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Affair

by Nick Stokes

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Part 1

Affair Begins

She waits outside the door. Or inside the door. Not in the door. I am in the bathroom. She is in the room. I just used the bathroom. She presumably did not just use the room. Besides her, there is also a bed in the room and maybe a few odds and ends and four corners which she is not using because she used the bathroom just before me when I was in the room listening to her use the bathroom instead of seeing the room. Then we switched. Here I am.

She did not flush. Hence, tangible confirmation of what I heard was saved in the bowl. What I heard was a torrential gush. Tangible but I could not touch it. I could have, but I did not. She did not flush. She is a girl who does not flush. Sometimes. This time. A young woman. I do not know much about her. I heard her stream stop and did not hear her flush or dab herself with paper or wash her hands and indeed when we switched places I could see she had not flushed. Because I arrived at a toilet already containing pee. Into which I also peed. Our pees mixed, diluted by water, undiluted by paper. Our yellows mixed. Our yellow. She had not flushed. I did not know whether or not to flush. I do not frequent flush toilets and she had not flushed and so I do not know whether or not to flush. I do not know if she expects me to follow her lead and not flush or if she saved the flushing for me who followed her or if she did not mean to set an example for me to follow or not follow but merely did not flush because that is what she does. I flush. This is no chamber pot. Our yellow disappears like sewage on the way to the treatment plant. When will it arrive? How will it be treated when it does?

She has treated me kindly and so I am here.

I do not wash my hands. I know where my hands have been. I know where I have been. No place much filthier than another. I do not know where the faucet handle has been. A germ or two bolsters the immune system. A little filth shores up health. I do not know where I am going. I do not wash my hands at home either.

She is waiting. I hope. I think I hope.

I fear for my life.

I do not know whether or not to do up my pants before I leave. Or go in. Leave

the bathroom, go in the room. She led me up here, to a cabin in the woods. With a flush toilet. Perhaps it is not a flush toilet. Perhaps I should not have flushed it. I followed. I do not know why. I mean, I do. She is young but beautiful and funny but sincere and smart but not overbearing and dressed like a gypsy but cleaner and mysterious but tactile and she wants me inside her. So I am in her bathroom. Outside her room. There is only one room in the cabin, besides the bathroom. Which I am in.

I think to take off my ring and hang it on the light switch. Electricity, she has it. Solar power perhaps. Or hydro or wind. Off the grid. What I have always wanted, I think. Then I think I should turn off the light when I leave, go in, at which point the ring would clang to the floor and I do not want to listen to my ring clatter, and the ring may further get itself lost in the floor, in the vent register for example, except there are no vent registers because this is a one room log cabin with a bathroom without forced air, but there are plenty of cracks in the floor in which to lose a ring, many more than four corners, and not a few holes, as in drains and mouse access openings and other holes less holey, all of which are hungry for a ring, which they would swallow, finger inside or no, no questions asked. Whether a man is inside it or no. I am not sure what I want to do and do not want to do right now, and all the bifurcations between, but I am absolutely without a doubt positive I at this very moment have no inkling of a desire to be looking for a ring I am inside on the one hand and outside on the other.

I also have no desire to forever lose my ring.

I leave my ring on.

Where am I? I ask myself because you are not here, and neither is she, nor are she, none of the shes I could mean, nor the one I do. She is here but not here all the same, considering the door.

I am not as good at answering questions as asking them.

I am pleased with myself for leaving my ring on because if I had removed it I would have had to zip up my pants in compensation and that would have been a decision. About my pants. Good pants, lots of pockets, lots of wales, lots of sticks. Luckily I went to the stick collecting place today instead of the stone gathering place, or my pants would be considerably heavier and piled around my ankles instead of sagging undone around my goosebumped buttocks. Or unluckily

because that is where she found me, if her finding me was unlucky, in the stick collecting place, where I was collecting sticks. She led me deeper into the wood, over a creek whose bottom was lined with good-looking rocks, up a rise, and to her dwelling.

I later asked her if her dwelling might properly be called a cabin.

She said, Yes.

That was a while ago.

The cabin has only one room, minus the bathroom, which is where I am, not looking in the mirror. I have not looked to see if there is a mirror. I cannot remember what she looks like. I put my wife's head on her. I do not mean I put it on her, but it is there in my head, my wife's head on the resurrected body of Marie Antoinette. Which is not to imply that the young woman whose name I will come up with eventually has a body that resembles Marie Antoinette's, except that it is headless in my head. Perhaps her body does resemble Marie's. I do not know. We never met. Marie was French. Gypsies are French-like. Though not the kind of French Marie Antoinette was, I imagine, being she was Austrian. And a queen before she lost her head. I have only known so many women. Surely there are similarities between their bodies.

I begin to pull the sticks from my pockets and other holes in which they are stuck. My pants need to be unencumbered for whatever decision I make. I wonder if I will be able to sell the sticks this afternoon. No I don't, but I should, even though it will not matter. I always sell just enough to buy rice on the way home, whereas if I am selling stones I always sell just enough to buy beans. No matter the day, the kids have enough for one meal a day. Thank God, even if he has nothing to do with it. I lay my sticks on the counter one-by-one. I lay my sticks on the counter one-by-one. I continue to lay my sticks on the counter one-by-one. This cannot continue.

Tradeoffs

Downstairs, he pours himself more coffee from the pot he made yesterday and heats it up in the microwave. The coffee comes out hot, thanks to microwaves. Very small waves energizing, exciting, vibrating, accelerating, colliding, rubbing molecule against molecule, creating heat. At least that's his idea.

He shepherds the boys through the bathroom. The bathroom as a verb. No, a noun but not a person place or thing; a process. Shepherd is too strong a word. Perhaps that is what he used to do when they were as young as Lilly; they were all as young as Lilly. Now Allen is ten and that means Lee is eight, and in general that means they use the bathroom when they need to without their father's involvement. No more clapping, cheering, highfiving when they poop in the toilet. There's been some issues with Ulster and the toilet; he's a little OCD about it in a negative going-to-pretend-it-doesn't-exist-and-instead-piss-myself-silly way. But he's growing out of it. He must be about five. He's in kindergarten and all that. They thought he would be the last, which would've meant three boys and no Lilly. But that wasn't meant to be, so it is not. He and Mary have a good physical relationship.

They think Lilly will be the last. They pray so. He doesn't pray, but he does use action verbs that are approximately true. He does inveigh in his mind, "One day, diapers nevermore," as he diapers Lilly, which is not a task he much minds though it is easy to inveigh against. Diapering is a doable task. He does it. Done, until the next.

The boys have shepherded themselves through the bathroom and Allen and Lee have even dressed themselves in clothes. He tries to set Lilly down. She cries and claws and clambers up him, a monkey. Carrying Lilly, he goes upstairs and fetches clothing for Ulster, who sits naked on the vent register venting forced hot air. The house recovers from the cold night. Mary is in the shower. Lilly says, "Mom." She releases him and goes corpse limp like a greased toddler and raises her arms straight up like a mouse disjuncting its shoulder to squirm through a hole smaller than its body but he holds on. She couldn't push her big head past her mother's cervix but she is learning. She pushes and hits and screams. He holds on. Mary does not need a monkey dangling from her breast in the shower. She needs to get ready for school, no matter what either want.

He clutches this howling beast whose DNA is so closely related to human's and

checks Ulster's bed. Sometimes it contains urine, urine from Ulster. He looks and feels for a large wet spot on the fitted sheet. The spots used to have a smaller surface area, but a greater unseen depth as the urine soaked into the mattress. Then they bought or were given, he hopes given, an impermeable plastic pad to fit to the mattress below the sheet, almost eliminating the urine's depth, though not its volume, so there was a concomitant increase in surface area of the dark spot. Tradeoffs. This is a good morning; there is no dark spot in Ulster's bed, nor any of the repercussions.

He takes downstairs a plaid shirt and striped pants and dinosaurs socks for Ulster. Ulster puts them on, just like that. His bum must be very warm. He says No once, but then he puts them on. Like without a fight. Which may be to be alone in the bathroom again without his father and his father's howler monkey, but it is not a fight.

The Author makes oatmeal by boiling salted water and then adding oats, which is how everybody makes oatmeal. Lilly waits for This this this and That that that object either on the counter or in some metaphysical space he'd like to go to too, with her even, but he can't see it and he doesn't know where it is or how to get there or how to provide her with its contents or how to teach her to go there herself to get what she needs, and nothing on the counter, not yesterday's mail not nutmeg not a spoon not the tea kettle not a banana peel from two days ago not the milk that didn't get put away last night not the cayenne or the scissors or the serrated knife or the meat thermometer will silence her or even provide a hint that he is warming to the meaning of This or That. He gives her raisins he will see on the other end. She quiets. Oats, sugar, raisins, cinnamon, nutmeg, sunflower seeds, oatmeal. Ulster emerges, still technically clothed, from the bathroom. Lee and Allen are doing godknowswhat godknowswhere godknowswhy.

But they appear when he sets their laden bowls atop the table. All four of his children eat heartily and hardly speak and certainly do not yell No or Yes at each other or throw a spoon or steal each other's raisins or get up and down from the table seventeen times between bites or drink his juice. His orange juice is with him in the kitchen as they eat and he makes their lunches. PB&J for the lot. A clockwork morning. A good morning. Apples for the lot. They barely giggle or converse at all, and not a single whine. Not a solitary tear. No, they eat at the kitchen table.

Mary comes downstairs cleansed and dressed professionally, more than

professionally, attractively, because that is what she is, attractive. That is not all she is, but she is that; she can't help it. He can't help it; he only thinks of one thing when he sees her in a skirt, even a calf-length skirt, and that is what's inside it. Her knees for one, but he doesn't think of her knees. He doesn't think of any parts; he doesn't think at all. It's an urge. He fights the urge. He doesn't have to fight the urge; they have four children and they're all in the room. Eating. He squeezes her right cheek and kisses her other right cheek and that is that, no time for that, things to do, clockwork to school for all except he and Lilly.

They have no money for childcare, but they're all in school but for Lilly and she is the last. He's been snipped. Did Mary get her tubes tied too? She asked for it, when the doctors went in through her belly to pull out Lilly, but that had been a royal mess and he wasn't and isn't quite sure it happened, and neither was Mary; she hadn't been paying attention. And it became as time skittered by a thing they did not talk about. So he got snipped.

Mary eats standing up with the Author. Nobody talks. It's brilliant. It's some sort of schoolday. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. A midweek schoolday. He believes on this day he may be able to work, to write, with Lilly at home. He eats in the kitchen with them all there even though breakfast with others is a kind of hell so he can get right to work when they leave.

They finish eating. They don't leave.

The boys get down from the table. Ulster asks the Author if he'll read a book to him. He says he can't because you have to go and I have to prepare you. Ulster finds the toy trumpet and plays. Allen to the miniature drums and Lee to the real harmonica and Lilly on vocals.

He stands in the kitchen, waiting. Mary brushes her hair in the bathroom mirror.

He goes to the bathroom upstairs. He does his business. He comes downstairs.

Mary has the long kind of hair. He likes her having the long kind of hair. He checks lunches. He sets shoes and coats out. He thinks he has an idea. He realizes he is wrong. He cleans up breakfast. They could have had sex. It doesn't take long. When you leave on the skirt.

Mary is finished brushing her hair. She unloads the dishwasher.

Do you have to do that? he says.

Do you have to do that? she says.

Don't you have somewhere you need to be?

I need to be here until I go. When I get there I need to be there.

I'm talking about school.

I'm ignoring you. I have like fifteen minutes. Lilly woke up early.

I know.

I know you know. I know. I know how many times she woke up last night. I know I kept her asleep on the boob until 6:30, when I wanted my boob back. I know I like to spend a few minutes relaxing with my family before I go to work. Don't you?

I did, earlier.

I need to nurse Lilly before I go.

I know.

He Wants

The Author sips coffee. The coffee is cold. The sun is rising, god bless. A child, one of his own, screams from downstairs. A ball bounces. Several thuds in succession. He sips coffee. It is still cold. Grounds in his mouth. He spits them out, but he can't spit them all out. He resigns himself to a few grounds in his mouth. He stretches. He is unable to write more, but he is not ready to go downstairs.

He does not want to write a story about writers, so he isn't writing one. What's important to writers isn't important to people. No one wants to read about writers; they want to read about the old in-out, the dive into the deep end, the fluid swap, the skin thwack, the love buggery, the conjugation. And what readers want to read he wants to write; he wants to satisfy the reader; the reader is who is important; if he uses the semicolon too often for the reader's enjoyment, he is sorry, but he does it anyway; it is easier to ask forgiveness than permission, and the semicolon is better than the colon, and he is not the one who put the reader's colon so close to the reader's sexual organ, and sometimes the reader doesn't know what will give the reader pleasure until the Author does it: the Author does it to pleasure the reader because that is why he exists. The reader is who buys the books, a small percentage of the profits from which pay his mortgage and feed his children, who also read and will one day be readers who likewise dutifully support the publishing economy and receive pleasurable entertainment in return.

That's not true, he allows, Mary pays the mortgage. He plays Shostakovich or one of those insane Russians on headphones and tries to create a world out of ink that people will want to pay to live in, no matter how sick it is or they are. Mary teaches Geometry. Sometimes Algebra.

What it is is a story problem, he thinks. He writes because that's how he thinks, he thinks. He thinks it all reduces to arithmetic. If he were to buy a Happy Meal or two, for example, some small percentage of a small hypothetical royalty on a hypothetical book sale would go toward the Happy Meal purchase, a small percentage of which in turn would go toward the minimum wage of the teenager at the counter, who could then exercise their freedom of market choice to choose which of the latest big-breasted airbrushed computer animated celluloid creations receives in their engorged account their small cut of his money within the small percentage they derive from each movie ticket sale.

Well, that felt good and was untrue. He will cross it out. Later. Symmetry is attractive in geometry, fiction, art, and bodies and faces and leaves and flowers and crystals and the swirl of how birds take flight and the bend of blood cells folding through capillaries and a whole host of natural phenomena, but in real-life he believes most actors have small or at least normal boobs and are not computer graphics and are paid a flat daily fee rather than a percentage of earnings or piece rate like a migrant apple picker.

Oh, for the symmetry of the circle of life. Oh, to not have written the phrase the circle of life. Oh, but for his reallife to not creep into his fictitious life. Oh, for his children to not have watched a certain Disney movie last night while he failed to read the New York Times, the last newspaper on paper and he far from New York and out of time. Oh, for dreams devoid of lions and kings. Oh for pleasant dreams; oh to soundly sleep; oh to be a king.

Oh bother. Some of his small earnings from book sales spent on his Happy Meal deprived children will, via the beef but in the opposite direction, that is from beef to cow, lovingly travel to cowboys in Brazil. Except way down there, he tells his daughter as she comes crying her brother's name but all wrong and with only one vowel-heavy syllable into his office, which is a corner of Mary's and his bedroom sectioned off by a Japanese screen with a tree overhanging a creek and falling leaves and abstracted flowers and an angular bird, possibly a crane, these words being images painted on the screen not objects present in his corner office, which contains just enough space for he and his chair and his desk and now somehow his daughter on his lap, cowboys are called horsemen. In that language. Maybe he's wrong. Maybe it's Argentina.

Maybe it's Wyoming.

It doesn't matter; the beef is from a place he'll never be. Like a cow.

He's being sentimental. He must be hungry.

He has stopped writing words people want. It was an accident. He has stopped working productively. An inability to focus. He has stopped creating. A lack of rigor. His daughter's face is in his, fat and soft and fleshy and saying, Hi, hi, hi, hi, hi. He says, Hi. He licks her nose; she lays her head on his shoulder. He stands and leaves his office and carries his daughter Lilly past the sleeping Mary with a pillow over her head and past the piles of clothes dirty, clean, and in-between to the bathroom. He needs to pee and then he needs to teach Lilly to

pee in the toilet instead of her pants, and then they'll flush their pee together and if he's lucky her poop and she'll crow Bye-bye! as the liquid yellow and if he's lucky solid brown or pea green or carrot orange or beet pink swirls and disappears forever.

In the Bathroom

She must be wondering what I am doing in the bathroom. As am I. She is not alone. She is not alone in wondering. I always am, usually. I am always wondering what I am doing. Is not everybody? I mean wondering what they are doing? Everybody does not give a shit what I am doing, which is why I am alone in wondering it. Does she? He? They?

All my sticks are on the counter. I laid them there. Since I am the only one in the bathroom. It is a smart pile. The stick pile makes me feel like I am in the woods, which I am, except I am in a cabin first, and a bathroom before that. A cabin made of logs, which are big sticks. I make a little cabin of my sticks on the counter, complete with a stick roof to shed God's tears, even though God does not cry, and even though a roof of sticks would not shed water. I peek in the cabin through a crack. No one is there.

I consider sticking a spare stick in my eye, but decide against it. Besides being in my eye it would feel good, but it would be rash. I have not done anything yet.

Antoinette. Her name is Antoinette I decide. I figure out. I remember.

My wife. I cannot think of her. Her name will come to me later too, unbidden. When I want it least and need it most, or the other way around, or there might be no difference. I will at least say that I do not not love her. Not loving her is not why I am here. Not loving her is not what I am doing.

I stick a stick in my mouth. I gnaw. The stick tastes like a stick. The stick would have rotted had I not collected it. It will still rot elsewhere, but it will not just rot. I swallow it. It might have been an accident, but it was not. In spite of the straightness of the stick – it would have fetched the highest price – and the clench in my stomach, the stick does nothing to straighten my stomach. Nor my rectitude. Nor does it fill even incrementally the empty gasp in my gut, if that is how the feeling is best described, or diminish the ever-increasing density of the already crushingly dense ball in my belly, if that is instead a better description.

I do not feel well. I cannot help wondering what all my children are doing right now, even though this has nothing to do with them.

She, Antoinette, raps lightly on the door. She says, Palo. My name is Palo. Or my

nickname, I do not know which. Palo is what I am called. By others. I do not refer to myself in the third person. The doorknob turns. It is unlocked. I am conscious of the fact that not locking it was a subconscious decision I was unaware of to invite her entry into my bathroom hidey-hole. Also, there is no lock on the door. This being a oneroombathwithabathroom. Since an internal door in a one-room cabin is a self-negating impossibility.

The door opens and I am blinded. I cannot think about the past I cannot think about the future I can only think about the ever-present present. I cannot think. I am blind. I see Antoinette standing before me, naked but for hair in the abundant light entering through the ample windows, filtered through larch, larch, and more larch.

With You

She offers me her breast. She offers me her breasts. I am not sure how she offers, other than by baring and waiting and continuing to breathe. Her breasts are plenty, but not extravagant. Appropriate. They are symmetrical as far as I can discern without a balance. Choose one. I would say at random, but nothing is random except perhaps which rice grain from a bag of rice winds up on your plate or which stars fall in the sky and land at your feet. I choose her left. My right. Do not ask for justification. As almost nothing is random except the distribution of sticks in a randomly piled pile of sticks or who you meet in the wide windswept world and where and how and when and what you do about it and thereby who you love, perhaps my choice indicates I list vaguely to my right. Perhaps my right leg is slightly shorter than my left. Or perhaps I am right-handed. Or perhaps her left breast is in some inexplicable way more becoming than her right. Whyever I choose the right, my right, her left, I choose. I consent. I suckle. I knead. Nothing is expressed, unlike my wife's breasts, which are difficult to not express, anymore. I stop.

Rebecca is her name. Becca. Or Reb. That is what I call her, Reb. I do not think she likes it, but it's been going on for a while and she has swallowed her tongue or forgotten I say it even as I say it. An amazing woman. The mother of all my children. Ten or twelve of them I think. This is my wife I talk about, Reb. I am sorry if I explicate things you already understand. I have communication issues, Reb tells me. Not now, she is not here, but she has told me and will tell me again. I am sorry, sometimes I am not present where I am.

Which is a oneroomcabinwithabathroom with Antoinette, who takes advantage of my undone pants to take hold of my screwdriver and pull me to the bed. Reb's invention there, screwdriver, but it reflects her handiness with tools. The wordchoice reveals something of her character is what I am saying. How her handy personality is what maintains our home while I am out collecting sticks or gathering stones.

Take advantage is misleading and I do not like to mislead. Antoinette did lead me here, but I followed. I offered myself by leaving my pants undone I realize now and the door unlocked, even if the existence of a lock was a physical impossibility. I understand my complicity, but I do not know why or how or from whence it comes. Oh, I know I have lead in my pencil and it is said that the pencil is the seat of man's thoughts. But that is facile. What kind of man fits a

pipe without love? I am not talking about the kind of love that makes you want to talk to the pipe afterward, but in the fitting of a pipe there is some love if you are in any way present in your actions, which I admittedly rarely am in totality but almost always am in partiality. Which, far from negating the presence of some love in my handiwork, promises at least some parcel of love in my penmanship. Which makes the act more substantial and increases the betrayal.

One of the untold things I am saying is I don't know about you, but my love comes from my mind. I do know about you, everything comes from my mind. Listen, I am not going to be one of these guys who believes there is no reality except my mind, but I cannot know what I do not know, and what I know is what my mind perceives. I know my mind perceives incorrectly, that there is a perception my mind is not perceiving, due partly to the reliance of my mind on my brain, the perception of which inspires a mournful scream, which sounds like a mountain lion's scream, which in turn sounds like the scream of a dying baby, but even the most animal of ejaculations arises from my brain. Where the leap from brain to mind is, I do not know. I know my body does things my brain, no, my mind, perhaps both, cannot control. My heart palpitates, peristalsis pushes a stick through my alimentary canal, my serotonin reuptake inhibitors are uninhibited. My pencil rights itself at a 45-degree angle and writes in messy globules. I talk. I also know that mind controls body and if I were more at one with my mind I would have more control of my body, and I know peaceful men have said release control to gain control, but I will not say control is what I am after. I do not know what I am after or before, but now I am in love, I am in my mind, do not blame my heart or my brain or my God or my pencil, ratchet, wrench, clamp, double bastard file, Yankee screwdriver, American workethic, capitalistic ethos, shallow morality, tool-and-die, or my drill press to perpetuate. It is my need. My mind's. If my mind and I are synonymous. I do not know what it is or where it comes from but it is mine, mind's, and the sticks no longer suffice, and I was not collecting stones today, and did not know what to say and did not want to say anything but I did not say No.

I am also saying, Do not think poorly of Antoinette. She is only human. Think poorly of me. Think of what I do to her. Think of what I do to Reb.

Another thing I am saying is I do not want to be saying.

Knowing love comes from my mind and not my heart or my toolbox is no help in explaining my actions, which is perhaps what I am doing. Should we discuss the transport of neurotransmitters, the geometry of dendrites, the flux of action

potentials?

I believe in the comity of relationships. I respect the communicative boundaries of self. I am not a serial fornicator. I eat only rice and beans and I eat them often but that is all I eat. Occasionally a stick. But Antoinette is a sheaf of wheat, tied at the waist, spreading to her breasts and spreading to her feet.

Which implies again an absence of her head. Allow me to state imperatively that she has a head. She has a head. With hair. Hair like wheat. Long wheat. Gold wheat. Soft wheat. Raw wheat in my hand. In my mouth. A canopy for my face.

It is just that I cannot get inside her head. I do not know why she wants me, or how. She shows me how.

I cannot even get inside my head. It has hung a No Vacancy sign. It went and got itself a room. Now there's no room in the inn. It hangs a Do Not Disturb sign. It has an ear for each sign and a disturbed vacancy between with much beating on the walls and moaning and no room for me.

Apologies, I almost forgot my own agency. Even if there is no room for me in me, it is still me who talks of me, incessantly, and she makes room for me in her.

I love my wife. Perhaps you do not believe me. That is fine. You are not here. And this is not a confession I need you to believe. It is not a story problem that can be solved by applying Math to English. It is a relationship.

Neither you nor I knows what love means.

Perhaps we are both wrong and the seat of love is in the brainstem. In the neck. Antionette has a nice neck. Guillotine through conservative and revolutionary and royal and right love. Hang the guilty by their love. Asphyxiate by love. I do not purport to suffer from a love so over abundant that it smothers. Saying so would be insulting to my wife, and would be a lie. Look at what I am doing on the hardwood floor. Now propped in a corner. Now facing out the window. What Antoinette and I do, I do to Reb.

Will you go away now? I would like to be alone.

You and I do not have a strong enough relationship to be alone together in

silence, even a breathy silence. Alone, I could be silent. Alonetogether makes me uneasy. Your presence makes me uncomfortable. Youandme makes an unwholesome we. You are complicit, you understand, you can leave, I cannot, so am I. I speak or write or whatever, communicate, like with words, when I could conceivably be silent and disappear from your, from all, consciousness. But something about you or something about me makes me not. Because of you, or more properly because of how you make me feel, how I feel about you then, I speak, using words, and my words make me yet more uneasy, uncomfortable, unwholesome. Those are not the right words, the right un's. My words make me yet more unpleasant, undecided, ununified. Inadequate, incomplete, intolerable. Make me yet more unaware, undeniable, unclear, uninterested, uninteresting. Yet more under, unless, useless, used. Unfurled, unloved, unlovable, unloving. More unlove. Fuck it. Forced air in my underwear questing for the right word. Perseverating, percolating, perambulating, penetrating with words when what my body, mind, and soul, which is to say I, enact in bed with Antoinette provides me with enough undertow. Incline. Orgasm.

Where was I? Am I?

In. Screwing my brains out on the bed. She screwing me, I screwing she, we screwing Reb, me screwing everybody, screwing our brains out, screwing your brains out, brains screwing all over the bed, a mess mish-mashed and flopped over and flung into and over and underneath and behind and in and out and in and out and in and in and in and in and huge and a soporific slop of slosh. A cry from the woods. Heaving breath. Quiet brains. Smalling. Out. Leaking. Hopping. Toilet flushing. Her skin again, flushed. A king for a moment. Now the guillotine. Relieved of my head in two minutes max.

Hi

They are gone, except Lilly, who is not gone. He immediately gives up on writing with Lilly. He changes her diaper again, lets her play at changing his, reads her a book where everyone hugs each other again and again and the word love appears and appears and appears and then one where a train thinks itself over a mountain and then he cries over one where a tree sacrifices itself for an insatiable man and then he realizes they too must go or he will go crazy.

This is the Author's job, how he really makes money, by saving them from spending on childcare. And this is how he cares for his child, by taking her on walks. She has begun to walk some on their walks. But not much. She often rides in the stroller on the way to the grocery or bank or library or park or post office or wherever he can think of to walk to. In the bike stroller when he tows her in her chariot to the waterfront esplanade. In the backpack when they go to the woods.

They go to the woods. They walk on a trail, below angular madrona peeling from red to silver and tall western hemlock and tall red cedar and tall Douglas fir alongside ferns on a bluff above the oceanic inlet. Lilly walks for a few minutes and picks up sticks. She teeters and falls and cries and no longer wants to walk on the uneven ground and as he loads her in the backpack sticks and all, her cries become chortles. He kisses her before he swings her behind his head. He walks the loop trail. He likes her weight on his shoulders and with her there makes good time.

He'd be happier as a walker than a writer, he thinks. But people want walkings even less than they want writings, and in this world you have to do something somebody wants for it to count, or mean, or be useful in acquiring useful things like bread. He would not mind swinging a hammer for a living either, he thinks; people want to buy the swinging of hammers; but though he's been the handy guy before, he's somewhat out of touch and would have to start at the bottom and throw in the towel on writing, or at least press an interminable pause, and if he's not writing what's the point of writing, or get up even earlier to write and become a worse person and father and husband and writer than he already is, and he guesses his writing is pretty important to him at least, even if it isn't to anyone else, and what's important to him is what's important, besides the fact that Mary's got a solid if not especially lucrative job and seems to not vocally mind their current economic construct, and besides he's of an age where

his body has begun to fail him, and swinging a hammer places strong demands on the body.

So he walks when he can, most often with his daughter, to ease his childcare duties or to ease the pressure of four children on Mary on the weekends when he can't write anyway. Lilly doesn't much talk when they walk, except to occasionally say Hi, or to say Pato whenever she sees a duck. Sometimes he tells her something about trees or sky or ocean, and she says Yeah. Mostly she zones out.

As does he.

Amid his oneness or absence or embodiment or what he is afraid to call peace, he has an idea.

Palo will walk.

He rifles through his pants for a pen, a pencil, any implement with which to write. He cannot forget. He'll forget if he doesn't write it; he always does. It is imperative that Palo walk. Vital. That is the kind of man Palo is, a man who walks. And after what he's done, after what he does, he will need to walk, and walk a great distance.

Implementless, the Author borrows one of Lilly's sticks and scratches WALK into a low muddy place in the trail. Lilly comes to life imploring No No No until he returns the stick, at which point she says Hi.

They walk. The fervor subsides. He pursues or waits for another passing peace. They see nothing alive except birds and trees and underbrush. They see no one, which is one reason they are here.

* * *

Hi, she says to me.

Hi, I say to her.

I am Antoinette, she says.

I am Palo, I say.

I know, she says.

I am collecting sticks, I say because I am.

I know, she says.

You know a lot.
I know you come every other day to collect sticks in my wood and take them to town and sell them.
I cannot deny it. I have a bundle of sticks tied to my back, sticks sticking every which way from my pants, and more sticks clustered in each hand. I have in fact arrived at the time of morning when I do not know what to do with the sticks I have collected but still feel compelled to collect more.
To town? Who buys them? I say.
People who need sticks, she says.
When?
In the afternoons.
What?
Sticks.
Where?
In town.
Right. How?
How do they buy them?
Right.
With the rocks they bought from you the day before.
They are stones.
And sticks.
Why?
Why what?
Why do they buy them?
They want them.
Why do they want them?
I don't know everything.
How do they use them?
Use them? They use them to start fires. To throw to their dogs. To chew on. Children write in the dirt with them. They throw them down and see who can pick up the most. The winner gets the sticks he picked up.
That's all?
Old ladies drop them on the ground and interpret the geometry of how they land to prognosticate what they will cook for dinner.
We always eat rice or beans.
So do they. Sometimes I eat fish or raccoon or duck.
How do you know all this?
They mostly save sticks to buy stones from you the next day. If they can't save enough of the sticks they bought from you with their stones, they will go stick

collecting while you are stone gathering so they can afford to buy your stones
with their sticks. In the afternoon.
I have not eaten meat in a long time.
I know.
I am a little hungry.
Me too. It's good to be a little hungry.
I am saving the sticks from decomposition.
Of course.
But I kind of like decomposition.
I understand.
It is a problem.
No it's not.
What they call a paradox.
It is how it is.
How is it?
Can I help you?
I am not sure.

She picks up sticks. She wears a flowing red-flowered yellow skirt that blooms
around her as she kneels. She wears a tight blue shirt that buttons up the front
and has vertical ruffles every six inches on the ventral side while being smooth
and shiny on the dorsal. The shirt is faintly Elizabethan, though she is vaguely
Gypsy and ambiguously French. She is barefoot. Her feet are filthy. She is
muddy halfway up her calves. Dirt streaks her face. Her forearms fill with sticks.
She is very good at collecting sticks. Purposeful, no wasted movement, but some
extra sway. Her hair is long, the color of sand. A purple orchid is tucked behind
her ear. The orchid is almost too much, but it is not, which makes it just right.
The quality of light is mid-morning November. The time is mid-morning. I
watch her pick up my sticks, my hands full.

When is Tomorrow?

He sees a path down to the beach. He's seen it before. But on this midweek day the path bears no footprints, which is unbelievable. This path he has not taken that other people take but are not taking he takes.

The descent is steep. Other smaller paths break off from or join to his downwardly inclined path and disappear in the woods or into his path; they may be deer paths or they may be paths people disappear down. At one faint intersection he stops. He listens. He has found that others tend to announce themselves with loud tramping noises or the jingle of dog tags on dog collars or if they are not alone by talking or if they are alone by talking to a phone. Always talking. He hears nothing. He hears Lilly breathe. He unzips and pees a stream unseen. Here is another reason to come to the woods this latening morning, to pee outside. He defies the Mary in his head because the Mary not in his head is not here to again say he distances himself from life. He is not sure what is closer to life than peeing outside on the ground. He pees a lot, all the time, always peeing, and he won't live in the bathroom. Lilly watches him pee over his shoulder. He will not implicate Lilly in his defiance, though it is entirely possible that seeing him pee inspires her to pee in unison in defiance in her cloth diaper, which is a beautiful thing if it is happening. But he doesn't ask if she pees because he doesn't want to know because he doesn't want to feel compelled by duty to change a diaper in the woods or on a steeply descending path or once they halt on the narrow saltwater beach, if there will be a beach, or at all on this trip. He doesn't want to pause their progress, which has little to do with motion or covering distance, though it is distance he wants to cover.

The path descends a fold in the bluff, a dry draw that dampens near the bottom into a stagnant pond, below the foot of which are slick rocks without running water. Below the rocks is a narrow saltwater beach. The path dead-ends at a great tree on a small bank ten feet above the beach. The roots are exposed from the water which must at times flow down the fold and run over the rocks and from the erosion of many feet. From the roots down to the beach is a scramble he undertakes with a woman somewhere between an infant and a toddler on his back. He arrives at the bottom with some dirt, having made his contribution to the bank's erosion.

The beach is clean of tracks and full of water. High tide, but there is a ten foot long patch of exposed sand, fronted by a straight of the sound, backed by the

bluff. This small piece of ocean laps at bare brush at either side. Across the straight, a small island that is relatively large. There are houses there. It is another planet. There are no other access points to their private beach. The high tide has created a secluded place; he is in love.

Pat, pat, pat she cries for Pato as a duck takes flight, flapping its wings like mad, skimming the water. Yes he says. He sets down the pack and lets her out. Her feet touch down and she runs to the water, leaving little footsteps in her wake. He says NO and she stops. She goes a little farther. She splashes in the wavelets and waterlogged sand. She has dropped her sticks somewhere but doesn't know it. She squeals; she dances. He watches; he smiles. Before she gets too wet, he pulls a granola bar from his pocket and opens it and calls her back. He sits on a large piece of driftwood, a huge ex-tree, a wet log. She wants to sit in his lap. She sits in his lap.

They watch the water, its movement. She calls to the ducks, the fish, the seagulls. He tells her about a distant ferry filled with cars trudging to the little big island. It is not especially sunny; it's cloudy; that's okay. There's a swirl of hundreds and hundreds of white birds what must be miles away near another chunk of land that is connected to he knows not what. He doesn't know what kind of birds, seagulls, terns, egrets, hundreds and hundreds of swans above the ocean. They are white. A few boats speed by. Pleasure craft. Another boat is not moving much; it's hard to discern motion on the moving water. It's working the water. It's a fishing boat. People live like that, the Author thinks, on the water, fishing. Unbelievable. Then, to the right, to what is perhaps the north, a dark slick thing breaks the surface and bobs a head, for a moment two three, then head under and back up and now under slipping and gone. A sea lion or some equally preposterous no extraordinary creature. He has pointed and asked his daughter Did you see it? Did you see it? and she says Yes, Yes, but he has a hard time believing her.

He cries a little. He thinks he is happy. But he doesn't know if he's ever known a happiness that wasn't also a little sad. A little sand. Sand in the works, in the words, in the sound. Nostalgia for the present moment. He squeezes his daughter. He watches the water.

They have to go. Naptime nears and she needs a nap and he needs her to have a nap. He needs to work.

She doesn't want to get back on his back because she knows that means they

are going and she doesn't want to go. Neither does he. But this is not life, he thinks, forever sitting in the sand, on driftwood, watching waves, remarking on sea lions, no matter how good or good and a little bad it makes you feel. We need to eat and you need to sleep and I need to produce. We will be expected home, if not for a while. We would be missed, eventually. He knows well this not wanting to go and he knows it is the same as wanting to do, and so he always has this carrot for himself: something to do, writing; a replacement for not going, making; a reason to go, the story.

He still doesn't want to go. Fuck the story, he thinks. He doesn't want to leave this moment. Thinking of leaving is a little like vomiting his heart.

Which is what he calls Life demands. In spite of the hurt he causes himself and her when he says it, he says We need to go.

She says No.

He hurls her granola bar far out to sea for some fucked gull then shoves her in the pack and she screams and rakes the face of the quiet with tears. He hates himself or perhaps Mary or more likely everybody for expecting him to do this thing he doesn't want to do when all he wants is what his almost-toddler wants, to stay and never go away. Lilly has said what he could not, but he cannot let her follow through or they will die where they sit, now stand, now scream, and it will stop being good long before then.

He gets her to realize he has half a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for her and she stops crying and takes it. He loads her on his back, and in the moment of the process where they are wet face to wet face, he says I am sorry. He swings her behind him.

He pauses. He absorbs the sound of the water and the quiet.

Wa-wa, she says, Bye-bye.

He is not sure if he is less of a man for the oceanic moment he ruined, or more for his daughter on his back.

There's no more than this Babe, he says, then immediately looks for a way out of what he said because saying it felt like lying. There is no way out.

If the tide weren't so high, they could walk along the beach and probably find another mysterious path up the hill and go a different way. But if the tide weren't so high, he wouldn't have come here. There would be other people, other footprints than their own.

He goes the way they came.

* * *

I have to pee, I say because I do.

We're almost there, she says.

She has been saying that for a while. I should just stop and pee but I do not because she never stops and I do not want to lose her. I think we are lost. There are places where people are not allowed to pee outside, but those are usually places where people live. And though it is true that Antoinette is a person and she says she lives in these woods, I have peed within its boundaries many a time, several times a day every other day to be precise, with nary a consequence, let alone a word, beyond relief. If one is not to pee outside when one is outside and needs to pee, where is one to pee?

Nevertheless her apparent need to go prevents me from doing anything about my need to go.

In this way I follow her with no choice but to watch the ebb and flow of the rock of her rear as she walks. It reminds me of the sea. Though not in breadth. Which does little for my need to pee. But the two things combined, my need to go and Antoinette's constant going, does much for thoughts of my wife, which do not breach the distended surface of this lovely walk in the woods with a beautiful woman who is not Reb.

Antoinette's mane sways as she walks. Calling her hair a mane has nothing to do with riding horses.

There cannot be that many trees in this wood with forks in them. I swear we have walked in a Goddamn-tail-chasing circle.

We did, she says. That's the only way to my house.

I thought we were going to my house.

No you didn't, she says, which is true even if I will not admit it.

I thought you were helping me.

I am, she says.

How?

With what you asked for, she says.

I did not ask for anything.

You didn't have to, she says.

I asked for help.

No you didn't. You asked for a story, she says, which is not true even if I admit it. Which means you asked for something to happen, she says. Which means you asked for something to do. Which means you asked for help, because no one can do it alone.

We pass the tree with a fork in it again. A madrona, red skin peeling, exposing brown and white skin beneath. The trail is muddy. We follow our footsteps.

I think of our single bathroom home, and how one of the children always occupies the one bathroom, and I wonder if Rebecca pees, or if she does not spare the waste, being a mother of ten or twelve, and how sometimes I do not well know my wife even though I know her better than anyone else and have known few others, and how when I am home in the dark, which is the only time I am home, I go in the backyard to pee in the dark behind the stick pile so the neighbors will not see and will not be offended, and how Reb always turns a light on for me to see by just as I begin to drain the main vein, and the smell of the peeing place in the corner of the yard and the maze of trails leading to it beaten into the ground by ragged deer desperate for a saltlick.

The more we walk in circles, the more I think of such Reb particulars, but I do not particularly want to elucidate or even talk about which particulars.

Geese honk overhead and indicate which direction is south, if geese are reliable indicators of direction. If the direction they reliably fly in November, which is

still when it smells like, is south. I don't know what good it is for me to know where south may be, but I know for a while. The sun is safely ensconced in clouds, so I cannot molest it for particulars. But the clouds must be breaking up, the weather changing, as the sun will be pouring in the windows as filtered though larch larch larch, though I do not know it yet. I will say larch three times. Some confidence. Or something. When those larch I will see the sun through may not be larch because there are no larch where I am and this is not a larch kind of forest but a western hemlock and fir and madrona with a fork in it kind of forest, but I have not seen where we are going yet, so who is to speak on the nature of its woods. We may yet enter new biomes. It is possible that it is not cloudy at all, but instead sunny, though what is not in dispute at the moment is that I cannot see the sun. And that there are no shadows. We could be on the lee side of a great protuberance within the circle we circumscribe. What I will call a hill. A steep hill. The sun may be forever behind this hill, and we may forever be in its lee.

I have forgotten which way the geese told me is south.

We happen upon a raccoon chewing on what can only be one of my sticks with a dull dented white gold ring on it, though my ring is still on my finger.

When is tomorrow?

Never, says Antoinette.

At the forked madrona, we break from our circle and walk inside the ring we have walked and go straight up the hill rung at its summit in gold larch in November and arrive at her red front door. She goes directly to the bathroom. I stand in the one room and squeeze my legs together and flex and do not see a corner to pee in while I wait.

The Theme of Foreplay

The Author makes it home with his youngest, his only, daughter. It's late, early in the afternoon but late for nap. He has been calling Lilly's name in the car and poking her in the backseat to keep her awake so she wouldn't take a fifteen-minute nap that replaced a two-hour nap. He has been minimally successful and does not know what will come of naptime. The final chapter on their morning excursion has yet to be written, though it is no longer morning.

She is asleep when he extricates her from the belts and buckles of her carseat and still asleep when he gets her upstairs, so he puts her down without her knowing it. He does not change her diaper for fear of waking her, which means she'll be a pink rashy mess this evening and Mary will frown and fret. Fret is not the right word, thinks the Author, but it fits.

He only found the parking lot by way of some vehicular braying that called him to the road. When he had climbed up from the ocean, he wanted to go a different way than he came. As such, he turned right and continued on the path he had been following before descending to the beach. The forest constitutes a park and the park constitutes an isthmus or perhaps a small peninsula, and it should not be hard to trace a circle back to the car with his feet by keeping the ocean on the same side, in this instance his right side. Due to time constraints, however, he takes a shortcut on a path intersecting from the left. As he expects, the ocean eventually returns to his right, far below but further on. On their right they pass a raccoon the size of a medium-sized dog who has disemboweled a trash can, which give him something to talk to Lilly about. Based on the evidence of raccoon and trash and dog-likeness, all of which exist in greater density or abundance or ampleness with increased proximity to people, he thinks they are close to the parking lot until they arrive at the junction with the path forking down to the water containing his footsteps oriented both down and up.

He teaches Lilly what a circle is.

He turns around and this time goes the way he came.

He again passes the fat raccoon who pays them no mind. The raccoon is now on his left-hand side. It does not take long for them to arrive at the car, prior to which he hears the vehicular braying, which as it turns out did not play an

essential or even active role in his finding the parking lot, but did exist.

As he drives he eats yogurt Mary made with banana he bought with Mary's money sliced with the knife he brought to their marriage. He feeds Lilly cheese and animal crackers and apple slices he prepared before they left and repeats her name, Lilly, repeatedly, Lilly, to prevent her falling asleep so she'll sleep later.

From the sound of it, Lilly is still asleep. Thousands and thousands and thousands of breaths, Babe, he tells her without words from downstairs through the ceiling into her room.

It is more difficult for him to write words in the afternoon light than the morning black. Maybe he only has so many words in him daily and once he evacuates them all each morning his daily constitutional is fulfilled. Or maybe it's that let there be light business. Mary likes to have sex in the morning. He likes to have sex in the afternoon. Neither time is convenient; no time is convenient. They tend to have sex at night. He is getting distracted thinking of Mary in a certain private inviting position. He needs to write and she isn't here. He's cheating on his writing. They were late and he has no time and he can't write and he doesn't know what he would if he could except that his editor if he had an editor or his publisher if he had a publisher or his agent if he had an agent or his reader if he had a reader would say Something has to happen, but he knows what he would if he could with Mary.

His house has 5 rooms, 2.5 bathrooms, a very modern and progressive and suburban ratio of 2:1. A ratio somewhere between Antoinette's 1:1 and Reb/Palo's ?:1. He might use 5:1. After all, Palo has the corner of his yard, and the character needs some hardship. Hardship makes things happen.

He prowls his house, exploring rooms and bathrooms and bedrooms and living rooms and doors and closets to familiarize himself with the allocation of space.

He realizes he lost his yellow hat while lost. It is, was, is the knit yellow brown gold of baby poop, which Mary calls Baby Poop. He is not happy. He's had the hat a long time. It is, was, is dependable and everyone loves to hate it, and having lost it while he was lost does not augment the prospects of finding it.

The Author is sick of his writing foreplay. He wants to get to business or not bother. What next for Palo. All he's doing now is screwing his brains out with an

attractive young woman in innumerable positions and it's taking forever and he hasn't had a thought in minutes and he's forgotten his sticks and he is cooking up pain with a dollop of satisfaction, as he would do if he were to cheat on his wife Mary is her name, which he thinks he never would. Which is the only reason he does this, which is not writing about his infidelity to Mary, which would never happen, but is writing about some hypothetical infidelity to love. That is the benefit of writing: not doing. He might write about it, but he wouldn't do it, doesn't do it. He would write and make Palo do it, and does, Palo who is not him. This is not a fantasy. Writing but not doing allows him certain opportunities that doing does not, namely the use of narrative structure, or arc rather, or the playground slide, the kind that spirals down, or an arc laden with the male and female of the species abandoning the survival of their progeny to screw the opposite sex of another species rather than their own: the lioness with the mouse, the bull with the sow, heifer with rooster, mare with a jack stud. God help him if that's where this story ends, but that is the opportunity, to create things that don't exist like climaxes, rising action, dramatic tension, geometry, biology, religion. That and themes like love and incompleteness and the tenuousness of sanity. Those kinds of themes and the theme that that is the kind of writing readers want to read. And the theme that wants are meant to be satisfied like needs. The theme that there is no difference. The theme that there is. The theme that there aren't things called themes. The theme that there are. The theme of themes. Right now, his right hand writes wrong, or not at all.

In a desperate effort to make something, anything, happen, he sits down to the computer to write even though he does not write on the computer.

* * *

As we climb the trees get thinner and thinner though there are more and more of them, the collections of which are properly called thickets, thickets being thin trees like stacks of sticks on their ends and their sides and interwoven at all odd angles, which is like what we are in. An abundance of sticks. I am distracted from my distraction. But the woods thin and the trees grow bigger. The same trees do not grow bigger, but new ones I encounter. Let me be clear, the thin thicket stick trees remain as they were, as they are behind me, perhaps by now dying they are so thin, but as they are, while the new trees I walk into are as they were and already are, which is much bigger, and remain so unless they fall and rot, which they do not do now, in them is where I am, I should know, but they could after I pass, anything is possible, and will one day. Which reminds me

they do grow bigger, they being the big trees and the little trees, constantly, even as I pass them, even now, pumping water and the like, though I cannot tell. Unless I stand there for years, which I do not. Because I walk, after Antoinette. In the end, they may not be growing right now, it is Novemberish, and there is dormancy to contend with. On the other hand, conifers do not go dormant do they? Or what is the point of being evergreen, the evergreenness of evergreens being their main advantage or disadvantage or at least difference from deciduousness. That is the question. The answer may be yes or it may be no. The answer may be or may not be. It may be awake or dormant or hard or soft. The trees I am in are made of both hardwood and softwood. I am not in the trees properly, but in the woods. I have never been in a tree. I have climbed trees for particularly attractive sticks and in so doing I often compete with birds and wind up stealing from their nests, but I have tried to give that up. But I have never been inside one. I will be when I die and liquefy and am absorbed and pumped up, but not now, for I am climbing in the woods and out of the trees, throughout in the outside until I arrive at her cabin and ride in her cab, apologies, getting ahead of myself, until I go in the inside and out of the outside, which has yet to happen.

We climb through exposed and gnarled roots, gnarled because roots are gnarled, exposed because the soil and mud has been eroded by much rain and too many feet. The trees are hundreds of feet tall. Huge Douglas fir and pacific pine, if such a species exists, or western pine, if there is any such thing, or perhaps just western hemlock, spattered with some oak too, as I alluded to earlier, I do not usually forget my allusions, especially when I walk among them. Though I do not walk among them anymore as we walk out of the trees. Trees so big Antoinette and I cannot encircle them with our arms and touch hands though we do not try because we are climbing on a mission and now there are no trees. We climb through a sidehill on the hillside full of flowers like larkspur that do not bloom in November and berries like salmon berries that have long since been picked over by bears and squirrels and birds and desiccated by the sun and rotted thoroughly by November.

In the copse of larch, the larch are tall. The needles have turned gold. November perhaps being a little late for the turning of larch needles. A deciduous conifer, nevertheless, yellow, gold, preparing to lose its needles.

On the hilltop I am on top of the hill with her, worn out, the sun on our level, entering her cabin.

In her cabin we breathe heavily. We wrestle to catch our breath.

An Affair

The Author emails his wife: He's had sex with her. What happens next?

She electronically responds immediately: He tells his wife.

It is as if she knew what he was thinking before he thought it; electrons are fast but not that fast. He checks the timestamps. Her reply is timestamped earlier than his original message by two minutes. The only logical explanation he can think of is she is in a slightly different time at school, that his time at home is warped and school is always two minutes ahead of home—no, it would have to be more—five minutes to account for her reading and thinking and typing, and so when she sends him a message she sends it back in time to where what has been done is being done. He concedes how explanations are not his specialty, but he doesn't want to get into an argument about which time is right; it is not worth it in something as relative as a marriage to be right. In the upper right screen corner he sees the time and computes that even by his slowtime classes are out for the day. Everything is coming together. She works at her computer after school. It's not that she knows what he's thinking; it's that time is warped. They are separate people. Individuals, even.

That's hard, he replies.

Do we need to have a chat session? she replies.

I don't do that, he replies.

Are you having sex with someone other than me? she replies.

I'm sorry I've been working hard lately? he replies and regrets the question mark but it's already sent and this is why he doesn't chat: he doesn't do things fast.

It's a straightforward question, she replies.

I don't think so, he replies.

Ok. That wasn't hard, she replies.

He stares at the screen for five minutes without replying. This is what people call writers block, he thinks.

Are you hard? she replies to her own message.

A chat would be more efficient, she replies.

Or a phone call, she replies.

Don't call, he replies.

Is this story your fantasy? she replies.

It doesn't feel like a fantasy, he replies.

I wonder if it's a fantasy, she replies.
If it's a fantasy, it's not a very good one, he replies.
I just wonder why write about an affair, she replies.
For love, he replies.
Even if it's for love, people are hurt, she replies.
People are always hurt. That's what I'm probing, he replies.
I don't think probing helps, she replies.
Nothing helps, he replies.
Loving helps, she replies.
That's what I'm probing, he replies.

* * *

We climb through clouds and into sun and each time we enter sun I feel freer and more alive and more more than I have in years if ever and every time we exit the sun and enter a cloud I feel how I normally feel. If foggier.

Here is a biome consisting entirely of moss. Perhaps there are trees and rocks underneath, but all I see besides Antoinette and cloud is moss. Green. Graygreen or yellowgreen or browngreen or blackgreen or greengreen, but everything is hued in green. I don't know if we are in a temperate rainforest, or what in other jungles is called a cloud forest, since we are in a cloud, or if everything is just green.

Then we are out of the cloud and in the larch and in the center of the larch is a meadow admitting the sun in the center of which is her cabin, which she enters.

But I have been infiltrated. Below my skin is a layer of moss, hungry moss, or at least some subcutaneous green. Before I enter, I take off my shirt, which I do not do when I first arrive, to absorb the sun and photosynthesize.

* * *

Do you want to have sex tonight? she replies.
I want to have sex right now, he replies.
Allen has a soccer game in half-an-hour. Is Lilly asleep? she replies.
Yes. There's time, he replies.
I thought you could come to the game, she replies.
Lilly's asleep, he replies.

I can squeeze you in between nursing Lilly and grading Geometry tonight if you put her down, she replies.

Somehow I think he needs to go insane, he replies.

You always think that, she replies.

I don't mean insane insane. Just pull into himself, withdraw, complete himself in a way no one else can, disregard all the other foolishness of life, even if his action or inaction is interpreted as misanthropic or absurd or deranged by greater society, he replies.

Do you know you're talking to your wife? she replies.

I'm not talking. I'm writing. And if he is going to go sorta insane I need to drive him sorta insane, he replies.

That is your specialty, but people like to read happy stories. This infecting pessimism comes from closing yourself off. Open up, go out, engage life, she replies.

"I am," he says aloud as he pulls the powercord and does his best to not throw the most valuable object in their home through the window.

Address: Splash, Wail, Roar, Remain, Stagger

When we summit the hill I find a mailbox. I cannot believe Antoinette has a mailman, but perhaps she has. She has a mailbox, after all. Though the question of if she receives mail is a question for her, not I, and we are not currently talking. I place a stick neither large nor small, neither hard nor soft, neither beauty nor beast, neither straight nor bent, in her mailbox. I address it: To my wife, I say. This may seem unwise considering what you know I am about to do, but I do not know. Yes, I do know in an Oh no what am I about to do sort of way, but I do not know. Nothing has happened yet. Or nothing has yet to happen. I do not remember which. I do not remember what is about to happen. The truth is I mail the stick in Antoinette's box to Reb because I love my wife and have never missed her so much as now.

* * *

The Author engages the toilet with his urine. This is life. He aims for the side of the bowl so as to not make so much noise, even though from years of experience he suspects this increases splashing outside the rim. That is life. He feels a little better; he really needed to pee. Life.

He has been told he has a small bladder because he has to pee often. He does have to pee often, but when he pees he pees for a long time. While he figures this engages him more with life, this being his incessant bodily need to urinate which arouses his constant mental need to urinate which consummates with what some would plead is an obsession with where he will next urinate and others would moan under their breath is a passion for when he will next urinate, he also reasons without contradiction that he has no choice because he drinks a lot of coffee and water.

He would like Mary to measure the volume of his urine on any given day and compare it to others and then tell him to volumetrically more engage life. Good luck saying that, he would say to her before she says it.

He doesn't flush so as to save the world 1.6 gallons of water and make it more like urinating outside and not wake Lilly.

He exits the bathroom. Lilly is awake. Lilly is wailing. Lilly is waiting.

He had had an idea for Palo but he doesn't know if he remembers it.

He finds a clock under a couch cushion. He doesn't know if it's in the same time as the darkened computer. But the email conversation with Mary took something more than 1.5 hours. Add on his dithering and urination. Equals naptime.

He stands there. Lilly wails harder. He wants to write down his idea. With barbed spears. For Palo. Salting her meaty face in tears. Palo is stuck. Adding to the ocean's woes. He is stuck. Adding to the ocean's depth. His story is stuck. Adding to its concentration of salt.

The idea is gone. He throws the pen. He has no dog to fetch it back. It's okay, his pen is the least valuable object in the house. It doesn't go very far until it hits something, some piece of crap, there are so many pieces of crap in the house, and no dog to eat them or to crap in the house to make the crap literal. The pen hits a wall. The distances between walls in his house are not significant. The pen makes the slightest of dents in the wall. Mary will never know. No one will ever know.

He is not mad at Lilly. He's not mad at Mary. He's not. It has nothing to do with them. It has to do with doing. With what to do with one's time. With how and whom to make love.

He wants to go outside. He wants to go back to the bathroom. He wants to live and write and make and walk.

He abandons Palo. He goes upstairs to fetch his daughter. He will hold her and she will curl against him and his old sweatshirt will absorb her salty tears and she will be warm and he will hum a tune and she will cease wailing and he will be heart-warmed thinking nothing and neither will say anything, neither can say anything, and that moment will be enough for as long as it lasts. He knows this is what will happen because it happened yesterday and the day before and the day before the day before, for as long as he can remember, which is not very long.

* * *

I still hear the roar of a road far below. I cannot be within this crown of larch without silence. So while I wait for Antoinette to complete her toilet so I may

perform mine, I climb up from the top of the hill. Which I can no longer honestly term a hill considering the lengths to which I have climbed. The hill has become an unequivocal mountain or more likely it always was, since hills do not under normal conditions become mountains very quickly. Not that any of this is happening particularly quickly. The hill-cum-mountain steepens, as it must to perpetuate vertically because there is not much space for it to narrow before it thins to nothing.

The crown of golden larch ringing where the hill-cum-mountain happens descends below me as I ascend. I am above tree line because there are no trees. I am above snow line because there is snow. I climb because I can still hear the whine of automobiles. I am above rock line because there are rocks. I am above goat line because there are goats. Still I hear the vehicular roar ocean crashing against land. I am above cloud line because I am in a cloud to which there is no end until I pass above sun line and there is nothing but sun and mountain and I still hear the braying until I make her cabin on top and go in and shut the door behind me and encounter silence.

You made it, she says.

I say nothing.

Where have you been? she says.

Out, I say.

Now you're in, she says.

And you are out of the bathroom.

Go in if you like, she says. It's that door, the only door, except the one you came in by.

* * *

He does the normal sort of thing for what remains of the afternoon, which is not much. It is November with Lilly.

* * *

I pass the raccoon again but much higher. On the side of the by now thin thin mountain rather than beside its thick base. Perhaps it is a different raccoon. Is there any difference between raccoons? Striped tail, dark circles under its eyes, smarter than it deserves, smarter than is handy, not quite smart enough and all that. Higher than you think it should be, for a raccoon. Perhaps it is a marmot. But the dark circles. Bigger than you think it should be for a marmot or a raccoon. Perhaps it is a bear.

No matter what it is, its existence with a stick in its mouth indicates that I am approaching Antoinette's cabin because these animals, no, there is only one animal here though the possible animals it is are many, this animal then surely lives off the scraps of Antoinette. No raccoon, marmot, or bear could survive on this rocky unvegetated wild spire without the leavings or affection or at least the unconscious or conscious excess of a human. Not up here, in the air, in the rarefied sun, in the superalpine altitude. Which is to say the mountain here is a sliver in the sky on which nothing lives.

So I am close to Antoinette, whom I have left behind, whom I no longer follow, whom I therefore lead to her residence where she is using her toilet. Which I also use.

I don't know if I'll make it. The view is staggering, and this is taking forever.

Hiked, On Premises

Toilet and diaper and snack and shoes and coats and hats and scarves and swingset and birds and airplanes and damp lawn and a little girl sitting on his full bladder bouncing bouncing chortling face framed by winter pastel blue sky going pink. He won't interrupt this by going to the bathroom.

* * *

I am not going to make it. I just get myself undone before I pee all over the side of the hill. Mountain. A deluge splashing on my boots. I wonder now that I held it so long and if I could have held it a little longer. I wonder if my yard deer will track me here, if they are that attached to my salt when there is surely other salt to be had, other salt in the sea. I am not the only person peeing outside. Surely. Part of me wants to be, part of me thinks how sad, most of me is relieved.

* * *

Palo bouncing on his bloated mind. Not on his mind but in the back of it. Less bouncing than a low steady pressure. An ache. Not in the back of it. Not in the slightest. Below it or behind it or before it. In the outside of it.

* * *

I put myself away. I feel remarkably better. Having peed, I do not know whether to go up or down. But for one thing, all my pee is below me and none above. And for a second, I find that after the great release of a good hard long large productive pee, I still need to pee. And badly. And the top is much closer than the bottom, I can only hope, even if there is no evidence to corroborate that statement.

* * *

The clouds have broken, the Author realizes, if the sky is blue and pinking while his daughter sucks his nose, and then he feels a sense of disappointment when he realizes how overused that line is and how much he's attracted to it and how few people care and how if he used it no reader would in truth fully know what he meant.

* * *

What I am saying in my own way and I know saying it straight will not clarify anything but will make it less worthwhile than if you got it on your own but I am afraid you will not get it, which is not an insult but is indicative of my own faithless need, the need to go to Antoinette is related to or proportional to or similar to or subservient to but not identical to or equivalent to or the same as my need to pee. Which is unspeakable.

* * *

He knows he is succumbing to temptation but as soon as his wife walks in the door he steals off to the bedroom and closes the door to dash off some ink, after he goes to the bathroom. What he calls ideas, what take the shape of words. About what Palo is doing to Antoinette, what Antoinette is doing to Palo, what Palo is doing to Reb. One must embrace temptation if one is to express, convey, or just write about temptation, he believes, or would if he were tempted to take a moment to put into words what he believes he believes, if only as justification for having embraced temptation, but instead he is writing down ideas.

Mary suffers his disappearance quietly or bears it with contempt or indignation or doesn't mind his absence or doesn't notice or doesn't care; he doesn't know; he's not her, and he's not there with her triaging children. He's upstairs writing about the slap of pelvis against buttocks and the give of skin and a cry in the woods somewhere between anguish and ecstasy and a stick posted in a box and an exhalation somewhere between a gurgle and a grunt and an inhalation that is a definite gasp and a collapsing under the weight of a limp body, all feeling and experience and blood drained and concentrated in one thumb-sized location. The Author is writing and ignoring his own bodily reaction to what he writes because he wants to see what happens to a man when he ruins his life by the choices he makes.

* * *

For how long I walk and climb, I do not walk and climb that long. Maybe an hour, based on the sun. Which I seldom see. Antoinette has long since completed her toilet when I enter her abode. Antoinette is on all fours, skirt hiked around her hips, bare rear hiked high. This is when it happens, but due to your presence I am not going to go into it.

* * *

The Author has never thought about why he is writing *Affair*, which is a lie. He has never thought hard enough to measure out a reason, to explain the process, to list his ingredients in so many words. Which boils down to a common self-criticism of him: he doesn't think hard enough. In contrast to a common criticism of him, which reduces to he thinks too much. He may not agree with the justification of why he is writing which he cooked up to conclude his last paragraph. But it is not really his choice, since he is writing about himself in the third person and inexplicably and ineffectually cutting in cooking clichés and limiting himself to being the Author. Still, it may not be why he is writing *Affair*. He isn't the type of author who works off a recipe. Which is to say he isn't the type of author who works off a premise, which isn't very helpful, kind of like premises, which are much less helpful than recipes, especially when trying to clarify the premise.

* * *

Except to say that Antoinette is not on all fours skirt hiked around her hips bare rear hiked high. That is a fantasy and untrue. That does not happen in life. Which is why it is a fantasy. And I would not inform you about it if it did happen, so you would not know it was happening even if you had suspicions. Your suspicions are why it is your fantasy.

What is true is she has long since completed her toilet. What else she has done is stacked the sticks she helped me with artfully in a corner like cords of wood. She does the same with the sticks I hold. She does the same with the sticks stuck in my pants, which you will recall and which should have been a clue as to the impossibility of jumping right into Antoinette upon my arrival without due process, besides the notion which is not just a notion but a bodily need of my still needing to pee, after she lovingly extricates said sticks from said pants.

It's Today Today

My shirt is off this time which is the first time. Because everything I say is happening. Truth has little to do with it. Except as an end goal. Or a way of life. Or a tool, for example a brace and bit, which are two tools used as one. Or a place to spasm and collapse.

This is when I go out of the cabin's oneroom into the bathroom. But first Antoinette lays on the bed, supple as a sea lion on an ice flow to wait out my toilet. Rather, she is still toying with my sticks, stacking and unstacking to get the tightest fit as I enter or exit depending on your orientation. Or perhaps I do not know what she is doing because I must necessarily turn my back to her to open and subsequently pass through the door.

Yes, the not knowing what she is doing when I cannot see her, like the not knowing what she is doing when I can see her, makes me feel fairly insane. But I have a high tolerance for insanity in myself if not others.

Besides, not knowing is my equilibrium state.

* * *

He is about to go downstairs when he thinks of Palo as a chemistry experiment. The Author writes the idea down, not a genius one he knows, perhaps even slightly embarrassing, but another link in the chain, and rehides his notebook and writing implements and opens the door and smells beans and hears the rattle of the pressure cooker releasing pressure and feels hungry and is about to go downstairs. He goes downstairs.

The only one who says anything is Lilly, Daddy! She is incorrigible. She lightly bounces a plastic baby she tries to nurse with her shirt pulled up while singing a song without words.

He knows the rest of them know where he's been.

Hug?

No, she says.

Hi.

Hi, Ulster says. He draws a short-bodied animal with long legs on a piece of paper at the table.

What are you drawing?

A fish, Ulster says.

But it has legs.

It's a lionfish. It's king of the ocean. It says Rrrrrr, he says.

Oh. Hi.

Hi, Mary says. She heats tortillas on the griddle and cools the pressure cooker under the faucet and checks that the rice in the Japanese rice cooker is done because it says it's done and cuts pale November quality tomato wedges and gets jars of salsa and yogurt to replace sour cream from the fridge. Lee is behind the couch. Allen stalks the bad guy with a guitar that is a gun.

Can I cut the cheese?

Please, she says. He cuts the cheese with a knife, knowing she'd prefer he'd grate the cheese with a grater.

That doesn't really happen you know.

What? Allen says.

The cowboy and Indians stuff.

I know. There are no Indians, Dad, Allen says.

There are cowboys.

Where? Allen says.

Around.

We're playing good guys and bad guys, Allen says.

There are no bad guys.

I know, Allen says.

And the guys we call good don't chase them and catch them and make things better. It's a fantasy.

I know, Allen says. I'm just imagining.

He tells Allen to clean the table for dinner. But I'm hunting a thief, he says. Set the table, says the Author. He broke the law, says Allen. He's a murderer. We don't talk about those things in this house. Set the table. Lee cheated on his test. He's not old enough to have real tests. Set the table.

General screaming of Lee at Allen for being a tattle-tale, of Ulster at Allen for taking away his colors, of Allen at Ulster that it's his job to set the table, of Lilly at Lee for engaging his feelings by pushing her down when he climbs from behind the couch. Mary says to the Author, If you're going to cut the cheese, cut the cheese, else let me do it.

He does it. She lays rectangular cheese on circular tortillas to melt and lose shape. Atop which she piles line segments of rice and ovaloids of black beans and triangles of tomatoes and blobs of yogurt and scattershot salsa. She passes them to him to role into cylinders like scrolls full of wise old important and indecipherable proclamations.

Dinner! he roars into the din.

A moment of silence.

He places food on the table in the den. They sit. They eat the proclamations, which is all they're good for. Things return to normal, which is normal. They were normal before, and continue to be normal. Lilly eats only beans, Ulster only cheese, Lee only tortilla. Everyone else eats everything else.

The Author is uncomfortable being together in silence. He prefers silent solitude. Silence together is not normal, even if it is preferable to non-silence together. Losing his mind in noise is normal. He yearns for normalcy, which he despises. A very successful and advanced and unique normalcy.

How was the soccer game?

Good, Allen says. We lost.

Allen stopped two shots, says his mother.

Good job. What about you Lee? What did you do at school today?

I picked what I was going to be when I'm a grownup, he says. I'm going to be a writer.

No you're not.

Why not? says Lee.

Writers aren't grownups, says his mother.

Who's writing this conversation? I'm trying to engage the life of my children. Now, why did you choose to be a writer, Lee?

I don't know, he says.

Come on, you can say.

Nevermind, Dad.

I won't be mad.

I forget.

It's the money, says Mary.

Oh, did you sell something, Dad? says Allen.

No.

No, no, it's the quantity of time you are justified in locking yourself up, says Mary.

Thank you for the offer, but I'm already engaged.

It's how it frees you up to pursue the meaning of being an incomprehensible jerk, says Mary.

Thank you for dinner. He begins to clear his plate.

Cole, Mary says to him, or Coal or Kol or Koal or Kole. Then Lee says his name something more like Cold or Colt. Ulster says a word like Skol. Lilly says, Okra. He puts food away in the kitchen.

Dad, what are you writing now? Allen says.

Nothing.

Then what were you doing in your room? says Allen.

A book.

What's it about? says Allen.

What's it about? encourages Mary. He was going to be a good politician or a good author and not-say, but he chooses to engage, for Mary.

A man cheating on his wife, he says. The Author knows such a happening is no shock to Allen. Three-quarters of his friends' parents are separated or divorced or unhappy or sleeping with their friends' parents, if he believes the stories.

Are they going to get divorced? says Allen.

I haven't gotten that far yet.

Divorce is a horrible thing, Allen, says Mary.

I know, Mom.

Nobody's having real sex with anybody.

I know, Dad. Then why write about it?

That's why you write about it.

I mean why write about it if it's so bad?

That's why.

But why write about it?

Because I'm compelled.

Why?

Because.

You told me because wasn't an answer.

He gives his oldest a look, then gives the first answer that dawns on him, which people will say is the right answer because he hasn't thought about it, as if instinct were the guiding light and he hadn't thought of other answers at other times and he had not thought about this answer before and hence subverted it, but god bless, he has something to say.

I'm exploring the nature of sin.

He expects Allen to not give in. He expects Allen to ask what sin is. But Allen already knows what people say sin is, though he's not a church-going boy. Sin is one of the great themes of western culture and cannot be escaped. He expects Lee or Ulster to pick up the trail, but perhaps they can read the look on their mother's face, or perhaps they haven't been listening; there's a lot of that going around, not to mention the food smeared all over the table and the yogurt pasted in Lilly's hair and the sounds of chewing.

Well, he says standing next to the table and eating Lilly's food, Lilly and I went on a walk to the water today. We saw ducks and fishing boats and a raccoon. What else Lilly? That's right, yes, a sea lion. And we got-

I want to go to the water, says Ulster.

We're eating, says the Author.

Another day. Maybe tomorrow, says Ulster.

Maybe, says the Author.

When is tomorrow? says Ulster.

He receives a sigh in reply.

Is tomorrow today? says Ulster.

No, it's today today. It's always today.

Did I Say

Did I say I am walking barefoot? If I did not, I meant to. I should not have. It would have been stupid to have said. It was stupid to have meant to have said, if I meant to. It would have been stupid to have meant it, let alone say, let alone do. Let do alone. Do let alone. Do alone let. Alone do let. Alone let do.

That got uninteresting pretty quickly while not augmenting clarity, though it does get at the essence of the thing. What thing? To have meant, alone let do. I stick with the last not because it is more right or in some way righter but because it is last and I have a poor memory, or wish I did. I mean them all I mean, regardless of if I remember them. Memory is as reliable as meaning.

Stupid because what you need is a reliable pair of boots, let alone on an endeavor such as this, which I did not know I was getting into when I laced up this morning, let alone when I chose to wear boots, which was ages and ages ago, before which I went barefoot, when I began collecting sticks and gathering stones in boots to not let my feet suffer alone, let alone suffer at all, that's what a boot is for. A pair of boots. A lone boot is useless, except to one of your feet. Put your boots on and let them alone until you want to untie them or they come untied.

My boots are black leather with eight-inch uppers and lug soles to contend with the mud. I stand a few inches taller in them, when I am not sunk a few inches in the mud. They are known as loggers because loggers wear them. People who log are known as loggers because they log. Or sawyers because they saw. I am a logger. I collect sticks. I am a sticker. I stick. I stick is what I wanted to say first, but I did not want to throw you farther than I can trust you, so I led you to it by the proverbial dangling carrot or dropped breadcrumb or logical reasoning or something. My boots are durable and sturdy, made to last and be worn all day in any sort of terrain from mountain to mud while providing proper support. I must care for them or they will not last. I do. Once a month I scrub them in non-soapy water to remove the daily grime, use the sun's heat to dry them, and grease them in boot grease. I know when a month has come and it is time to clean and grease my boots by my wife, when she is not pregnant or post-partum, which is often, which complicates my accounting of time. That is okay. There are other methods of counting time. I just have to think of them. There is the Cahokian method of setting poles in the ground in the proper arrangement and based on the sun's place in relation to them or where the requisite shadow

lies an interpretation can be made as to the month of the year. What I am suggesting is an involute, no, complicated sundial which the people in town do not understand but in the pursuit of the understanding of which they purchase many sticks with their stones. Thankfully. There, another market for sticks. I mean use. I have helped the engineers with stick manipulation, but I was not much help. My opinion is they just do not spend enough time on mounds close to the sun, they do not build mounds to be close to the sun, they do not get close to the sun, as the Cahokians did before they died off, but no one is much interested in what I have to say. I am the sticker. There is also interpreting changes in nature such as buds breaking, quarter-inch pink, leaf out, the rut, the velvet, the shed, but all this is decidedly animist or pantheistic or having an awful regard for nature and its processes and its definition of time. I prefer my wife when I can have her. The boot grease contains honey, like the honey from bees, in fact it is honey from bees. They dance and jigger to communicate in an unspoken language – the best kind of language I might add, and I do, even if I am not making good use of it at the moment – the location of a flower from which pollen might be collected, even though they do not collect pollen, they collect nectar and the pollen distribution is incidental but not dental and vital but unintentional to an entirely different natural process. Pollination does not work without pollen. All this is incident, I just wanted to mention the figurative physical silent intimate language of bees, except it is not just incident in that they use their language to collect the nectar they use to make the honey in the boot grease with which I grease my boots—I remember now, there is always a reason—rubbing with my bare fingers the honey grease into the sunwarmed leather, working it into the toe, heal, instep, tongue, into every crevice, softening the leather, to make it comfortable, to make it form-fitting, to make it last, to protect it, to protect me. I have a bad memory but I remember because I do it over and over, monthly, give or take. I recall it because I am grasping at sticks to delay the inevitable, though I do not know how sticks delay the inevitable, which has already happened, though I do not know it. I also wanted to quote Samuel Beckett, known to intimates and acquaintances as Sam. If you do not know him, that is okay, neither do I, never did, I exist in a completely different existence than he does, he is dead. I fail and quote Molloy, or is it Moran in Molloy, “I would never do my bees the wrong I had done my God,” namely make his bees into a nice idea, which is to say domesticate the bees like God and let them die like God, that last bit being mine, do partake of the nice ironic equivalence between the bees and God but let me preemptively dispense with the distinction between Moran’s God and Sam’s God and my God and your God, no matter which existence all the Gods and Godlessnesses are the same,

don't worry you don't need to believe in God to partake and dispense, all of this former and latter being mine, me being Palo, except what's in quotes, hence the quotes, which are mine not his, him being Sam, or rather Moran in Molloy, who had a slightly different interpretation of what he said, finishing the sentence, "to whom I had been taught to ascribe my angers, fears, desires, and even my body," even though the bees which contributed honey to my grease are every inch or centimeter as domesticated as the ones to which he referred, as is the God whom we collectively inveigh or beseech. Or veigh or seech. Or stick.

So when I step fast and hesitant into Antoinette's cabin, I have my boots, which I love, to contend with. Namely how to get them off. I have no names for them. They are not pets. They are boots. Yes, yes, I know, unlace them, but what is the proper etiquette when Antoinette is on all fours, which, remember, is not true. But neither I nor you do not know that until I open the door, which I have done but not now. And so, do I unlace my boots outside the door or inside the door, standing or sitting, do I knock the clods of mud off against the stoop or do I stomp, does she unlace them or do I, or is this the kind of cabin you wear your boots in, it being a oneroombathwithabathroom in the woods atop a hill-cum-mountain? There is also how quickly I will want to leave to consider, unlacing and lacing boots is not quick, and whether I will leave alone or not, and whether my boots will be worth saving when I must leave quickly, which has not been decided, which they will. They are good boots. I trust them with my feet.

I consider all this outside the door, unopened. I consider all this because I do not want to make the wrong choice. I consider all this because I do not want to ruin my life. I do all this because I do not want to do what I do. But at the same time I have this God damn stupid need put inside of me, not in my pants but in my heart I tell you which makes it so much worse now that I have told you, to have sex with Antoinette. Some things are best left unsaid. Not solely have sex with her, the act, but make love to her, cherish ever inch of her skin. How that eats away at a man. But I do not have to tell you. You know how it makes me feel. You feel the same.

How having this one needy thing inside floundering flopping thrashing with the other shreds for air needing more and growing and not being able to breathe and thereby needing more until I am no one but a bootless need. A man without boots is not a man. A man divested of boots fails everyone. A man who removes his boots to satisfy some need within himself is not who he says he is and therefore cannot satisfy who he says he is or what he says is inside him. Boots on the threshold, Antoinette inside, the door before, me nowhere to be found. I

cannot go through the door. I already have.

Will Have Been

Is it tomorrow now?

Still today.

He gets all his best ideas from those of his children who are five years old or younger. In four years he will have nonesuch. The choices, then, if the trend maintains itself or whatever maintains the trend continues to maintain it, and there is no reason that it won't:

1. In the next four years write a widely regarded successful masterpiece, not that good ideas or execution have much correlation with wideregard, wideregard not being why he does this, exactly, let alone success, success in the conventional sense, whatever that is, not being why he does this, exactly, or even what's considered a masterpiece, masterpiecing not being why he does this, exactly, either. But he has less than four years to write something good. He can't define good, except that it has one more 0 than god. 0 0 0. One zero more, he writes. Ha, he thinks, that's better and did not originate in a toddler, except originally. He begins to doubt whether good having one more 0 than god is better than good having one more 0, then realizes he's being clever without any substance and that is a bad idea and not a good way to live.
2. Have more children, which would presumably involve Mary and her consent. She does not want more children, nor does he. But she is invested in his career or its absence. And part of life is doing things we don't want to do.
3. Be a failure forever. It does not escape him that it doesn't take very long of being a failure before you are a failure forever, and it doesn't take very long of being a failure forever before you are nothing.

He has neither the intention nor the ability to choose between the three. He will continue to live much as he has and one of them will happen. That is such self-protecting bullshit; he's trying for one, which is by far the least likely, the odds for one being even worse than the ones for two, no matter if he has been snipped and Mary's tubes have probably been tied, perhaps because one is the least reflective of what he meant and the poorest worded and the worst written.

But trying is different than choosing.

But he started writing the list to start writing it, not to reach a conclusion. He started writing to get around to Palo because every time he starts writing it comes to Palo eventually. Palo consumes his thoughts. No no, Palo is his thoughts. So he writes in the bathroom. He writes in the bathroom in the master bedroom. He writes on the toilet. He writes with his pants around his ankles. Pretense. Not solely pretense. He farted, nothing solid, a while ago, in the past tense. Beans, an explanation for farting. Except he is always farting, beans or no, though he always eats a lot of beans. Present tense. He writes in the present tense for immediacy. He writes in the present tense to dispense with memory or authorial intrusion or artificiality. He writes in the present tense because that is how he eats and farts and writes and ignores the tumult of children preparing for bed and lives, in general. In the present tense. He does not expect to fart more, but he never knows, let alone anything solid, though that is the pretense of sitting on the pot, that in the future tense he will produce, you never know, you have never known, you will never know. Shit, he thinks, a present perfect slipped through the crack and splashed into the pot in place of the past. You never knew. What folly, tenses, what for? Sometimes he strains, because he never knows, but it usually comes to nothing.

A grammatical continuum of temporality. *He walked*. Definitive. Nothing is that definitive. *He was walking*. Continuing. But done. Also implied is he was at one time not walking. *He had walked*. The time before the time before, though fuzzy on when that was. *He had been walking*. Continuing and completed before the time before. The confidence is comforting, but a little removed, temporally, from reality. Also explanatory, which means it's not as smart as it sounds. Which could also be indicated by its using more words to say almost the exact same thing as He was walking. *He has walked*. He's a toddler now, or was. This tense knows something about He, or about who He used to be, or what He's done, if only once. A nebulous distinction as one of the present tenses. *He has been walking*. It's present and past and probably done. Though at least it's been going on for a while. *He is walking*. Implied is the existence of a state without walking, but it could instead be interpreted as a statement of being. *He walks*. Unspecific temporally. Could have always been walking, could always be walking, no implied other state, other than the conditional. For now he is walking. Rather, he walks. He walks is what he does and therefore who he is. He knows not; he walks. Active. *He will walk*. How do you know? So confident. Inactive. Hopeful. Also known as waiting for who knows what, when. *He will be walking*. Will this just keep going on and on repeating itself? *He will have walked*.

What? It will have happened in the past in the future. He doesn't understand this. You have to understand something to write it. *He will have been walking.* What's with the need to cram all time and meaning into one sentence? He doesn't trust a tense that knows more than he does. The tenses then are a parabola of knowingness. The origin, which is the nadir of knowingness, being the present. Perfect. No, present. Tense. Legs spreading upward infinitely in either direction to the knowingness of the simple past and the future perfect progressive. Spreading infinitely even though there aren't infinite tenses, only infinitives, which is the mother of all tenses. There are only twelve tenses or thereabouts, and they form a kind of circle – no, he's sticking to the parabola; he will focus; he will not bend it however pleases him; you can pick your geometric device but you can't pick its nose. What's the slope? Low, gentle, reasonable, a fraction. The slope is inviting; the legs spread wide; it takes a long time to climb out of the hole to a future knowingness that is not and will not be steeply approached. But man is young yet. There is hope. On the other hand, the tenses perhaps form an inverted parabola of usefulness. Statements about the future are made in the non-knowing present, which perhaps make them useless. And what use, the past? Let alone the past in the past or the past in the future. In which case there is no hope; the present tense is the apex of usefulness and there's nowhere but down to go. But it's always the present. Is it the present tense when the present is buried in a contraction?

He's not sure how to follow this revelation or if it is a revelation or what a revelation would feel like if one were to happen to him, and so he is about to throw two sheets to the wind in pursuit of forward motion and embark on a detailed description of the bathroom via Palo, but is waiting for he knows not what inspiration or impetus or impulse when he jumps at a knock on the door. His legs hurt where they mate with his ass from sitting on a hole. His bathroom is a typical bathroom: dirty toilet, cluttered counter, mildewed shower, slimy sink, overflowing cabinet. Nowhere to hide in other words. Dust bunnies behind the toilet, clothes piled behind the door, a see-through shower curtain, which makes him think of movies and women showering in silhouette, or it did before the sheen of mildew. In the floor, a vent register he could fit his arm in to the elbow, which is better than nothing. No window. He makes sure he locked the door.

Hello?

Are you going to say goodnight to your children?

Of course. What time is it? Sorry, not feeling well, the beans you know, I think, nothing wrong with your cooking, it was good, just my stomach you know. Weak, gassy.

They'll be asleep soon. In her words he reads her tenseness. That she is growing tense. Rather, she is tense and tensing. Him too. He can't produce under these conditions.

I'm almost done. He waits. Nothing. Then she says, You should say goodbye to them. She doesn't say that. That is what he made up for her to say. To fill the nothing she says. She says nothing. She may have left, or be leaving, or leave, or will have left soon. Mary?

Yes.

You're still here? Or there, I mean?

No.

I'm out of paper.

Do you need more?

Yes.

Would you like me to get you some paper?

Mary, would you please bring me some paper? He reaches across the small bathroom and unlocks the door. He is glad at least he did not describe the bathroom, which would have been tiresome and stupid and self-indulgent and used up a lot of words he could better use otherwise or maybe not but they would have most explicitly not moved the story forward. She opens the door just enough to roll in a roll of paper without seeing anything. He hopes she saw his pants around his ankles. One part of him hopes she whiffed his stagnant rot; one part of him does not. His other parts are in between or elsewhere; he is not just two parts. She could say something like Thank God I don't have to shower, so as to say it without saying it, but still it would have the desired effect of making him self-conscious even after all these years. He hates being self-conscious, which makes him self-conscious of his self-consciousness.

He wipes just to be sure, nothing, and for the sake of his own legitimacy, not nearly so much as nothing, and to justify his conspicuous consumption, a smear, and augment his perpetuation of an untruth with the flavor of veracity, good god what a mess. He drops the used paper in the toilet and wipes and drops and wipes and drops until he can bear it no longer, at which point he flushes, does his pants, hides his writing tools under the sink behind the extra rolls of toilet paper and pauses briefly to consider how toilets work without elucidating or clarifying or actually thinking through how they work. When he opens the door Mary is not there. He goes to tell his children he loves them.

Euphemism

When I have opened the door, Antoinette is standing on the doorjamb jamming the doorway, being a new door, tapping her bare foot and douring me a look.

I say, Have I been long?

Her silence is less difficult to interpret than most silences. The unambiguity is abetted by the fact, and of facts there are few and each one vital, that this time when I open the door for the first time, she is fully clothed and on two feet, one tapping. Her arms may be crossed or her hands may be on her hips, but not both, depending on your own experience with women. Her clichéd or postured but communicative posture does not negate that she is on all fours skirt hiked to hips with an orchid in her hair, how can I have not mentioned that, I am distracted, with an orchid in her hair the other first times I open the door, and standing with the prospect of hiked rear yet other first times, and exhibiting said posture of displeasure promising nothing when I have opened the door this first time, the only time I will ever open the door, if I may be so premonitionally bold, this time, going this direction. Which is out of the outside and into the inside.

I say, I am sorry. I have been exploring. And though I have made no kind of decision on the matter, I am committed to ruining my life with you for a few moments of rabid pleasure, no I will not degrade what it is we share, will share, which is a few moments or one attenuated moment of desperate love, the ephemeral eternal that we are each, or allow me to speak for myself, I am attempting moment by moment to perpetuate, because it is all I have ever found to live for, the remainder being foreplay and memory, like a God damned aesthete, which if I am decapitate me now or I will do it for you. But before we are to arrive at the time when we will have had sex, which will fall hard on the time when we will have begun having sex, no matter my endeavors, no matter my clutched longings, no matter my acts of sin and my acts of whatever is the opposite of sin, virtue perhaps, though virtue somehow does not suffice, no matter how much I strain to clamp down on my impulse, I have an inveterate need to use your bathroom.

She is moved. She reaches to hug me but is prevented by the sticks in my pants and in my hands, which is just as well because by this point I really do need to pee, which is a need a hug does not help. I read in her face that she completely

understands this need, and therefore me. She steps aside, providing me access to, and thereby inviting me into, her one room but more importantly the door to her bathroom. Which I open and shut, and pass through in between.

I go to undo my pants but I have a problem, or several. Number one, I have a problem I will not discuss right now, so it does not count even if it is the only one that matters. So number one does not exist and I will begin with the first. First and secondary, not to mention irrelevantly, I am still wearing the shirt I removed to absorb the sun. Secondly, my pants are full of sticks protruding every which way, sticks that have been removed lovingly by Antoinette and stacked like cords of firewood in her one room, sticks that I now carelessly and hurriedly extricate and pile on the counter, sticks with which I will shortly build a miniature cabin, a dollhouse without dolls while I prolong the pleasure or pain of my moment with Antoinette. Which I do ineffectually like I do most things besides collect sticks and gather rocks because I prolong the moment or moments before the moment, the moment itself proving to be an orchid, no, proving to be an elusive thing, partly because it is no thing. Partly because it is beautiful. Partly because it dies easily. Yes yes, I have sticks in my hand that Antoinette has stacked in the corner of her one room lovingly but this is no problem because I drop them in the one room in haste, I grant you that, so I may open the door to the bathroom, the door handle of which requires some jiggering, as it sticks. In fact, these problems are not the problem for me that they are for you, I imagine, as you are stuck in a world where multiple occurrences cannot be occurring to your sticks at one time. No, what is a problem for me that I will discuss is I by this point really need to pee and with the toilet there as a receptacle for my urge reminding me of my need I in point of fact have no time to rip more sticks that are not there from my pants. I take one step to the toilet, one step being the breadth of the bathroom, find my stick or pencil or flathead screwdriver or pipe wrench or gooseneck ratchet or six-inch c-clamp or coat tree for Reb's coats or her clotheshorse for pet names, a name horse then, which is not a problem for me to find as I am often finding it among sticks that are and are not stuck in my pants and I pee.

Bless God for this opportunity, wherever he is.

* * *

When he closes the last door, which is Allen's, who was born first, after saying his last I love you, sweet dreams, relax, don't think about anything, think about something relaxing, imagine you are floating, I know you're not floating, that's

why you imagine it, it's relaxing, there's no light, it's easier to imagine in the dark, because that's my job, this is relaxing, then try harder, are you breathing?, breathe for god's sake, then focus on your breathing, long exhale, long inhale, long exhale, long inhale, long exhale, long inhale, yes I used to have these problems before I was this tired, keep that up until morning and you'll be all right, breathe, in out, in out, in out, good night, Mary is standing there in sweat pants and nothing else, shivering.

So, she says.

So.

I got cold, she says.

Well you don't have a shirt on.

I had less on. But I was splayed on top of the covers waiting and fell asleep and when I woke up I was cold. I'm looking for you.

You found me.

You take a long time to do anything, she says.

Just building up the anticipation.

Do you have a few minutes before you have to close another door behind you? It won't be long before you get back to it. Hello. Cole. I have work to do too, Kole. I have to grade Geometry. What are you thinking about? Where are you? Coal. Fuck it, I'm cold, she says.

Wait.

I have been. In the position you told me you liked back when you communicated, back when you said you liked things. But my ass got cold, she says.

I'm sorry. I had an idea.

About your story? she says.

For some dialogue.

Why don't you use some dialogue on me? she says. See if it works. You said this is a sexier story.

Okay.

So, she says.

So.

Do you want to do it? she says.

Do it.

Is this your dialogue? she says.

We are talking to each other.

Is this why you never do anything? she says.

Why?

You always want to talk about it, she says.

I have characters to do things so I don't have to ruin our life. All I want to do is do, you see, but it's a bad idea. I have characters to do so I can explore what it is to be.

What is it to be?

It is a long walk with a cute girl.

And the quick of your wife.

And the long quick with your pretty cold wife.

You're talking to yourself, she says. You can't write about it if you don't do it.

You don't want an explorer for a husband.

Yes I do, she says.

Explorers are never home for dinner.

You never play along, she says.

It's not a game.

It could be, she says. We can do it and talk about it, she says, if you want.

Listen, I want to do it, but the last thing I want to do is talk about it.

Then shut up before I go find a cucumber to sit on. I'm cold, she says.

A hot dog.

Better, she says.

A hot beef injection, a jalapeño pepper, a soldering iron, a soldering irony, a wood engraver, a fire poker.

Shhh, she says, or you'll ruin it.

Toilet

I pee for a long time. Which is great. I pee for long enough and it is great enough that I wonder if this is the act I should be seeking to preserve. Which, as the wondering does not cease, make me wish to be done with it, the peeing and the walking and the sexing and the loving, to be at home in bed next to a breathing Reb who will hate me or love me or both when I will have had sex with Antoinette.

Such a time may never come. I pee. My pee mixes with the pee of Antoinette and dilutes hers, or concentrates it. It far outdoes hers. I believe. I cannot know. I was not here to measure the volume of her production or the length of time she produced. A matter of faith then that the probability of another peeing as long as I is inconsequentially small. Although if she has equaled me in this attenuated exercise, that poor poor longhaired vivacious young woman, we may unfortunately be meant for each other for the moment. Bladders may seem to have nothing to do with it, and indeed they do, have nothing to do, in this instance, with it, as my bladder is not why I still pee, but why shouldn't our bladders mean we are meant for each other versus any other organ if our bladders do have something to do with it?

Apparently I have time to survey the bathroom. Which is an exciting proposition. Or something to do while I pee. Which, as you can imagine, I need. As, you can imagine, how tiresome it becomes. I am anyhow always looking for something to do. Which is how I got into spending all day alone collecting sticks and gathering stones, depending on the day. Which also gets tiresome. The always looking for something to do, not the collecting sticks and gathering stones. Though usually I do not have to talk about it so much, which helps. The talking about also gets tiresome. If I am lucky enough to leave the house before the family wakes and return after they bed down, I may pass an entire day without encountering a soul. I may then pass said day without a word. For I am not the kind of person who converses with myself, much less others, it is your presence that draws it out of me, if you left I could stop going on and on, which is not how I wish to spend my few brief moments of existence. Yes, I am quite capable of transacting sticks and stones in town without exchanging words. Numbers is what we talk in town after all, and I have digits on my hands. Stick to the basics. Yes, today is a rare day. Far from home, far from a wordless day. Far from alone, you are with me today, of all God forsaken days to have a witness or compatriot or accomplice, and Antoinette is with me, or has been and

will be. She is inside or outside the door at the moment.

My God I am still leaking and have yet to begin to give an account of the bathroom and have begun to call on my unreliable and amorphous God of dubious existence. The situation must be dire. I have not to the best of my knowledge, and if we do not by now take my knowledge with a grain of salt then we will swallow anything, called on my God since I sired my fifth or sixth child, which is the last one I explicitly remember siring, and also coincidentally the one Reb says has a spark of God in him or her, what with the red hair and the plastic wrap on the toilet seat and the soiled toilet paper dangling from all of our neighbors' trees, and we do not even have neighbors, I do not believe in them, our trees then or nobody's, so that the neighbors all say The devil's in that one. Be careful what you believe. All of which may have come to pass because I called on my God while Reb and I reconsummated our union, or perhaps it had nothing to do with the words but with the infinite quality of that particular bout of loving, which lasted several days as I recall, we decided to love like turtles that time, slowly and precisely, if indeed that is how turtles love. Yes, those were a good couple days, good is not enough of a word but it was good, the quality of the act being what is important, the quality being such that you or me or anyone would feel compelled to call on a God in which we may or may not believe, using whatever words dribble or do not dribble from our lips, not the words but the dribble is what is important.

I am pissing away my life.

Good. Got that out of my system. It may have hurt you, but it hurt me more, rest assured, that stone. It caused no uncertain splash to accompany the pain, which they, those who say things, say is like giving birth, though I do not believe them, mostly because they say anything, and also because I know a woman who gives birth often. I have always passed a lot of stones, none of which have lived to be babies, but what I have done or not done is somehow beside the point. Which is that that stone seems to have been damming a reservoir of urine hidden in my distended bladder. The point is I pee more. Perhaps what is required of me to end the pee is to provide a vivid description of Antoinette's bathroom, as I have implied. Which implies that I created the necessity of the bathroom description by my very implication of its necessity, which implies that I create my own if, then logic: If I describe the bathroom in excruciating and unnecessary and excessive and obnoxious detail, then I will stop peeing. Which implies I created or create the law by which I currently live or do not live as the case may be. Which is a neat, if too neat, implication to imply.

The toilet is a normal toilet. White, a porcelain bowl, a lid of wood, open, a seat of wood worn smooth, open. To give the toilet some personality, let us hang the water closet from the wall, one of those raised, old-fashioned cisterns with a pull chain that, I am assuming here, the engineers must have hung so as to provide a greater distance for the water to fall and accelerate and thereby achieve greater velocity and more flushing power. Why you do not see such raised cisterns anymore I do not pretend to know. Perhaps the acceleration of water has increased over the years, which may imply that gravity has increased, or perhaps less aqueous velocity is necessary to trigger the siphon, or perhaps less siphon is necessary to dispel the former contents of our bowels, which are the contents of our bowls. Perhaps our bowel contents are less than they once were. Perhaps we are getting more efficient. In a word, better.

Oh for that to be the last word. We will let it lie. In spite of its old-fashionedness, this toilet works like most toilets in the free world. The closeted water when released falls past the toilet bowl outlet and due to its greater relative velocity to the water in the toilet bowl establishes a negative, or positive depending on your frame of reference, pressure gradient. Bernoulli's principle establishes that as a liquid's velocity increases, its pressure decreases by means of the conservation of energy. Not by means of. I do not know what the means might be, but the conservation of energy, which states that the energy in a closed system remains constant, nevermind that systems are not closed and constantly leak energy to what we vaguely call heat, which is in fact sometimes heat and sometimes light and occasionally noise and all other manner of God abandoned energies, and even receive the rare energy input at the cost of some other system's energy, explains it. En sum, as the kinetic energy increases, potential energy decreases, and vice versa. Hence, as the velocity of a fluid increases, its pressure decreases, and vice versa. Lose kinetic energy, gain potential. Lose velocity, gain pressure. I will not define these terms, I feel time slipping away, especially energy. Okay, energy is the capacity to do work. Work is force applied over a distance. Force is the rate of change in momentum per unit time of an object. Distance is the distance from here to there. Time is time. I could sustain and attenuate this definitioning and mention actions and events and past, present, and future, and dimensions and spatiality and the spacetime continuum, but I will not, it all arrives in the same place, or does not arrive there, without ever arriving there it arrives at the limit of physics and words, which spliced and nevertheless continued on become an integral, an indefinite integral without bounds, which is calculus which is math which is toying with numbers which is a language begotten to explain which does not explain, a

created game which has no winner and is not fun. Be careful what you believe, how deep you dig, what you say, what you do not say, to what limits you exert yourself, push yourself, pressure yourself. The still dirty water, no, if yes, still no, the dirty still water is under greater pressure than the water descending at a non-zero velocity and is therefore pushed or pulled if the pressure differential is great enough over the hump of the S-pipe holding it back by means of hydrostatic pressure, which is again just what the principle is called, not the means. The S-pipe acts like a dam. The S may as well be a dam. The S is in fact a dam. What I am saying is water will not flow over a hill of its own accord unless the hill is totally submerged. I have moved on to hills, which I did not know, though I do now, having experienced unbeknownst to me an uninspiring moment of knowing, also called a realization, revelation, or grasp, of my talking about hills. I am wrong. I am right about the dam-hill-S-pipe, and about Bernoulli's principle and all the velocity and pressure buggery which is not the means but the explanation by which planes and birds and really anything I know of flies. Not missiles or rockets or bullets, which are projectiles. Do not fear, I do not intend to describe flight here, which is really much more complicated than Bernoulli's Principle, and ancillary. As it at this point seems unlikely that I will today fly or be associated with flight, a shame, though my path does bear some kinship to projectile motion, or will.

What I am wrong about is, flying has nothing to do with toilets but the fluid dynamics. Bernoulli's Principle does not explain the flushing of a toilet. The siphon is the means and explanation by which a toilet flushes. A siphon is initiated when the cistern water is dumped in the bowl, note an epiphany here, and pushes liquid down and up the S-pipe, over the dam, over the hill, past the sewage vapor block, actually compressing the sewage vapor and pushing it before it into the sewage line. The falling wastewater pulls the remaining wastewater after it. Or rather, the wastewater column in the descending waste pipe beyond the toilet has a lesser pressure than what remains in the bowl, and therefore pulls what remains in the bowl behind it until the bowl contents are fully evacuated and the toilets emits the familiar gurgle burp gasp of air breaking the siphon. Or rather, since the exiting wastewater column is at a lesser pressure, the remaining bowl contents are under a greater pressure from themselves and the atmosphere and are therefore pushed, not pulled but pushed, furiously out of the bowl in a mad rush supplanted in the end by a gurgled gasp. Push, pull, out of me into the bowl into the pipe out of the bowl, me pushing pee, pee pushing water, water pushing pee and water, pulling other pee and water pushed by more pee and water and the atmosphere, me not

pushing but draining, leaking, dribbling, more than, streaming, pee pulling out of me, please please understand, gasp, gurgle.

Please understand why.

Why?

This explains why a toilet flushes, one kind of toilet, one kind of why. The toilet I pee in does not flush.

Please note that though being right is not important to me because there is no quicker way to ruin a marriage than by being right, I was not entirely wrong in the first place in my initial, exploratory explanation. Pressures and the like are involved and integral in waste removal by siphon toilet. Also, I do believe my initial idea is a plausible and workable idea which would have the added benefit of creating a briefly lived vacuum between the descending water and the bowl wastewater and suggests the possibility of the non-necessity of soiling the clean cistern water by introducing it to the dirty bowl or of cleaning the dirty bowl at all, instead conjecturing a parallel flushing system where the cistern water falls, triggers flush, is pumped back up to the cistern with a little energy input without ever being soiled itself by human waste, and is used again and again and again without the need for outside water, without the need for water outside itself, forever clean and useful and self-contained, once the leaks are clamped and taped and caulked and tightened and cemented, but it is unwise to ever get too married to an idea. Because ideas are unfaithful. For one thing, the cistern water would have to fall very very very fast. For another, the toilet would never be cleaned. Ideas are never as good as they should be. Ideas let you down. What dribble.

To finish with the toilet. Lord, Lord, to be finished with the toilet. The responsibility for my continuation is yours, as you believe it is unrealistic that my by now unrealistic volume of pee has not overflowed the large but finite capacity of the bowl. You are wrong, and I will show you nothing could be further from unrealism, and I would appreciate you not doubting my reality, at least any more than your own. As I fill the bowl we must revisit the siphon. Let me just say this, I do not pee fast enough to trigger the siphon. There, that is enough to say, to explain the whole shebang, but I will elaborate for your pleasure and because you must please understand how this works, please, or I am not, or at least I am for not. For though I pee for a long time and in what I, if not you, would call a torrent, it is not fast enough. As I make water into the

toilet the volume of water in the toilet does not rise, yes I know this is miraculous, wait, yes unbelievable, and okay, it rose slightly at the beginning but it has not risen in a long long time, for nearly the entirety of our duration, not since our very beginning. Please permit me to explain this because it is quite magical and if I can sufficiently convey the magic perhaps I will forget I am peeing altogether and thereby cease to pee. If nothing else I would like to not know that I pee. The water rose in the bowl and concomitantly in the S-curve of the outlet pipe until it reached the top of the curve, that is the cusp of the hill which typically dams the bowl's contents. But now, as I pee, the liquid in the S-pipe wishes to rise, fuck this need to anthropomorphize, to deify, but has nowhere to rise to because there is no more hill. With nowhere to rise, the wastewater falls into the sewage pipe. At the same rate with which I introduce it to the bowl. I trickle into the bowl; I trickle out its orifice in equal quantity. Steadystate, an equilibrium so rarely achieved, a picture of beauty.

Herein is the crux of the siphon: the deposited liquid must enter the bowl fast enough that the S-wastewaterway is filled to the brim with liquid, pushing away all gas, so no air remains in the S-pipe, none, or as near as none as is feasible, which creates a siphon when said liquid filling the waterway falls to the sewage pipe and does all that pushing and pulling nonsense with the rest of it until the bowl is empty. Modern toilets employ a siphon jet to directly deliver the cistern water to the S-wastewaterway with a speed and volume that readily achieves siphon. My bodily engineering does not enable a sufficiently quick delivery of my water column. I do not trigger a flush. The energy in a closed system remains constant. I pee. The beauty does not stop.

Affair

The Author makes love with his wife. The door is locked against children. He feels good while making it. He could say it is fantastic if he had a single word in his head, which he doesn't, thank god, if he were conscious of his wordlessness, which he is not. He makes love to Mary. He does not want it to end. He would want the story to end if he gave a goddam about the story right now, which he does not, if he gave a goddam about a god right now, which he does not. This is his wife. Soft and wet and hard and smooth and this woman pushing back skin on skin on air and his wife rising and in and heat and Mary breathing and Mary pushing and he dallying out and in how he fits all the way in he can get no further in outside of himself ringed entirely by her. Eventually, quickly, in no time he gurgles and drools on her buttocks from his slack jaw and unable to hold himself collapses onto her back for a moment before pushing back up and beginning again and returning to work until she gasps, which could be mistaken for a cough by a voyeur or a burp by a man who doesn't know her but he knows her well and is not just watching. He says he loves her. He means it. He does it. He loves her. They lie wrung together warm and bare in cool air thoughtless and complete, present and conscious, all this for a moment, two damp circles where her breasts pressed against the sheets, together and pleased, happy and breathing and entwined, until he begins to drip, which does not take long, when he runs to the bathroom. She squeezes her legs together until it's her turn. Not once during making love or cleaning up from making love, or for several minutes thereafter, does he think about Palo or his story or what it is to be.

* * *

I am trying to slow myself down and prolong the beauty but in spite of my personal privations and because of my muscular strain in clamping down my valve, the pressure builds and I, we together, no, you are not part of this, I was wrong, you are not culpable, not inseminated, I mean not incriminated by your presence, your witness, although perhaps you are because if you stop listening this hurtling forward motion bringing me closer to what has already happened stops, yes, and if you stop I will not do what I have done, and if you stop I am left forever peeing, and if you stop I will never return home, do not stop, don't stop, don't stop, please God don't stop, listen harder, harder, harder, to see my children again, harder, to come closer to that eternity when I will have had sex with Antoinette, harder, to go home. Which is my fantasy now, to go home having done what I have done, suffering for having entertained this alternate

reality with Antoinette. Don't stop. No, perhaps I can never go back to my life, but it is my fantasy, and I do not know what life is if not the pursuit of fantasies, and if the incompatibility of my fantasy with my reality finishes me, thank God, that is thank the air or the light or the vibration or whatever energy is, for leaving me. I will be gone. I will go. Forward. Harder.

I go to the bathroom.

The toilet. I am finished with the toilet. No, I am not done with it, still yet the beauty of Palo excreting in without altering the contents of, but I am finished with it.

The bathroom is longer than it is wide. The axis of length is perpendicular to the axis of entry through the door. That is you enter the door, encounter a wall, and turn to the left to encounter the bathroom. The door to the bathroom from the oneroomcabin's one room is therefore in a corner of that room, which may prove important, though I cannot imagine how. A narrow path leads past the sink hung on the external wall, adjacent to which sits the pedestal toilet, me before it, facing it, standing, peeing into it, leaning against the inner wall, worn, both myself and the wall worn, as if the wall has supported many such men, but that is not where I am going, for the inner wall is quite close to the external so that myself there before us might and does easily lean against it while still peeing into the toilet without danger of missing or spilling or splashing, though the chance of splashing is everpresent and greatly reduced by my reduced flow reduced by constricted urethral sphincter constricted by my brain like my contracted pelvic floor and everything else down there that I contract and constrict and squeeze and assuage because I still try to slow down and not do what I have done, the only way to avoid said perhaps being to end me despite my professed and sincere desire to go on, the desires to go on and not go on being far from incompatible. On either way. You may have noted that it likely took me more than one step to reach the toilet upon entering the bathroom. I am of like mind. I am not above contradicting myself. I am above a toilet. Beyond myself and the toilet and completing the fourth wall is the shower, a shower seldom used, a small shower for it is a narrow space, one of those showers you stand up in, I do not know what it is called, I do not have much experience with showers, no it is a shower that encompasses the toilet to save space, yes, I have seen this, in a dormitory in an old flat country near the sea when I was young, and I see it here in Antoinette's bathroom, there is no separate space for a shower, but a showerhead above the toilet and a shower curtain to be pulled and a drain in the floor and a slight grade to the floor so the

graywater drains down the drain. A toiletshower. A toiler. A showlet. Then why not dispense with the toilet and its complicated beauty, not to mention all its time and energy and consumption and engineering, and get closer to elemental existence and piss in the floor drain, and yes yes, that too, that is right, the solid, that is why, the solid, how to dispense, how to expel, how to eliminate, how to treat the solid. Even though there are plenty of squat toilets in the world, and plenty of holes to shit in, we continue to advance, to move forward, and so the most exemplary example of progress, the toilet, is present in this old rustic log cabin. I said I would say no more about the toilet, or if I did not, that is what I meant, and I will eventually. But saying about the toilet is for some sick reason necessary, the sick reason being, as I have said before, I have nothing else to say but must keep going must keep saying or I will have had sex with Antoinette. Perhaps Antoinette will come into the bathroom and we will do it here in the shower on the toilet and then it will be done and I can figure out what is next, no no onward go yes. Then let me, you, us, if the toilet is desired, needed, do away with the shower to increase our focus, there is no shower. It was a nifty solution I came up with as to the problem of space, namely combining two distinct parallel spaces into one functioning unit, but nothing is better than a nifty solution. Nothingness, rather. Meaning is meaningless without precision, and I mean to be nothing if not precise. If there were a shower I would have to pee in it.

There is no shower. There will be no sex in the shower, which is good. Sex in the shower is neither as doable nor as pleasant as I would lead you to believe. Reb and I have experimented and learned that for you, so you do not have to. If she bathes at all, Antoinette bathes in creeks, in rivers, in lakes, in the ocean. Which would explain the salty taste I will soon taste and the fishy smell I will soon smell. I do not know where she bathes. I am not her keeper or her husband. She may not bathe, which would explain something too, surely, such as my inappropriate comments, or I do not know what, I do not care if she bathes or not or if it explains or not. There is no shower. The absence of a shower does not require explanation. It is just not there. I will not be washing myself off.

I have inadvertently but thankfully narrowed the confines of the cabin as a whole. I now have a corner to support me where I lean, going to the toilet. Palo, before us as we explore the bathroom, has a corner in which to lean as he makes water, shakes the snake, lounges the lizard, drains the main vein, fuck it, pees, I have never been good at separation from self or objective distance or euphemism. There is no mirror above the sink or where the shower would have

been or behind me or above the toilet or on the back of the door or on the wall the door opens against or on the ceiling. There is no mirror anywhere, thank God, or whatever.

* * *

When the Author is still in the bathroom several minutes later, Mary mermaids downstairs with her legs pressed together as one to the half-bath, discharges, wipes up, locks the front door, and climbs the stairs again like a naked two-legged woman. She does not cover up or cringe or linger in front of the windows. She is not what she once was, but no one is, and she doesn't think what she is is half bad for what she is: a middle-age mother of four, which is nothing she minds a pleasantly surprised passerby or a young admirer indulging in fantasy or a psycho with binoculars catching a glimpse of; these little remarkable events are good for punctuating the day-to-day, though she has no intention of making a lifestyle of revealing herself. Merely imagining another glimpsing her full spheroid breasts and her triangle and her intersecting legs and the split ends of her long straight hair tangentially grazing the curve of her rear end is enough. And if she glances at her reflection in the glass before turning out the lights and saving money, it isn't lustily or because she wants something other than what she has, or not enough to act on it. No need to go beyond imagining. She knocks on the bathroom door, not because she wants to talk, though this is what the Author thinks she wants, but because she wants her toothbrush. The Author does not respond. She tries the handle. It is locked. She says his name, Cole or Coal or Coil or Kole or Kola or Kol. Nothing. Her annoyance rises, but she does not believe in going to bed angry so she lets it go. She will go to bed happy, because that is what she is, happy. She ditches her Geometry and ignores the laundry and forgets her husband and returns to their bed.

Post-Ironic Flush, or The End of Part 1 of Affair

I do not want to go in any sense of the word, including the staying sense. The beauty of irony is one can mean what one says and not mean it at the same time. It, like I, gives expression to believing a belief and its negation concurrently. Which is good. Are any of these words mine? No, they are yours, I give them to you, I dislike even hate them, though I teach my children not to hate though they never learn and I am never home to teach them. I only utter them to help you understand though I do not know why you need to understand and I do not personally or impersonally believe in understanding or the inherent value in expressing oneself or in expression so I do not know why I am saying this except to fulfill an urge to be done with doing what I do not know if I want to be done with, what I do not know if I should have begun, what I do not know I have done, but what I do do I do for you, by whom I mean me. I am the one who does not want to go to the bathroom that I am in and does not want to go out of the bathroom to do what I have done or perhaps am doing and face what I have become. Which is me. I do not believe in irony and there is no irony in the bathroom.

There is nothing in the bathroom besides what I have said. Toilet, sink, walls, door, me, my doings. No shower. No cabinets, nothing in them, no rugs on the floor, there is a floor. No towels no mints no toilet paper and above all no soap or shampoo or body wash or hand sanitizer or disinfectant or antibacterial kiwi coconut vanilla hand lotion or anything Palo peeing before us might consider cleaning with if he had an urge or compulsion or desire or need to clean any part of himself or anyone or anything else now or in the future or in the past. There is nothing that could be considered a toiletry. No toothpaste or floss or toothbrush, let alone more than one. No drain. No vent registers or ventilation fan or ventilation. She keeps nothing, has nothing, possesses nothing. This is one quality I as Palo like about her, find attractive about her, find seductive sensual sexy sultry erotic, that is the one, about her. Fine, love about her. The floor is made of rough-hewn planks but it makes no difference. We do not have wild passionate filthy sex on the bathroom floor where we would be filled with splinters. The floor is cold on the soles of my feet if you must know because I divested myself of my socks with my boots. Because they were wet. But not as cold as stone would be. Because they smelled. Let me get this straight, a stone floor would be exactly the same temperature as a wood floor, but it would be colder. Because I do not believe in wearing socks to bed and I did not know how soon we would go to bed even though I knew I am peeing for a long time. Is that

enough explanation, justification, reasonation?

There is only what I do and what I bring with me. There are the sticks on the counter and the sticks in my pants. Which I begin to remove and set on the counter one-by-one as I pee, to turn them into the sticks on the counter. I do it for something to do because peeing no longer counts, peeing longer does not count, the thought of peeing longer makes me want to divulge whatever I am vulgung and say what is desired of me to say so I can be done with this everpresent apprehensive tedium, peeing no longer would count, though the thought of no longer peeing makes me nauseous or whatever the word is for needing to cry.

* * *

In the morning, the bathroom door in their bedroom is still closed.

* * *

On the way up the hill I pick up sticks I drop on my way up the hill.

* * *

Mary possesses no indefatigable belief in not becoming angry shortly after waking up, and she is not a woman beholden to beliefs she does not believe.

* * *

It is not working. I, Palo, where else I am, am in the bathroom. I cannot get out but by the door. I cannot not do what I have done. Neither can I undo. My stream, blessedly, torturously, is drying up or out or in or down. I constrict. I drip.

* * *

I have to go to work, she shouts after doing all the things she's supposed to: pounding the door, calling his name, which is Cole or Coal or Kol or Kole, and cursing him. Her robe is undone and she knows it and doesn't care because no one is watching but Allen and Lee and Ulster and they have seen her before from the inside. Or rather she doesn't care because she does care in that she is unbelievably pissed off and leaving her robe open to the world is some small

way to get back at him. I need to wash, she says calmly. You better be dead, she says calmly knowing he's not because she's looked under the door at his feet and though they don't move much they move slightly, bare and surely cold on the tile where the filthy rug she threw away last week used to be and she believes she can hear him breathe though there is too much blood in her ears to be sure, or I'm gonna skull fuck you, she continues calmly. Lilly is screaming in her crib.

She tells the boys to get ready, change your clothes and eat your breakfast and stop listening in for God's sake. She goes to shower in the kids' bathroom, feeling lucky to be living in a modern and thoroughly suburban house with a 2:1 ratio of rooms to bathrooms, and leaves Lilly to scream because she feels so dirty she cannot touch her baby or anyone until cleansed.

* * *

I do not want to go. I want to go. I want to cease. I do not want to cease. I want this all to be in the past the distant past imbedded in memory or the future far enough in the future it is not even a twinkle in my eye.

I sound dismissive of my children with my unspecificity as to who they are, their names, number, sex, and birthdays. Please do not think I am not aware of it. If anything I am overaware of it, and am aware how aware I am, but awareness is no use, and awareness of awareness doubly so. I am just bad with names, numbers, sex, and birthdays. Which is no excuse and no reason. But the truth is my children are the only reason I am alive. My only reason to live. Besides Reb.

I vomit. In the toilet. The involuntary heave looses my urethral sphincter and pelvic floor and prostate. The remaining contents of my bladder, which are not insignificant in spite of everything and could have kept me going for some time, plunge into the toilet with my vomit. The muscle or whatever that was holding back tears also relaxes and a few tears drip in the toilet with my stomach broth and bladder torrent at the same time as in simultaneously as if in synchrony or as near as you can imagine to now, into the toilet, the cataract of my kidneys falling, the eruption of my stomach spewing, the wet expulsion of my eyes tearing from a great height.

My sudden volume triggers the siphon. The toilet flushes my uncontrolled functions.

* * *

My mother's taking a sick day for you Cole to watch Lilly even though she's not sick and Lilly's not sick and you are not sick. So you realize what you made her do. My mother does not believe in lying. She believes in working. You owe her, which you already did. For me. And she can't do it on Monday. She already said it and she doesn't go back on what she's said, she's a woman of her word if nothing else. So back to the routine Monday. Write it down so you don't forget and get lost in the bathroom. And I have things I need you to do this weekend. Fuck, I have to go. I'll tell you this isn't working Coal, I am telling you that Kol, this isn't working, I have told you that before Kole, this isn't working and nothing has changed or maybe it's gotten worse but probably it just seems like it's worse because it is exactly the same and the expectation of there being improvement, some effort at progress, some fucking forward motion makes it worse. So yeah, even if it's exactly the same it is worse and I sent the children downstairs but you know they're listening to every word I say and you don't say. So just open the door Kö. Koal. This is not working. Coil. This cannot continue.

* * *

I finish vomiting, peeing, crying. Convulsing. I gasp for breath. My blood must be clean at least. My blood is well filtered. My blood is sifted dust. My blood is sand dripping grain by grain through a narrow renal capillary out of the emptying cistern of when I will have had relations, no, sex, no, knowing, no, love with Antoinette and into the never-filling bowl of when I have had relations sex knowing love with Antoinette, the contents of which remain without addition or subtraction even as I add to it, never to disappear until my last grain is gone, if then.

* * *

You flushed. Was that an answer? Was that some attempt at communication? Language? Was that a mistake?

* * *

She is naked and I am thirsty. She offers her breast and I take it but it does not work. I ask for a tall glass of cold water. She brings it to me from where it waits on the windowsill. I drink. Water, flowing from the ball appended to the top of

my trunk, down through the stalk of my neck, to the stick at the base of my column. Water flows through my pipes, to wash out my mouth, to provide liquid, to provide material, to flush my system.

* * *

Kale, I have to go. Goodbye Coral. I'll see you when you open the door. We'll talk when I can see you.

* * *

The toilet refills as before, gurgle gurgled, gasp gasped, the high whine of the pipes whining, porcelain soiled, rinsed, waiting to be soiled again.

* * *

A door opens. High-screaming. Indecipherable. Children. A door shuts. Silence.

* * *

I Palo am in the bathroom. I cleanse myself over the toilet by means of the tall glass of cold water and my hand. Without means of towel or paper. She is postcoital on the bed. The water is cold. It drips into the toilet with our sex. I shrink. I wipe with my shirt. Which I wore not long ago. I do not know what the sticks are for. I am done gasping. I breathe at the level and stare at the wall. There is no mirror or window or judas hole. I stare at the toilet. Having done this, am I the man who has done this? I have done what Palo has done. Which is? I go where Palo goes. Do I? I am who Palo is. I do not know who that is. I do not know what knowing matters. How it helps.

Part Two

Affair Begins Again and Begins to End as Part Two Begins

I have done what Palo has done. I go where Palo goes. I am who Palo is.

I have not. I do not. I am not.

I am in the bathroom in our bedroom. Because there is nowhere else to go. I sit on the toilet. There is nowhere else to sit but cold hard tile. Door, sink, toilet, shower. Shit everywhere, the figurative variety. Toothpaste. Toothbrushes yellow, orange, purple, a blue racecar, contact case, contact solution, glasses, floss, a man's rusty razor in a bear with holes in it to hold toothbrushes that lie on the counter, barrettes shaped like butterflies and flowers and normal barrettes, rubber bands, scissors, a cup, candles atop the mirrored medicine cabinet, a sludge speckled mirror huge above the sink, a wad of clothes large and small and male and female in the corner behind the door, dust bunnies behind the toilet, toilet tank behind my back, mildewed plastic rubber duckies and plastic building blocks in primary colors and plastic dinosaurs and a brokenass plastic boat that does not float and a mildewed plastic translucent shower curtain, an oval of green soap with a thickness giving it three-dimensionality, three kinds of shampoo, two kinds of conditioner, baby shampooandsoap so they don't cry, shampooandconditioner to save time I guess, a blue towel hung on the rack behind me above the toilet tank, a dark blue towel hung on the hook behind the door, a lighter blue towel hanging over the shower curtain rod, a towel the same blue as the first under my feet where there used be a ragged bathmat of which she dispensed. The hook on the door under the towel is brushed chrome. The trap and pipes in the cabinet under the sink are plastic. The toilet is porcelain. The faucet is chrome splattered in dried toothpaste. The faucet in the bathtub is chrome layered in soap scum and ringed by mildewed caulk. The towel rack under the towel and above and behind me is chrome, shiny and out of sight. My pants are zipped and buttoned and belted and on because I am not using the bathroom. I am using the bathroom but not the toilet. I am using the toilet but my excretory organs are not. Okay they are, for support physical and spiritual and verbal, but not the typical biologically evolved excretory organs you think of when you think of excretory organs, unless you have an unnatural obsession, which people do, not the excretory organs siphon-jet toilets are designed for, which are the excretory organs of the filthy, the toxic, the unnecessary, the solid, the liquid, the liquid that should be

solid and the solid that should be liquid, the inefficiencies of the body. Which come to think of it could describe the excretory organs I do mean, even though I mean others. Okay I mean my mouth for one. My hand for another. There are others I think. Perhaps my eyes. Surely my ears. I have more excretory organs than most. I have more waste than most. I have waste that is more than most excretory organs can handle or afford or endure. I have my pants on because I'm done with pretense. She will be fine. She is fine. I knew she would take care of it, of Lilly. I know she will take care of it. I know she is taking care of it. She takes care. She always does. She is a good woman. There is a forcedairventregister in the floor. Warm air is being forced out of it. The furnace is controlled by the thermostat which is set for various temperatures during the day depending on who is supposed to be home and what those people are supposed to be doing. I should ask the thermostat what I'm supposed to be doing but it is not present with me in the bathroom. It is elsewhere and I am here and so it cannot concern me. The hot air exiting the floor and entering my space concerns me. It should not concern me. Only what happens on the page concerns me. Limiting concerns to intrabathroom concerns is a limiting limit, which is why I chose it, to take a step in the right direction. No window. The light is on. Two bulbs in a fixture for four because with four it is too bright and hot and a waste. A ventilation fan is set into the ceiling. It is off. Its switch is next to the light switch in the same switchplate, a dualswitch switchplate. Within the wall housing the switches and the wiring junctions is a doublewide dualswitch junction box I've never seen. I installed a light outside the garage and wired it to the switch for the light inside the garage, except with its own switch, which I added to the first switch by retrofitting the original to a dualswitch configuration. I cut holes in the wall with a skill saw and snaked wire along struts and cut holes in the ceiling and bored holes in joists and it didn't go as smoothly as I'd planned or look as nice as I'd hoped but the house hasn't burned down and it was all a long time ago. A long time ago does not concern me. The door is closed. It's a cheap door. As in not costing much and of poor construction. Hollow. Light material. As in not weighing much. It does not emit light. Though it does have some shitty plastic-seeming surface treatment that makes it shinier than wood. There is no reason for its shininess. The door is functional in that it delineates my space and it shuts.

Something has to happen. That's why I'm here. Something has to happen in the story. Some action, some reaction, some raccoon. That is a mistake. I provide action, action provides interest provides readers. Readers provide ... Readers provide. Punctuation will not solve this. Readers provide: (pause) Readers

provide *pause* – Readers provide money? *Money?* I want to shoot myself. Change. Readers provide change. I believe in change. Coins. No, change. Oil. No, change. Diapers. No, change. Change. Yes, I think so. Getting better. I don't know. Getting different, then. Maybe. While staying the same. That's the one. Character change. Character change provided by the reader? The reader's character change. Internal change. Social change. Fiscal change. Evolutionary change. Whatever. I guess. If there is no change what is the point of writing? And if there is? Nevermind. The premise: if, then. Cause, effect. Change. Change is what I believe in, if I believe in anything, then I believe in change. Sorry, the wrong kind of if. I honestly have some difficulty in if, then statements. The difficulty being I do not believe in them outside of math. Mary has taught me about iff statements, though she only teaches me new mathematical maneuvers if and only if I do something around the house such as pick up my papers or mop or play ball with my boys or clean the toilet, but allow me to proceed. A reader wants to see a man, nay, a hero, fail. Or nearly so, depending. Wants to see what happens to a man when he is put through his paces.

* * *

Palo paces. In the enclosed bathroom smelling strongly of vomit and urine and faintly of tears and male and female sexual fluids. Salty liquids, in general. Providing their vapors to characterize the air. He looks out the window at the splash zone in the snow, snow melted in the splash zone, the splash zone plopped at the outlet of the wastewater pipe. There is a spray zone beyond the splash zone. There is a window. He has done something. Now something else must be done. Which is what happens whenever one does something. He made a choice, even if he characterizes the choice as not a choice. Now he must make another choice. Stay or go. Stay or go is always a choice. Specifically in this instance the space to stay in or go out of is the bathroom of Antoinette. If he goes out of the bathroom, the space to stay in or go out of will be Antoinette's room-cum-cabin. If he goes from there, the space will be the top of the hill-cum-mountain, and the choice will be to stay in or go out of the top of his known world. If he stays in the bathroom, the choice will still be to stay in or go out of the bathroom. If he chooses to stay in the room-cum-cabin, in the next moment he will again have to choose if he will stay in or go out of the room-cum-cabin. Stay or go, always, there is no in between. One cannot stay and go. Or perhaps one can but let there be one black and white thing in this world. The choice does not go away. Or rather it does but the next choice is the same choice and the time between the choices is infinitesimally small and the repetition creates

the effect of the choice never going away.

Palo paces. Two steps from wall to wall lengthwise. As this breadth also defines the breadth of the cabin, it follows or proceeds that the cabin is significantly smaller than it was when Palo entered. The space limitations might explain his difficulty making love with Antoinette, which was not difficult. The space limitations might also explain the plethora of possibilities breached in their lovemaking which they did not have time to explore. Possibilities he will not specify because he has no more desire to relive what did not happen than he has desire to relive what did. Reliving is infinitely more painful than living. Infinite pain might seem like a lot, but there was zero pain while living it, so there is nothing left for it but, relatively speaking, infinite pain. This kind of thing is what is attractive about the small confines of the bathroom and why he has thus far chosen repeatedly and innumerably to stay in it. As his space approaches zero, something, perhaps some nonthing as undefined as time, approaches infinity.

Palo paces. His sex-soiled shirt is a crusted wad in the corner. His pants are in the other room, the only room. With what remains of his underwear. His sticks stacked like cords of wood. Though his sticks are also here on the counter, built into a cabin. His sticks are everywhere, whatever they are worth. The door is locked, iff there is a lock. She was asleep, twitching, dreaming, when he slipped out of her, and probably she still is and will not come to the door. Unless he knocks, which would be unusual because he is inside the door and she outside from his point-of-view. Not to belabor the point, but he is not in the mood to do anything he knows is unusual. He is not concerned with the door. She will not try it. She is not waiting for the bathroom. She, Antoinette, is the kind of woman who does not mind leaking on the sheets. Even kind of revels in it. Believes that uncleanliness is living. Reb is not that kind of woman. That is a lie. Belief is too strong a word. She embraces the experience of bodily fluids. He walks, two steps, comes to a wall, turns 180 degrees, walks, one step for each foot, comes to a wall, turns 180 degrees, walks, comes, turns, walks, walls, turns, walks one step, turn 90 degrees, takes ring from light switch it is not on, inserts finger in ring, opens door, turns off light, walks.

Enunciate Spasm and Walk

Out of the bathroom, thank god. Not much reason to it but reason only goes so far in decision-making. And remember he is in the process of losing his wits. I got him out so now he can do something else. Grow more actively witless rather than watch some schmuck who fooled around piss away his sanity because he won't leave the bathroom. There are more engaged means of losing one's mind. I feared he was stuck in looping repetitiveness, the agony of which drives people crazy daily but which is boring. I feared neither Antoinette nor Reb would have a fair chance at him. I feared he would never collect sticks in the woods again, and all those sticks uncollected would collect on the woodland floor of their own accord and rot. Nevertheless I fear the only way for Palo to fully grasp who he is is by being alone in the bathroom forever and step-by-step turning the screw and by going he has turned down a great proposition and missed the opportunity of his life, the only way for him to mean anything. Well, he's gone and done what he's done and now he and I and you live with it, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and health, for as long as we all shall live, or longer, for as long as this story shall live, which might be shorter. A stroke of luck, remembering the ring. What he'd done with it, how little that matters, but what he'd do with it, an object, an event, a change to break the repetition, a link in the chain of causality, a synchronization of events in the past and in the now: he puts on his ring regardless of if he ever took it off. All in all, I believe I am relieved he is gone from the bathroom, or in the process of going. It is something to do. I am relieved. Past participles disappoint me.

I am the Author. A pause here in the action as I am relieved. As I relieve. As I relive. Sometimes you have to flatout lop off letters until a thing can stand. We're not missing anything. I should know. I may not be Palo, but still. They call me Kol, more often than not, when they call me anything, which is not often. Sometimes it sounds like Cole or Coal or Koal. Other times it sounds like cold or cool or coon or colt or coil or skol or cola or kola or collar in the English pronunciation or collar in the Spanish pronunciation. Once, it sounded like okra. But it is Kole, I think. Once, when I hadn't used my name in some time, I spelled it as Kale and for quite some time gave my name as Kale, when I gave my name. Which was not often and is not and is not my name. In fact, I do not give my name. I am horrible with names. With pronouns in general. Not to mention nonpronouns.

I do not give you my name as a confession, and I do not give you my name as a nonconfession. What I give, what I ink, what I relieve, what I write, is all involuntary, or an involuntariness I've given myself to to reveal a truth about a man. What shit. An untruth and with two to's too. To tell a sad story. I don't believe in sad stories. To tell a happy story. I don't believe in happiness. I made myself happy with that declaration. Relax, soon I'll be sad. Happy, sad, happy, sad, happy, sad. My god, is there no equilibrium? To tell a story. What story? I don't believe in stories. I don't believe in statements of belief. My god, what haven't I already said? To explore sin. My god, why have you forsaken me? I said that once, didn't I? The explore sin thing, not the forsaken me thing; I know who said that; I'm not Jesus. That doesn't mean anything. Sin has been thoroughly explored, every cranny and declivity probed and exposed. Which doesn't mean I wouldn't mind exploring it some more. But further exploration is unnecessary, like most else. Not to imply that what I do is necessary, god forbid. It is not eating or drinking or breathing or procreating or sleeping or excreting, which I've claimed it is. Which are only necessary if you want to live. Or perpetuate living. To live then. Perhaps that is vague and internally conflicted and self-negating enough to be the answer. What was the question? Not to bring Palo to life or to give him life or for Palo to live. Because he doesn't live. I don't care about Palo, let me say once and for all, definitively and without judgment or implication of irony or ambiguity. He does not exist. To enunciate existence I'll say; I do say; I write, because it has a poeticism, poetry rather, prettiness I mean, what I wrote is pretty you should know, and because existence is a hard word to enunciate. As is enunciate. I have to believe there is some benefit when I say words that are hard to say, even if I only write them. I don't have to believe anything.

To finish, or at least to bring us around. Kale became Kate which became Coat which became Coal, and from there you can only imagine, until we are back where we are with my name.

To finish again, writing is a sort of spasm, and I am not sure of the worth of spasms.

* * *

Palo is outside the door. He sits bareassed on the step, which is a log ripped lengthwise, which is what it means to rip a log. It was probably ripped with a whipsaw, because that is how logs were ripped before everything was milled lumber. The step was probably whipsawed then, by two men, two men who

knew how to saw, two men long dead along with the ability to saw, two sawyers, one down in the sawpit, the other atop the log. A great exertion was exerted to make the step Palo sits on. Someone once really wanted this step and applied their skill and muscle to make it. He sits neither gratefully nor ungratefully. Rather he is neither grateful nor ungrateful for the step. What is the posture of gratefulness? His sitting is ungraceful. His posture is ungraceful. His position is ungraceful. He pulls on his socks still damp from his earlier exertions in climbing up the mountain. He places his feet in his boots and laces them tight. Though haste would seem appropriate, and he did indeed not make any effort to somehow reclaim the remains of his underwear to string around his waist, nor is he attempting to salvage his pants from Antoinette's teeth, for she put them there for a reason, for surely there must be a reason, for there always is, in this case perhaps to muffle or stifle, which?, her cries, or perhaps she did so to not bite off her tongue in an epileptic fit, or it could be some combination of the two, and even if the dependent clause is far too far from the independent clause, which is slow to come, but must if it is not to completely disregard the physical laws and inherent constraints of being a part of a larger sentence, or rather the independent clause is its own sentence and therefore the dependent clause would be doing the disregarding, which would be to abandon its identity in the hubristic hope of becoming more or less or precisely what it is, and, but, or, although if intent is to be laid on a clause perhaps the independent should be laid with it, for it is what waits, withholds, clamps, wanting desperately to come last, for all clutching clauses to come before it, to deposit the last word, and in that self-revelatory pursuit it abandons all the dependent clauses before it which depend on it, which need it, which beseech it to be present with them, connected to them if only by a comma, or even a conjunction, even if grammatically tenuous, until they finally say a ragged and naked fuck you and walk off to become their own frowned upon, misunderstood, incomplete sentences, he does not begin to think of going without his boots. Not without his boots.

He left his sex-saturated shirt in the bathroom. His torso regrets it; the rest of him knows his torso would be colder for being clothed in a wet shirt.

He left all his sticks. Which he should regret because they are his life's work, but he needed his hands free to open and close doors and be ready to ward off Antoinette if necessary, which was not necessary, and his hands are not hands that are adept at juggling. Instead of regretting his sticks, he is happy he left them. That sounds sick, him happy at a time like this. Satisfied. Pleased. No, no. You must understand this is a minute happiness, a seed of happiness in a great

plain of grass and sedge and unhappiness, a sort of self-loathing happiness, a pleasure in personal pain kind of happiness. An inability to be completely consumed by pain, an animal reflex to find the positive in the void. No, perhaps no matter what way he says it, you will not understand. He figures if he is going to ruin his life, which he has done, he may as well ruin it all, every aspect, smash it leave it fuck it, so that he, Palo, may cease to exist. Ceasing his existence is an act that would satisfy him.

But for now, he needs to go. To get away from Antoinette, so she can begin the slow climb out of the hole he puts her in by going. He does not know what he has done to her, he cannot, he is not inside her, except that she is crying. He does not know what she expected except sex, except that sex is never just sex. He has hurt her and he hurts her more by going but staying longer hurts Reb more if there is any adding to how much he has hurt her if her hurt is not already infinite, if there is a finite amount of hurt divvied amongst the three of them, like they are each teacups and the hurt is poured into them by an unseen hand, which would imply a perhaps limitless quantity of hurt, although each of them would only be able to hold so much before overflowing. Which may explain tears. Or perhaps he is the teapot, the source of the hurt, the quantity of which may as well be infinite relative to the capacity of the teacups, and so by going away he takes the hurt with him, to let the cups' hurt evaporate to emptiness. Which at least would give him a reason to go away.

Which would be and is very elegant. But the reason he goes is he cannot stay. It hurts too much. He is not a man familiar with hurt, if there are such men. He was such a man, if there ever were. He now knows emptiness. He now knows he is a man who cannot stand with such hurt, he can lie with it or he can walk with it. He will try walking for a while. But he left a large piece of himself in the bathroom. He is not sure which piece it was. Perhaps the piece that cares.

The crying inside grows louder. She has removed his pants from her mouth. The crying inside grows nearer. The crying inside stops. His pants cannot do that. Without sound, he doesn't know where she is. The door opens. She stands in the doorway, naked, longhaired, redrimmed, saltstreaked, a stick in her hand.

You said you were leaving.

I am.

You're still here.

I am trying.

Fuck trying. You're talking. Do it you fuck. Go.

She pelts him with the stick. She reaches for another. He does not know what to do. He was going to go, but being hit by the sticks hurts, and something inside of him, probably the hurt, wants the hurt inflicted by her to never stop. He looks at his feet, rather his boots on his feet, waiting for a crown, a mantle, an armor of stick pain. He feels blood trickle. He will stay. He will give her all his blood, trickling, dripping, globbing on the ground. He will die for her in a prolonged ecstasy of pain and blood and bowed head.

In the dirt at his feet is scratched the word WALK. This is an unusual place for the written word to be, which speaks to him. He listens to this word in the dirt. If nothing else, it reminds him he is not the only person in the world. He changes his mind. He turns. As he walks out of the clearing in the larch grove, past the almost but not quite saturated ground of the splash zone and leech field of the outlet pipe, and into the larch grove and away from poor beautiful lonely woodland gypsylike Antoinette forever, she throws stick after stick after stick after him without words, each of which stones him in the back, each of which he relishes.

Coal or Cole or Coil and Your Story

And what of the preponderance of this word which, which is a very ponderous word which they teach requires a precomma to add to the gluttony of punctuation. Which is something from a term paper or inductive or deductive reasoning or at any rate writing that is trying to prove something or at least argue a premise, which is not good writing, at least in fiction, fiction being closer to the truth and therefore without premise. Which is a definitive statement of belief for Christ's sake, which introduces a clause with as much subtlety as Santa Claus; whiches are from the time of Santa Clauses, when clauses were saints and witches straddled broomsticks, but that time is in the past. The saintliness of punctuation and grammar and meaning and words and anything written and therefore he who writes is passed. This writing is unsaintly, which is bad, whatever that means, good writing and bad writing, it means nothing, or it does, we all know good apples and good sunsets and good pees and good sex when we taste them or see them or hear them or smell them, and good books too then, though there is less encountering of them and less agreement on which is which. The good is what moves us. So definitive! Good writing does not use exclamation points. A good pee is a very still kind of movement, an outward movement. Good sex inspires and requires much movement physically and vocally, unless it is that slow quiet kind of sex, which is rarely as good but has the potential to be better. Good sex moves us to love, or else to hate. Good sex makes more babies than bad sex. That may not be true but if there were logic in the world it would be and it fits my sample size and suits my purposes so let's say it is. Good apples are more likely to be eaten. But a good pee is no more productive than a bad pee, both kinds of peeing producing pee. And a good sunset provides nothing more useful than a moment of spiritual satisfaction which a bad sunset lacks, though both end the day equally, if one with less definition than the other. How do good books move us? Inwardly, to dig into ourselves. How is that movement? You cannot dig very far into your belly before you come out your back. We're not digging to China. Good writing brings China to you, there, so you don't have to go. Vicarious. I said, wrote that once. Though perhaps with a different word or words. I hate repeating myself, especially when I'm wrong and haven't said it but intend to say it in the future and am therefore repeating something I've never said and no longer know if I ever will. Is that all good writing is, a travelogue of places we'll never go?

Good writing is not writing about writing. I've written that more than once. I'm doing what I set out not to do and what I've already done. I write about writing,

which disgusts me. Mostly because readers don't want to read it, which means they become notreaders, which strips them of their identity and my livelihood. Readers don't want to read about writing, they want to read writing, writing written by the author without too much of the author in it. That sounds like the author talking, which it is, it always is. And so the author, who is I, is to annihilate his presence. It is hard to write while annihilated, especially coherently, if coherence is what you're into. Okay, annihilate is too much, a war term when this book is about love, not war, so a love term is what we need: withdraw. The author is to withdraw his presence, and the good writing will be what's left. But the withdrawal method doesn't work I tell you, I have experience, it ruins the experience, you never finish in the right place and it never feels right and you always leave something of yourself behind and fertilize new writers no one wants to fill the gap you left, and then there's the mess, and what a mess. I prefer the rhythm method, it doesn't work either, but it's more enjoyable, come and go as you please according to the uterine calendar of buildup and flush, as the uterus pleases then, at least you always know where you are and where you end. Where do I end? All this writing about writing, all this writing about writing about sex, where are my words in all of it? Always worried about satisfying the reader. What the reader wants. What about me? Is there no me? Where am I?

Well, I can think of worse things to write about. Which means things could get worse. I can always think of worse things. There is that. Oh no, much worse than pudenda and scabies and hygiene and illicit acts and the proximity of the playground to the waste treatment facility not to mention the food processing plant and the spiritual congress industrial park. Much worse. Do readers want to read about writers writing about reading? To return to an earlier unanswered question, oh my god this would not be a bad time to die, one of these times when I return to where I have been and nothing has changed except perhaps a pronoun I will die, Is the reading unsaintly if the writing is unsaintly? If and only if? Is the unsaintliness of reading conditional? Conditioned on the unsaintliness of the writing, which was not established but merely raised as a possibility in the question, which was and is unanswered, though leaving a question unanswered is in and of itself an answer. All questions are unanswered, which is a statement of belief, which I do not believe in. When repeating a point I have previously repeated, I like to slap myself in the face, but no, this is about you, would the reader prefer I repeat it in the same terms to emphasize the repetition in hopes of continuing to probe the same nerve-rich spot and trigger a response, or should I do it in new terms, restate it in a

reworked way and thereby alter the angle of attack? Attack, I lost it, I'm sorry, back to the terms of war. There are other positions to take too on any point, if there is a point, and other points of entry. I will return here to delve, I promise, there is nothing else to write about but me and you, yes I have other commitments, I am beholden to a story, to Palo, having set him in motion, having made him do something, but I am committed to you because you alone are here with me now and no other and I pledge to be faithful to our faithfulness through self-absorption and existential doubt, in good writing and poor, in love and not in love, it is still too early for you to tire of my limited tricks, in fidelity and infidelity, for you will read other books but you are not right now, and I will write other books if I can muster the mustard, but never now, in the here and now between you and I, you and me, me and you, we'll exchange positions sometimes to mix it up, screw propriety, we do what we want, this is our world, there is nothing else, until the end is reached nothing else exists but this communication between us, wherein everything is possible, I can be anyone, you can be anyone, we can be who we want to be, together, in this space of our own making, which we make together, in our own time.

To your earlier question, or was it mine? That's not the question. It doesn't matter, there is so little difference between us. A non-answer: Readers want to read about writers writing about sex. No, readers want to read about writers having sex. Zeroing in now. Readers want to read about readers having sex. To specify, Readers want to read about themselves having sex. What happened to having sex? Readers want to read about sex so they don't have to have it. My god, the repetition. My god is meant to convey both pleasure and pain. It's a sloppy business. They want to experience without having to experience. Enough said. Less mess. Vicarious. There is that god damned word for it that I've said before, which I've said before, which says all I've said in one word and makes all the preceding a waste.

I, the author, in the bathroom, whoever I am, apologize to you, you know who you are, and if you don't what are you doing here, I don't speak for you, I do sometimes because I can't hear you and I have selective hearing, but I don't now because I'm spent from our exchange, which makes me more thoughtful than verbose. The problem is there is no distinction between me and writing, there is just me writing. I can't talk about me without talking about writing and I can't write without writing about me. I could just stop writing perhaps. But then what would I be? Oh goddamn hell, where is Palo? It is so easy to forget myself but I remember why I'm here: to put a man through his paces and see what shakes loose. To map his decline. To have him for once do something,

something that assaults the senses, something that makes him feel alive if only for a moment, something that may or may not be wrong but for which he feels regret. And then, to make him do another thing. To send him to the wilderness to wander, to never make it home, it's the journey not the destination and all that claptrap, to force him to learn who he is, face himself, watch his mind decompose, his love shred, his person fail, and experience him never making it home. To tell a story, even if you don't believe in stories.

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Palo exits the clearing and enters the larch ringing the protuberance of the mountain's summit. He chews a stick. The stick is one of his sticks, one of the sticks that pelted him, welted him, stoned him. The last stick has been thrown. Antoinette and her oneromcabinwithabathroom in the woods are out of range, out of earshot, out of sight, out of mind, except for what he sees in his mind, which is not much, he does not look, one foot in front of the other, except to pick up as many sticks as he can cradle in his arms, for no other reason than that is what he does, collect sticks, and to occasionally think, What to do now, or, I will never go to the bathroom again. He must mean I will never go to a bathroom again, indefinite versus definite article usage there, and the definite makes no sense, as it is bodily impossible no matter the efficiency attained. So what he thinks is, I will never use a toilet again, or, Who am I except a crusty naked infidel in boots in the woods with an armful of sticks as inadequate receptacles for my rent piety. He does not loiter in such inquiries. Which might be destructive. He abides in movement and time and his feet to move him to a destination even if he does not know where that is. Self-examination will only get him so far, which is not very far, there is not much space inside his skin, and discussing self-examination will get him less far, there being yet less space in his mouth. All this is hogwash, he just does not have anything to say. He left that part of him, the part of him that says, in the bathroom. He is not thinking but continuing. He is hungry. He chews a stick, which is something for his mouth to do. The sweetness is soon sucked out.

As he enters the larch ring, all his sticks turn to stone. No, not to stone. To stones. Why this happens he does not know. The change should make him think, What does it mean that the sticks are now stones, how is such a change possible, should I call it a metamorphosis or perhaps transubstantiation, what is change for change's sake, what is progress, but it does not. He accepts blindly in stride, perhaps reasoning it is tomorrow, an alternate day, a day when he gathers stones, though time is clearly not passing quickly enough for it to be

tomorrow because he feels the joy and pain, no, fulfillment and emptiness, not those words either, characteristic of time passing not at all. No, he reasons nothing. He accepts that the nature of his objects was stick and is stone. Stones are harder than sticks, both in weight and stickiness, harder to carry then, which means he drops them all. He is thankful again for the boots, which mitigate the pain. To his credit, the stick in his mouth metamorphoses into a stone of appropriate size to suck on, no more chewing because Palo must preserve his teeth. He has no money for dental work. The stone in his mouth is something more like a pebble. No, a pebble is too small; he might accidentally swallow it instead of his saliva and choke like an infant on a raisin, which is much softer and more forgiving than a stone, as an infant is to a man. A small stone then. Better than a rock. A rock is too rough. A rock can be from anywhere. If they were rocks one could say, He dropped his rocks. Or better, His rocks were dropped. Better still, His rocks dropped. The passive voice has its purpose, no matter what anyone says, which is often a purpler purposefulness than the active. But unlike a stone, a rock cannot be used for building, though there is no implication besides the wordchoice of stone that these stones are to be used for building. Or anything. What exactly Palo does is a mystery. Feel free to feel frustrated with not knowing. Excuse me, I am where I am not. Permit me a moment to leave. To Palo's credit, the stick metamorphoses to a small stone of appropriate size for sucking and not into a large stone that would shatter his teeth, sever his tongue, and rip his mandible from his face. Which would, in the woods far from home, cause his death. Which is not an end he is actively pursuing or trying to avoid. The bit with the stone can be viewed as either fortunate or unfortunate then, depending on where you stand, in Palo or outside of him, as no one wants to contend with that quantity of another's blood, whereas we rarely deal with that quantity of our own blood except to spill it on purpose, though our heart pumps it about, though our heart is hardly us. Whether it is classified as fortunate or unfortunate is your choice, not Palo's, because Palo does not care at this moment if his face is ripped from his face and run through the paper shredder. On the other hand, if there is another hand, the stone bit could be classified as neither fortunate nor unfortunate, but as something that happens. He picks up the stones he can pick up and continues, leaving the remains to lie.

At the edge of the larch ring, under a bed of khaki gold needles, he encounters a knit stocking hat. The stocking hat is the color of baby poop, not unlike the gold needles, though needles are two-dimensional. The consistency of neither the needles nor the hat is that of baby poop. His stones drop. He drops his stones.

He looks up, so much movement. The larch are naked, bare, needle-free. Hence the needles on the hat. Everything is naked, or everything that matters, he, Antoinette, or she was when he left her and therefore forever will be, the larch, the sky. He rationalizes that he has skipped tomorrow and moved onto full-blown winter, which would allow for the snow he remembers he is standing in and the hat and needles are under. He feels fortunate he caught sight of the hat before he remembered the snow. And again, blessed by his boots. Unfortunately, this rationalizing is again an example of what he could be and probably should be rationalizing as he gazes up at the naked larch, but the business in the cabin seem to have made a dumb brute of him, or else he is busy missing the part of himself he left in the bathroom, if he is capable of missing anything, or else the blue sky is ironically making him vaguely melancholy with its inorganic beauty, really the possible reasons he stares up are innumerable and will not be enumerated here, except to say he does so. It seems highly probable that at some point he must decide if he will dig the hat out from under the snow or leave it. Also, there is the everpresent choice of stay or go. Four possibilities: Stay with hat. Stay without hat. Go with hat. Go without hat. Also, if he digs the hat out from under the snow and needles, will he put his stones in it or his head in it or nothing in it? But if nothing, why dig it out? Nevertheless, possibilities, not justifications: eight. Stay with head in hat. Stay with stones in hat. Stay with nothing in hat. Stay without hat. Go with head in hat. Go with stones in hat. Go with nothing in hat. Go without hat. He is not sure whether to begin making his choice by separating it into its constituents and narrowing the possibilities, such as by first choosing whether to stay or go, then whether or not to keep the hat, then what to put in it, or by taking a leap of faith and choosing one of the numerous and fully explicated choices straight away. The problem with the former is he very well understands, if such a state is possible, that by making a step-by-step process of choosing, new choices will always be tagged to the end or popping up in the middle before he reaches the end, such as He is hungry, should he eat the hat? If so, he is thirsty, should he use it as a vessel to drink snow from before eating it? If not, what should he eat? If so, one dies more quickly from dehydration than starvation, so even though he has chosen to eat the hat, should he go back on his word and choose now to not eat the hat to keep it for a non-glass drinking glass, or does he want to stay true to his word and stand by his choice and maintain a steady grasp on his dignity and eat the hat and have nothing to drink from and thereby die? But there are needles, should he drink from needles? Should he get down on all fours, naked but for boots, and scoop snow into his mouth with his bare hands? Would that satiate the need to both eat and drink? Would that be more economic? Is

economy the end goal? In the process of elucidating and perhaps even making these evermore minute and specific and unspatiated choices, the greater choice of what to do is never made. The problem with the other kind of choosing is it demands an almost impossible act of self-denial to break from the state of infinite resignation and reason, which is what makes us human, and trust to no rationale but the gut, he is hungry, really hungry, and leap to such a monumental choice. This method of choosing implies there is some inherent value in what the gut wants, and that one can determine what the gut wants, no no, no determining, just following, that is the point. What is of questionable location in the pro-con matrix is the value of the gut's desires. Metaphorical gut here, though it is seated in and has an intimate relationship with the literal gut. Which is perhaps the reason for the metaphor. He is in short having difficulty choosing how to choose. He is not short. The greater the problem, if a problem is even possible, since understanding seems to not be possible, which is a problem, at least socioeconomically, is that Palo suffers indefinite existential suffering when choosing, and if you are the type of person who does not value existential suffering and interprets such a characteristic as a character flaw, unlike the Author who interprets the absence of such a characteristic as a character flaw and tangentially asserts that existential suffering is spiritual suffering, please insert the suffering of your choice, physical, emotional, material, marital, spiritual, it doesn't matter, starvation, irritable bowel syndrome, a spear in the side, social anxiety disorder, a kidney stone, pancreatic cancer, pregnancy, a palpitating soul, societal oppression, lost love, debilitating poverty, faithlessness, there is surely some variety of suffering you value and that is what Palo is suffering, Palo is yours too, all of ours, and he suffers when he chooses, and therefore he does not believe in choosing, and yet he believes you are nothing but the integral of all your infinitesimal choices made over time.

Where is Palo?

He is not here. Are none of these words his?

Sustenance

The problem is Palo's name should no longer be Palo. Considering the changes he has undergone. It should be Stone, or Rock. In Spanish for consistency. Consistency is a godsend in stories. A story is what I'm writing. Stone in Spanish is Piedra. *Pietà*. *Pietà* is at least Italian, closely related to Spanish, a pear to an apple here, Ishmael to Isaac, half-brothers by the father, which is almost consistent, at least Abraham was screwing more than his wife for consistency's sake. And then there is the gravitas of changing one's name to *Pietà*, or having one's name changed to *Pietà*, due to its overt symbolism of a virgin mother holding her dead crucified godson in her lap, no, not symbolism, the *Pietà* actually means a representation of the Virgin Mother mourning over her dead crucified suicided songod thanks to Michelangelo, no, that is one well known example but it is not his fault, he is so dead, a deep or at least long and wide stream of artistic obsession has set the meaning of *pietà* in stone, though it also means pity and compassion and piety and reverence, and symbolizes despair and hope. And god and man. And life and death. And love and lovelessness. Is there anything I have not included? I aim to be inclusive. Pipe up. You bought the book, you've earned a say in its meaning or symbolism, whichever you choose, but not both, unless you bought two books, then you could use one say one way and the other another, though that would be splitting your says and they just might wind up negating each other, trust me, I'm experienced, but don't let me discourage you from buying more than one book. If your name were Palo and suddenly, all of a sudden, with sudden suddenness, never use sudden in a story or nobody will buy it, your name were *Pietà*, what would you do? Nevermind. Irrelevant and not at all what I mean and misleading in that it implies that what you would do is relevant to this story. I mean, such a name change would be on par, I hate golf, with Jacob becoming Israel. If a tad less grand. But who can say what will come, when Jacob became Israel he did not know Israel would one day symbolize a nation, if a fucked nation, let alone an entire people. Now there is the logic, the gods are not without their logic, it merely takes time, enormous and unforgiving quantities of time, bail it in buckets and bundle it in twine, as to why the gods will not allow me to change Palo's name. *Pietà* is a word freighted with meaning. When god, okay God to be specific, was permitted to change Jacob's name, Israel had no meaning. I just made that up. I'm just hoping, praying, that is why. That is why I cannot change Palo's name to *Pietà*. A little deduction is all that's required. Or induction. Whatever works. Adduction. Outduction is not a word. Until you start using it as if it were and it acquires a meaning. You do it. I'm not up for it. All I need to do is

choose a meaningless name for Palo that means stone or rock. I'm hungry. I'm sorry, bodily needs should have nothing to do with this. I'm not good at such meaningless choices. Or meaningful choices. Whatever that means. And we all know how Palo feels about meaninglessness, and therefore meaning. He is not given to talk of them. I put words in his mouth so he acknowledges their existence. You'd think some common community of existent subjects, meaning, meaninglessness, himself, would give him some sympathy, some cordiality, some decency to say Hello, but apparently it does not. His mouth is getting harder to find.

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Palo has not encountered anyone for a long time who would call him Palo. He has not encountered anyone for a long time. He has not encountered anyone since he left Antoinette, and he does not remember her using his name, and does not expect to, he is alone in the woods, descending, and Reb did not say his name this morning when he left so many yesterdays ago before dawn whole seasons ago back in the fall before she awoke because she was asleep. Since he does not refer to himself in his head in the third person, he is in the early stages of forgetting his name, though he does not know it. He does not know if not knowing he is Palo means he is not Palo, because that is not something he thinks about. He does not refer to himself in his head at all, not in the first person, not in the second person, not in the third person, not in singular or plural, not in however many persons there are. He does not know if this lack of self-referentialness means he has no identity. There is no evidence he refers to anything in his head. Nothing is known of him. Except his actions. Which is frightening. Which are disconcerting.

He tries putting both his head and his stones in the hat. That does not go well. He carries some stones in his hat, turned upside down so they will not fall out, and one stone tucked in his cheek like an acorn. For all purposes, the stone is an acorn, but less nutritious. He descends the hill naked but for his boots. He descends by a different path than he climbed by, no, he descends by no path, which is different than the path he climbed by. He descends with a cavity in the soft zone between his ribs and pelvis. Which is to say he is hungry, though he does not say it. He tries to hold a steady downhill course, though this is more difficult than it sounds. He is often suddenly heading uphill and must turn around and go the way he came.

He comes upon a fowl. A duck. A grouse. He is silent. The grouse permits him to

come very close, perhaps because Palo makes no noise, perhaps because Palo smells foully of a passive prey animal, such as deer or grouse, perhaps because it does not know Palo is there because he gives no evidence of being so, perhaps because grouse are not very smart. Palo bends down and picks up a large stick, which becomes a club. He raises it but it turns into a large stone too heavy for a man to hold in one hand above his head. He brings it down on the small head of the grouse, crushing it. There is some blood. Some bone. An eye projected. He turns the bird over, ventral side up. He steps on its wings and pulls on its feet. The innards slurp out slick as a withdrawn promise. The innards dangle from the feet. The muscle and organs, the edibles, limp and dripping and warm. All feathers remain with the skin of the evacuated bird. He removes the spit-saturated stone from his cheek. He eats slowly, before the bird gets cold. He begins with the breast. He continues with a thigh. He swallows kidney, liver, heart, each a pill with its own texture, each a pill he chews. He licks blood from his lips. The sky is blue. Branches are brown, speckled in green. He stops shivering for a moment. He continues with the other breast, the other thigh. He chews each mouthful of muscle for a long time.

* * *

Forced air. A scratching at the door. I lie down on my stomach to look underneath the door. There is not enough space, so I bend my legs at the knee and dangle my feet in the air like a five-year old reading a book on the floor, though there is nothing to read but some piss stains and dust bunnies and the eyeball underneath the door, pressed to the floor, outside the door, looking at me.

Hi, the eyeball says.

Hi.

Pizza! the eyeball says. Pizza! she says again. Pizza! she says several more times because she, this eyeball, either finds repetition poetic or is desperate for her communication to be understood or wants to make me cry.

A piece of pizza is pushed under the door. A conventional piece of pizza, a triangle with an outer edge that is an arc of a circle, the piece being an eighth of a circle, a 45° section of a pizza pie, $\pi/4$ radians of a pie, pie in Spanish is foot, perhaps too then in Italian, though Italian doesn't matter, and I cannot see her feet but I am sure they are like mine, swaying in the air from her upright lower

legs held perpendicular to the plane of her body which is parallel to the floor, in contact with the floor, cheek pressed against the floor, though the eyeball is not yet five, they learn so young. We are head to head on our stomachs, the door between us, mirror images, but mutated, as she is a considerably shrunken version of me whose dimensions are somewhat out of proportion, whose limbs are too thick, whose hair is too red, whose head is too large, whose eye is too prevalent. Still, better than the image in the mirror in the bathroom, I imagine, I must imagine because I will not look there. Which begs the question of if I am the image in her mirror. I hope she doesn't think she looks like me.

The pizza lost a piece of pepperoni. She shoves it through with enthusiasm, Daddy!, and her poofy hand comes through too. I touch it on accident. Not on accident though that's what I tell myself to justify my transgression. Her skin is soft and she laughs, no, chortles and she grabs my finger and we go back and forth, a little tug-of-war that I let her win to the extent that I can, which is no great extent, there being a door between us.

I take back my frolicking finger. I eat the eyeball pizza. It is the best pizza I've ever eaten, unsurprisingly. It is not a surprising piece of pizza, except in its delivery. The eyeball is pushing her hand far under the door in search of my finger in exchange for the pizza, tempting me with touch, now the whole hand is in, now up to the elbow, nearly the shoulder. I am beginning to fear the entire eyeball will squeeze herself under the door like a mouse that can disjoin its joints and squeeze through holes much smaller than it, there is the head to remember, you can't disjoin your head even if you're a mouse, the head then is the limiting factor, when I remember this eyeball has a large head, much larger than the crack under the door. But despite knowing this, out of fairness, and in hopes of a bit of satiation, no, I am past hoping for satiation, but to compensate for what I cannot give her, I place in her hand the last bit of crust. She chortles some more. She slowly withdraws her hand and its prize. It takes a moment, a number of moments; it's a tight fit. As the last sight of her fistful of crust disappears, I speak.

Is it tomorrow yet?

The eyeball's feet thump, running away.

The dirty clothes in the corner I wad under the door. I fill the cracks. I don't want to know.

Golf Fir Table Stone Raccoonbear Fight

Palo walks down out of a cloud into a notcloud naked wearing boots and an evacuated grouse on his head and a small stone in his cheek and stones in his hat-cum-sack. The grouse-cum-hat's primary color is brown though brown is not a primary color, a variation of which is the primary color of Palo and most everything in the woods, except the new green, the ferns, the apple blossoms. Dried brown blood runs down his forehead. Dried brown blood stains his forehead where bright red blood once ran. He walks. Wings thump limply about his ears. He is in a word insatiable. He is in a word.

There is no word for what he does now. He roars. He does not say anything. He is out of words. He roars. He appears to think of emptying his sack of stones and throwing each stone downhill one-by-one and as he walks down and encounters a stone pick it up and throw it downhill and proceed to the next and thus continue downhill without carrying the stones of which he knows not the purpose as if he were playing golf with multiple balls and no clubs and no holes, but he appears to choose to not follow through on his apparent thought. He undoubtedly hates golf, or would if it existed for him, or at least he would hate what it has come to represent: real estate development, money, the American aristocracy, expensive pleasure, a good way to ruin a long walk, if he knew of golf's existence, though he may be attracted by the original game, the pure thing, uncorrupted, in Scotland, and be willing and even proactive in engaging the game in Scotland, if he knew of golf or games or Scotland. He chooses to not play solitary golf with his stones without clubs or holes or a score or balls or grass or pencils or people perhaps because he does not know the possibilities. In which case perhaps it is not a choice, though it is not the choice's fault he does not know.

What is possible perhaps narrows for him because he is losing his capacity for rational thought. Though perhaps it is the opposite that is true. Perhaps what is possible expands because his rationality declines. Or perhaps it is the other opposite; his possibilities are shrinking because his rationality expands.

He chooses instead to pummel a fir tree senseless with his sack of stones. The fir tree does not appear to care. The fir tree does not fight back. The fir tree does not give any outward indication of pain. The fir tree does not hurt him. Fir needles are friendly. The fir tree takes it like a tree. The fir tree loses some bark and absorbs a dent. He continues. He goes. The fir tree, largely unharmed,

stays.

* * *

Dear, the door says, the hollow door, the door with some kind of plastic coating, the door with some thin margin of wood in it somewhere, below the surface, above the hollow, not at center, however processed, the door whose qualities somehow inspire excessive imprecision, no, somehow inspire some excessive use of the imprecise word some, no, sometimes some is more precise than precision because precision lies or at least does not tell the whole truth, which we teach our children is lying, in a very nice or apologetic or alluring voice, I need some help picking up a table.

What table? I speak in spite of myself. I speak in a voice of one who suffers from chronic low-level annoyance. I speak in an annoyed voice. I speak in an annoying voice. That I speak is annoying. The introduction of absurd unforeshadowed objects such as tables is not what annoys me. The expectation that I speak annoys me. That I am spoken to annoys me.

I got us a new table, the door says.

The expectation that it is my business to traffic one absurd object for another when the one already possessed is a perfectly sufficient absurd object annoys me.

How much did it cost? I say.

It's new used. It's nice. Seats six. Black granite, the door says.

The expenditure of money on an absurd object, which I could just as easily have made, which also would have been annoying, and not possible because though I can write into existence a shiny black granite table that seats six I cannot make such a thing, which is an annoying shortcoming, annoys me.

What's wrong with the old table?

It only has three legs, the door says. The door, having no legs, is jealous.

So do I, I say. I annoy me.

It's a nice table, the door says. It's a lot cheaper than it should be, the door says. It'll make me happy, the door says. The door wants a friend.

My inability to cease annoys me.

It's heavy, the door says, I need your help. The door has no hands, and thus cannot lift anything that is particularly heavy.

Don't you want a new table? the door says.

I want less noise.

Tables don't make noise.

That's not true.

This one will make no more noise than the one we have. Maybe less with a fourth leg.

I want less signal noise.

This isn't a turntable.

I want less background noise.

After the kids are in bed I'll lay on the table, the door says. The table will be hard and cold. I'll be wearing my skirt, but not by much. We'll christen it whatever you come up with. We'll explore what kind of noise it makes, it's natural frequency. Then I'll turn around and it'll be a turntable and it'll make music and we'll look down into the mirrored granite surface and be in the hard table that will cost us so much less than it should and I'll think of all the money we've saved by buying it and you'll think of whatever it is you think about, I don't care, it's a free ticket, use your imagination, you can be behind me and below me, we'll look into each other's eyes in the table and we'll all eat off it for breakfast in the morning.

The door is just talking, perhaps not even saying what it's saying, which is out of character for the door or anything to say. The door is hard. I am hard. The floor is hard beneath my feet. The toilet seat is a hard ring on my ass since I opened the lid and dropped my pants to once more feel more legitimate. Feeling

legitimate is hard. Writing is hard; living is harder; not living is not hard; traversing from living to not living and vice versa is hard; determining what is living and not living is hardest. Opening a door is hard or not hard. Picking up a slab of granite is hard on the back and irrelevant. Granite is hard. Making love to a hard door is hard, much harder than screwing a swallowed scream out of a rock-hard table with a pencil, and I will have nothing to do with the table. I will have no part of it.

* * *

Palo is face-to-face with a raccoon. Which is very large. Not a very large which, a very large raccoon. It is very large because it is a bear, except with circles around its eyes and a striped tail and the mind of a raccoon. It is perhaps the raccoon, though it is not a raccoon, except in appearance and mind. It does not have a stick in its mouth, but that information is not informative because there appears to be no sticks anywhere anymore. All the sticks on the ground are stones. The sticks still attached to trees are not sticks but branches, or perhaps sometimes twigs, but not sticks and therefore not stones. Branches are still alive. Sticks are not. Nor are stones. Such distinctions are important, but why is another question. What alive means is a branch which will not be broken.

The bear wants something from Palo. Or Palo wants something from the bear. He wants his life, but he will not give it. They fight: claws, mauling, blood, gutting, evisceration; it is hard to tell who wins and what winning is, winning is living and losing is dying, that is pert, but what is the condition of the living and what is mercy. It does not happen. There is a fight that does not happen. There is a fight that is only written. The difficulty is in that, perhaps, he is too smart for his own good, like a raccoon. He wants his hat, but he will not give it to him because it is on his head. He means the hat on his head, meaning the grouse. He offers instead his hat with the stones, though it is unclear if he knows which hat was the object of his desire in the first place. How this is communicated is hard to describe. He is not a talking bear. He is not a man who talks much. The simplest description is he points at the hat; he gives him the other hat.

The bear, being a raccoon, takes two small stones out of the hat and approaches them as tools, approaching them while they are in his paws, taking a mental approach to the stones he takes. He smashes the air between the rocks with the stones. Which does nothing. Sparks some sparks, but nothing. He tries to eat one, which does not work. He stacks one on top of the other but they keep falling over, or the topmost does. The bottommost is effective at being a stack of

one stone. The bear hurls the two stones away and declares them useless through his actions. Palo takes back his hat full of unthrown stones and is about to show the bear what stones are good for by braining him, he really should show him how they are useful, so the bear knows and so Palo can eat him, it is the only rational act. Palo is hungry and he will always be hungry, and he is naked and he could skin the bear and use the bear skin as his skin so instead of being naked he will be a bear, which is an order of magnitude more socially acceptable, but remember Palo is losing his mind, imagine it, a naked man in boots with his head stuffed in an evacuated grouse talking without talking to a raccooned bear that does not talk, all while refusing to relinquish and yet yielding his sinfully inappropriate stick of a name, for which he should stone himself to death, for it has ruined a perfectly acceptable if relatively loving family without advancing his career or significantly satisfying his passion, to use an oxymoron or paradox or histrionically anachronistic ox of a phrase, besides ruining his profession without advancing his love, whatever profession that may be, but having lost his mind he neither brains himself nor the bear, who does not have his mind either, but one of a raccoon. He is so singularly focused on going downhill that, after going uphill and searching for what feels like hours and picking up the mysteriously flat and heavy stones discarded by the bear, he proceeds downhill without further acknowledgement of the bear's existence. The bear shrinks to the size of a raccoon, dark rings still around his eyes and tail, the whole bit. He trails Palo downhill like a tail. Fine, like a dog with the body and mind of a raccoon and the air of a defeated bear.

As they go, as they go down, the bulbs come up. First crocuses then daffodils and hyacinth and blue bells and finally tulips.

May's Divide

It's May. I've decided. For how short a time Palo was in the cabin doing what he did, it took a long time. And all his walking, which is good for him, his health and that. He should slow down. He is walking too much; he needs to sit down, or squat, it doesn't matter, on his haunches, and smell the tulips, which don't smell much, or the hyacinth, which do, and relieve himself. Nevermind that where I live May is often not a beautiful month, rather February or July more bespeaks spring. It's the idea that counts for whoever's counting. It's been a while since I've used the word god; I should again, but I don't want to; I want to talk about May. The word May bespeaks spring regardless of the actualities of the month, but even here May hides the powerlines in leaf and bloom. The difficulty is in the sunlessness that dampens birdsong and mutes the sweet candy color of petals opening, anthers extending, and pollen bursting forth. Nevermind, just keep neverminding, all that is outside and I am inside, having escaped the seasons and the advance of time they lord over you and the sensations they demand of you, the productivity and torpor of summer, the resignation and belief of fall, the despair and anticipation of winter, the joy and joy of spring, oh who wrote that, who can imagine feeling just one way or even two for an entire season, other than tired, among other feelings the seasons make you feel hot and cool and cold and warm in that order if you start with summer and live in the northern hemisphere, the Coriolis effect is too weak to affect the direction the waters swirls when I flush and do not think I flush but it means my hemisphere has no effect on me, I live without hemisphere, without sphere, without here, with a hard pencil and a soft notebook, with a hard brittle broken pencil with soft lead within to be spread on a notebook that is neither soft nor hard but has profound tensile strength in one dimension or two but not three, maybe the fourth, in order that I may share with you what's important to me, namely the scum building in my bathroom. It's where I live. We have a relationship to suckle, and what relationships are suckled on is honesty, or at least an effort at truth, or at least a pretense if we agree that truth is a soft plastic thing hard to define, and so I cannot continue to tell you what you want to hear, if that is what I've been doing. The difficulty is I also have a relationship with Palo to maintain, not to mention others for they are not pertinent, a relationship that is not going well, or it is going too well. He appears to be leaving me, though it is hard to say because he does not communicate well, never has, though he's always listened, always except now, and, and well, that does not feel good, that being the feeling of him not listening, the sensation of him going, the realization that our relationship is starving, the pity

that he is losing his mind, the sympathy of his decline.

I'll tell you then what I don't want to hear, in the hopes that you will not want to hear it too. I don't want to hear that I hear the door talking to me again, or perhaps still. I don't want to hear it because it is not useful in my endeavor to produce something useful, something of value, something that says I am not still here but have gone somewhere in the metaphoric forward direction, something worth the while of the bathroom and Palo leaving and you not loving me.

Let's go for a walk, Cole, the door says. To breathe the air. It's beautiful out. The sun is shining, which is so rare. You must be stifled in there, and the smell, surely. The mildew fumes are going to your head I think. But I won't explain it, I know how you hate explanations. Let's go for a completely unexplained walk, a walk that will mean nothing. We'll walk. We'll walk forever. Allen will watch the kids and himself and we'll walk. We'll walk through the woods until the land begins to rise and we'll continue walking. We'll climb a mountain without even meaning to and find ourselves on the summit overwhelmed by the world, the sheer breadth bursting our chest cavities as we become our proximity to the sun, our presence in the sky, the folds of the earth, the eagles flying below us, the flying ants riding air currents zipping over the crest and down and down we will go past bear and elk and mountain lion until we find a horse, two horses, bridled and saddled because we will ride for a long time and riding bareback for very long hurts and you have no control unless you're a cowgirl and we're not cowgirls, no, bridles and saddles on the ground and the horses are cropping grass but we bridle and saddle them swiftly and mount and ride slowly. We ride to the other coast over rivers and plains and other mountains, through prairie and wood and we encounter no one but ourselves and more of it is miserable than not but when it is done the misery and suffering is not what we remember or think about, but the sea infinite before us. We sail across it on a boat because we know how to sail, we sail into the wind because that is how you sail, sometimes we sail with the wind too, we hoist a spinnaker, we sail every which way, on a sailboat, past hammerhead sharks and humpback whales and bottlenose whales and great blue whales and seagulls and terns and ducks and flying fish and state-sized regions of swirling sea trash and whatever sirens or sea lions or leviathans live at sea. And again we suffer and starve and dehydrate and hate each other and the wind always the wind at first exhilarating and then oppressive until it is gone and we pray for it so we can move and survive and arrive in Scotland, which is where we arrive. You've always wanted to go to Scotland, to play golf the way it was meant to be played, next to the ocean in the wind and wild grass and whatever heath is and dunes

and big rocks and small mountains by your side.

* * *

He leaves his steps behind. Where is he going? Down. And beyond down? You can only go down so far before you come out the other side. You evince a belief in geometry, specifically the geometry of geography, as well as the geometry of the sphere, as opposed to the geometry of existential Christian ecology which clearly states that the possibility and trajectory of despair and resignation is a limitless and infinite and necessary digging down into the truth and self, ascetic solipsism for the good of the people, or at least a person, lord help us, let geography be not our geometry, let the sphere know no bounds, let it be from this inner place that we take a great leap beyond ourselves, let all this decline be of some use. Or else let it be social anxiety disorder and let's medicate. Where is Palo? There is a cat hole. It is too small a hole for Palo. Perhaps it is a foxhole. Are you implying he used it? Or it could be a Judas hole. We should examine it for signs of life. Or it could be that we finally discovered the straining butthole of the world, see how it dilates, like an iris. I mean for signs of Palo. Which would explain the smell and our presence and its largeness. I'm going to poke around. Don't use your finger. How come there are no sticks? Don't fall in, this is an end of the alimentary canal, though it is impossible to say which end, we could say if we could measure the pressure, there is a positive or negative pressure within, the one to ingest the other to expel, if there are distinct ends, it is entirely possible that both ends are one, in which case the hole is used for both in and out because the contents of the hole cannot be constantly added to or evacuated, can they?, and are we inside the hole or outside of it?, but to more pressing matters which include not asking unanswerable questions even if they are the only kind worth asking, if this hole is both ends, there must be both positive and negative pressures within, which means we, or the hole, we and the hole now that we are in and of the hole, in the hole without passing the hole's threshold mind you, we are in the hole without passing through it, if the other side of the whole is out and this in then we are in between, if the other side is in and this out then we are in between, we are on the rim, on the cusp, no in the rim and in the cusp, let me say it, we and the hole are in either an impossible state or equilibrium, or both. There are no signs Palo used this hole. Isn't the sky blue? Except this. That's a word. I know. What's it say? Walk. What's that supposed to mean? It means Palo was here. Did he write it? Has anyone else been here? Ever or today? When did today start? Was it written today? How could it have been? There are no sticks. There is a stone. Where? Under that mound of pink blossoms. I get it, he wrote Walk with a rock. It's a

stone. I'm not going to have this discussion again. Then we should Walk. Why? That's what it says. That's no reason to do it. Do you have something better to do? Better? Do you need to use the hole, for example? We are using it. You know what I mean. Not while you're here, not unless you leave me alone. I'm not leaving you alone. I'll go with you. Come on, I'll help you out of there. Thanks, which way? Down. But which way down? Follow his steps. What does it look like I'm doing? Stay close. Wait, I'm getting distracted. Don't. There's another set of steps. Two? We are walking over two sets of tracks. Well he has two feet. I think he's being followed. Who would follow him besides his other foot? A bad guy. There are no bad guys. An Indian? Are Indians bad? Nevermind, there are no Indians. Sometimes little boys wear goggles as masks and aprons as capes and carry sticks as swords and imagine they're bad guys. A cowboy, then. Maybe the tracks are just the jingle of Palo's spurs. Nobody wears spurs, not even cowboys, if cowboys exist. Look, the second set of steps are much smaller than Palo's. With claws. I fear for Palo's safety. No you don't. I fear for my safety, which is the same thing. You are not Palo. I fidel our fears. You are not allowed to make a verb of fidelity. Nevermind, the fear is sublimating. Why, or I mean how, or perhaps, converting, what are you talking about? Firstly, my fear sublimates because fear wasn't the right word; secondly, my fear sublimates by turning directly from a solid to a gas, just like anything sublimates; thirdly, I'm remembering. Is that the same as sublimating? Don't stop, come on. Let's go, walk. What do you think I'm doing? Follow his steps before they sublime, like you.

Decrepit Finding

I remember walking through a decrepit city. I am not alone. I do not remember who I am with, adult or child. Wife or child. Both, but only one. Both in one person, a conflation, an amalgamation, an imagination. My wife when she is younger than she is now, but older than a child, the child one of mine, no younger than now. Which child? All of them. The child then is more boy than girl, three-fourths boy mathematically speaking, which is a careless way to speak in this instance. I will not figure out the ratio when combined with my wife, who is a woman, and how many girls and boys does it take to make one woman? For it is not that this other is a proportional combination of them, but the other is all of them at once, each of them individually with their individual traits and distinct beauties. They, the other, walk beside me and hold my right hand or just my right middle finger, the one with the dent inside the outermost knuckle. My left hand is free. There is a ring and no ring on the ring finger; this is before and after I am married; I continually feel the feeling of my finger entering the ring while the remainder of my finger exits.

We are walking to the park the grocery the bank the library the post office. It is spring, and that and the other holding my hand is enough for the moment.

* * *

What if the second steps are the same as the first? What if the second steps are our steps preceding us? There are two of us. What if both steps are ours preceding us? What of Palo? Are we the same? Are we? It doesn't matter. It's irrelevant. Do they look the same? They? The steps. The second looks smaller. Do we look the same? It's getting harder to see. He could be shrinking. You're suggesting they're both his steps, he's just smaller the second time through. Soon he'll be impossible to see. I don't see him now. Find him. You find him. We find him. Now? No, we are finding him. We are? We are trying. Why? We have no choice. Really? That's what it feels like. Why? Maybe because that's our function, that's why we exist. You're saying if we choose the other, the not trying, the not finding, we cease to exist. In not so many words.

* * *

We see decrepit people. We do not know what to do with them. We do nothing with them. We don't need them. We have each other. We have walking. We

have a task. We are not yet decrepit.

We are walking and the wind is blowing and the clouds are scudding and the sun is radiating and the birds are chirping and the flowers blooming and the trees sapping and the city decrepiting and the leaves leafing and all that.

We arrive where we're going. We play on the swings, on the teeter-totter, on the jungle gym. We deposit and withdraw money. We buy cabbage and return books. We buy discounted bruised overripe bananas and check out new free old books and accidentally smear banana on them because we accidentally smear banana on our hands when we purposefully eat the overripe bananas on a park bench overlooking a goose-laden lake. With money we withdraw, we post mail within which are checks drawing on our invisible account. The mailman gives us a knowing smile because he knows us. This is what we do. We kiss on a park bench overlooking a swan-laden lake. We do not smell like overripe bananas because we have not eaten overripe bananas because you do not kiss after eating overripe bananas.

We leave where we're going. We're going nowhere, but we're going. We play leapfrog, we play hopscotch, we play baseball with a stick and a stone, we play peek-a-boo, we play twenty questions, we play having sex on the grass at the park under a skirt with no one noticing, or no one caring, or no one saying anything, we play feeling good, experiencing experiences, sensing happy, living life, we play in a bubble of our own creation, we play with each other, we play with words we play with, we play.

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And what of the other? The other is what we've been discussing. Oh, well then, what of the other other? Isn't that the original? Are there only two? Could you be more precise with your language? As in more specific? As in saying something that actually says something. I am. Oh, I didn't know. Getting more specific in the actuality of what I am saying is precisely what I am doing, if you please. I'm sorry. What I'm specifically saying, if you'll listen with some goddam precision, is the actualization of your original undefined, unrealized present participle. Which one is that? The trying, but it doesn't matter, I am giving up, if I have to explain everything, I am giving up. I understand, completely and utterly. Listen, my question is, what if we find him? What if indeed? Do we too then cease to exist? Too, as in also? Precisely. You are depressing. We have already established that we cease to exist if the other, as we now have if the

other other. Hypothesized, not established, I quibble with your wordchoice. Which means either the cessation or the realization of our current present continuing action ceases us. You're talking about the trying, the searching, the finding. I'm talking about dying. Well, you don't paint a pretty picture amigo, but listen to this, I am going to lay a nice treat on your plate if you just keep walking and following me following these steps. I'm in front. I'm in front. We can't both be right. Which way are we going? Why? Therein lies the answer. This way. This way. Just don't stop walking or we cease to exist. We exist now and so even when we stop existing we will have existed forever and no one can ever take that away from us. Is that enough? Irrelevant, that's all there is. Is that what you were going to say? I said it. I mean is that the end? Don't stop walking. That was the treat as you called it, laid on my plate, a treat like I'm a dog, on my plate like it's sustenance or something sweet to get me through the afternoon. Yes, that's it. Because what they take from us is us. Who is they? What is taken from us is us. Us us us, what about Palo? What about him? Where is he? Don't get depressed, we'll find him. Just hold the line. What line? The straight one, or else you'll walk in a circle. How do I walk in a straight line? A straight line is defined by connecting two points by a straight line. What happens when I arrive at the second point? It becomes your first point and you find another second point. What if the new second point is not in line with the original first point? Well that is just what's bound to happen, you walk in a short straight line but not in a longer straight line, and as you continue to do this in short straight segments you describe a curve, and as the curve becomes longer and your straight segments become smaller in relation to the curvature of the curve, well, you begin to have something to do with calculus and the definition of an integral of a function.

That was the space where you say something. Where are you? I ... I don't know how to go on alone. Have you left me and why? I know I am wordy, but is that a good enough reason to abandon me here alone in the woods? Where are you? I won't try to argue with you to come back but I want you to come back. I won't speak of calculus anymore. Or of circles and lines, others have said it and better. Perhaps you left me for them. I won't argue. I want you to come back for me, not for the value of my argument. Where are you? What does one do while alone? One talks to oneself. Which should help me find out something about my nature. I am alone I am alone I am alone. Where are you? Are you listening? Are you hiding? I am no good at finding. Don't leave me. And don't forget there is Palo to think of. Think of me and think of Palo. I see Palo. I see.

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We play practical jokes. We plastic wrap the toilet seat; we dip your fingers in warm water while you sleep. We shove a roll of toilet paper in the toilet and mix laxatives in your brownies. We tip the porta-potty; we build an outhouse with no hole in the seat. We hypnotize you to sleep, we squirt shaving cream on your hand and tickle your nose while you sleep, we write on you while you sleep, we put ourselves in your hand and tickle your nose while you sleep and we wrap ourselves in your hand and tickle your nose while you sleep and we squeeze ourselves in your hand and tickle your nose while you sleep and we slather ourselves in shaving cream and slide ourselves into your hand and tickle your nose while you sleep and still you sleep. We shave your head and take off your pants and shave you there and pray for you and pee in a glass and pray for you to wake up so we can tell you it's apple juice.

We play impractical jokes. We play cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians, dragons and knights, superheroes and villains, serpents and saviors, virtues and sins, mr. presidents and first ladies, infidels and fidels, monsters and men, good guys and bad guys. We play outside and inside. We play outside jokes and inside jokes. Exploding cigars, banana peels, anvils falling from the sky, greased door handles, locked doors, dead fish, dirty underwear piles, finishing the toilet paper and not replacing it, using each other's towel, using each other's deodorant, using each other's toothbrush, using each other's sexual organ, using each other, fertilizing, bearing young, forgetting young.

We play with bite. We play with our overbite. Our children bite. They scream. We throw them in the air. They scream. We catch them. They scream. We play where's the baby, there's the baby.

We replay. Which gets old. We get old. We rearrange the furniture. We get bored. We get boring. We buy a table. We climb a mountain. We go to Scotland. We play golf. We wish we learned how to play guitar, piano, violin, tuba, oboe, saxophone, harmonica. We wish we learned how to play anything beautiful. We play golf. We stop playing. We play with other people. They are the same people. We stop playing. We play at being sailors. We stop playing. We don't remember when we stopped holding hands. We always remember where we are. We aren't playing.

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We find Palo. We are finding Palo. We are in Palo. Suddenly we do not cease to exist. We are more properly slowly subsumed, consumed, quickly absorbed,

ingested, immediately masticated, digested, promptly sublimated in due course to say the least, by him. We are not alone and never will be.

We are in Palo. We are Palo. We are not we. Not we are Palo. Both and neither are right and not right. There is only Palo.

I am Palo. Which means nothing. It is possible you were the raccoon, but now you are Palo. It is possible you were the raccoon's consciousness lagging behind the raccoon, desperate to catch up, following the raccoon and my tracks. It is possible and not true and an inadequate explanation, inadequate being part of the definition of explanation, and I do not care. You are Palo, the raccoon is Palo, we are Palo, I am Palo. I ate the raccoon. I think. Yes, I did. He is not here. I am here, in a way, unfortunately. First I kicked it under the chin with my right boot, which dazed it. Second I smashed its head between two rocks I clapped like cymbals though the noise it made was more a thud. Third I ate the raccoon. Between second and third I pretended a stone was a knife and gutted and skinned the raccoon. Third I ate the raccoon. Fourth I made a breechclout from the raccoon by turning the raccoon skin upside down and keeping the fur side out and tying the left foreleg and hind leg together over my right hip and the right foreleg and hind leg together over my left hip. In this way the mashed raccoon head hangs upside down mouth agape below my bellybutton to hide my pubic region and the striped raccoon tail dangles down from my backside. Between third and fourth I vomited some. It was not the raccoon's fault. I was sick of seeing and feeling myself. I decided to make the breechclout. Fourth I made the breechclout. Fifth I wish I had water or time or smoke or a better stone or the inclination to properly scrape and wash and cure the hide but before considering this I crushed the raccoon's head between stones because some infernal clock told me the raccoon was slowing me down and I did not have time and it was time to continue going it alone or perhaps it is not an infernal clock if it objectively informs me I have a long way yet to go and limited resources and a hatsack of stones and I have to use the bathroom and I have no paper but leaves and I do have stones but I will not sit on this hollow stump and think of stools. I will go home to my wife and all my children whom I scarcely remember and I cannot remember and I cannot think of them because to think of them is to think of me, to remember them is to remember me and I cannot think of me. No because. No explanation. No expression. Because I will split and split and split, a maul to a round, a stone to a skull, a bacteria in a wound, a bacteria in a gut, an atom in a star, an atom in a star does the opposite of split but it is still the same thing, I would forever split the distance between here and home and never arrive home. I let myself go. All my energy goes into

notthinking, into silencing the inner monologue, into quieting my voice, into not being me, so I can be. Why be? Shh. I don't know. Shh. Remember Reb and all the children. Shh. Forget them. Shh. Don't forget them. Shh. But do not think of them. Shh. Do not think of them. Shh. Just go to them. Shh. Am I what I have done? Shh. Whose words are these? Shh. Just go to them. Shh. Whatever I am. Shh. No I. Shh. To be with them. Shh. The rest of the energy goes into walking.

To Urge

We are done with games, these games specifically. You are done with these games; I am done with these games; we are done with these games. We don't have time. We have important work to do, and other stuff besides, like the infernal doorknob. I don't know what to do about the doorknob, but I don't like how it wiggles. I have found Palo and though he acts without logic and wears an evacuated bird on his head and an eviscerated raccoon over his loins, he has not yet lost his senses. And though he walks, indeed never stops, unless it is to gut the odd fowl or small mammal, he has not found his paces. For I am here in my bathroom to put a man through his paces, I said that once and I am a man of my word, to plumb his walls, to square his joints, to rewire his old fire-hazard-not-up-to-code ungrounded wiring, no, not to fix him, to make him tread his borders, his boundaries, the outer limits of what he can be and the inner limits of what he cannot be and thereby define him, if with too many words so be it, define him nonetheless, and with urgency, there is an urgency because, because well, it's my urge, I know nothing else to do, no one else to be, no other reason to do, to be, than this urge, this urgency, to hunt a man, and the doorknob is telling me in not so many words, godbless it, You have no time, there is no time, now now now.

The doorknob talks. I don't hear it. It rattles and wiggles and gyrates or something, but I don't know it. It is far away. The bathroom lengthens and narrows. A change, to hold the course and stay the path. A change, to not change in my everchangingness. Its volume remains the same but its shape changes. It lengthens and narrows; the wall presses into my knees and the toilet is pushed into the wall behind it until my back is pressed to one wall and my knees to the other. The door is barely visible and there is no way to get to it because the path by the sink has been squeezed shut by the walls and the sink and counter and cabinets have been squeezed up by the walls so they grow higher and higher maintaining their volume as their depth decreases, their length and height increasing until they are in and of themselves insurmountable obstacles and due to their presence between myself and the door I cannot see the door at all and cannot be sure if the doorknob talking that I don't hear is actually the doorknob talking or just in my head. The door is so distant I can barely imagine it. The tub and shower has become just a shower. The kind you stand in, so I could cleanse myself if I so chose but I haven't and I don't and I won't. I am not sure if the ceiling has been pushed up or not. It is white up there, but it is hard to differentiate the white of ceiling from the white

of distance from the white of nothingness, like it is difficult to differentiate between milk at the bottom of the cereal bowl and the bottom of the cereal bowl. If your cereal bowl is white. Or at least the same white as milk. Cow milk. Pasteurized. 2%. Force-fed corn. Perhaps milled animal. And your proportions aren't perfect so you have extra milk in your bowl, or at least the possibility is possible. And you actually look instead of raising it to your lips in faith, that is what notlooking is, faith, or you are three years old. I do note that the toilet tank has not as I said been pushed into the wall but has been converted to an old-fashioned tank-on-the-wall mount hanging high above me with a very long chain so it is not impossible to flush the toilet, but I won't. I haven't used it, I don't think, but I will, if I live. Eliminating is a condition of living. I look down between my hairy thighs to check. A ring grows in the toilet bowl.

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He walks. May. Woods. Flowers. Leaves. Sun. Evacuated grouse hat, eviscerated raccoon breechclout, eight-inch leather boots, hatful of stones, woods full of stones, cheek puffed around a stone, a stone perhaps used for grit while he ate the raccoon, as if he does not have teeth, which he does, as if he has a gizzard, which he does not, as if he were a chicken, which is a more domesticated animal than he has had relations with lately, or perhaps a bird of prey, say a condor, which is not a bird of prey but a vulture, since a condor is more likely to eat raccoon than a chicken, at least a dead raccoon, not to mention more likely to eat chicken than a chicken, though chickens are more likely to be eaten by a raccoon than a condor, especially a raccoon that has been a bear, notwithstanding the fact that neither birds of prey nor raptors require grit or gastroliths for digestion, not that Palo is utilizing his mouthstone as a gastrolith, or at all. And being a condor is an order of magnitude more holy than being a chicken, condors only eat carrion, and being holy is what he is after.

He walks to be holy. He walks to go home. He walks to lose himself or part of himself while still going home but this is what is called not being able to lose yourself or even a part of yourself. There are axes and asses and wives and knives, but these are not the means of losing the part of himself that he means. There is elimination, but there is ingestion, and besides this is not what he means. There is the forgiveness of sins, which is fine, but God help him irrelevant and not what he means. He means nothing because he does not think. If he were to think he would perhaps mean that you cannot undo what you have done, what you have done is who you are, what you do is who you are, no matter what you think, and when you are someone, who you are is

inescapable. To which he would perhaps reply, Though I am walking to lose myself or part of myself, I am not trying to escape but engage or encounter or involve, all of which are bullshit words, or find my way home. What he might say and might mean is, I am trying to survive. What he is more likely to say and guaranteed to mean, though it is unabashedly untrue is, It is hard to lose yourself when you keep the ocean to one side.

Palo is getting somewhere. Or at least he is getting off somewhere, somewhere having been Antoinette's hill-cum-mountain, here being elsewhere, descended to sea level, which it is hard to descend beyond, though not impossible, near the sea. The woods have given way though the stones persist. A long curve of stone beach. The clack of stones shifting underfeet, the roar of the ocean neverending and soon sublimated into background noise. On the stones he leaves no steps. Here is where he gathers stones on the everyother days he gathers stones. But he does not know what kind of day this is and he does not have his stone carrying device, his pants, and he has to go somewhere, anywhere, one place in particular, an insane place to go considering what and who he has done.

And there, here, he comes upon the outhouse he uses everyother day since he never gets access to his home toilet, the outhouse built so people would not defecate in the sea, though the ocean is so big it is beyond soil, except in thought, no one wants to think of feces floating or sinking in their ocean, and except in actuality, no one wants actual human feces in the actual ocean, and except in quantity, people produce such an inhumane quantity of crap, there are so many of us defecating and it all goes to the ocean one way or another, though this particular outhouse seems to have been personally built for him as he is the only person he has ever seen use it or this beach. The outhouse is built of weathered driftwood lashed together with seaweed. He is not sure if someone, a caretaker, comes and relaces the structure with fresh seaweed every dawn, or if the tide rises and submerges the outhouse every night before receding, but it occurs to him that if the seaweed dried it would become brittle and break and the structure would collapse and so the seaweed is always dripping. Both explanations are unlikely. Who is so loving as to caretake a solitary outhouse daily, or at least everyother day? And tides are not regular. They are, but not in a consistent time-of-day regularity. And the tide as scourer would defeat the notsoiling the sea business. There are glass floats adorning the driftwood seaweed outhouse. As ever, there is no door. There is an odor. The vacant doorway faces the sea. He thinks, no, he does notthink, as he often thinks of how full the hole is and how hard it must be to dig an outhouse hole

amidst all these stones. Seeing it now, the outhouse fills him with the same urge it fills him with every other day. When he sits in it, his knees poke out the doorway. He does not sit in it now, but when he does his knees protrude, hairy in the open air facing the sea. He sits and rests and relieves himself and thinks of nothing but braces against the wind whipping through the gaps between the driftwood and stares at the sea, taking in the ocean, occasionally seeing a sea lion before wiping with an exceptionally smooth stone he drops into the hole, but not today. It is a matter of debate whether his elimination experience is aesthetic or spiritual, and if there is a difference between the two, though the debate is not his.

But today, if it is a different day, now, for the moment, he has no desire to follow through on his urges, except the urge to not act on his urges, except the urge to go home. He walks past the stone beach outhouse of inspired driftwood and seaweed construction and gives no indication of thinking of stopping though how he walks clarifies the fact that he should. He leaves the crunch of stones and a certain odor.

Dimension Contraction Scab and Sea Lion

You might think, considering the contraction of the dimension perpendicular to the wall my back is against, which is the wall the mirror hangs on above the very tall sink, and considering the concomitant expansion of the wall and everything in its plane, or most things at least, or at least many, a notable number of objects expanding in those two dimensions whatever the proportions, that the mirror's height and width is likewise increasing as its depth diminishes. The problem, no not a problem but a fact, if I may assert the existence of facthood and then abandon it as necessary, is that the mirror had almost no depth to begin with; it was essentially two-dimensional, the third dimension was all perception when it was looked into, looking into a mirror is an act of faith, like I said not looking in the bowl is an act of faith, if I remember rightly, though remembering is an act of faith too; acts of faith breed like rabbits apparently; breeding is an act of faith; the semicolon is an act of faith; and though in theory these two acts occur simultaneously, the contraction and the expansion, in reality when time is divided small enough there is always a time discrepancy and therefore simultaneity is a myth and thereby something happens first, then another thing happens, then another, please understand this diatribe has next to nothing to do with causality, it has to do with the mirror's height and width approaching infinity as its depth approaches zero in order to maintain a constant volume, but per the diatribe the depth either has to reach zero first or the height and width have to reach infinity first, and since it is well established that infinity is not a thing as easy to become or acquire or arrive at as zero, at least in a timely fashion, one example of which would be a human's lifetime, the depth in fact arrives at zero first and the mirror flat ceases to exist.

I'm not saying I'm disappointed; it's just what happens. Not that I can see its absence anyhow, with the tall sink and its cabinets, but seeing is not believing, which itself is not knowing. The thing is, the splatter of toothpaste and floss flingings and zit puss and errant snot rockets and aberrant child vomit backsplashed from the sink and tweaked eyebrow hairs and nose hairs and ear hairs have or had a thickness comparable to that of the mirror, and therefore exhibit or exhibited, suspend the movement of time with me for a while and let's remain in the present even if it's passed, exhibit a thickness, let's say depth to be consistent in our terminology, exhibit a depth much more in proportion to the measure of its other dimensions, we're talking of the dimensions of each individual splatter, or I am, you're not saying much of anything, like usual,

which is fine, for though they cover the mirror in entirety, each individual splatter's volume is small and remains so as the depth of each decreases towards zero without arriving and the height and width of each desiccated splatter, each short curly hair, each piece of puss, grows and grows alarmingly large without meaningfully approaching infinity due to the original proportionality of dimensions, the proportionality of dimensions for each scum having originally been much nearer unity than the mirror's, remember, a cube's proportionality of dimensions would be unity, are we all together here?, 1:1:1, until each individual smear takes up a surface area equal to that of the absent mirror, and as the cruds grow they overlap and layer, so that even as their individual depths decrease and become negligible, the overlapping and layering increases their cumulative depth until they pile from wall to wall, a narrow space to reach across now to be sure, the depth of which is defined as the distance from the triangular surface of the face of my patella to the coccyx of my sacrum, for I have not changed dimension, like a scab except unpickable, I am talking of the former mirror muck, not me, and healing nothing, except perhaps the space between myself and the door, which may as well no longer exist, which may?, both the spacebetweenmyselfandthedoor may as well no longer exist due to its immensity and the door may as well no longer exist except as a handy metaphor or something obnoxious and oversaid to say from time to time due to its distance. The doorknob no longer talks except in memory. I want to say the ex-mirror crust has a pulse, though I wish I didn't. Perhaps I can blame the drumbeat on the footsteps of the oxygenated blood coming in my ear and the deoxygenated blood going from my ear.

I think I am getting somewhere with Palo, somewhere I haven't been or at least not in a long time, so in retrospect I've decided to let him go where he is going, even if it is hard to say where that is. Being alone on the mountain has done him no good; it's helped his sanity, despite the bird on his head and raccoon inverted on his loins. So I'll let him walk along the ocean. Let's see what that does to him. And eventually he is bound to encounter people, bound to, they are impossible to avoid, they are everywhere, and then we shall see what society does to him. Then, if he survives, perhaps he'll even go where he says he's going, which is home, and we'll see what that does to him. Remember, this is a story about the horizontal mambo and drilling for oil and making love and whoopee and fidelity and protracted orgasms as athletic or aesthetic or atheistic or religious experiences; it's a story about exploration and transcendence and discovery and rhythmic rocking rambunctious sex, about good sex, not bad sex, not boring sex, and as such it will not be boring, it has not been boring, and it is

not boring, and what else it is not most of all is a waste of time, which there is so little of.

I check between my legs for my progress, which is also little. The waterline remains the same, as demarcated by the pinkbrown ring. Below this line, submerged, on the porcelain bowl grows a yellowbrown film, thicker near the siphon jet. Above the line, candycane pink fingers streak down in a swirl pattern from the water jets under the rim, which is itself camouflaged in graygreen growth. Life carries on, good, as it should. The unfortunate thing, or perhaps fortunate, no, no perhaps in this case, the story is from my point of view god damn it and my point of view is decidedly unfortunate: between my legs in the water I see me looking at me. I look away but I don't know if he does. Or if I do. The other I. And the moment is so awkward that it requires conjugations of the verb to do that do not exist, it being virtually impossible to write, If he, or I, does. Or, If I, or he, do. There is no cohesive subject for my verb; there is no verb conjugation for my subject; there is no clear way to write what I'm trying to write. I don't know what I'm trying to write, which is perhaps part of the confusion. But not all of it. Another complication is the seduction of words, which seduce me into the seductive belief that I can say what I mean to say and convey what I mean to mean, whatever that is, I who don't believe in belief, I who believe words are just inanimate objects that when properly used become tools, I who long to be seduced, though so too is that not all of it. The explanation of the seduction of words is itself a seduction. All this is still not all of it. Far from all of it.

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The man approaches the sea lion. The sea lion is feeling neither ferocious nor fearful. The man keeps the sea to his left. The sea lion knows this man. The man wears a grouse on his head, a raccoon on his loins, boots on his feet, sunken eyes in his skull, and an emaciated disposition. The sea lion knows this man as well as a sea lion can know a man, which is to say he is familiar with his presence if not his soul, which are perhaps the same things. The man carries a hatful of rocks which could be weapons. The sea lion does not know any of this in the conscious sort of way that one means when applying the verb to know, for he is a sea lion, but it is a means of explaining the sea lion's general deportment toward the man and his unaware awareness of the man. The fact is the man is hungry and it is written all over his face. The man is cold and it is written all over his body. The sea lion's general deportment toward the man is recumbent. The other fact is the sea lion is made of meat and fat and warm

skin, all of which the man lacks. The sea lion watches the man approach without much watching him. There is the crunchy roar of the rocks and the muffled roar of the wind and the background roar of the sea. Though the man is dressed somewhat differently than normal, the man always carries rocks and wears these boots when he comes by and so nothing has significantly changed, which makes the sea lion happy, or at least maintains his recumbency. As he comes abreast of the sea lion, the man's eyes are seen to be yellow or fallow or fellow. The sea lion's eyes are dark brown. They look each other in the eyes. The man says, Hi. The sea lion barks. The man keeps the sea lion on his right. The sea lion keeps the man between he and the sea, which pretty much means he maintains his position, which from an outside perspective is a bad idea considering his lack of escape routes. The man does not stop moving. The sea lion does not move. The man recedes, striped tail dangling between his legs. The sea lion does not have his head bashed in. The fact is the man cannot eat anymore until he eliminates. The sea lion is not grateful; he never considered his consumption a possibility. The fact is the man likes sea lions and if not for his Reb and the kids would sacrifice his life to save a sea lion and so did not entertain the notion of braining the sea lion for food or clothes, no matter his misery. The sea lion continues on with a sea lion's recumbent state of mind. Beyond the facts, there is no indication the man gives a second or first thought to the nature of the creature whose life he spares, no, does not spare because he does not even consider eliminating it, but passes by, bypasses, though he did say Hi, and it is unclear what is to be made of that. The sea lion watches him go without watching very hard, which is to say dispassionately, which is to say he is aware of his having gone. An example of a second thought from the man would be his looking back over his shoulder, which he does not do, even if he were to then continue on, which he does. The sea lion, tired of stones and perhaps hungry, scoots and grunts and heaves and generally writhes on a slight descent and finally flops its enormous meaty blob of a body into the salt-choked sea, where it gracefully disappears. The man, with the ocean to his left, disappears. The beach is empty, save of stones and a fine mist and the ubiquitous and unmentioned seagulls looking for droppings and leaving their own.

Reentry Revolt

I am revolted. I am disgusted with myself and the water in which I live. The thought of me submerged in the unsterile water fills me with a sympathetic nausea for myself, but spewing a stream from my mouth would only further foul my watery home, though it might trigger a flush, flushing me away, which might be okay, since as I reach up I realize I overestimated the reach of my arm or underestimated the distance to the chain, which is far out of my reach, or perhaps the distances are yet growing but I am not. I look up. There are things up there, far away. I look down. The sludge growing at the bottom of the pot below me resembles a sea floor and like a sea floor it bears witness to wavy tendrils and a still current and the indistinguishableness of inanimate sediment and plant matter and animal life such as coral or anemone. With enough time or lightning or imagination or whatever is necessary for life to spring forth, shrimp, crabs, jellyfish, fish could grow there, perhaps salmon, which would give me something to eat, perhaps a sea lion, which would give me something to love, perhaps a mermaid which would give me a reason to be.

I have done so little for the women in this story, Reb and Antoinette and all the others who could have been, which is a disservice to them and a weakness in the story, and if I could bring them to life finally, give them life as mermaids in my toilet-cum-oceanic-breeding-ground, then perhaps I wouldn't feel so bad. I could give them something to feel good about, make them feel good, be more generous with my love.

But I need to use the toilet, and eliminating on them would make me feel worse. I will not eliminate in my ocean. Especially when I am in it. I have been in the bathtub when a toddler has soiled the water, and I will not be a toddler. The ocean is mine, all I have, I in it is all I have, and I would rather flush it away, flush me away, than crap in it, but there is nowhere else to evacuate, to eliminate, to escape, the drain in the shower has squeezed shut and the shower and toilet are now one inextricable unit so I am in the shower on the toilet in the ocean and the drain is the toilet so the problem remains the same: I cannot flush the growth I sit on and swim in and write and consume the krill of, and something to write, my god how I long for something to write while I'm writing, someone to write, where is Palo, we had a life together, a salty one, perhaps he is now a saltwater fish, perhaps he is here somewhere, I am not a fish at all, I have no gills, and I know that's an explanation and all an explanation is is an excuse and I know I don't know that but the fact is I cannot breathe this water.

I need to flush to get rid of me and the water and start over with new water, new water without sea lions or Rebs or Antoinettes, new water I can write on, new water I feel better soiling, new water I can breathe.

* * *

A bell tinkles. The man walks into an overlit store. Screams from the street spill in with him. The storeowner, a portly man dressed to the height of fashion, no, not to the height, but to what is popular and comforting and slightly eye-catching but that says above all I am a man of my time and place, perhaps a tweed jacket, perhaps a pinstripe suit, no he is not that wealthy, but perhaps rectangular glasses, perhaps khakis or pre-worn jeans or stone-washed jeans or carpenter style jeans though he is not a carpenter, and a synthetic fleece or wool sweater or v-neck sweater or plaid button-up shirt, depending on where and when he lives, depending on where you live, when you live, this is your story regardless of if you acquired it in a store. He wears what is popular depending on where and when you live. The portly storeowner is about to call the police. He cups his hands to his mouth to scream for the police, there being no phone in this town thank God, because the man is naked but for a grouse on his head and a raccoon on his loins and boots on his feet and that cannot be good for business, in his business are displayed fine assortments of sticks and stones and leaves and bark peelings and vials of sand and cups of fresh water and cups of salt water and seasonal arrangements of flower petals and sterilized seeds and in the frozen section blocks of snow, but soon after the bell tinkles and the man comes in the door out from the street, the windows fill with faces and in a sudden flash of instinct the storeowner believes he is incorrect. This man is good for business. Besides, he recognizes him, though he is not sure from where. The man might be a friend for all he knows, such as businessmen have friends, by which he means a colleague or associate or competitor, by which he means someone with whom he could do business, from whom he could make a profit, not predatorily, not capitalistically, but in both their best interests, communally, a profit with instead of a profit from, though he won't be picky, he'll take the latter if it comes to it, and really doesn't have energy or time to spare to convert a from into a with. Instead of screaming for help, he says, How may I help you?

The man pours his hatsack of stones on the counter. The storeowner recognizes their ilk. The storeowner says, Ahh, it's been so long, Pieta.

The man stares at him. His right eye perhaps twitches. He adjusts the hip straps

of his loincloth, that is the tied raccoon legs. He says, Make this go faster.

The storeowner chuckles it off with his heft. He says, Sorry Palo, just a nickname I like to call you on stone days. A fond remembrance. But you're right, I don't think this is a stone day. You've changed since I saw you last.

What do you mean?

Something about your hair. You're wearing it differently.

I'm wearing a dead bird.

That must be it. How may I help you today?

I don't want to carry these stones anymore.

I don't know why not.

They are heavy.

I can imagine. But I'm sorry to say that by disappearing for a time, your relationship with your customers has lapsed. There is no longer a demand for your stones. No market for them. I'm sure you understand. It's all about maintaining your relationships. It's all about maintaining your brand. Your stones are out of touch, out of style. It's all about giving those who want what they want, or making them want what you give.

You wouldn't have to give me much. Give me a few apple petals. Take them. Give me leaves.

I'm sorry Palo. I haven't even leaves to spare. Now if you brought me sticks, it might be a different story. As you can see, my store bears and bares a dearth of sticks. And, Palo, a feeling in my heart tells me it is a stick day. I can't take your stones Palo. This business is not about taking but about giving. Give and give and give, Palo, don't take, and give a little harder. The customer will give in return.

I don't have customers. I have to go home. Don't give me anything. I want to give you my stones, and in return I want to drop a few stones.

You want to give me what you want to give me, again.

I'm here to see a man about a horse.

I'm not a horse trader or horse thief or horse breeder.

I'm here to drop my kids off at the pool.

What pool? Where are your kids? There is no pool that could hold them all.

I'm here to punch a grumpy.

Me?

I'm here to pull the chain.

Since when did you start talking in metaphor? Since when did you start talking?

I'm here to drop a few stones.

Ahh, you want to use my bathroom. My nice squat toilet with the footprints so you know where to put your feet to help you aim at the hole. The one with the channel for urine, the one with a simple and elegant flush action like a flashflood scouring a littered canyon.

Yes, that one.

Would you like to use my bidet?

If it's not in use, but it is not essential.

Else there is always wastepaper.

Why I'm here is to not return to my wife and children so heavy, so full, so foul with the waste, the toxins, the foulness in me, to not need to defecate, desecrate, eliminate, foul the house, the air, the homecoming, as soon as I walk in the door, to cleanse, defoul, defowl, deflower, and define myself for love.

What you are here for is a premium service, and as you know, my store's premium services cost. If you want me to give you the right to give your stones to my hole and forget about them and move on then you have to give me something I can give others so they can give me something of greater value in return. And nobody who comes to my store wants your stones, Palo.

Let me tell you a story, and I want you to think about how you can service this story. A man walks by a sea lion on the beach. The beach is the sea lion's home. The sea lion is portly. The man needs to take a dump. He is also hungry. It has been since he knows not when. He is also cold, this not being a sandy equatorial tropical beach and he not having any clothes except a makeshift hat and what can barely be described as a makeshift shift, but only barely, as it is some sort of itchy stench oozing maggot riddled undergarment that shall remain vague to protect the identity of both the wearer and the undergarment, and for that matter for the preservation of innocence of he who listens and is witness. The sea lion has an outhouse, a fine outhouse constructed of driftwood and seaweed and wind. The man has used it before; they have done business before. The sea lion does not use it; he is a sea lion; he poops in the sea. The outhouse is for visitors to the beach, so they do not poop in the sea. Do not get all huffy about rights, about who has the right to poop in the sea, the fact is it is right for sea lions to poop in the sea because they are lions. It is not right for humans to poop in the sea because they are men. The man really has to go. The more he thinks about it the more he has to go. He has been going for a longtime without going. He has been trying to go without thinking about going to the bathroom, with a measure of success. And here is a socially and environmentally acceptable receptacle, one with which he is familiar, the sea lion's outhouse. But the man passes it by without a second thought. Without a first thought. Why? Out of respect for the sea lion? Because he made some hotheaded vow in his desperate despair to never use anything resembling a toilet again? Because he is so hellbent on walking that he is unaware of his bodily functions? Because relieving himself in this scene of beauty would defile it? Because if he sat in this scene of beauty he might never stand and go on again? There is no why. There is not even a first thought. He goes on to the sea lion. In contrast, he thinks long and hard about whether or not to kill the sea lion. He has a hat full of stones, remember, perhaps I did not say it, remember it anyways. He knows how to use them. He has used them before. The sea lion's skin would warm him. The sea lion's ample meat would feed him. And the thing about the sea lion is he does not care. He knows his life is in danger, but he just lies there, satisfied. Or is it complacent? I have never understood the difference from one word to another. He has never understood the difference from one word to another. He makes his choice. He goes with his gut and swings his hat of rocks around his head to deliver it with the utmost momentum unto the sea lion's skull, when he changes his mind, maybe just for change's sake, which always rubs me wrong but a little chafe is unavoidable when you have walked for an unspecified longtime with a raccoon between your legs. Sea lions are meant to

be satisfied and complacent, you see. He is a sea lion; he is king of the sea. He is a seal ion, and seals are so slick. Why slaughter the portly regality when it is so graceful in the water, slipping in and out, toying with the surface, killing fish? And if he kills him he has to gut and skin and eat him, and at some point during all that he will crap himself. He is so busy going, he does not have time to go. He has hurt people he loves, and they are the only people he wants to be with. He spares the sea lion and continues on with the sea on his left and arrives in town and feels an urge to arrive home as he left, empty-handed, and he comes into a store manned by a portly, smartly-dressed, and content storeowner redolent of terds and singing of decay when the entire purported reason for his shop is to save objects from erosion, rot, evaporation, melting, deflowering, etcetera, to see if he can relieve himself of his stones. Considering all that has and has not happened, as the proprietor of this establishment, this menagerie, this store, how do you feel, think, believe you can best service this story?

Are you going to kill me?

I will do what is in the best interest of my story.

You wouldn't go so low as to kill an innocent man.

What you don't understand is that you are not innocent. What you don't understand is that I am already much lower than you understand, that killing you might be a step up, and that I have nothing to lose so it might be worth a stone.

It's not in the best interest of the people. Look at all the people Palo, at the windows, watching. What will they think when you collapse my skull with a stone? What will they learn when my eyeball pops out of its socket from the internal pressure created by your blow? How will they grow and evolve and endure and continue on the path to being better individuals who create a better society by witnessing the destruction of my cranium and the small flecks of my brain smearing out and the disconcerting quantity of blood contained in the human body spilled and growing on the floor, very likely to cause a slip and fall mind you that could result in a lawsuit that would devastate this business, and how hair mats to a bloodied skull and how limp and lifeless and heavy and difficult to move is a dead body and then you crapping in my state-of-the-art squat toilet all because I tell you You do not have enough to give to be allowed to use my squat toilet because you have nothing to give that they, the people, want. Is it your goal to put all that on their shoulders?

This has taken too long. The honest to God truth is I don't give a shit. I just want to go home. I should kill you because you are a leech and I believe you are detrimental to society but I don't care about society and more than that you devalue life and diminish existence itself but I'm about as close as you can get to not caring about those either without being there, and it'd be good business for the story, some violence and blood to go with the sex, but the story can put its dick in its own asshole to plug its incessant drip. I give up on you. I'm going to go.

He does what he says. He goes. As the bell tinkles and the portly proprietor watches Palo's taught hamstrings and the way the well-defined muscles in his back move as he walks and the strong right arm flexed in carrying the hat of stones, and the wings flapping gently with the bound of his step and the tail swaying between his legs and the clomp of his boots on the threshold, going, and the squeeze of his buttocks holding in ascetic self-denial, the storeowner's knees buckle and give out. He loses and loses the remarkable self-control which defines him. Palo is gone. The storeowner does not make it to the bathroom before he goes to the bathroom.

Plastic Wrap Bean Day

I on the toilet gasping like a fish out of water reach down to pull myself out of the water by my hair but my hand touches a surface and discovers that contrary to its apparent elimination there yet exists a barrier between me and me in the water, a thin translucent papery plastic film that clings to my hand, invisible, only visible to touch. I probe, explore, touch what I can reach, which isn't much. The outside of the toilet bowl, the soapless soap holder in the wall that used to be a shower wall though there is now no shower, the wall at my knees, my knees, the empty toilet paper dispenser, the vent register for warmforcedair under my feet, everything is wrapped in plastic wrap, no wonder I've been so cold besides not wearing pants. Where is my pencil or ink pen or quill or writing implement to puncture this film that would never take writing, I don't even need the entire implement, just the point, which reminds me I have had no implement but my hands for some time, if I ever did. Everything is under the thinnest layer of synthesized polymers that hide and do not hide and I pull off the layer I am sitting on and the seat is double-wrapped for protection and I pull off another layer and the hole in my seat is triple-wrapped for preservation and I pull off another layer and the hole in the ring is quadruple-wrapped for quality and I pull off another layer and the center of the ring is quintuple-wrapped because all the space is is plastic wrap wrapped around plastic wrap and I rip off layer after layer to get at the thing below the space, the thing inside the bowl, which is me, it wants to breathe and be contaminated by air, but there is nothing there, it is plastic wrap wrapped around plastic wrap, you can see right through it for Christ's sake to where I can't breathe and I want to breathe but I am wrapped in all this plastic and I rend layer after layer but I can't get to me, I can't poke a hole through to my airhole and I want to breathe but I am sucking in plastic in a convulsion of lungs, a spasm of diaphragms, plastic wrap stretched tight over my body for quality over my mouth for preservation over my nose for protection over my eyes to keep out the flies over my ears so I can't breathe and under every layer of plastic is wrapped another layer of plastic because I am plastic wrap wrapped in plastic wrap wrapped around nothing but plastic wrap wrapped around an airless cavity outside of which I cannot get in and inside of which I cannot get out and on both sides of which I cannot breathe.

* * *

Rice or bean shop. Nice raccoon, man.

I'd like some rice or beans.

Which is it?

What kind of day is it?

Bean day.

I'd like beans.

You've come to the right place. What've you got?

Stones.

I don't give beans for stones. I've got no use for stones.

Mh.

Are you Palo? Christ man, how the hell have you been?

I don't know.

That's lovely, man. I've been holding my own too you know. Nothing to shake a stick at, but, you know. You're on your way home. You'd like some beans. Now I know you've been gone a long time having sex with that French lady with the one room cabin, don't look at me like that, everybody knows man, everybody has known. Christ we heard you two from here, exploring or whatever, like the French do, and those who didn't hear read the book about it, though it made less sense than what we heard, even less sense than how what we heard made us feel in our hearts, but still, it got the gist across. And boy, has their been a marked increase in the occurrences of fidelity and a general bounty of Corinthian love since we witnessed your act, not the least of which have been enjoyed on my dinner table, but you should know how this works. You trade your stones for sticks you traded the previous day, then you trade your sticks for leaves, oak leaves precisely, which you trade for acorns which you trade for oak boards which you trade for oak barrels which you trade for oak barrels full of water and wine which you trade for raw rice which you trade to me for beans. This being a bean day. On rice days, the process is somewhat different.

You've lost weight.

Thank you.

And your wife?

Her too.

I mean how is she?

Doing better.

And mine?

Having a rough go.

Have they had food on the table?

They had to sell the table. Nice table. Does well for my wife and I, supports us nicely and wipes up easily for meals.

They sold it for rice and beans?

Don't worry about the rice and beans. I've kept them in rice and beans. We're good friends, even when you're not here. I've had the royalty checks made out to me, such as they are, which isn't much, which is why I asked nicely for the table. It seems to have boosted my fertility.

Congratulations.

Thank you. I don't know how you do it.

I don't. Reb does it. What you were saying, about how I could shed these stones, that's not going to happen. For starters, I don't know when yesterday was, when today is, or when tomorrow will be.

Which?

Which means I did not trade sticks yesterday, which means I cannot trade stones today, which means I will not trade sticks tomorrow. I'm sorry to hear that, Palo. As one entrepreneur to another, I suggest you start over with feathers. Or as a tailor.

But I do not in truth want beans. I want to use your bathroom.

Sure man, you don't have to give me anything for that. It's a public service. Pissoir out front. Neighbor kids'll look at your back while you go and it smells like piss because it's where the homeless piss, but it's been upgraded with a frontal screen for modesty and a funnel for easy aim.

When I go home, I want to go home. I do not want to go to the bathroom.

Totally understand. You're setting a good example.

Do you hear what I am saying?

Utterly.

Do you hear what I am not saying?

With all my being.

How do you do number two?

The deuce? I don't. I don't eat my product.

Oh. I have to go. Thank you Rob. Maybe I will see you tomorrow.

Maybe, if it's not tomorrow today.

The Salt Whore

Wisps of clear clarity without thickness distended and clinging to muck dripping in salty ammonia smut all over the room no room in and out of the water no space for a breath sheathed in plastic and a porcelain ring biting into ass and water thrashing but not splashing the hole is well-wrapped and get off get off get off the toilet seat before you soil yourself in the bowl looking up at you but nowhere to go no room no space elbows cracking corners hitting funny bones knees locked in by wall nowhere to go you can't go sitting on toilet quivering on the wrap with nowhere to go and needing to go bowels shaking begging weeping leaking against plastic breathe release relieve relax breathe in breathe out breathe in breathe out breathe out breathe out breathe out no no no wait hold your breath will be everywhere hold hold in your toxins don't exhale don't blow don't share don't go don't withdraw don't go don't withdraw try harder harder try harder to breathe in but don't breathe out take in don't go hold yourself in once you let go you're spent and the inside of the room is a wet mess and it's over breathe breathe in in gasp but don't sigh gasp don't end it stop exhaling stop going stop ending it stay don't go don't go quivering against plastic

Light bulb burns out, thank god. Darkness. Privacy. Relief. You go. You're gone. You're everywhere. No, I'm everywhere. You weren't here. You are not here. I everywhere defile my little room. I define my room. My knees are locked against the wall. I cannot stand. I sit in it. I want to go. I want to spread and stretch my legs. But my back's against the wall, the wall's against my knees and even if I were able to pull me by the hair out of the toilet bowl and lubricate my knees until they slipped out of joint or I don't know chewed off my legs like a snared wolf it is dark and I didn't write myself a window so there's only the door I can't get to but even if I were wily as a raccoon and I just found a way somehow to get it done and I went out the door, what would my wife think of me now, sopping, without pants, covered in excrement, having chewed off my legs? Do I have a wife? Children? Are they grown and gone? Is Mary there? Is she here? Is she ashamed? Has she gone to live with a man who will live with her? Has she gone with what remains of my children? Where is the toilet? Am I alone, abandoned by myself? Where am I in this dark? What is that smell? Where are you?

The light burns out, thank god, but it is okay, it's only light. I don't need to breathe; I'm blind. Imagine what the blind can smell and taste and feel and yes see. No, don't imagine, I am blind, I don't need to imagine. I smell and taste and

feel and yes see in reality. I have no need for imagination or eyes or hands or senses or others or that smell. I am in the dark everywhere not here not gasping not splattered perhaps not aesthetically pleasing but the aesthetic is not the endgoal. I am resigned, infinitely resigned everywhere, which is the last step before the cleft on the other side of which is faith, the fidels, I'm just saying that, I can smell it, how I could use a cleaning agent, some chemicals, some Borax, some disinfectant to scour myself into a cleft, a trench a channel a cliff a straight, scour myself into a declivity a crack a chasm a cave an absence a hole, which is the only way to get to the stench and get rid of the stench, become the stench, scour myself into stench. It is bleach I could use to scour myself or all the shreds of myself before my family finds my finally inanimate bleached beached corpse shredded by seagulls. If not too degraded they can use my skin for warmth, my oil for light, my oil for machines, my oil for pencils, my oil for soap, my oil for longevity, my blubber for meat, my muscle for meat, my meat for meat, my heart for meat, climb into my water-logged head and scoop out my tons of spermaceti to burn smokelessly or lubricate their clocks or rub on their face to make themselves more attractive and kick my great black eye for a good time and therapy and foreplay and use my vomited and defecated ambergris as a perfume or to remedy a headache or as an aphrodisiac to help my wife reenter love or be reentered in love and play the harp on my baleen or wear my baleen as a corset or draw scrimshaw on my teeth or filter the salt from their drinking water through my fine long thick baleen or fish with my baleen to catch another whale and harpoon it and lance it and lash it to the side of their boat to hack and flense and sell while the sea turns red. Who says this goddamit I am not a whale, whales are not fish, whales need to breathe until they are dead.

The light burns out, thank god.

* * *

Why are you crying?

I'm making salt.

That's why I'm here.

Salt for your stones?

For my wife. I'm going home. I'm giving her salt for her eyes. She will need it.

I see. That makes me cry. Thank you. Take as much as you like. You have given me a reason to cry all night.

I'm sorry. To make up for it I would like to give you these feathers and these stripes, these wings and the rings around these eyes. I'd like to give you these stones.

Give me the one in your mouth you bastard.

In my mouth.

In your mouth.

I'm hungry.

Yes, go home hungry, without a stone in your mouth. Eat your tongue if you must so I don't have to smell all the places it's been. Go, with your wild fowl and scavenging mammals, go be content, swallow your sin, be a man who's done what you've done like many men before you, it's what a man is, if I get much more mad I'll stop crying.

Thank you.

It's my job. I'm the salt whore.

I have one more question.

Go.

May I use your toilet?

My chamber pot is beneath the bed.

Here?

Yes.

This?

Yes. Go.

Here?

Yes.

Won't you go elsewhere?

No, I don't go elsewhere. Go.

I am trying.

Wait. Stop. Don't go. Don't you see?

No, I don't look into other people's chamber pots.

Don't go.

Is it full?

My husband, he's spread plastic wrap over it.

Can I pull it off?

No, only he. It is a backup in case I run out of other reasons to cry. He is out collecting ocean water or perhaps banging at a clam hole in the sand while fantasizing about mermaids. He will not return until dark, if then.

Why are you crying?

It's my job. Why are you?

I need to go.

Go.

Believe in Palo

What I, Cole, I think, I've narrowed it down to Cole or Kol at least, am trying to do is breathe, in the dark, which I can do, though it is a foul dark I breathe because I disseminate disperse spread stretch sublimate sublime myself into the dark, which I am not trying to do, meaning I am trying not to do, meaning I am trying to not breathe myself, gasified, only gasified in that the solid and liquid particles of myself are small enough that I can breathe them dissolved in the dark, perhaps the word then is vaporized, or dissolved. I am wrong. I am not trying to not breathe. What I am trying to do I think is slough off no flush no eliminate everything that is unimportant of my life, everything important of my life, everything of my life, my life, from the story in service to the story, in service to what it is about, sex, is sex still amusing?, don't believe I believe this story is about sex, sex is the absolute last act this story is about, this story is not about sex or getting busy or screwing silly or god knows fucking or making love. I just want to be clear on that point, if nothing else, no matter how much love is made and unmade. How many beds left made and unmade. No, what I do, my elimination, is in service to the story, to what the story is about, which is Palo, good, I do it for Palo, in service to Palo, to destroy Palo, to discover who Palo is, and thereby praise him if he is deserving of praise, no, no judgment, praise him for being, praise him for who he is, which I and you with me will discover only after I am eliminated from this story, for I am a distraction from our purpose, did I say that? purpose? me? yes, don't doubt I said or wrote or transcribed it even if I cannot believe I did. Purpose me. The problem or truth or fact or lamentation is that I cannot do it, please always write can and not together as one compound word, cannot, instead of two, can not, cannot is flat out more aesthetically pleasing and concise, and that means something, and if you can't bring yourself to do it, if you feel it's a little flamboyant, no not flamboyant, self-important, I understand, I understand you, but please all I ask of you is to contract cannot to can't, concision and contraction becomes you, please do continue to use the word, cannot, and in lieu of cannot can't, and in lieu of can't silence, it is a beautifully melancholy word, cannot, I cannot do it, I can only talk, and not well because I cannot breathe, and if it's hard to talk one's way out of a story one's writing, it is even harder to gasp one's way out. But you can do it, you can do it for me, eliminate me for me, for you, for Palo, for Reb, for their children, for mine, even for Antoinette, whom I've disserved, like everyone, who cannot be forgotten, like noone. Eliminate me please along with my pretension, my pretense, or I will sex you again with my words while you sleepwalk through my lines, sleepsex between the sheets, while you read, while

your partner sleeps or uses the bathroom or is absent off doing god knows what without you while you gasp in pleasurable shock or elegiac ecstasy or a burning moment of self-awareness except it will already be done, finished, you're done because I am fast and do not last long, no one does, nothing does, to foul fidelity, to penetrate faithfulness, to shred love does not take long, not long enough to recognize what is happening if anything is happening and you wonder what happened if anything you imagine nothing but you feel a vague ache. Done. Eliminate me then wipe with me then flush me or I will use you like I've already used you like I use everybody, even Palo, for the good of Palo, to be, for him to be, except Palo is beyond my use, as a hot-blooded man, while I am an anemone a water flower a water filterer, a solitary polyp, a secreting toilet barnacle making love to paper making toilet paper while asphyxiating on my plasticity. That I write this begs the question are these words mine, is this world mine? Stick to the first question like a stone adhered to the breech of a boat, like a barnacle humping a keel, because it actually has an answer, as opposed to the other, though I do not know what the answer is and it is relative and irrelevant because the question is who cares whose words the words are? Serve the story I tell you. The only thing anyone cares about, if anything, beyond themselves, is the story, the story they listen to, the story they create, the story they tell, the story they live by. The story is what is important, not me, not mine, not you, not yours. The story is Palo, and his affair. Believe in the story. He's been unfaithful, but believe in Palo.

* * *

The conductor checks your ticket but not Palo's, which makes you wonder if Palo is here. But his smell gives him away. You are blind. The train bounces, clickety-clack clickety-clack. The train creates its own crush of wind by the window. This man whom you identify as Palo by his smell breathes heavily across the aisle. He breaks wind, which you hear. Now you smell the broken wind, which is what you smelled before but multiplied. The train's bounce jostles and soothes. You fart silently without smell and hear the slight thumping of wings against his ears, his tail static sparking against the seat, the skin of his haunches sticking there, and what might be a rodent's teeth clacking at his crotch. You cross your legs and feel the vinyl seats cling to the skin on the back of your upper thigh where it mates with your buttocks and you feel fluttery about the head wondering how many people besides yourself sit on this bench in this commuter train to Palo's home without pants and what do you have in common with them, what do you share with them, what do they share with you, besides a sense of violating un-uniqueness and puckered sphincters now relieving internal

pressure, now gasping. Every time you shift, your skin sticking to the seat, your skin and the seat acting in unison then, makes a farting noise and you blush because you cannot be sure it wasn't real, wasn't just noise, and it is possible this fart will not not stink and Palo will or perhaps is smelling you although it feels like he is somewhere else, not entirely present, home already perhaps in his head, in his imagination, though still some part of him, namely his nose and the olfactory nerve, must smell you even if he chooses to be unaware. You never thought you'd think this but suddenly you wouldn't mind Palo's eviscerated raccoon breechclout, are even perhaps covetous, though your desire for his headgear is tamer. Your bottom making the noise of breaking wind, you shift to ask, no, first to reach across and touch Palo on the shoulder, to speak first without touching him seems somehow wrong, to speak to him without confirming his existence could in the end prove embarrassing, to touch then, and then ask him if you might borrow his eviscerated raccoon, not borrow, if he would give it to you, you don't intend to return it, not once you've worn it, and you won't buy it, you've already spent enough on his story and why does everything have to cost something, money doesn't grow on trees, because he just might say yes, after all he has nothing left to lose, he is going home to confess to his wife that he violated her faith with a much younger Frenchlike woman who has not birthed dozens of children and did acts to him she used to do and a raccoon over one's loins is probably neither a positive or negative in such a situation, whereas your modesty and self-protection stands to benefit greatly, and he may be more amenable because he likes how you look, though you don't know how you look, except to the touch, you're blind, and you are reaching out to touch him to see what he looks like to ask him what you look like to untie the raccoon hands from the wings of his hips and retie them around yours with his hands strong and rough from collecting and gathering when you touch nothing but absence across the aisle and hear the thud of boots walking away and the click of a door opening and the slam of it closing and heavy breathing and fumbling in a tight space and an elbow smacking a wall and an inappropriately loud gasp and a shamefully loud breaking of wind and the thud thud thud then splatter thudding and splattering below you below the train receding as this man you don't know except by what he's done and how he smells expels himself through the hole in the train floor that they call a toilet onto miles and miles of track, more miles in minutes than all the miles in the months of walking downhill since his act, and when it is finally quiet you wait for his sigh of relief at having relieved himself of his waste but you only hear his knees hit the floor and his tears now dripping through the hole before you and breaking against the tracks below you amid his splashing vomit and the

train's mighty wind.

You Arrive By Train

I'd like to service to serve to surmise this story, to serpent it, to surgery it, to circle it, to put its dick in its asshole, to surfeit it with it, but I cannot, and the service would cost me and who would pay for the blasphemy, for the disgrace, you?, you've paid too much already, me?, that would be quite an act of generosity, me paying for you to experience the story sexing itself, and remember I am already eliminating me and there are limits to my charity, who then, Palo?, Palo has neither sticks nor stones nor sense and by all appearances he may have syphilis, but not really, I just said that to be hurtful, to express my emotions, not everyone who has an affair with a Frenchlike, Gypsyish, bohemianwise woman contracts syphilis, but he isn't real, he's an abstraction, there is no train, there is only us and soon there will be only you, but no, the money, the cost is no object, is not why I, Kol, I like Kol better because it uses less letters and satisfies a nostalgia for Scandinavia, I believe, won't insert this story's penis in its rectum, which I want to do my god do I want to do but I cannot, I can't, it doesn't fit, it doesn't reach, the story doesn't bend that way, it's not made to bend that way, a hole anywhere a hole in the story in which to stuff this story, the mouth, almost, almost the mouth, but no it does not quite reach the mouth, close enough for hope but not actuality, the rectum is really the nearest hole but still the story does not bend that way, do you?

* * *

You want to go to Palo. To hug him, to hold him. But you don't know him. And you're not wearing pants. Leave him alone.

* * *

Let Palo try to find some value in suffering, I am so tired, some compelling narrative for misery, no, bored, some justification for solitude, no, inept, some love for being, no, alone, yes all those tired bored inept alone of it, it being story, it being being, it being perhaps the most versatile word in the English language, it being able to satisfy many parts of speech, be it subject or object, direct or indirect to a verb, object to a preposition, it being a pronoun referencing a lifeless thing, a stone, an inanimate life, a tree or dead raccoon, a sexless being, you, or an abstract entity, me, it just needs to be a verb too, to be everything, to form a complete sentence, It it it., but It hit it. or It lit it. or It bit it. or It fit it. is as close as it gets, as I get, let Palo try it, let him hit it, let him

flog it, let him light it let him bite it let him fight it, let him value compel justify love it. I cannot it.

* * *

You go to him. He is kneeling over the hole. Below the hole is the ground, which stops moving. The train stops at his stop, which is the only stop. You present him with these pages as toilet paper because he has not wiped because the train does not carry toilet paper because it does not cater to its customers because it is a public service and does not want to encourage the use of its facilities and he has nothing to wipe with besides his raccoon and you want to wear the raccoon. He wipes with these pages-cum-wastepaper. The air in these tight confines is fresh because of the negative or positive pressure gradient created by the air rushing below the hole when the train was hurtling forward, the airbelowthehole's greater relative velocity and lower pressure sucking the foul stagnant air in the bathroom out, which sucked better air in from the train car and cracked windows and loose joints. If everything were sealed perhaps all the air in the train car would be sucked out this hole, still open, the flapper still unshut. But all that is in the past: the train stops and the wind is broken and the air does not move and Palo drops these soiled pages through the hole where they go nowhere but a few feet down and lie in a small smeared pile on the gravel below.

While he wipes you put on his warm rotten squelching raccoon. He does not stop you. This toilet paper for an eviscerated raccoon breechclout: that is the transaction. With the raccoon head between your legs you feel better about hugging him, and you do, but it is like hugging a hole. You are not sure you hug him. He goes like you are not there.

* * *

What I can do, what I do do, is sing in an attractive voice in an enchanting rhythm with seductive words I am sick of. The question is do I have the focus, the fortitude, the strength of heart to see this through, the self-restraint and commitment and discipline to do what I set out to do, the purposed hole and harnessed desire and penetration of mind to eliminate myself from the story and destroy Palo and thereby discover what it is to be? I can imagine nothing more devastating than for him to encounter those whom he has destroyed, these wives and children, is destroying, destroys by his presence, by his infidelity, by his broken faith, broken again and again in its reiteration, nothing

more shaming, nothing more disgracing, nothing more. It will be good for you too when I go, we will discover together, we will be engaged engaging life apart, just relax, don't relax too much, relax your mind but don't lie there like a log, move with me a little, roll where I roll, push back where I push, touch where I touch, fit our shapes together, we are geometry, what will fit in the ring?, yes a hole but there is already a hole in the ring, there, yes be on top put the round hole on the round peg, okay put anything that fits into the round hole in the round hole, anything that fits whether it's round or not, that's novel and functional, purposing all these pieces that don't fit, it doesn't have to fit perfectly, of course it does but we take what we can get, I'm sorry there's these edges and corners and I am covered in this inveterate plastic film but I have no protection, take what you can get, be in control be yourself be out of control lose yourself get me loose yourself take me in please take me please push me in please pull me in please all my pieces please get me out of here please all my shreds into you please all my please into your please.

I Go

Alone, you step off the train after Palo. Palo stops before his house, the gravity of which you feel, and as the chugging train pulls out stands tall to breathe and feel the sun's light on his bare chest, which you feel too on your bare chest, the slow warming of your heart. You hear the sucking sound as Palo removes his head from the grouse cavity and the whoosh then thud as he lets it go and the limp wings do not slow its fall or ease its impact. You kneel down to pick up the ex-grouse because it could be a face, your face, a face for you who does not know your face, who knows a hollow grouse better than your own face, and as you fit your head in the grouse and feel the warm flesh slip over your forehead Palo puts his old stoneless yellow knit hat the color of baby poop on his head because though he will enter his home naked his head is suddenly cold and so he will enter his home naked but for his hat and his logger boots, his boots are who he is, his hat and his boots define him, what good could he be to Reb barefoot, he would be invisible to her, he would not be himself. And while you are down on your knees you smell the hyacinth and hear the bees and touch a tulip smell a tulip feel a tulip, no, you see tulips, you who cannot see sees tulips, you cannot see but you can see in your head, you use your imagination, more than imagination, bright bursts of tulips, red yellow pink orange variegated purple impossible black white-striped petals and sepals, three of each, all six tepals, forming the half-ellipsoid shell, the empty dyed egg cupping nothing but six stamen encircling a three-lobed stigma dangling atop a style rising from a three-chambered ovary, spreading in waves of waves of fields of tulips and you think, I should pick some for Reb because she deserves something besides infidel you, raccoon crotched and grouse headed and there were no flowers to be had in the city or perhaps there were but you were unaware due to the distraction of all the bad guys no there are no bad guys due to being so bent on your purpose of returning home to Reb and presenting to her your failed love that you missed the hawkers the vendors the market for flowers but this, this is something at least, a peace offering, a display of affection, a display of how much your feet hurt and the sun on your chest no, Reb, the children, do no lose sight of them, a show of what is important, a thought of them, and you reach out and pick flowers for Reb from her front yard with Palo's hand and you pick as many as Palo's hands can hold and then stop picking and then pick a few more and then stop again not because of a lack of tulips or love for Reb but because your hands are full, can hold no more, which is your limit, and you listen to the grind of the dirt of the front walk under your boots and the beat of wings at your ears and the chafe of your upper inner thighs from all those miles

caressed by pelt and the clack of tiny carnivorous teeth and the thud of your heart treading the steps and the creaking and bending boards and the railing paint flaking in your hand and the chickens clucking in the rear and the morning glory enveloping the old Toyota truck on cinder blocks and the swaying of the plastic door of the plastic toy house in the gentle breeze and the fading of a derelict plastic toy kitchen in the sun and the expectant open generosity of a plastic training potty wanting to be used to teach to be productive to be filled and the crunch of innumerable unidentified plastic toys underfoot and your and Palo's knuckles together in unison no not in unison as one rap at the door, which makes you feel awkward, knocking on the door of your own home, but awkward is what feels right for you come as a stranger to your house, but you feel worse than a stranger, you feel intrusive, like a proselytizer or a salesman who does not want to be a proselytizer or a salesman but who does it anyway, who demeans himself out of a sense of duty or for money to eat or to satisfy some ethical convolution or in the service of a twisted redemption, selling yourself to eat and your God to feel better. You decide you will not sell yourself, you will give yourself. You will ask for nothing in return, maybe you will ask for forgiveness, no no no, how could you, you will ask for nothing. You decide you will present yourself as a stranger with tulips, as a person these people you love once knew, as one who loves them and has hurt them, as a plastic training potty, whatever use your decisions are, which may not be much, but which may be all you've got besides boots and an eviscerated raccoon and an evacuated grouse. There is no answer from the door. You grasp the handle and turn and open. You go in your home. You come out of the sun. You begin to end a very long walk.

* * *

Thank you thank you thank you oh please God thank you.

* * *

A gasp.

* * *

Now what?

* * *

Many gasps.

* * *

I mean, what now?

* * *

Your eyes adjust. It is cool.

* * *

I don't know how to begin cleaning this up.

* * *

You are blind. Your mind adjusts.

* * *

The muck and stench of my fidelity.

* * *

Dozens and dozens of little feet pitter away.

* * *

My wife my children my life.

* * *

Somebody else enters who smells a lot of flowers and a little of chicken shit.

* * *

Your husband or wife or significant other or partner or lover. Your love.
Yourself.

* * *

The eyes belonging to the feet are not gone away. They are in hiding behind curtains under the couch peeking out over big open books they pretend to read ears pressed to bathroom doors watching listening becoming.

* * *

I — I have to go. I'm so sorry. I just must go. I'm sorry for what I did to you, what we did together, I hope you enjoyed it, at least on some level, as an experience, or at least found it engaging, something, anything, that I was worth it, but I cannot be near myself anymore, which is no reflection on you, you were wonderful, are wonderful, thank you, I felt, feel like, am more than myself for a moment, but I, who am I, I give you this story as a gift, a sadgift, it's not mine to give, it's Palo's, but I give it to you anyway, it's yours, you bought it, it's all I can leave you, except this godawful mess, I must go home, I don't know if repairs are conceivable or what they will cost or if it has been totaled but I don't have insurance and I've already given you everything I had to give which is how we got into this slop in the first place, I'm sorry if I destroyed anything of yours in the name of love, in the name of a created world, but I don't know where I am, where do I go, there are no holes to crawl out of or into, it is all one big hole I go blind seeing, I go saying, I go.

Reb, Affair's End

You gonna use the restroom before we go? says Reb, she of flowers and the chicken shit she feeds them.

Go where? you say.

On in this conversation. To where you, Palo, tell me, Reb, what you're gonna tell me. To when you've said what you will've said.

Will you be with me there? you say.

I'll be there and here, where I need to finish fertilizing.

I did it on the train, you say.

Spread it over the whole county, did ya?

I held it a long time for you, you say, holding out the flowers.

For me? Thank you. How your hands must suffer to have held them flowers so long. How long precisely you been holding them?

I've been walking -

Where you been, Palo?

In the woods collecting sticks.

Where you left your pants.

And my sticks.

What happened, Palo?

Well.

Well.

It's a long story.

Ain't got all day.

It'll come. What am I to do to help it come?

What come?

What happened.

That's what I'm asking.

That's what I'm saying.

Then say it.

I'm asking what I'm supposed to do.

I live in a world where people do and do and do and never get done with what they need to do and you live in a world where all you do is decide what you should do.

I'm not sure how to say it.

I'm saying I got things to do.

I'm saying there's nothing worth doing to do.

I'm saying there are infinite things to do, and I want to have a little less to do, in which case I got to go do something.

Wait.

For what?

I will have had sex with Antoinette.

Will have?

Have had.

Had?

We live in a world where I have sex with Antoinette.

Ain't none of 'em good options, but of the bunch I choose have had.

I have had sex with Antoinette.

Stop saying that!

* * *

I give you this story as a gift, a sadgift, a gift picked from your garden, a remembrance of our brief encounter, affair, love, it's not mine to give, it's Palo's, but I give it anyway, it's yours, it's all I can leave you, I go, except this mess, I go, these pages and petals and slosh and mildew, I go, this relationship, I go, I can't breathe, I go.

* * *

She beats you about the head with the wooden spatula with which she scrapes out the coop. You collapse. She continues. You are not sure if you go unconscious or numb or feel each blow like one who is stoned, if one who is stoned does not go unconscious or numb or is in some way able to separate oneself from one's body, transcend one's pain, be other than oneself, be above oneself. Your body quivers involuntarily with each blow. She beats you in a wild rhythm until she is finished. She finishes. You don't want her to be finished. She rakes your cheeks with her fingernails and ravages your face with her teeth and gouges her thumbs deep into your mouth. She finishes. She stands above you, gasping. She hits you in the ear. She throws the spatula across the room. She lies down beside you. She is crying. No, she is sweating. She is finishing.

I'm sorry, she says.

No, you say, I am.

You ain't what you were. I fucked up your face.

It's not my face. It's a bird.

I'm not gonna cry.

Okay, you say. Should I take my ring off?

I already cried. While you walked. Cried and cried and cried. I'm done with it. Whole county knows what you done. Broadcast it to the whole world. You're beating your head against the internal dead end and I get a goddamn sucked-on stick in the mail.

Good, you got it.

Don't know why you couldn't least be quiet.

It was a mistake. An urge in the moment. Something inside, you say, told me to externalize the metaphysics of being, to –

Stop using words.

To engage existence, to –

You did it with another woman.

To make a lot of noise, to –

To roar like a lion.

To scream, you say, like a lone mountain lion in heat.

Like a baby being stepped on.

* * *

I can't go. I cannot get out. I have nolife outside of the story and I want to be outside. If I'm mold I want to be outside mold, orange fungus on a tree, if I'm mildew I want to be outside mildew, pink mildew on high white mountain snow, if I am excrement, I want to be a green cow pie in the pasture or a yellow dog terd in the park or purple bear scat on the trail, if I am to go, I don't want to go in a toilet. I go. I cannot go.

* * *

You try to look at her, but your eyes don't work. Your mouth doesn't work either, but she knows what you say. You have lived together for a long time.

Your nose no longer exists; you can't smell her; you want to. The ear of yours that she didn't hit hears the children stretching to see, to hear, to smell, to taste. You touch her face with yours. It's damp. Your face stings.

You got the salt I sent, you say.

Best chicken we've eaten in months. Some on the table for you.

You eat it. I don't care about me. I want you to finish destroying me, you say.

You're only saying that to feel better about yourself.

What do you want me to say? you say.

Nothing.

What do you want me to do? you say.

What do you want to do?

I want this to not have happened. I want to not be me, you say.

That's not something to do. I guess I want you to live day-by-day with this affair, with this shit you've done, and add new things you've done atop it like coral. I will always hate that part of you but I want it to just be a part of you and I want you to be with us. I want you to die and not go away and I don't want to smell your rot because you are the man you were but you're not and if you die I'll kill you so I guess I want you to feel like shit and I want you to not want to exist for a while but don't tell me about it for the love of God just make sure I know that's how you feel.

You forgive me?

Forgive? What the dirty fuck does that mean? No, I don't forgive you. I want you to shut up and go collect sticks. We're out of beans. We're out of rice. Go clean your face up. And don't make a scene out of it. It'll heal, eventually, sorta, minus the ear. And there's no bringing your nose back. And put on some pants so I can stop thinking about that roadkill raccoon. Put on pants and put sticks in them and shove your words up your ass for godsake, the kids are listening.

* * *

I go.

* * *

You think for a long time, lying there with a maimed and crusty face, or you don't think but are aware of Reb's mounting annoyance and know the only thing left to do here on the floor is to have sex with her or get up and go to the bathroom and clean up and get on with the day, but you are pretty sure she won't have sex right now, make up sex doesn't exist and you're not made up besides, but you feel the need urge compulsion to say something before getting on with it, and after all this time all you can think of or not think of to say is I love you, which you say into a silence that you feel you've sinned against, for you receive no response, and after enduring the silence you broke for a while you get up to go fetch a bucket of water because the water doesn't work in the bathroom, it must not work, it's never worked, and you'll need the bucket of water to lave your fouled face and flush the toilet, which you need to use again, and the bucket is in the bathroom and the water outside, so you need to go into the bathroom to get the bucket and then outside for water and then inside to use the bathroom so you try the door to the bathroom to get the bucket and discover the door is locked and the bathroom is in use, and there you stand, waiting for who must be your children to finish in the bathroom, wondering who you are, what you look like, what you have become, what that even means, or perhaps none of those, because you are Palo, except this last, the only question that means anything, what are you to do now? you can't be more precise, and you have no answer but you are doing something, going to the bathroom, not yet, going toward the bathroom, feeling along the walls, hoping to make it, going and waiting, your wife crying or not but getting up to put the cut flowers in water so they don't die a lost investment, so they can be sold for money for food or perhaps you have some faith yet that the cut flowers are being saved for beauty or perhaps all your faith is used in going, in believing you're going to the bathroom, in believing that it's enough for now to go on, hoping to go to the bathroom, groping for how to go, waiting to go, believing there is somewhere to go, a private place to relieve yourself, a place to go.

* * *

END