched their partner leave for the office enjoying a second cup with heated milk, and babies and children were waking up from their deep sleeps and children's dreams of bold adventures on the open sea; when die hard fitness fanatics were just coming in from their morning jog, gamblers all of them, playing the odds at a longer life; when all thoughts of another sick-day died in the fret of too-many-missed-days-this-summer-to-be-inconspicuous realizations; when pools, a mere day ago choppy with horseplay, had grown glassy-still and placid; when the hum of urgent traffic drowned out the sound of birds signaling another turn of the earth into bright day, then Lloyd Moesby would glance at his watch, sigh and try not to contemplate the inane pattern of another day at the office.

He always took the bus to work, not out of any particular allegiance to environmental concerns, but rather because the downtown parking situation had become intolerable and he already owed a considerable debt in tickets. Standing on the concrete slab next to the sign that indicated which busses would come by and when, Moesby would reach into his jacket pocket and thumb the edge of a worn out paperback copy of *Bullet Park* that he kept near to him at all times. He would close his eyes and imagine himself at

a railway station then, ten minutes before full daylight, waiting to travel across the world into an eternal city, a Gotham; breadbasket of the suburbs, breaker of dreams; he would imagine a trip much longer than the one he was about to take, rich and symbolic; he pictured a briefcase in one hand, and an umbrella under one arm; across the platform a pair of newly weds were kissing each other good-bye, and on a bench near by a lone woman sat crying, softly. It took only the opening of his eyes to shatter the dream. The reality was he was not on a platform, and no train was coming. This day in particular his only company at the bus-stop was a nerdy looking teenager reading Tolkien, a youngish woman talking overly loud on her cell phone, which had played Ode to Joy when it rang, and a sleeping drunk; a pilgrim from a far off planet, another world, in the gutter, in the core.

Moesby squinted at the sign. The bus was five minutes late, no surprise and no real disappointment. The disappointment would be when it came and he would fail to see the shape of a beautiful naked woman combing her hair pass by in one of its windows, moving like a divine spectre through Acre's Ridge. When it finally arrived he trudged on board, flashed his pass and gave a courteous, if disinterested, nod to the driver. The faces of the other passengers (oh, how he longed to call them commuters) were as lifeless as he reckoned his must be. Moesby shuffled to his seat without making eye contact with any of them, dropped down, and began to read. Here was a world he could reckon with, within these pages. A sinister world to be sure, but a poetic one nonetheless. A world where names were significant, where unhappy children lay in bed for seventeen days, where dark plans were hatched and relationships were loaded. Here was a world of drunken parties

and of extra marital affairs, of hurt and desire, of gloom and grave architecture. Here was America. Here was the world.

Here, as far as the geography of Moesby goes, was actually a smallish prairie city smack-dab in the middle of Canada. A small enough place that driving in any direction for an hour meant you were well out of it, but big enough so that there was at least one of everything you might need. Here was the place where Moesby lived and worked, a place where the difference between urban and suburban was a mere matter of miles. Here was a place where Moesby was happily married, worked a job he cared little for, but could handle with ease and skill, loved his children immensely, had an uncomplicated and friendly relationship with his father, bore little or no resentment to his brothers and sisters, had few financial worries, had met no dark strangers, drank often, but was rarely drunk, never pined for his faded youth and beauty. Here was Moesby on the bus, uninterested, uninspired, unpoetic.

The thing Moesby most longed for was to be a character in a story, to have a life worthy of literature, and not just any literature at that. He longed for his life to be the stuff of the great American story teller John Cheever. He longed for the kind of repressed anxiety, unhappiness, self doubt, self loathing, and barely concealed well to-do spite that he found so perfectly in Cheever's characters. He had at times considered other greats, but ultimately none of them worked out as well. Hemingway was too curt and all too often his characters died or ended up alone. Carver he liked, but Moesby found the notion of alcoholism distasteful, so that was out. Similarly he was too sane for Sylvia Plath, and too white for Richard Wright, too fulfilled for Sherwood Anderson, too straight for Sinclair

Ross, too male for Margaret Atwood, too dumb for John Barth, too realistic for John Updike, too well adjusted for Flannery O'Conner, too protestant for Gabriel Garcia Marquez, too catholic for Margaret Laurence, too landlocked for Melville - the list could go on, but for Moesby it was Cheever or bust.

He devoured Cheever the way some people devour romance novels. He had read every story repeatedly -his favorites "The Country Husband," "Goodbye My Brother," and "The Swimmer," dozens of times each. He had read every novel at least twice, placing *Bullet Park* at the top and *Oh What a Paradise it Seems* at the bottom in terms of greatness -though he loved them all, and if you caught him in a mood he would talk about any of them for hours. He had even read Cheever's memoirs and found, much to his delight, that the magnificent author's own life read like that of one of his characters'; poetic, sad, and lovely. This was the life he wanted for himself, a world of meaning, a world of ambiguous but undeniable truths. Above all he wanted the story of his life to proceed with style, with blissful prose; above all he wanted elegance.

Moesby climbed off the bus a block from his office and stared back the way he had come. He estimated that if he were to walk in that direction, keeping up a reasonable pace, he would be back where he started in about one-and-a-half to two hours, certainly not a distance that inspired any neo-romantic notions of the commute. This was a problem. In Cheever the suburbs are remote, self contained, their own little universe, but for Moesby simply taking the elevator to the top floor of his office building and looking out the window meant he could *see* the suburbs. This had a certain demystifying effect to say the least. Another problem was Moesby's marriage. When he told himself that he loved his

wife, that he loved Carol, he knew he wasn't kidding, he did. In twelve years of wedded bliss there had not been a single dalliance, which in and of itself might be the basis for something Cheever-esque if Moesby had tried and failed, or perhaps gotten to the critical moment and been unable to perform, but such was not the case. Temptation was not an issue, as he felt none. Carol and he had a gratifying sex life and still possessed the ability to make each other laugh and give each other little goose bumps of excitement at the thought of seeing one another. They were perfectly happy, which perturbed Moesby to no end.

There were other tragedies as well, not the least of which was the happiness of his children. Dale and Tuesday were well adjusted, confident without being cocky, gregarious, active, loving, courteous, and intelligent. How Moesby wished one of them could be depressed, or fall ill with a mysterious psycho-somatic condition! He wished that they hated him, or at least resented him, but he knew he was far too open minded and caring a father for that. He wished that he didn't understand his children so well, or that he had lost the ability to put himself in their shoes, but such was not the case, and, alas, he was a kindly and sympathetic parent. Carol was no better, for she and the children loved and understood one another as well. Moesby's extended family was also a problem, close in both proximity and spirit they treated one another with a love and respect unseen anywhere in Cheever's somewhat gloomy appraisal of familial relations.

There was also the issue of his name: Lloyd Moesby. True, under a different spelling it was one he shared with a semi-decent former major leaguer, but it was not particularly significant or eye catching beyond that. Frances Weed, now there was a name! Or Farther Frisbee, Nailles, Hammer, Neddy Merrill, Wapshot, Tifty Pomeroy - any would

be better than boring old Lloyd Moesby. As he walked to his office he rolled his name around in his mouth, a rounded pair of words that, when spoken slowly enough, sounded uncomfortably close to the lowing of cattle. How much we can read into a name! The sounds, the connotation, the implications, the double meanings! What could anyone ever read into Lloyd Moesby? It wasn't as if he wanted to be a barber named Chopcut or anything nearly so Dickensian, but Lloyd Moesby? Sadly, just another name among a miscellany of characters who will not appear in any half decent work of literature, certainly nothing of, to coin a phrase, Cheeverian proportions. Lloyd Moesby indeed!

At some point in the fog of his past Moesby had tried to become a writer himself. He sat down at the computer he'd purchased for Carol and the children -an item he regarded more as an expensive typewriter than anything else, and banged out a few lines, something about a retired jockey living in a Roman villa. It wasn't very good, though he reasoned that first drafts rarely are. Moesby placed the story in an empty drawer and vowed to return to it some day. As a means of acquiring inspiration he sat down to read "The Brigadier and the Golf Widow," the result of which was the opposite of what he'd intended. Inspiration eluded him, the prevalent feeling was one of immense self-doubt and discouragement. He knew his words could never leap and dance like Cheever's, that his sense of humor was nowhere near as complex and urbane, and that he could never find that indescribable, almost imperceptible rhythm that rivaled the very stars above in beauty and grace. Poor man, cursed with understanding, but lacking ability; a fool, but one wise enough to know he is a fool; a mere peasant whiling away his nights in books, while at night men of gold herd leviathans over mountains in the sky.

Lloyd entered his office building and made for the elevators. Brampton was waiting there, glancing around without much interest. He and Moesby were friends at work and played the odd game of golf together.

“Hiya Lloyd,” he smiled.

“Duane,” Moesby smiled back. Brampton swung a driver in pantomime.

“Are you gonna get out this weekend?”

“I doubt it. I’m taking Carol and the kids up to Clear Lake.”

“Well hey, they have a great course, maybe you could sneak away for a couple hours.”

“Yeah,” Moesby sighed. This sort of conversation was the only kind he ever had with Duane Brampton, sports related white noise. Nothing especially interesting had ever gone on between the two of them, there was no tension, mistrust, competition, or unfriendliness buried beneath their relationship. Moesby wanted to tell Brampton that three years ago, at a barbecue in which they had gotten their families together he had fucked his wife Gladys in the bathroom. The trouble was it wasn’t remotely true. It was not Moesby’s nature to commit such a betrayal and it broke his heart. The elevator stopped at their floor and they got out.

“Well, see you at lunch Lloyd,” said Brampton as he entered his office.

“Yeah,” said Lloyd, “see you then.”

Another day at the office began its long, slow roll. Another day in the life of Lloyd Moesby. As much as he might wish, dream, and pray, he knew there were no personal disasters lurking around unseen corners, no dark secrets lying in wait, apt to spring at any

moment. Moesby was nagged by the disturbing certainty that everything in his life was fine, perfect, wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, wonderful as it had been and would always be. Though not in the way he wanted it to be, not in any repressed or buried sense. He wished he could at least lay claim to being a repressed homosexual, finally blooming into self actualisation, but he could not, he was straight as an arrow and he knew it. In what felt like the blink of an eye it was lunch time. Moesby decided that, given his mood, a half day might be in order. He gathered his things together and went off to look for his boss Redmond.

Mr. Redmond was sitting in his office, staring at some papers intently. The door, as usual, was open. Moesby coughed to announce his presence.

“Oh, Hi Lloyd come on in,” said Redmond with a friendly wave. Redmond was always friendly, and conducted his work in a manner Moesby loathed to admit was fair and courteous to all on staff.

“Jack, I think I need to go home early today.”

“Oh? What’s a matter, feeling sick?” Redmond raised an eyebrow, but there was genuine concern in his voice. *Yeah, sick of it all*, thought Lloyd.

“No. Not really Jack. I... I just don’t feel... myself today.” This was a lie. Moesby’s problem was just the opposite. *I am too much myself*, he thought, *far too much*.

“And it’s interfering with your work?” Redmond ventured. *No*.

“Yes.”

“Well we are a little ahead of schedule this quarter, so I can’t see the harm in it.”

“Thanks,” said Lloyd, “I’m sure I’ll feel better tomorrow.” *If, that is, I wake up in*

*a completely different world*, he thought.

Moesby left the office as quickly as possible, without stopping to talk to anyone. He headed out of his building and made for the bus stop. Standing, waiting for the bus, he found he was alone. He pulled the book from his pocket and flipped through its pages, stopping here or there at favorite passages and re-reading them. This was an unnecessary act, most of the passages were committed to memory, but Moesby liked the look of the words on the page, and the sensation of the book in his hand. He decided that he would read "The Country Husband" when he got home. Lloyd checked his watch, and squinted in the direction the bus would be coming, then scanned the sky, looking for a cloud, a column of smoke, anything, and sighed.

I think this is where I will leave him, standing alone at the bus stop, watching the sky for falling planes and the glimmer of dreams yet to be realized. He is no joke, Lloyd Moesby, I fear I understand him all too well. We are fools, Lloyd and I, so overcome by beautifully imagined worlds that we fail to notice our own happiness; longing, longing, longing, longing forever, that somewhere, in some time, we will be remarkable. It matters, you see.

## The Academy

The halls of the Academy are filled with the warm silence of an autumn afternoon. It is always fall here at the Academy, a quirk enjoyed immensely by myself and others of my crowd. From the window of my office I stare at reds and greens, always. It's very comforting. It is at moments such as this, and there are many, that I contemplate my place oh my darling, and I sometimes feel the best gift I could give to the world would be my own demise. Nothing dramatic. Something quiet, and, with any luck, painless. At the centre of the fantasy is the arrangement of my own funeral. It ought to be tasteful, no pews of bawling mourners drowning out my choice of music (Chopin, *Nocturne in E flat major, op.9 no.2* followed by some Fleetwood Mac, *Songbird* probably). The event would be well attended, and melancholy. Not bleak, just...well wistful. Everyone smiling love's saddest smile. Closed casket I think, perhaps a simple picture of me left on top of the coffin. I have one picked out, I stare at it when I am thinking about what has gone wrong. It is me as a boy, sitting on the hull of a boat in an orange life-jacket. I am squinting, the wind is blowing my hair, and I am about to laugh. The whole thing is lovely.

I am often interrupted during such moments of reverie. The life of an academic at this particular Academy is full of interruptions. It could be almost anyone. Today it is the Mummy, a colleague of mine. I offer him coffee but he shakes his head.

"Each of us lives," he says, "In a world of his own devising." I am about to concur when he goes on. "I think the problem with the Academy is that they want us all to live under one roof, so to speak. One set of rules for everyone. Well don't that just cut it. Take you and your dreams of an elegant funeral..." and here I am shocked at the availability of

my secrets, “and me, who lives so much in the past. How can we share one set of rules? Does Blake not say ‘One law for the Lion & Ox is oppression,’ and so forth? Should not our codes of conduct be shaped and defined by our experiences?” - and I suspect here that he is referring to young coeds, but simply nod my head. We are always making these choices. I let my experience of this particular colleague govern my response, for I know I will see him at an Academic function tonight, saying nothing, with a beautiful literati on his freshly bandaged arm.

From my window I can see cafes, rows upon rows of them. The owners are closing down their sidewalk service as the nights are becoming cool and blue. It is always this way. People, presumably of considerable intelligence, are sitting outside still, fighting the cold in sweaters, knitted scarves and tweed hats. They are drinking double espressos and chai and discussing the possibility of gracefully easing into urban decay and a recent dance recital. They discuss newness amidst the tired old patterns of movement, they discuss the possible and, yes, love too. How did this happen my darling? Where did these people come from? For them, at least, the world is perfect.

There are many functions that a member of the Academy must attend. I find myself at one such event. There is a string quartet playing in one corner, Bach I suspect, or possibly Steely Dan. An ice sculpture of Dopey, the seventh and dumbest of the seven dwarves stands in the centre of a large rec room. A reminder? Several colleagues have already pointed out that in the original Snow White the seven dwarves had no names and, furthermore, that they were certainly not adorable renderings of assorted human maladies and weaknesses. When I hear these comments I smirk and role my eyes - as if to say What

can you do? A student, writing for some local arts journal, is asking me how it feels to be one of the Academy's more mediocre intellectuals, explaining that her opinions on intellectual worth are more or less based on a few of the more reputable prizes and appointments, some of which of my colleagues have amassed. I am about to tell her what she can do with her pen and paper when the Mummy shows up. I introduce him grandly. He stares drunkenly at the young student in her young student clothes. She giggles nervously as he announces he is charmed. They amble off together and I am, for the moment, forgotten.

There are several myths about the Academy, I don't deny it. It is hardly, as many assume, an extended frolic in the days of wine and roses. We have our difficult days too. Recently, while shopping in the Academy bookstore for a new collection of love poems by the latest urban truth-seer, and a how-to book on home repair, I saw a child who had entered the store, presumably to fight off the fall chill. He had shabby clothes, matted hair, mud on his face and round, impossible eyes. He stared at the patrons, my colleagues, as they wandered among the shelves, sipping chamomile to the strains of Haydn, or Elvis Costello. Everyone saw him, pitied him and moved on. That was a bad day. Another time I entered my office to find a man seated at my desk. He was very drunk and clearly not an Academy member. I asked if I could be of any assistance. He replied that, if I wanted to, I could get him a sandwich and some coffee. I explained that this was not my department, but that the cafeteria staff may be helpful. The drunk man stood, sized me up and opened his hand to reveal a smooth round stone.

"See this rock?" He asked. I indicated that I did indeed see the rock. "No," he

said, "look at it." And I did. Painted on the rock was a winter landscape of such unusual beauty that my breath came up short. In the middle of the stone sat a sun, around which a burning array of ice blanketed the sleeping prairie. There was a bird, an eagle I suppose, floating above this world and, on the ground, a mother pointing it out to her child. It was a dream. Extraordinary. I asked if he had painted it. He replied that he had. Then, balling his fist around his work of art, he struck me full force in the chest and ran off. This too, a bad day.

The student has found me. She asks if it would be all right to resume our interview. I smirk and mention our skeletal acquaintance monsieur Mummy. She blushes and says something odd about being in the presence of celebrity. She is, however, quick to point out that he is just as pedantic and single minded as any old relic. It occurs to me that I may have misjudged this girl. She wonders if our interview might not be better conducted at a quiet bar that she knows, explaining that the sound of wolves at the door make her nervous. Over her shoulder I see the Mummy with a drink in each hand scanning the room. I reply that I would be delighted and together we make our exeunt. The bar is shabby, a student bar. Some of her friends have arrived and joined us. They have been talking for an hour without stopping to breathe. They are talking about the death of genius and about social atrocities and various marches that they're sorry-they-had-to-miss-but-they-had-a-date. The girl from the party says:

"I'm sorry, but I just don't see a space for genius in today's world. And art, I mean, what is it anyway if not the upper-middle class flexing it's muscles yet again?" I stand up and announce to the table that comments like that are why they will all be

students forever. I then remark that I must go, as we mediocre intellectuals need plenty of rest if we are to compete. As I leave she is laughing and/or crying. It doesn't matter.

What happened oh my darling? What brought me here to the Academy. How long have I been a member? I hardly remember joining. I sometimes can't help wonder if it isn't all just a metaphor. But no, that's impossible. Wishes and dreams, my darling, do not come true. We dream that there is a beautiful life for everyone. That some day things will fall together and the sad people of this world will have a kind of grace. I dream of such a happy accident. I dream about ice cream, and about that little boy in the bookstore. I dream of a great rain of roses falling softly from heaven. A tide of red to warm this weeping earth.

## **Behind the Door**

There are wolves behind the door. Howling wolves. Slobbering wolves. Hungry wolves. Howling, slobbering, hungry wolves. I put them there -I wish I hadn't- but I did and it's done and there they are. Growling. Too obvious, I think, and, moreover, a little plain. Putting the wolves behind the door seemed, well, the right thing to do at the time. I thought people would recognize them, that people would understand them. They did, and called me obvious and plain. Still, they're there now (there-there now), be consoled, they are not alone. The wolves are just more clutter for the pile, more kindling for the big fire. Yes, there are big fires behind the door as well, dense and symbolic, forever burning houses (also dense and symbolic) to the ground, leaving nothing but a dense and symbolic frame, a skeleton, and the palimpsest of grief.

There is palimpsest behind the door. Want to know what that means? Look it up. I did. I did, because it is behind the door and I wanted to know what it meant, you see. It seems an impossible, exotic, impish word. Fun to say, pa-limp-sest, certainly erotic, and yet odd to look at, with too many peaks and valleys. Everything behind the door has a definition, each thing could be found in a dictionary or an encyclopedia with well ordered parameters sectioning it off from each and every other thing. However, attempting to find definitions for everything back there would be an extreme bore, most of the stuff is pretty easy to recognize anyway, though things behind the door usually behave in a way that confounds their definitions. In fact, there are confounded definitions all over the place behind the door, racing around with deep frown lines and furrowed brows, demanding that people, places and things, behave in a manner more becoming themselves. Still, go ahead

and look up palimpsest, you can use it to impress/annoy/degrade your friends at parties.

Behind the door there is a lion playing poker with a polar bear. The bear has been cheating for hours. He looks like a cheat, slouching like that. His dopey expression isn't fooling anyone, least of all the lion, who, having lost another hand, affixes his noble stare upon his foe and says (loud enough for everyone to hear) in a bright, bold British accent:

"It seems my dear fellow, and worthy opponent, that there is simply no end to your good fortune today." Everyone laughs, partly at the wit and audacity of the lion, and partly because the timber and inflection of that British accent suggest that something humorous has been said, and nobody wants to look like they don't *get it*. Oscar Wilde, who is also behind the door, chimes in:

"Yes, yes... and might I add, either the curtains go, or I do!" And we all snicker like brilliant idiots at his terrible, terrible joke. The polar bear, meanwhile, mutters something about how in the Arctic, occasionally, the Sun will shine for twenty-three hours a day. The lion cuts off everyone with a majestic roar. There is silence and they resume playing.

Persona is behind the door. So is Irony, Hyperbole, Understatement, Paradox, and even, much to my chagrin, Sarcasm. They are having a conversation about Baseball. Persona is telling everyone about how much he loves the New York Yankees.

"They're my favorite team," he says.

"Didn't you just say the other day that Cleveland is your favorite team?" someone asks.

"Did I, hmm. Well I'm quite sure it's the Yankees." He's a tough one to pin down,

that Persona, you're never sure what's really going on with him.

"At any rate," chimes in Hyperbole, "this conversation is far more interesting than the one we had yesterday. When baseball was invented the gods themselves descended from their heavenly thrones to bless what is surely the most wonderful human achievement of all time."

"Oh yeah, baseball is *so* interesting, and I just *love* talking about it," smirks Sarcasm.

"Monsieur Sarcasm, charming and bright as ever," adds Irony.

"Perhaps our good friend Paradox, who has studied and the game since early childhood, may have some small thing to say on the subject of baseball," says Understatement.

"It is my great misfortune to have had the opportunity to learn so much about baseball. For I confess, though I do love to watch the game, I hate the sport," says Paradox, with proud humility.

Behind the door there is a woman. Well, there are lots of women, but there is one in particular. She is most notable for what she is not. She is not soft red lips on a page or milky breasts heaving in the wind. She is not demure looks cast down, or shaking her fist at the hard prairie sky, swearing to tend the farm until a rugged stranger who could love a hard working woman rides into town and replaces her recently deceased Pa. She is not lying passively waiting for her man to climb out of a clear, cold forest pool and make love to her, naked, refreshed and uninhibited. She's in no need of rescue, there are no dragons at her door. I like her immensely, but can't go into more detail at the moment. It's

probably none of my business anyway.

Behind the door are my many friends. Tom, and Sarah, and Darren, and Lutz, and Marijke, and Doug, and Karen, and Gilles, and Felix, and Jacques, and Bob, and George, and Roland, and Gabriel, and Woody, and Manuel, and Thomas, and William, and Donald, and Italo, and Grace, and Julia, and Michel, and Achi, and on and on. I have many friends behind the door, and they are always talking, well, having a *dialogue* would be a more intelligent way to put it I suppose. The sound of all those voices snaps, crackles and pops up the stem of my brain, an electric charge that ignites me, embraces me, terrifies me, and comforts me. Cooley is behind the door too. If you don't know him, you may know the type. Always smiling, but always disappointed. It is sad, but big hearts are the easiest to break. He thinks we can all do better. He's right, we can. My good friend David is also behind the door, believing in brilliance but not genius. Believing in himself and in me. He is plagued by the lingering suspicion that anything could happen. He's right, it could.

There are cowboys behind the door. Cool gunslingers not afraid to kill, but only with good reason. They are discussing neo-romanticism and its broad implications in a post-industrial universe. There are duelists, whose speed with the rapier is matched only by their skill as lecturers on the topic of the internet and the importance of decentralized information . There is a space man sitting with a werewolf arguing about whether or not postmodernism is an ethos, or simply a mode of aesthetic classification. A band of yowling Vikings swoop down upon a quaint Flemish village to tell them about long distance savings. Roman Legionnaires wait in line for decaf lattes at the cyber cafe, while across the street Prometheus bums a cigarette from mighty Zeus. On the television

Cleopatra and the Yeti appear in an infomercial selling the latest in personal fitness equipment during a break from a program about a crime solving dog and his anal retentive owner. Behind the door Jesus and Mohammed went on a bender, smashed up Moses' trans-am and God is pissed. Napoleon, Alexander the Great, Hannibal, and George S. Patton are playing a game of Risk behind the door. It has been going on for three days and there is no clear end in sight. Behind the door the Hardy Boys are out to solve a mystery, racing against time. Sherlock Holmes, Nancy Drew, and Tin-tin, are also on the case. Behind the door there are ways to make yourself thinner, fatter, taller, smaller, more sentimental, less maudlin, more focused, less obsessive, more sensitive, less neurotic, more restrained, less dour and all of them are accompanied by celebrity testimonials. Behind the door humanity's proudest moments are used to sell toilet paper.

The door, in question, is not something you should overly concern yourself with. It is not important. It is certainly not a "doorway" in my mind, or anything remotely like that. It is nothing ethereal or philosophical. In this case it is merely the thing which has things behind it. It's just a door. If you're the type who needs to visualize things (and if you haven't done so already) then think of the front door of the house you grew up in. There. That's what it looks like.

Behind the door there is no good and evil, only the *idea* of good and evil. The world behind the door is a world of ideas. I suppose I know this. Why then, do I have so much trouble when I'm trying to get to sleep? Why do I lie awake worrying about my hardwood floors, the things I have done, the things I have said, what the government will do, if the love of my life still loves me, if I'll be a good parent if I ever have kids, the cost

of fame, the price of my behavior, how I will get by, where I will live, etc.?

Once you've been behind the door it is hard to imagine what the rest of the world looks like. Sure, the rest-of-the-world is behind the door, but it's not the real rest of the world. It is easy, from behind the door, to imagine that the real rest of the world is, in fact, not real or, at least, no more real than the-rest-of-the-world that exists behind the door. There are lots of ideas behind the door, ideas that are important and powerful, ideas that change the way you feel about the little details of everyday life. These important ideas are unimportant to most of the rest of the world. Interestingly, the people who share these ideas usually think the ideas would make the rest of the world a better place. Whether they would or would not is a tough call. From behind the door it seems like they might, but things are very different behind the door than they are in the rest of the world. Very, very different.

Behind the door there is enormous guilt. Not everyone behind the door acknowledges this guilt. Most of us, in fact, pretend it isn't there, but it is. It wraps itself around each and every one of us like a giant boa constrictor. Every now and then we can feel it squeezing, the walls begin to close in, we have break downs, we become exhausted, we get out of the city for awhile. Usually we recover, but guilt doesn't go away. It is always waiting for us, even before we are born, and it will be around long after we're gone. Every now and then someone really stupid says guilt is a waste of time or an unnatural feeling. That is a ridiculous thing to say, but such things are occasionally said here, behind the door.

## Sampler

at ten-thirty-eight the sudden sound of Sparklehorse reminds me that it *is* a wonderful life

repeat        repeat        repeat it until you believe it and with Annie just gone out  
the door

whose eyes I *do* compare (and have a million times before) to everything her  
voice is a melody yet fool I do not listen I do not *listen* OR If I listen I do  
not *believe* in u. f.-ohs OR the Bermuda triangle OR  
my(I)self OR god (who I secretly do believe in OR at least  
fear) maybe the best way to overcome disappointment is to avoid

everything seems to get me down my so-called adult so-called friends

my biggest fears so what there is a poetry to this life but not  
where... Q: what is contentment content context

a con job? walk-through-my-neighborhood thinking of all the movies I could make

(would make) if I had the time OR ambition 's for  
suckers there is a poetry to this life but not where...

you think you understand what's killing the minds of today's youth tvvtvtvtvtv

though you (and I) both watch for hours and we think we're pretty smart and I too

wish I

had : a tiger's heart a cowboy's swagger

a spirit worthy of adventure a dry white wit a

warm red glow cool blues making this night like so many others

beautiful and sad and funny

and *Bottle Rocket* reminds me that it *is* a wonderful life for some reason is  
cardinal a job OR an accolade like being knighted ? knights in white  
satin OR nights in white satin playing I think how gay (not  
as in queer not queer as in strange but as in gay but in this case not as in gay that  
way OR not in gay as in happy but as in something that is well gay) it is  
there is a poetry to this life but not  
where...

you least expect it 's inevitable that in the summer and winter we complain  
about the heat / about the cold

the government the system the idea behind the system the system behind  
the idea behind system the man behind the system behind the idea behind the system  
the idea behind the man behind the system behind the idea behind the system

but we can't agree how could we ? and *Under the Bushes Under the Stars*  
reminds me that it *is* a wonderful life for some the revolution can't  
come too soon revelation can't come too soon elation can't come too  
soon for some one of these letters is in the wrong place/ one of these

letters just doesn't belong

there is a poetry to this life but not where...

you imagine ideas OR things ideas OR things ideas OR things

and *Snow White* reminds me that it *is* a wonderful life for some technology

is the answer      rejecting technology is the answer      the answer is blowin'      it

the answer is not the answer

repeat

repeat

repeat it until you

believe it

the answer is not the answer

there is a poetry to this life... *it is* a wonderful life... but not where... for some...

there is a poetry to this life... for some... *it is* a wonderful life... but not where... there

is a poetry to this life... *it is* a wonderful life... *it is* a wonderful life... *it is* a wonderful

life... *it is* a wonderful life... for some.

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