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BOLT FAST OR WEATHER

by

STEPHAN MCCORMICK

Under the Direction of Josh Russell

ABSTRACT

Just graduated, Livy McHaney moves into a loft owned by father and daughter Wallace and Keegan Sammler. As Livy gets to know the Sammlers, he becomes fascinated by the sense Wallace makes out the world, a skill difficult for Livy. At the same time, Livy starts working at Zoo Dunn conducting its Tournado Train. Wallace explains to Livy his reflections on animals, enthralling Livy with his big ideas about freedom and questioning when one is supposed to not. In an attempt to make his grand pronouncements concrete, Wallace recruits Livy into a secret plan to kidnap and set free a popular young elephant from Zoo Dunn. Once in motion, much of their plan fails and everything appears less certain. Livy is forced to rethink the kidnapping's meaning, the possibility of changing the way people view animals, and ultimately the allure of Wallace's "truth" in forging his own ideas about life.

INDEX WORDS: Elephants, Zoo, Captivity, Animal representation,

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in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2006

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THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 2008

I found a junk e-mail in my inbox this morning entitled LEARN TO BE A MAN AT THE ZOO. After such a bold claim, I had to open it: Zoo Dunn has five positions open, and Friday afternoon it's holding an 'open call' interview. I double checked the e-mail's veracity at the zoo's website (and legit it was, if in odd taste) and submitted an application online. The prospect of working in a zoo excites me since I don't do anything here at home – three months since graduation, I can't get through five pages in a book. Television and music hurt more than help. Nobody but robots e-mail. And my bank account's almost empty. But I am doing *something*. This counts as something. Hello, journal.

The novelty of working around animals should at least get me through a security deposit at a new place. Of the jobs on the website listed, I doubt I'm qualified to be an elephant keeper. And I'm finished serving food. So that leaves ticket ripper, carousel conductor or tour-train driver. I think I'll try for the carousel.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 14

There was a time when people were in the habit of keeping things to themselves. I once heard it termed *hardboiled-dom*: an austere, scrupulous, outward focus which mirrored well-made interiority (if only by way of the whip). Thus all it took to understand a person's character was to watch them, to listen to how they spoke for the habits of their thought. When a person speaks of herself, a sensitive looker feigns interest. A person's character is a construction and should be like a tangible map; but take away the activity from the construction and he's as ill-equipped to know himself by relying on his emotions as he is to find double-sided glass in a hall of mirrors. But this constructive idea hasn't gone anywhere, it's just evolved. We are enjoined by it now to forge ourselves out of base materials. I can't imagine any more pressure, even in a town with every judging moral eye on you than the weight of an empty personality when nothing is disallowed.

Everybody has a story. Nobody cannot not be heard. Even the deaf and dumb can break themselves into signification. Power and character were never synonymous, but when light carries grandiosity across the world in milliseconds, it becomes easier to find the brightest firefly. Many of us aren't brave enough to throw ourselves to the intrusion of the wind, to blow like dislodged oak-leaves wherever autumn takes us. Though I think most of us are meek enough to try.

For something that's blown about, you'd think there be some landing involved, something would catch, or that eventually a twig would spear it and hold. To keep with the metaphor a little longer, that presupposes something as unified as a leaf, falling from a tree where the nuts and leaves are more or less the same but each twirling to its own landing spot. For me, there's never been an articulate observer to offer a version of myself to myself. And as long as there are no cracks in the glass or leaves grow eyes, I'll never find the promised door, or even know I'm a leaf.

When most people usually start and stop or keep going journals, I drew pictures. Boredom's physically painful, but I can engross myself in pointlessness. I once created my own fleet of paper air-ships, cataloging each into class, style, and faction. It took me nearly two months to fold and write up four-hundred ships. They'd of course never fly, and they didn't move right when I blew them on a table; I put each ship into their faction's space-station, which my creativity failed and were just kitchen appliance boxes. I doused each one in gas and flour and pretended the nearest star unexpectedly super-nova'd. I think one of my middle-school friends still has the tape. We haven't spoken in ten years, but I don't really want the tape.

I used to draw and sketch to pass the time; the pictures I drew were for impressions. Each one began with nothing in my head but something strong in my chest. This was before skill mattered, but my drawings have never improved. I showed a sketch to Ms. Appletree, fourth grade, who gave it back to me with a book of logic puzzles. This was during art class. I never drew again at school.

College didn’t help and I continued to blow without landing. I started playing guitar and thought I’d major in it, but I soloed as well as I sketched. I had no Ms. Appletree since this time I was paying. But it taught me what other people were like who had found somewhere to lodge.

After swallowing the sour pill that I was a poorly fit music major, I switched my studies to English Literature. I like books. But I also like John Coltrane and Roy Hargrove. Burning for something doesn’t mean you’ll shine, but I didn’t have any other ideas.

And then I graduated. In my jobless life, where inspiration flowers but never makes a smell, I say to hell with it all – I'm just going to write in a journal, to have it out with my head. If this doesn’t help, maybe I’ll go back to blunted herbal-life. But something has to change when you leave college, doesn’t it?

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 15

The ‘interview’ was so moronically simple it felt scripted, but then for everyone there in an official capacity it probably was. I arrived just after one. They had five tables arranged but the last two were for me, the unskilled positions. At the first table they sought a head-chef. Three people in bright yellow safari shirts sat at the next two tables, around which most of the applicants hovered practicing the sub-linguistic groveling you learn attending school dances. I skipped the forth table, as it was for people who hadn’t filled out applications yet. A skinny woman sat at the fifth with a yellow legal pad under her folded hands, and next to her a black-bearded man asked me questions about how I got along with people. The applicant pool must have been unusually shallow today; before I could finish, black-beard held out his hand and said ‘Mr. Mchaney, Mr. Mchaney, please! I think you’re wasting your overqualified time here. But, you seem to be willing. I won’t be the man who stops another man from doing what he wants!’ This must have been an inside joke, since he laughed and nobody else cared. I only cared because I didn’t seem to be the punchline. So he said, ‘Which position should I call yours?’

In-the-moment thinking told me that working a booth is too boring and stationary, not to mention free-loading workman's comp does *not* cover neuroses related to inactivity. So I told black beard I'd drive the train.

One more useless notch on resume: train conductor.

In other news, it's been three months since I tricked a female into believing I'd appreciate the curvy dimples of her naked body (don't get wrong, journal, I *do* appreciate them, but some people work so well by games and manipulation that they have to mask the truth by pretending it's a put on). Thus, at night, I've started keeping my hands in my pockets, and when no pockets are available they fondle cigarettes. I figure I have a better chance of delicious dreaming with full reserves than I do spoiling all my sexual energy beforehand. I feel very odd mentioning this to anybody in Real life. I nearly said something to Strobe today, when I ran into him leaving the bathroom after his morning poop. I thought we could have a going-into-battle-together high-five and butt-smack, but I couldn't bring myself to explain *why* I had smacked his butt, so I just pretended to be sleepwalking. That way I maintained my limpid illusions of sexual grandeur. For better chances with high-quality girls who only sleep with guys other high-quality girls sleep with. This is the logic I've used since high school. Though it might be time for another book of puzzles.

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 16

Today I cleaned my room for the first time in six months. I wonder if there's a way I can forget *why* it takes me six months to clean my room. Nothing is unimportant. Everything requires attention, perfect placement, reflection. Even a pencil evokes memories of its use, the people who have borrowed it or bought it or, since nothing helps imagination like procrastination, those who made it in the pencil factory. That it takes six hours to clean my room is why I do it bi-yearly. And yes, journal, if I were to clean it next week, it would still take many hours. The second time

through something usually takes longer, anyway, since you're working with everything above the base, building upon your previous work, etc.

But anyway, I'd rather move out than have to clean again.

Monday, November 17

First day of zoo-training week. Turns out there's not much to train conducting but pressing two buttons and patient waiting. Which is why today was spent on employee-customer, employee-employee relations. How to talk to kids. But I think they knew we knew it was all commonsense codified.

The man whose job it fell to to make sure we all were habituated correctly as children was Mr. Mere Cunningham. Energetic, hyper-perspirer, short legs, Mere didn't want to encumber the freedom of the top three buttons of his yellow Zoo Dunn polo, much in the same way he didn't want to encumber overtly what he thought were our intellects. He had an annoying verbal tic of up-speaking 'right' arbitrarily after clauses in need of our attention. After our first morning session, I thought he meant it condescendingly, as though he were holding our hands through difficult-for-us-but-not-for-him material, but after lunch Mere still needed our blinks and groans to battle ahead. By the afternoon lectures, it started to become funny in the way slamming your hand in a door can be funny if it keeps happening.

'What's the first job of working at Zoo Dunn? Before you do anything else, what do I tell everybody, everybody, right? From the keepers to concessions, Kori Bustard to Guinea Fowl? Smile! Right? I don't know why anybody would not *always* enjoy themselves inside such a fun environment, right? Fun for all ages and animals and shoppers, you know, right, Zoo Dunn is great for everybody. But *no matter what*: smile! If we are caring to our patrons, right, and show them a face not embarrassed to be on a Cheshire Cat, helpful faces, quick to answer to the best of our abilities, right, there's no right good reason their bad day might not just be right 'n fixed, right? Zoo Dunn is the places for happy thoughts! Right?'

Who attended these seminars were future volunteers, non-salaried positions like my own, animal staff (required every five years as a refresher), secretaries, office staff, office managers; basically, everybody at the zoo had to sit through these things.

Environments like this bring people together out of mutual cynicism. The first person I had a real conversation with was Rocky Clamrock. He was a ginger, bushy haired, freckled on round full cheeks, middle height and husky. I prefer to lead people into talking about what interests *me* about themselves instead of hoping whatever they come up with on their own won't grate. Thus I usually ask more questions, interviewing them, than provide polite counter-banter. Of course once a person is investigated I stop leading them, either letting them or myself free.

'I worked at a traveling fair,' said Rocky at lunch, as we investigated provided food from Zoo Dunn's eatery, another point of our education: steak fries, hotdogs, and chili-cheeseburgers, whose buns involutedly swelled (they had been made fresh!) as we decided the chili should mask all taste but itself, since it's really, really difficult to ruin chili. Rocky said his position as zoo-keeper-in-residence, a new creation, had originated from the transfer in a month of Little Baby Senlin, the movie-star baby elephant, from the soon-to-be released Rock Hyrax film 'Dr. Pachyderm.' The movie was news to me, but was supposed to be big PR deal for the zoo, so I most people already know about it. Of the three elephants already at Dunn Zoo, Dorothy, the oldest, just turned celebrated her forty-fifth – antique, Rocky said, for captive elephants. But Dorothy had had a fast life, not much glamour but lots of glitz. She had turned into a sick old thing. Rocky's theory was that Senlin could help in two ways. First, in order to blunt the public's sadness from Dorothy's sickly state by what he called being 'a sprightly, dumbo-eared quasi-cartoon elephant toddler, dancing her memory away' while simultaneously rubbing off some of his own celebrity onto Zoo Dunn itself. Nobody wants to tear up when they walk through the African plains, he said, and if there were only two elephants, if they didn't replace Dorothy, their presence would speak more to Dorothy's absence than if they all had died together in a fiery accident.

What really interested me was that he had worked at a traveling circus. He said ‘it wasn’t as exciting as you’re imagining it. And it was a fair, not a circus. Sure we had animals – a tiger, an elephant, a few striped lemurs, a chimp (who was the celebrity, I guess our version of Little Baby Senlin), but nobody was going to fool you into thinking they didn’t come to us for our rides. We had the largest transportable rollercoaster in the country, the Liberty Yell. And bumper cars, cotton candy, merry-go-round-and-round, centrifuges we called Martian UFOs. Our animals were a good thought, but an after-thought. They probably started using them for the old ladies and little babies Liberty Yell didn’t draw. It was smart, you know, give the people what they want and all that.’

Rocky apprenticed under the elephant keeper in the green and white animal tent. He said that at Zoo Dunn he hoped he’d become a ‘full fledged’ keeper. ‘School’s a waste for learning stuff like this, but it never hurts to make the elephants at least your hobby, ‘cus wherever you might work with large animals, especially big animals, anything that makes caring for them easier is welcomed by everybody.’ So he would read National Geographic and pick up ideas from the internet. When Luci, the fair’s only elephant, grew recalcitrant, Rocky put on a white and red polka-dotted dress that belonged to his sister because he had heard elephants were more comfortable around matriarchs. Sounds of videogames in the next stall always made Luci nervous, but she had kept her calm until then. Rocky walked into her performing-ring on his knees and offered a banana. She took it happily, it seemed, to everybody who was watching. She wouldn’t kick up anymore dust. Maybe Luci smelled his sister’s perfume, or maybe it was the red dots, but somehow the gesture worked great for the elephant and ever greater for the people who came to see her. Everybody watching loved it. Rocky’s idea made him so popular within the fair that subsequently the owner promoted him to Luci’s full keeper (her old one moved to the chimp). So then Rocky got the idea that he could keep up with the elephant thing, maybe a career thing, ‘so that’s how I got here, I guess.’

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 19

Yesterday afternoon I was going over handouts from the Zoo and heard the door slam in the kitchen (it doesn't fit the frame and always slams). I went downstairs and saw Holly Treadwell. She appeared possessed by something, which gave me the opportunity to attempt to be that something – she seemed already in the right mind for possession, I thought I could slip in unnoticed through the window. In the living-room's swirling dust, lit by two wall-length windows behind my back, dust-corridors converged on her. Everything slowed while I imagined *she* imagined us both on the broken-springed couch, green-plaid and black-stained to my left, our eyes and arms locked amid a convex depression two feet deep. But the hypnotic moment ended three blinks later, because such reveries are impossible when involving the smell of barbeque.

'Livy, where's Strobe? He's not downstairs. I'm supposed to pick him up for trivia and it's getting late.' The entire ceiling fan shook from where it met the ceiling, with clinking vibrating fans shaped like hearts and dancing phalluses.

'Holly!'

'And he was late last time, too, so *this time*, I even volunteered the ride. Now he's nowhere!'

'How are you!?'

'We can't expect to win if he's not there, Livy. Where's Strobe?'

I followed my nose to the front yard through Daniel's mobster-themed frat-boy room. Strobe, not surprisingly, was throwing a barbeque party. Strobe is like a gauche wizard, and looked the part standing in the yard, twirling his grille tools, announcing himself master of fire, and his tall white chef's cap, secured to his forehead with electrical tape, swiveled as he moved. Last Thanksgiving he had opened the juice-shoot to his turkey smoker and the grease burned through five inches of soil. He stood in the hole because it looked funny being face-high to the smoker.

‘What do you expect from a quarterback freshman?’ is what he said as Holly tried to make him pay attention to us. His white-and-red mottled grille-mitt flipped fitfully stuck-together ground beef to the air, where upon falling it splashed sizzling, mottling the mit more with the grease fireworks. ‘Energy and excitement are virtues, I admit, but you can’t go from a triple-A school to a contending Division-1 team over a summer. Our record is probably the most inflated of the conference! You can’t make a season on flukes and good luck. Especially hoping good luck will come at the hands of a 19 year-old spazz! Elvis, what are they teaching you in school?’

‘I don’t by that for a second, Strobe,’ thick-necked, thick-jawed Elvis said, who shoved his sweaty beer-cozy to his muzzle before rejoinding completely. ‘He has instinct, no? He’s the most popular player on the team, no? And not just because he’s young and wining – it’s because he’s basically *orgasming* style out there on the field where it counts and paper doesn’t mean shit’ and here he pointed over everyone’s head to the stadium’s ostensible location, ‘and you’ve seen him, you *ass*hole, break the ankles of safeties and lineman with in*sane* quickness,’ and here he started twirling, ‘and which you think makes your mother jealous ‘cus *your* slow boring ass racks up fat bills in college getting drunk,’ and here he plopped down sitting and somehow he did so with his legs crossed, ‘and all you’re gonna do, architect, is design some thing someplace and make some person more money,’ and here, to full-stop his point, he vomited all over his lap. A girl I hadn’t noticed hurried over and tipped him over, depositing his vomit and beer on our grass, which seemed in the moment a fertile sacrifice to Strobe’s taste in company.

Ten people stood or swayed about in the yard at sporadic locations. At the top of the seven steps that lead to the street, I noticed there were only four blooms in our three rosebushes. I thought we had had more. I’ll have to ask Strobe. I had important machinations relying on those blooms, and Strobe throws a party and his guests munch on my flowers. Very inconsiderate.

After Elvis left, Strobe was still in his grease-hole (which must have gotten deeper over the afternoon, as he looked deep-sunk, now sitting down, knees high, as if plopped in a trashcan).

Holly sat down facing the road on our first step, staring into the courtyard of the boarding-school-turned-apartments across the street.

‘That ass drinks too much.’ Holly moved her eyes from the old brick school to me.

‘It’s kind of funny drinking so much when you’re named Elvis, as if you didn’t already know how you were doing to die and wanted to call fate’s hand.’

‘I'm serious, Livy. This morning we all decided that I would take Strobe to trivia tonight, not sit bored at some stupid barbeque of his, and that we wouldn’t start drinking until we were all huddled together with our pencils and pizza.’

‘We all decided?’

‘He and I.’

‘So *you* decided?’

‘Don’t be dense, Livy. Strobe’s a vital part of trivia, has been for the last two years, and when only one regular decides to no-show our chances of winning our meal away really get hurt. The last three times he didn’t come, and as shocking headline-news to you, I had to pay for *his* part of the pizza.’

‘But how many people came?’

‘Um, well, four, including myself.’

I chortled, but playfully, before asking: ‘And how many were supposed to come tonight?’

‘I'm not exactly sure. We were supposed to meet the rest of the group on the patio, before trivia started.’

Everyone in the front yard, I noticed, was Strobe’s friend, people whose lives I knew to the extent of recognizing their faces, though Holly didn’t know a single one. There’s no football team at our school. Or rather, at my alma mater. Ah, no more school feels like a bad break-up, in that most of the time I can’t remember everything is not like it used to be. I said ‘So this was your plan to get Strobe alone – to be just you and him enjoying a night of trivia and beer and hopefully something less trivial once it was over?’

‘Nope. You know what, you’re retarded Livy, you’re always pretending like you know how things work.’

‘And then if you two, just you *two*, somehow did *well* during trivia, that would be some kind of bond, some connection or something only you two shared, so that maybe you could forget the rest of the trivia team, *your friends*, and intimate some burning personal want to rely on Strobe for trivia *and* the deeper things (because I’ve gone to trivia with you and know you never answer a question) in the same way you rely on your friends to win you that pizza. Am I wrong?’

She pulled her lips to a corner, waiting to unload something explosive. ‘It’s not as though we have a lot of chance to really hang out, you know. Not you and me, you ass, stop that, stop . . . chortling. I meant Strobe. When I'm not working, or he’s not working, or telling me he’s working, we’ve got these nights of trivia and these nights of his parties. If you haven’t noticed,’ out she pulled a box of mentho tooth-picks, handing me one, ‘in my group of friends, we do mostly everything together. We all share at least one class together, we work for the same professors, outside school we go to the same parties, meet up with the same friends’ ancillary friends. And we all drink the same beer. So I know what you’re hinting, I think. That there’s a problem with that, you know, and it’s a problem of the familiar. Now I sound like you. Great. But even you would say that some people, men, are wired to find energy and excitement in unfamiliar things only. The mysterious chick, the new girl, the unreachable cavern between the legs, whatever. It’s all so sophomoric, but that’s how you can divide probably more than half of all the guys our age. And then there’s the other kind, the kind who probably grew up with one girlfriend who then dumped them when they came to college, who attach themselves to consistency and the known and, excuse me for evoking every television talk-show ever as if I haven’t already, but everything fucking *comfortable*.’

These toothpicks really were minty. So I said ‘But we know which category our Strobe falls under, don’t we? It’s not like he’s involved with anyone. We’ve lived together for three years and he’s had sex three times that I know of. You have to ask yourself if that’s because of

his quirkiness or some kind of demonstrable, flux-like thing, him thinking of energy and excitement and all that stuff you just said and finding it in no one but still longing and desiring all the same, feeding his normal cycle of things by not doing anything different, remaining lonely, alone, and choosey, but essentially happy, like, like, like a goldfish.'

Our little epiphany bazaar ended when I heard behind what sounded like a gunshot in a keg. Someone had tipped the barbeque over. Charcoal mixed with grease to convert the yard's bald-spot into full-scale hair-loss. The surprise shut everybody up, and maybe the fact that strobe was still in the hole helped too. He used the burger-flipper and poker to push himself out. His clothes were smoking. He grabbed the fallen grille's handle with his mitted hand. He heaved it, not just up-righting the grille, but sending it helplessly just as wrongly the other way. It landed on its unbent side, bending it. The ejected charcoal burrowed new bald spots.

For the next ten minutes Holly and I sat on the step without speaking, which was odd at first but after a couple minutes I started getting into it. We watched a man wheel a shopping cart down the road. It hit a big pothole, and cans jostled out from his over-stuffed trash bags. He allowed the buggy a gliding stop, standing over the mess and the guilty concrete divot, seemingly unconcerned, curious. I saw he kept his cans in thin hazy plastic bags, of the kind I remember being given during elementary school detention, the kind supposedly used to pick up pine cones and sticks from various pastures around campus. The kind made too cheaply and thinly for even trash – pine cones shred the sides, sticks joust to freedom, and from a bump crunched cans crashing to the concrete. The man bent down with inexorable patience. Things like this couldn't upset him, or he'd have cracked years ago – lifetimes, I imagine, collecting cans for a living. And I couldn't help but think that I could learn a lot more in those pasty, crumpled cans, and in the man himself, who probably smelled of motor oil and sweat, than in all the books and lectures, half-understood and highlighted, I vaguely now used to form my conversations for me.

But before I could stop my warbling stupid heart from singing the most vital song ever sung, intoxicated by *soi-disant* epiphanies and feelings of lost opportunities, I asked Holly if I could take Strobe's place at trivia.

'Does it really matter now? It's about to start, or has already started, I dunno. Just one person called me back anyway, and nobody's here from our group. How's that for your theory, huh? Someone else is coming. But anyway we'd be a team of three and no Strobe.'

'But I have money for the pizza if we lose. After all, I'm moving out, I have a new job, so what if celebrate with my last $16?'

'You didn't tell me about all that.' She let the wind fondle her hair before she spoke again. 'And you'll drive?'

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 20

I'm getting so carried away with the idea of journaling that I pass out before I get to the best events of my day! But part of this whole diary-project is so that I *can* finish something, not to completion but until there's a hint of wholeness to it. And like Aristophanes would tell you, often it takes the absence of a penis before we start singing of such wholeness myths.

So we arrived at the trendy, local trivia joint we call Mussolini's Pizza. The food's mediocre, the service perfunctory, but everything happens cleanly, on time, always in the same way. Holly was correct in that once we found a table it was final-answer time for the second question. Holly seemed detached, so I ordered cheap beer for everybody. Something caught her attention and she wandered away as the waiter delivered our drinks. I had already decided to let her general apathy bounce off my social-shields. I had quickly deduced, on the ride over, that I'm a terrible surrogate for Strobe. She outlined painfully Strobe's putative partying as an affront to her clandestine affections he should have already picked up on. Though I doubt she evinced labile come-hithers like she imagined she did. Holly grew up in a many-dog-around-the-bowl household. You never knew when she agreed with your line. Tonally every response was a

confrontation. Discussion should work at least sometimes like you're both trying to reach for something clearer, more articulated, for all parties involved, and not like a fight of hugger-mugger madness. Perhaps I exaggerate. When everything someone says has the potential to be unserious, and everything's said in a serious tone, how can I be faulted for believing she's misunderstood by everybody but me?

But when she returned, she brought an unexpected debilitating burst of anti-matter.

Holly sat down next to me, and her friend, who she had gone to intercept at the entrance, took the other side of the booth. Her name was Keegan. High cheekbones and a low small chin made gave her face a skeletal look. It was alluringly odd. Her large inset dark eyes didn't help to soften anything, nor did the high hair line. But you could call her beautiful. And serene. She pursed her lips a little as I studied her, as if she waited to be challenged, knowing she'd win.

After introductions, she said, 'But I know you, Livy, I mean, we've met, don't you remember? I came in to that breakfast place you served at. And after you took our order you went to the back to get something, and came back out holding a really tall stack of egg-crates. And then you walked by us and tripped.' She covered her mouth and said to Holly, 'I've never seen eggs fly that far or someone look as sad. You slid so far on the yolks!' Her words suddenly seemed to catch up to her, and added, 'Did it hurt?'

After I pretended this wasn't embarrassing – I should have gone with it, you know, should have kept sliding on the eggs here at Mussolini's – Holly asked about Keegan's father, if I'd met him that day.

'Yes! I mean, no, not really. I didn't get to really talk to him. We were busy. It was Saturday, no time to even do my job. He seemed a bit . . .,' this is me fishing for a word, 'eclectic. An older guy dressed fashionably, I remember, I really liked his sweater, and he spoke a lot, speaking like, well, a younger guy who happened to be condescending and sour.'

Keegan giggled at my dull wit. Holly had drifted off again, looking bored, riding in her imaginary rocket ship, barreling towards Neptune, blasé to the stars and planets that have nothing

to do with her journey, and Keegan and I were her great stale celestial bodies, the kitsch wallpaper paneling her lonely flight.

‘Didn’t you . . .’ began Keegan’s first attempt at figuring out why I’d run away during that morning fiasco. I really was too busy that day, and I was a mess besides, dirty and stained, probably hung over. I had dropped their check before the food came so that I had no obligation to return.

‘It was my break,’ I dodged, ‘I didn’t have a chance to say goodbye.’

She looked to the table, from hand to hand to fork, and with a coy and teeming half-smile said ‘That’s a shame.’ I'm pretty sure I'm not just making this up. I'm pretty sure she meant to be coy about it. I'm pretty sure I'm supposed to read a lot into it. Totally sure.

While Keegan and I flirted and skirted, our dialogue screened Holly’s own with the waiter, a dirt-swarthy bohemian with a face commonly spotted by and around town. He recommended the pizza de-jour, a pretentiously named, Francophiliac multi-cheese-sun-dried-tomato job. And since we obviously weren’t going to win any cash from trivia, I felt a stab of pain from back-pocket’s bulge, impelling me askew in the booth.

We finished dinner and I made good on my in-the-moment, I'm A Millionaire promise to Holly. We had nothing to do but to step out into the thick cold gentle evening and stand closely together under one of the light poles, our satisfied stomachs and questing hearts spot-lit in the soft light imbibed by every particle of the comfortable moment. In a way that meant the evening shouldn’t end yet. I felt a docile longing, a quiet, well-practiced longing, sadly adept from my practice of endlessly flowing whimsy bereft of audacity, or maybe will, to do something with my desire. But the moment was silent. So I tinctured it with jokes and anecdotes, though Holly nor Keegan bantered back. This attempt of mine to make everybody else feel as happy as I did continued painfully too long until I remembered the state of my house, surely destroyed by the party and general lack of care, all mess and grease, vomit, burnt lawn and winter mosquitoes, and it gave me an idea. A much needed banter-aide to my hemorrhaging of jokes and quips. I began

laying subtle stones by which Holly or Keegan would follow and offer their places, no matter which, for us to life-support the evening until I got what I wanted, which, honestly, was a muddled morning fog of sleep on a foreign couch. And lovely attentive Keegan took the bait. She offered her loft. Said her father wouldn't mind, that he needs company and never seems to sleep anyway. Holly made a show of thinking through her own options, but then gave in much easier than she ever has to me.

When we got to her gate Keegan realized she had lost her key-card, but under big stage-like street lights the gate-keeper buzzed open the gate for us. I asked if he always let people in without cards. She shrugged and said he did, and made a comparison of the gate to metal armor in the gun-powder era. On the way to park in front of her loft I had to drive under remnants of old walls, now standing quite free of any other purpose than to look old. I had a general feeling, driving around to find her room, that I had entered a once-important fortress, a Fort Sumter of the industrial revolution, weather-worn, crumbling, but the decay added property value and that idea seemed strange to me. I mentioned this to Holly, who said 'what do you expect, she lives in an antique.' As useful as the phantom walls I drove by were the cracked brick pillars, cap-stoning parking spots arbitrarily positioned by themselves, and the occasional hanging garden tenants had erected. But with throwbacks to antiquity and the *soi-disant* security, I couldn't help thinking the whole place a giant farcical metaphor; but of what, I really can't say. Maybe I can come up with something later and tell Keegan about it.

The security into her building itself (there were seven entrances into the building) was your standard swipe-and-go or callbox job, the widely adopted kind which buzzes your cell. She hadn't brought her cell, either (she kept telling us her purse lay inside on her bed, 'I'm soooooo sorry!'). She took my phone and dialed her father. She shifted a leg in a hip socket and waited. We waited. She hung up and dialed again. I showed her how to work my text-messenger. She text messaged. Her cheeks burned crimson, from embarrassment or anger or from some stew of both I couldn't say. I didn't want to calm her (Holly did; she kept saying 'calm down!') because on her

face her oddly spaced features fit better with a little color. She grew upset, and I wanted to poke her with a stick to split her embers. Before I could whittle a choice prod (I had been searching the ground for thirty seconds or so), the door clicked and Keegan opened it shoulder-first, sighing and grimacing and pushing through like a fullback determined to make up for the last failed play.

Things were pretty much what you'd expect, exposed water pipers and cat-5 and electrical grounds, big smooth concrete walls and ceiling, space-age elevators and 1950s carpeting. I looked from Holly to Keegan and thought how wonderful it was to have friends, simple and sophomoric but still a curiosity to me, someone who seriously believes if the world and his sanity allowed he'd never leave his room. A droplet of sweat fell down Keegan's scintillating luminescent forehead. She caught me studying her and we met eyes; she forced a smile, dashing my hopes for getting something unforced, on her part, from her. I wasn't going to blame the decrescendo on our waning energies. I'm not even sure we even had a tempo to pull back from, but the fizzling immediacy of us should have subsidized our attenuated wits. I swallowed down my infatuation when the elevator dinged and Keegan punched six. Holly asked Keegan about her cat; Holly hadn't been to Keegan's in some months (they couldn't remember how long ago) but every part of her got excited as soon as Keegan mentioned Kingsley; she asked me if I liked cats, and I said that of course I did. Holly told some story about her own cat, and then about how much Kingsley reminded her of him, but I don't remember anything of what she said. We were spat into the hall, where the carpet was yellow instead of red, and guide Keegan took us straight to a dead-end of a long hall to her door.

When the door opened slightly opened (how some people do when they forget they have peepholes), I was startled by Christmas-light green eyes, partly covered by bushy hair, emerge from inside a penumbra of mood lighting and incense smoke. Keegan yelled at the eyes, and they retreated, opening the door.

'You have friends!' is what the owner of the eyes said, maybe he said 'Come right in!' He wore a baby-blue sweater, silk from what I could tell, but only because it appeared melted,

stiff, too-small, like silk strings tend to after a run through the dryer. He also wore dark brown cords that, in their puffiness, brought out the twigginess of his legs. Keegan told me later that he always wore those pants, frayed back pockets, faded see-through ass and all, but would change sweaters every few days. He had a philosophy about this, she said, but didn't go into detail.

The loft was big and rectangular, very palatial because of the high ceilings and coloring, that I felt like a confused Lilliput without his ropes. Every wall had been painted a lambent white; the decorating choice gave the place conflicting airs, institutional but firmamental, with the lights and scant wall-hangings, blanched but graceful. Walking in I noticed to my left a modest kitchen with stainless steel everything, appliances and countertops; to my right was an overstuffed couch, black fabric colored with orange cat fuzz. In front of it sat a glass table and in front of that a tiny television, the kind with big knobs, right-angle box and tiny screen. About halfway to the back of the loft from the door (the rectangularity reminds me of a train-station) a black-iron staircase wound up to the half-exposed second floor. It seemed like the second story of a barn. At the very back of the first floor there were double doors, painted yellow, the only permanent object of color in the entire place. It gave the sensation of looking at the sun through a cage of clouds. Very eerie, and so new it intoxicated, mesmerized: the naked brilliant walls upset all gauges of size and distance. I couldn't have said, from the front, if the double doors were twenty or a hundred feet away. Though not every wall was as visibly invisible: under and to the right of the winding stairs, along the same long wall as the TV, hung a great red Chinese dragon, staring at me, green eyed, and a snaking black tongue. Without it, the room could have just been a long rectangular box.

'I'm sorry for bothering you, dad, I can't believe I left the house without my purse. I'm so forgetful of things I have to keep.' For a girl in her mid twenties, Keegan spoke to her father overly deferentially, as if she feared upsetting him; but with an odd twist, it was only on the surface that she spun obsequies, as underneath was firm and resolute.

'No, no, nothing dire – not that I didn't mind – but letters from old colleagues aren't their voices, and as such, don't fade away with time. Anyway most paper's not made with acid these

days, so I *imagine* they don't fade like they used to. The letters I wrote your mother, you know, she kept them all in that too-heavy cedar-chest of hers, and you know it rained when I moved in here. It's like a hurricane spat all over them, all wrinkled yellow now, I can barely read what I wrote. But organizing them has had my evening interesting.'

Wallace's magisterial tone lacked the force of breath. His olive skin wrinkled uniformly, except around his eyes where thousands of tiny folds gently teared out, somnolently, though his milky eyes blazed in line with the dragon behind him. His brow bore the deep-set ridges of long concentration, his nose a pugnacious twist, his lips a pouting votive.

Wallace nodded at Holly to excuse himself, and left to finish reading his letters. It was half-past midnight. The key fiasco had oddly affected Keegan. She grew quiet, and Holly, in the same mood she'd been in for hours, remained aloof. She would have gushed clauses had I mentioned Strobe, but I had no reason to mention Strobe and so she just stood and stared.

So this idea of mine obviously back-fired. Some feelings are best left lit outside, under lamplight too inextricable from the moment they arose: change of scenery, and *Jenga*!

Holly used the phone-to-the-ear excuse to leave out the front door; Keegan apologized and stepped into the bathroom. *So be it!* I rejoined to their insolence. I wanted to follow to where Wallace had rolled and disappeared, through a knob-less door the dragon hung on that I hadn't noticed for it blending in with the room. I heard a shutter of central air, and a cold hand pushed me forward. Some steps later (so far the place wasn't as large as I initially thought), I met the door he had disappeared behind. I pushed on it, and it opened up. Behind it, quite out of place with everything else in the room, was dark, heavy oak door, very ornate, with a chiseled arabesque top half, shiny smooth bottom; a very aristocratic hunting-lodge door.

I knocked softly but hurt my knuckles badly. The door was not hollow or soft; it lived up to its appearance. Its machinery clicked; and with a measured, well-oiled pull, it swallowed me inside.

It must have been Wallace's bedroom, though a raised cot was the only evidence I had that it served at least that function. His little room mirrored the monotone theme of the loft itself. But instead of white, the room was banana boat yellow like the back doors, floor to wall to ceiling, and with that odd oak door open, looking into the loft was like staring right into a volcano. The room reminded me more of a small garage-shop than it did a study: a long table snug against the wall the length of the room and little shelves (yellow shelves) hung above it on pegboard. The wall behind the desk held nothing but shelves and an obscene amount of books for how small everything else seemed. On the far little wall hung a bronze statue of Ganesh.

I took all this in with a quick inconspicuous look before settling on Wallace, rocking back and forth in his chair. It reminded me of someone tapping their fingers on a table. In one of his hands he had a little palm computer, and the other on one of his wheels, rocking the chair.

'Terrible to be stranded in a foreign place, isn't it?' The computer plopped to his lap and he spun around and pulled up to the desk.

'Keegan and Holly had both stepped outside and so …'

'But more terrible than that is to feel foreign where you're sup*posed* to be stranded. Your house. Your job. In*debted* good American. But this also is nothing new. I imagine you'll learn this with time.'

My eyebrows creased and I must have looked stupid while I tried thinking of something to say. But when people talk like this, it's hard to respond without sounding hackneyed or clichéd or just plain idiotic. So I responded with silence.

He asked for my name and said I looked vaguely familiar. He said he owned a mental repository for faces 'but not words, names, attributes, tendencies, etc, outside what one can glean from the face. Its a dying critical attention,' he said, 'physiognomy – and for some people to cull so much out of what for most is so little, a mere byproduct, is no longer possible but in the descriptions of a metaphysical wit, and thereby making our possibility of apprehending such

things entirely passive, and impossible. He held strongly that such a wit, as far as he was concerned, died with Saul Bellow.

He kept on in this manner for the next thirty minutes, sometimes rocking, spinning slow circles as he free-associated and looked at the yellow ceiling, fumbled with his little computer while searching for a word, or wheeled to the corner away from me and stared at the wall while he talked. In making grand proclamations, he would equivocate for a moment, get tongued-tied, mutter *fuck it* then continue on as he was. He seemed to fluctuate between the officious, didactic, and self-consciously obtuse. He didn't appear all that concerned with me until deciding, probably as an after-thought, his point needed 'real-world' affirmation. So he would go on about love, and half-way through the jeremiad would ask me if I had ever felt the injunction to love.

'At times,' I replied, 'when feeling lonely, or uncreative in my free time.'

'But you've lingered in the chambers of the sea, as it were?'

'Um, yes, I think, I mean I think I know what you mean. Yes, I've heard the mermaids singing to each other, but in my personal experiences it's been all second-hand, in movies and songs and books. I'm not too dense not to believe in it, though.'

'But do you know what "human voices" mean?'

'The imposition of reality?'

'No, not really, no, those are the wrong terms. Think of the person walking on water, or in the naked air with their eyes averted from where their feet touch. They look down, they fall, like Wiley Coyote (but *not* Road Runner!). So you can't tell me that in any of those instances they have "reality" waiting for them when they lose or question their faith. We're not working in "reality" terms here – it's much more to do with faith within a frame. They don't believe in their fantasy enough to continue it. So when you're called out, or before that even, when you hear the voice of the not-mermaid, do you immediately question what's before you? Of course you do. You fall, your lungs fill with air, you're dead. Because it surprises you, this intrusion. But that's because you never saw the voices there from the beginning, that the sea-girls did more than sing

in their undersea club, that the whole time they were singing for *you*. Don't you get it? It's your fantasy. That's all we've got. We've become enlightened, all right, but with the wrong kind of illumination. If you think everything is illuminated then you're going to get sun-burned from the lack of shelter.'

Keegan interrupted, apologizing, more than was necessary, and I played the part where the person says no no, you're fine you're fine. She said she was fading, and offered me the couch in the living-room. Wallace lifted his eyes, scrunching his forehead like an accordion's bellows as he prepared his valves to sing.

'Are you drunk? High? Why can't you go home? I don't mind, of course, just curious, always curious when people prefer sleeping someplace strange.'

'Well,' Keegan said, 'Livy said his roommates threw a large party tonight and he'd rather not go back. He doesn't seem to like where he lives, at all, actually.'

'Well it's more that I'm going to be moving out soon,' I said, 'and that I have no attachment to it now. It's the whole I'm-graduated-time-to-move-on thing, and I want to be as literal about it as possible. It's really a shabby place. I've grown to despise it. It costs too much to live there, anyway. I just got a little job, but at the moment I can't even afford squalor.'

I said this as I followed Wallace out of his office into the living-room area. We stopped in-between the kitchen and couch, and I glimpsed Holly's shoes tapping the top few steps of the iron stairs

'What are you looking for?' asked Wallace.

It took me a moment to realize what he meant. 'Something comfortable, quiet, where I won't walk in on people scraping spilled salsa off my cabinets with chips. Somewhere with heat, or a fireplace. Air-conditioning during summer. Water-pressure, too, would be a nice change. And maybe where every season change I won't need to buy a new car stereo or play duck-duck-goose with parking spots.'

Keegan giggled but I wasn’t joking. My insurance company had thought I was trying to scam them. Nobody believes that I have had that many stereos stolen. Keegan was eating a bowl of fat muscadines in the kitchen while I collected my courage to ask for one. Wallace pushed himself away from us to an open area, dramatically, and spun himself in a circle as he’d been doing all night.

When he stopped he said, ‘Move in. Here. I had meant to put out a room-for-rent ad, but you’re saving me the trouble. And you, for you, $20 a week. This is unbeatable. I'm saying this because you’re not going to say no. Right? And Keegan, how about him taking the spare bedroom?’

She stopped chewing. With big eyes, trying for ambivalence but only succeeding in to show struggle, she looked from her father to me. I was as uncomfortable as the muscadine half-bit in her front teeth. I think she wanted to say something, maybe to point out the intrusiveness and sheer randomness of his offer – but she assented. A bit-lipped nod. Content, Wallace wheeled away. She shut off all the lights but light blue ones in the kitchen. I tried to fall asleep, staring at the ceiling that in the soft light looked like dusk sky, but failed to relax until the large room itself slowly lit from a skylight somewhere above me, meeting sleep as the rest of the city awoke.

Kingsley woke me around noon by inserting his tongue as far as he could into my right nostril. Luckily I wasn’t in the middle of a dream or I might never have recovered from the way in which my mind decided to adapt to the stimulus. Keegan had already left for work and Holly, always contentiousness and polite, had left when she took her phone call. Thanks again, Strobe.

But the sheer unexpectedness of Wallace’s offer kept me from leaving. I found him outside the yellow doors sitting on a wooden porch six stories above the city. ‘So what I asked you last night, he said, ‘I wasn’t joking, and don’t think that I'm touched for asking.’

With a strange mix of barely restrained excitement and debilitating apprehension I was unsure of how to craft a response.

‘Well?’ said Wallace, ‘you look torn. I need more than my statues to talk to, if you understand me. You yourself have said you’re looking. Think of this,’ he said and then rolled to the edge where he rested his hand on railing facing downtown Dunn, ‘as a renaissance for me and an enlightenment for you. What are we going to teach other? Am I going to teach you how to grow old? Or you’re to remind me of when I was dumber and thoughtless? I can offer you more than a bedroom. That’s more than most landlords, as I'm sure you’re aware, who aren’t paid in drugs or sex. But I'm kidding. But really, though, I have stories that do more than pass the time – you have no idea. I was never one for writing things down, but I *am* one for remembering them.’ He pulled away from the edge to face me. ‘I'm not going to beg. But say no and you won’t come back.’

He knew I had nowhere else, but then I hadn’t seriously been looking, just wanting. I *was* afraid of saying no to time, after all, I'm giving myself carpal tunnel for that very reason. Thus I had a choice between contrary forces: for myself or for him?

He blinked his eyes, darker in the sunlight, fingering his droopy mustache.

‘But it won’t be long,’ I said after more pause.

‘As long as necessary.’

The crusted salsa came up once I scraped it away with a spoon, and I'm leaving the front yard completely up to Strobe, but while I cleaned the rest our disheveled ‘home,’ my mind thought of many things, all from the last couple days, and all, related one way or another, to Keegan, my new celebrity-crush.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 21

Tomorrow is moving day. I sometimes like to think that life is all blind chance despite the afternoons we spend preparing, and I might as well not try to stop it. I'm looking forward to getting to know Keegan and Wallace. They’re basically still strangers, and I want to be more than just the stranger who rents from them. I’ve never lived with anybody who wasn’t friendly, or

became a friend, and I don't expect this to be any different. And a hundred dollars a month means that I might not have to get a new job soon. Wallace has his reasons for why I'm living there essentially free. I hope to figure that out over the next few days. But to be free of this shit-dump, where I've spent the last four years – I should stop writing before I cover the page in wet happiness.

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 22

My new room's up the stairs on the second floor. The original layout of whatever this loft used to be had had such a high ceiling – maybe thirty feet – that when then developers renovated it for hip leisure both ceilings remained high. It's a nice change from swollen yellow water-stains an arm's reach away. My room neighbors Keegan's, and there's a bathroom in-front of us which we're going to share. I accepted Wallace's offer before seeing the rooms upstairs, and now that I have I'm surprised Keegan accepted me without a struggle. I would hate to share a bathroom with a stranger. True enough I'd rather die than live beside her a stranger, but anyhow, currently as the stranger I don't mind sharing hers.

The room's just large enough for my little bed, bookshelf, a writing desk I stole from an elementary school, clothes rack (I have no closet), and sewing machine. I traded Strobe my futon for his old Singer. Someone broke into the shit-dump and stole his bed last Wed night. He had to sleep somewhere with Holly so took my futon while I stayed over here. Anyway, as I don't have room for it, and he had been sleeping on it already (he wet his own mattress last week – I hope the thieves weren't expecting much) the trade was easy. Another reason I don't mind is that the sewing machine's an antique. I don't know how to sew, Holly does, but I plan on asking Keegan if *she* does.

During my final stage of my room refit, unpacking knickknacks and little paper hovercrafts I had started making again, Keegan rapped on the door sexily and said hello. She has a very soft touch. We talked while I started arranging my books because it made me look better

and it also meant I could remedy any conversational lull with my fingertips and a question. There's still everything to learn about her, though, so my latter excuse won't stand critique.

I decided against trying to lead our conversation, and I couldn't have because her fascinating cranium had me occupied trying to get a get picture of it stationary in my head. I didn't pay enough attention when we started speaking to recall exactly what she said, but the general points where that a major reason she agreed to rent to me was that Wallace came up with the idea. Keegan was forced into working six days a week, Saturdays off, but Sun through Fri she's gone nine to nine. Wallace, who's in his late fifties, has been recently 'drifting away,' and she's not sure if he's leaving his wits or her. For how many times she kept blaming herself, she obviously believes the reason's her. She said he used to live alone, and seemed alright with it, functionally, despite his handicap. For many years, from when he lived alone till now, Wallace had an old eccentric friend of his come over to keep him company, and when Blažej, that's his name, had time, he would help Wallace shop, play chess, debate, to listen to him talk, etc. She kept mentioning how austere their lives are. If I didn't think right then that she would have been saying the same thing during a session with a new shrink, I would have thought that she thought I thought they had money I could get a hold of. I get the idea Wallace comes from rich blood. But Keegan has to support him completely now. She said she's glad she came to live with him – she grew up and went to college in Toronto, living with her mother, and accepted a job in Dunn city at the National Institute for Preventing Pathogens in part to finally get to know her father. She speaks of him as if she *still* doesn't know him, as if they were nearly as estranged as I was the stranger. But she desperately wished she could be the one to keep his mind active, to not rely on others like Blažej for it. He doesn't seem to be affectionate in any fatherly way, and on an intellectual level might be the only way he can connect with people. Explaining why Wallace almost never goes out. He hasn't made a new friend in years. He wheels around the loft, and when nobody's around, will debate with Ganesh on the wall, or the cat, who's almost never around, or the toaster. This is where, of course, I started rubbing my chin. She said he's been

getting worse, that sometimes, spending a planned afternoon together, he lets most of it pass without talking, giving one or two word replies even when her questions demanded at least a dependant clause. Then something would set him off, a commercial, the clock ticking, and he'd talk nonstop for twenty minutes, thirty, an hour. Then she'd feel guilty as their roles reversed, herself not having the energy to keep up with him after an afternoon of prodding. This is where she got the idea that his 'deterioration' is her fault. I'm not sure what kind of condition he has, if it has a name, but she says if nobody stops him when his in 'his mood', he'll talk forever – and it's conversation he needs to be healthy. He might always steer the responses (I can relate to that), but he needs the stimulus of the steering (my motives are more magnanimous as I see it, for if I get bored, I can't even pretend to carry it on). Blažej, his weekly friend, hasn't come much recently. Keegan's lived with Wallace, working at NIPPs, for two years, and in the last three weeks Blažej's come twice, about four times less than before during the same amount of time. Until Wallace invited me to move in, she thought she'd have to cut hours to make up for his absence.

I took most of this without asking questions, but my now curiosity's burning. Why is she supporting him? Where did his money go? Was Wallace born in a wheelchair? Who and where is Blažej ? Where was Wallace when Keegan grew up?

So I'm in an odd situation, but not completely unexpected. One-hundred dollars a month to live here with rent subsidized for spending time with Wallace. I have one more day before call-time to start train conducting. I called Mere but the schedule's not posted. I hope my shifts won't be too long. Keegan seems to think Wallace needs me. And if he's anything like the Wallace I'm constructing in my head, it'll be mutual.

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 23

As a sign of good faith to the Sammlers I slept with my door open last night. The skylight woke me about seven, drowning my room with the ding of the world's first alarm clock. Since

I'm still no good at re-falling to sleep I thought I'd enjoy breakfast on my first morning. Keegan had told me I could use anything I wanted downstairs, so as she came in I was stirring my coffee.

'Sleep well?' she asked.

'Like a baby and all that.'

'I noticed.'

'Yes, well,' I put my spoon in the sink, 'I'm unaccustomed to comfortable accommodations. I haven't slept with my door open in years.'

'I'm glad you're liking my place.'

I smiled into my cup. 'So it's yours, as in you own it? I meant to ask you that yesterday. So I know who to give the money to.'

'You can give it to me. Technically it's mine. That's what the bank will say, but it's been dad's since he was in his twenties. Younger he had a lot of opportunities to make money and, to celebrate, I dunno, the first million, he bought apartments and things all over the world. This loft was one of his first large purchases. But lawyers always need new wings to their summer homes, and they put dad in a spot where he either had to keep paying them or lose all his money by the people who'd take it quicker. He'd been paying his settlements the whole time, in small sums, but everybody else's counsel got pissy because they wanted his money faster and dad's expensive lawyers kept the settlement-payments low and kept the appeals coming. Dad's cash ran low around the time the firm's head partner, who received most of the billable hours and was dad's only friend on his legal team, got sick. It didn't take long after losing his best client for him to die. But like I said, Dad's money ran out. He tried to liquidate some property, but when the seniority died the firm dropped him, they knew he couldn't keep paying. With no council the courts took all his property but this loft and everything in it, and me. I mean, I wasn't even in the picture yet. This was about 2003, and dad had been tied up with the courts since the mid-1980s. I lived in Toronto, working at a little pathology lab at U. Toronto, living with my mom. I was their passion-baby. My parents were 19, first loves, and struck out on their first pitch. But both were

from money. And her parents hated the Sammlers. His whole family's like dad: loud, self-righteous, passionate. So Mom went to live with her own parents in Canada while dad was always traveling with work, across countries and to his scattered little villas across North America, Europe, Africa. But we've always kept in touch. I guess we were ok not visiting each other often. I saw him once every couple years until I moved here, but every week we'd talk to each other. But so I had wanted to leave Toronto for a couple years and had sent out apps to labs across the country, a few in London and America. A handful responded, but when NIPPs called, and with Dad's case being what it was, so much seemed to connect that I accepted immediately. The courts were still perching over Dad, waiting for him to die to liquidate the rest of him. As it was, he had no social support, no means of income because he lost all his property. So I came up with the idea of buying all his stuff – the loft and its furniture and appliances and stuff – to end the court thing once and for all, to not have the stress of it floating above Dad's soul, and then would move in with him. Now I had this job I could provide for both of us, but he needs more than food and a roof. Blažej had been visiting Dad here for years, but he's not the most reliable stimulus for a chair-bound old man who doesn't go anywhere and who needs people's ears so badly. So I knew I could do a lot just by living with him. It's been the two of us for the last three years.'

Wallace had glided across the floor as she spoke and pulled up behind her. 'But don't let her fool you, Livy! She supports us by killing more mice in a month than any talented exterminator could in a year. Botulism, Livy, she puts it into them in an assembly line like chicken nuggets!'

'No. Dad, *I'm* the assembly line. Would you rather me use a needle and risk poking myself?'

'No, but if everybody had to use the needle things might be a little different.'

'And so we just let every case of Botulism in the country go unchecked? Doctors hoping for the best?'

‘You know by the time you have results it’s already past the human’s treatment window. You’re just double-checking.’

‘There is such a thing as a single-source multiple-exposure.’

‘Ok, but what if they don’t die?’

‘Then who knows if it was because of the serum or a negative exposure. My work’s important. He knows this, Livy. He just likes to make a deal out of it.’

‘So you double check samples with the mice?’ I asked.

‘People send us botulism cases from all over the world. I inject the mice and wait until there’s a reaction or not. Then I report the findings. We are the definitive answer if whatever the sample was is positive or negative. It’s no rock star job but it helps people.’

‘But rock stars can help people –.’

‘But I,’ Wallace said, interrupting me, ‘my only point is that, haven’t they come out with a flash test for Botulism, at least a few strains of it? And it’s taken them how long? My point is that nobody felt the need to find another way to do it until there was already another way to do it. They make it easier and safer for you to do it the old way, but the new way, it might not always give you the right response. It might be, in fact, a little kid might die from a false-negative, or by treatment from a false-positive. But nobody cares my daughter’s killing a few thousand mice, bred to die, a year. That’s all. I’m not making any judgments. It’s just one of those questions people have to think about and don’t. We let the *sanctity* of human life gloss the vilest practices and sometimes, when the sacrifice is monetary, we prefer parting with something that *doesn’t* speak.’

Wallace finished making his toast and coffee and said he had to write a letter in his office. Once I heard his heavy door shut, I felt comfortable enough to ask Keegan why the courts had bothered him for so long.

She sighed. She looked suddenly burdened, deeply saddened, and I was afraid I had overstepped into something fetid.

That ‘he used to be into animals’ was all she said. I wasn’t about to crack the silence with another ham-fisted question.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 24

My conductor skills will never be challenged outside Zoo Dunn. But that still doesn’t mean I can’t take pride in being anachronistically important. I drive trains! I conduct! I feel a part of sixth-grade history, conjoining prideful destinies and economies across continents. Trains brought together the two sides of America. Now as a result we all grow up to be the same! I bring little children ostensibly closer to animal America, but it’s to a place that seems Zoo Dunn already believes they are. Animal friends, animal friends! Bring your children to our Animal friends!

I never noticed this before spending eight hours in a zoo. There’s a feeling that what you see, inside cages, pens, exhibitions, animal-facts on conspicuous boards – I have this feeling it’s all being controlled somehow *too much*. This isn’t paranoia, not as I’ve ever experienced it. But it’s as though people who visit zoos expect to watch a fashion show for the models. But it’s not the models, of course, not for the zoo itself – it’s for the clothes.

So I’m not allowed to wear ear plugs. This is my first complaint. My second is the loud bleating children – because I’m not allowed ear plugs. After my first hour, six train rides, I bought plugs from the gift shop (why are ear plugs at the gift shop?). But Mere, always officious, stopped me between departures and said I'm putting everybody’s life in danger. How could I hear a called stop? What if someone jumped off the moving train? The passengers’ exhortations would benefit only themselves, right? Do I not remember what I learned during the seminar? I asked him if he had ever ridden on Zoo Dunn’s Tournado Train. He said Of course I have! Then I said Well then you’d know that after the first fifteen seconds and before the last twenty seconds that’s

all I hear from the passengers. Screams and the inveterate parental protestations for quiet under their children's up-held arms.

The tour itself is a gimmick, really. This is disappointing. I sincerely expected something called the Tournado to tour something. But it's a $3 commercial. Round trip's about four minutes long. The 'conductor's' narration, pre-recorded, spends twenty-five of those two-hundred forty seconds describing the sights we pass by. But to be fair, there are only about twenty-five seconds of real-animal sightings across the Tournado's path anyway. An idea I'm considering mentioning to Mere is that I would narrate. To improve the quality of my work-lackey life. To find new things to say daily, or for each new ride, even. A new anecdote, joke, lemur fact, anything to break the motions. But the speech I'm enjoined to endure, written by the fecund wits in the PR department, front office, or maybe even Mere himself, is not that especially terrible for what this tour is, it's just especially vapid for what the tour *should* be.

Boys and girls, strap yourselves in to the round trip Tournado, brought to you today by Admiral Electric's new equally luminescent but half-the-wattage light bulbs, Equi-Bright! For your safety during the ride, keep all *body parts inside your car at all times. Are you ready?! Let's go! Today we're taking a round trip tour around some of Zoo Dunn's fascinating animals. Be sure to keep your eyes sharp for all sorts of special sights. Here at Zoo Dunn we care for over two-hundred sixteen types of animals from all around the world. Did you know that there are even* more *animals in the wild? We're still not done counting them! Have you noticed any of your animal friends yet? [*At this point we haven't driven past any real animals. What we have driven past: the train station, one of three hotdog stands, six spray-painted animals on particle board, and through a long lightless tunnel where, during morning hours, you might glimpse the un-painstakingly rendered ersatz cave paintings on the tunnel walls, courtesy of a project by a local art school, which I can only imagine are supposed to get the children into an I'm-ready-to-meet-animals mindset, but from the screaming and dimness of the tunnel take on a useless, clueless droll quality*]. Zoo Dunn keepers never tire of all the tough exciting hard work that's required to*

*take care of so many animal friends. You should visit the petting zoo to see for yourself! And when you're done, mates, hop on over outback to see the Kangaroos and Wallabies! [*One might spy at this point a mindless kangaroo who forgot that a rattling train saunters past his cage every ten minutes – I noticed the animals consider train-side patches a *bête noir*, and when surprised by the Tournado flee to the other end*] While you're there you may also want to stop by their neighbor, Ferret Parrot, and hear what's on her mind! She's always ready to talk to a new friend. [XING] Speaking of giant tortoises, on your left you'll see Adabra tortoises who look like Galapagos tortoises but live over a thousand miles away! How does that happen! And do you see that large grey building behind them? That's our brand new Senex Brand Potato Chips Conservation Complex, home of everything wildlife safety. You can't go in, but you can visit the Frisbee Fun Forest play space, featuring all your favorite Frisbee characters, including Hackberry Horse and Fogy Bear. Would you like to spend the night at Zoo Dunn? Our Night Sight program takes visitors on a wild and crazy overnight adventure inside the Frisbee Fun Forest where you get to play exciting learning games with our animal experts and their friends the Golden Striped Lemurs, nine of whom Zoo Dunn has successfully bred for introduction back into their native mountain ledge in Brazil. Well kids, it's just about time for the Tournado to wind down. When you pull up to the gate, be sure the train has reached a full stop before exiting. And be sure to take all belongings that you brought on with you. If you are interested in learning more about all the exciting work of Zoo Dunn's dedicated wildlife friends, special brochures are available at the station's exit including daily coupons for free hotdogs at Zoo Dunn Palace. Thanks again for joining us on the Tournado Train and have a great day!*

It's just something I need to get used to.

During lunch break Rocky met me at Tournado and from where we decided to eat at the café. A generous twenty-percent discount puts the hamburger meal just under $6. We walked about as we ate, too loud indoors from the bleating children and shepherding parents to carry on about how annoying we found the bleating children and shepherding parents. As we made our

way back to our area, passing through the yellow hotdog-stand tables, Rocky nudged my shoulder and pointed to a table where a uniformed man sat. Not one of ours, but a policemen, his radio on the table next to his chilidog meal-deal. As we approached I could tell the man was ensconced in the act, so much that he hadn't wiped the chili from his lips since he started eating. I stopped to the side of the table while Rocky skipped around the man's left-facing shoulder and punched him on it. But this friendly gesture, quite innocent of course, piqued something deep inside the police officer. Taken witless, his meal-deal reverie exploded, awakened from its fetal-dream of perfect contentment. He dropped his chilidog. It splattered on to the table, his shirt, his forehead. The man bolted upright. And screamed.

'What the *fuck?!*'

Rocky instinctively raised both arms at the elbow.

'I thought I knew . . .'

'You don't know me! Back up! Back!' Both of their faces matched the color of the cop's splattered forehead.

'I'm sorry, I . . .'

'Don't mess around with me, now go!'

I stood still in front of them both, but my expression offered incredulity at the manic turn. Rocky took two steps back, then turned to me and we took the back path around the tables.

Rocky told me as we stood between the train and carousel that 'I really thought I knew him, I thought my sister hired him for one of her parties last summer. I still think it's him, he didn't even look at me, he just exploded.'

'He'd guard well, I suppose, with that reaction – better on your side as opposed to not.'

Rocky shook from the encounter I imagine since his taught adrenal glands were oozing. We stood under a juniper a tree and sunlight falling through its thick coat reached our heads in drops, little spotlights in our wind-fluttered hair. Or maybe it was the chili in Rocky's. His wobbly voice told me (because I knew from experience) that at that moment he wanted to be into

something, onto something, important, meaningful, *alive*, but that it was only the shock and surprise of the cop's reaction that made him feel animated. He said 'why can't I always feel this way?' as he tried to hide the sparkle of moisture around his eyes.

The afternoon passed without incident, aside from the children and more children. I'm sure I don't hate kids. It just cloys how they scream and overreact, the little narcissists.

Back home at my home that doesn't feel like home yet Wallace noticed that I used meatballs in the baked ziti I prepared. This set him off on a line about the thoughtless ways in which living creatures became commoditized for food for a majority of people who lacked the moral strength to have killed – and prepared – the food for themselves.

'But who's to say hunger wouldn't compel them to hunt, to fish, and then skin or scale them?' I replied. 'If we had to, we would.'

'But can you, now?' he said. 'You can't live in a modern city and still find game. In China, perhaps, where you see live frogs and eels next to the cold cuts at Super Wal-Mart. But for us, we'd need to move into the country, or suburbs, to glimpse a deer or a lamb. We are accustomed to a panoply of choice at any moment, from artic trout to choice veal or venison. This choice comes with the price of a regimented system for procuring and preparing them. The social-value of the cut aside, the meat becomes fetishized in the Marxian sense of the commodity. You not only forget the rigorous human and mechanical labor involved with bringing these meats to stores but also the sacrifice of the animals themselves. Native Americans relied on Nature and animals for their survival, and together with the absence of the concept of private property, saw the animal's sacrifice sort of like a sacred dialogue. When your food loses its connection to where it came from it also loses its spiritual significance. This significance is respect. Do we not believe animals, on the whole, deserve respect? If I torture Kingsley and pin his carcass outside my door I'd be arrested and charged with a felony. But if I bring home five different cold cuts and buy a bull's head from Wal-Mart, no eyebrow is raised, accept maybe by those who know me. Until the day when in order to buy your side of roast you yourself must stare the bull in the face as you slit

his throat while he dangles from roof-hooks, or to prepare your new pair of shoes you peel off his skin and cure it, stretch it, sew it, until you hear the death rattle and sigh of the collapsed lungs of your shoes, belt, jacket, wallet, car seat, headphone cups, or baked ziti with meatballs, you will never realize how infused with life all these convenient items are. Until you do, you won't think about them outside the mindset of vulgar carnivorism.'

Why does he make me feel guilty about such a constant staple in my life as meatballs in my pasta dishes? Just as he tries to make Keegan feel guilty for providing for him! It grates not just common sense but common decency. Have not all civilized nations divided the physical preparation of food from the masses, if they could, who would rather do without getting their hands dirty? He's stuck with only the world to attack, the flutter of a dying man shaking his fists to the sky.

That was too harsh. But before I finished my ziti finished I picked out the meatballs. As much as I might not agree with what he says, what he's constantly saying, I *did* feel a sort of twisted guilt. Though where will the guilt end? Shall I now feel reprobative pangs as I swallow my multi-vitamin? As I attend the doctor, or as the dentist puts fluoride on my teeth? Must all leisures induce guilt? I should talk to Keegan about this. Over a few bottles of wine.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 25

Work was shortened today because the train's whistle didn't project. Passing over the Kangaroos and Wallabies crossing it wouldn't offer its shrill toot but rather sounded as if it emerged from deep inside a dead buffalo, or perhaps buried at the bottom of an empty lidded trashcan. Mere shrugged when I told him, scratching his eyebrows with one hand as he said this wasn't uncommon, scratching his ass with the other. He said normally the problem is from a lack of pressurized hot air feeding through the whistle tubes. The lines could get frayed, taught, pinched, until the sound of it might scare the kids more than the cave paintings do.

Driving to the loft I received a call from Holly. I had left a small-box worth of stuff at the Shit Dump. She and Strobe wanted to bring it over to discover if I had really moved up, like I told her last night on the phone, not just out. Her sentiment surprised me, but that might be from my general distrust of the depth of my friendships. Never on my side, of course. I cherish every relationship as if it were a yellowed Polaroid of a long-lost relative. I might even shed real tears when its chemical patina faded away the memory. Others, however, to me, never seem to connect as much as I do to the idea of *us*, to the sum of Livy and Person. Only in waves do I apprehend a hint of this love-of-idea as mutual, and hints of my own connection to theirs. There could be stretches of days or weeks where if I had with me a stranger, or a female I wanted to woo, all the circumstantial evidence of my life would convict me to a position I did not really deserve. These airs might continue for even a month, but something unspoken always passes across air and distance to make the calls less frequent, the distance more distant. And because my phone remains silent, implicating their taciturnity, their Polaroids fall into the stack with all the rest.

But this might start another wave. I brought them in and watched their faces as they walked into the bright whiteness of the Sammler's. I spent more time studying Holly, even though Strobe had never seen the place, and the way the room spot-lit her cocoa cheeks. During the brief tour they kept looking toward the yellow door in the back. When we had walked up the spiraled stairs and stood in my modest room, Strobe asked what was behind the yellow doors downstairs. I told him that was where the Universe began, or ended, depending on your perspective of things. This made him toss my box of things to the bed. People always react this way when I try, and admittedly, fail, metephorizing reality, but his silly reaction aside, there were much more important matters in front of me. Cigarettes! I had left a pack of cigarettes! And three pens, a stuffed owl, my bottom retainer, a t-shirt I had used to check my oil and left on the porch, and *Mr. Sammler's Planet*.

Things didn't feel comfortable, talking didn't feel comfortable inside. Once I led them through the yellow doors, however, and we were perched on the Universe, the porch, overlooking

the city, and I had lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply and slowly, smoke and warm air creeping out of my nostrils from massaging my soul, only then did Strobe and Holly have something to say.

‘So guess what?’ Holly began.

Inhale, upturned chin, exhale. ‘Strobe capitulated?’

‘No,’ said Strobe, eyebrows creased, ‘but, actually, maybe a little.’

‘But we’ve started dating,’ she said, ‘as a couple, seriously. It wasn’t worth the trouble to pussy-foot for months before this conclusion, so it’s just us: we’re a couple!’

Holly took Strobe by the arm and they each offered a credulous smile, first to me then to each other. I felt joy to the pit of my soul, the crags of my consciousness weeping pure spring-water rapture.

‘In fact,’ she continued, ‘I’m going to be moving in to your old room.’

This turn offered genuine surprise. I had loved Holly’s old apartment, her one bedroom, one bathroom, one door, one person apartment.

‘We think separate rooms ease the tension of living together,’ said Dr. Strobe. ‘The last thing we both want is to annoy each other without somewhere to go. Distance is good, but always so painful. We get the best of both, with this . . . I think.’ He full-stopped his sentence kissing her cheek. They both looked as though they had each brought home a new puppy to surprise the other, only to be surprised by their own surprise surprised.

I stammered, congratulated them, and tried to make them feel as welcomed as I myself felt uninvited. And lit three more cigarettes. They don’t smoke, so as they imparted decorating and cleaning plans for my old dump of a house, dump of an old life and room, I had to smoke them all at once.

But this news has put me off night. I shouldn’t be jealous. Holly made her choice, a non-choice as it may be, but there, she’s gone and made it. Though it’s the intimacy of the choice, and their felicity and future, to what I left, both the house – which I never liked – and the familiarity of them both which distance, as I mentioned, lessens – it is the intimacy of the switch, from me to

him, from my position to his, that has me mildly piqued. I hate to admit this, but admit I must if this record is to be more than nothing: I cannot and could not stomach Strobe. During high school he spent more time with the math team than he did the cross country team, on which we both ran. I concede, dear journal, my animus originated thither nursed by an adolescent spite at another's manifest skill. True enough I 'did my own thing,' silly songs and recordings, but it was not to be until my senior year until I began to luxuriate in the same intellectual pools as Strobe had wadded since middle school. He lacked charisma – his vast lack weighs as much as what I possess, surely – but yet not what Holly needed. Not what her or my jealously needed. Thus I'm here in my little room scribbling injustices, about which I hold no pretensions, directed toward myself. My closest Holly-figure is Keegan, but Keegan I know as well as the classmates I've forgotten. What's required, then? Something like Wallace's loquacity? Strobe's sublimated audacity? Holly's self-serving perspicacity? Or none of all, but each.

After they left Wallace intercepted me while I made dinner. Kingsley weaved himself under my feet with one of my socks in his mouth, emitting an unnerving guttural groan. Cats were apparently on Wallace's mind, so he began about cats.

'Cats!' he yelled, raising an arm with flair. 'Dogs, no no, cats – why were 18th century Parisians obsessed with hunting these creatures for sport? Not all of them, mind you, it began with printer's apprentices and then spread around as entertaining sports do, around the whole city, The Parisian Cat Massacre. But why, then, was bludgeoning kittens capricious fun? Because they each held death inside themselves, the people, as an apple holds its core. These weren't their pets, not the workers', and even if they were, which they weren't, I figure keeping them healthy took work, or no work at all if you didn't mind their deaths. But petting fluffy – what if they weren't fluffy, then what did they call them, greasy? gaunty? – touching and petting only to the extent disease (but not *dis*-ease, aha!) wasn't about like a dandelion pod in the wind. And also keep in mind that most of these people had more relations with animals as a physical relation – actually working with them, from them, and then using them – than any of us do outside a farm. Maybe

not even there, because nobody in a farm in America is worried about starving.' He found a cigar from his chair, and fingered the unlit baton between dark frail fingers. 'But ok, this idea of the city as community exterminating a common pest and making a sport of it – but you bet it was blunt fun, a riot!' He couldn't withhold a guffaw, and poked the cigar at me as if I didn't get the joke. His eyes started to drift off at this point in the monologue, probably imagining himself bolting down some stone-paved side-street with a shillelagh**,** ignoring the easy catch, the creaky starved kitten, to fetch the mother, swollen with more felid parasites, and on to where the truths of physics and physiology rear themselves like looped intestines around a cudgel. 'I could never do that myself, though, bludgeon them for sport. They had their reasons. Apprentices and journeymen upset at their fat-cat Bourgeois masters' love of cats. So one of the workers cat-calls on the roof above the printer's bedroom, who then thinks a spirit is after him. Well, the order goes out to collect the cats, to kill the spirits. They take the utensils on hand, brooms, bars from the press, and smash the first cat they find – which coincidentally is the bourgeois's favorite. Then they head out into the allies and smash those cats, too, bringing their bodies back to the shop. Now the workers didn't have to worry about being fed rotten cat scraps, as they had before. Now they would get those scraps first, *before* they rotted! Back at the shop, a pile of dead cats on the floor, they perform a titillating mock trial where they convict the cats of being satanic malingerers, or rather the bourgeois accused his workers of that until such a general light feeling about the air and a feeling of exercision sent him on his way. The workers bludgeoned the cats with the same intent as if they had bludgeoned all their points of animosity, and released themselves in boisterous fun and *good will*, toward their deed and themselves. The obverse of this is true for us: we feed them and hug them and buy beds for them with the same adorable love we would for any other point of affection. But do you notice, you do, they are *always* by proxy. Why do people have domesticated animals? To *create* another instance of affection in their lives. Their new point is theirs, for it is their creation, as much as the animal is considered a piece of property, for *it* is their creation, through the means of labor, just as much.'

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 26

To come home to conversation! For what little actually happens in our loft there's always something happening in Wallace's head and he's never shy of sharing himself with his captive audience. Never so much on the level of plot but as development. For instance, I came home to Wallace rambling with a person I had never met, speaking in long metaphors I won't pretend to have understood, with the energy of a tennis match in September. Their lines seemed to attach those extended metaphors, run it around and over, then slide into another closely related, or so I thought, to keep their conversation flowing undimmed by dam literality.

They continued talking in the living room while I made tea for myself in the kitchen behind, Wallace always gesturing, his pitch rising and falling with his normal articulated precision. Once the water started rolling I heard Kingsley start toward us from upstairs, probably hunting for socks, and hit the top steps with enough alacrity to invite certain doom for anything not evolved to bolt down steps, as cats must have been walking down steps of the Pyramids to reach the most orgasmic cat-box ever. Going full clip he slid, nearly splayed, once he hit the smooth gloss floor. Despite his nails over-due for trimming Kingsley always did more strafing when he ran than anything close to forward movement. It reminded me of cartoon physics, or oil in a hot Teflon pan. Once gravity gave him footing he ran to the kitchen and at my feet immediately started crying. Boiling water doesn't sound like any iteration of cat food I know of but nonetheless every time I make tea he does this. And only to me. Wallace nor Keegan compel the entreaty. I believe he thinks me the fresh-faced rube, too green to *not* offer human food. Wallace had told me after my first night here that Kingsley's stomach couldn't digest it. He said Kingsley farted onerously (his word). He forgot to inform Kingsley that I knew of his gastric disquiet, but I also know how these things chagrin the exposed party. When the cat reacted this way to boiling water I felt that he accused me of spoiling him. I dreaded to be forced into territory

where I needed to argue for my innocence because even rightly denying your culpability has already spoiled you in the accuser's gut.

Wallace called me over and introduced me to oft-mentioned Blažej. When I shook his hand I met his eyes but only his right one met mine. His left seemed to be watching his back, not distant-seeming as some lazy eyes tend to be but the skin around it emphasized its gaze, a gaze of focused paranoia, perhaps, ill at ease. Does that make me paranoid to think he looks paranoid? His dark grey beard became white around his mouth and jowls. Where it was darker he had little wriggling white hairs longer than the grey ones, little squirming hairs as if someone had chosen to fight maggots with smoke. His heavy Slovenian accent lisped hard sibilants; but like Wallace, speech flowed easily. He didn't shake my hand with firmness but by the swollen size of them, his hands, where I could have fit in one both of mine, he felt tense, awkward, as if his hand were a giant ill-fitting mitten that he was forced to sustain because the doting old woman who made it just died.

'Wallace was telling me that he has gotten himself a new roommate,' said Blazej. 'It is good, I'm telling the old man, and I've always told him he needs to do more than battle the internal forces of our age! (which I think he embodies with his own constipated body! Ha!) Wallace lets his balloon swell with high density gases! To be kicked around on the schoolyard! But I'm glad to find you lightened up during my absence, old man.'

'Everybody seems to think that those little visits of yours were the only stimulation that this man got and gets' Wallace said. 'But who believes that doesn't realize that I'm not immune to the benefits of modern life, say, rolling down this building's halls enjoying the seats of modern fashion in modern seats – oh modern dress! – and a chair frees you from seriousness if you're light about it, as you might say, Blažej.' Wallace pushed himself straighter his chair. 'I've never had reasons to be the coquette around women, but especially now, the attention makes them feel better about watching an old man with wheels. It replaces their pity with something else entirely, something philial, I think – the wrinkled cripple becomes sweet little brother who studied all

week but still scored a D. He just can't do any better but we love him still. Maybe even more so because he's stupid and needs it. A healthier condescension, I feel.'

Blažej replied by holding his middle finger to his thumb and snapped it, like fussy rector fixing grammar on a chalkboard. 'But your pipelines have not corroded, Wallace! Ha! And to forge yourself instead into the building's cauldron for sympathy may provide use, over the fire, good for stew, but will never provide the copious dividends (nutrition aside) of their original configuration: to nurture life or to create it. How about this, listen to this, Livy: is it not a function of Wallace's timidity that his avidity overtakes him? Hmm? That because he could still, if we allow for a drastic change from what his disposition has become, sleep with a woman, you choose to preclude all possible context for *Eros* in favor of the one to allow play for your eccentricity.'

Wallace shook his head quickly. 'You put things in all the wrong places. I wouldn't be a Byron to these girls. It has nothing to do with precluding context. It is all a matter of constructing a context out of a non-context, or a context out of one out of my control. If I don't sound too far out of my head, I'd prefer to shape the reality around me. This is an old but important idea. You restore art for a living, Blažej. You would be a fool to start work without analyzing the pigments first. And I can't imagine you're still for invasive analytics – consider me an oil painting, then, where the pigments are the contexts of my social interactions since birth and what's painted is the result of those contexts shaped into my character. The frame will be the limit of myself, my body or what people perceive as my individuality. The world around us is the gallery. Now, all I'm saying is that after time passes and cracks appear, you don't need to flake off more pigment to discover what's missing and what're there. You need to discover how the remaining pigments resonate, to match them to their equivalents as closely as possible by their reflectance spectrum. So to attempt to create an erotic situation would be harmful – because their negative reaction makes me the Dirty Old Man – whereas if my attention is banter from Safe Sincere Old Man, there's no *caustic* cynicism from either side and I might even get something from it!'

Their raillery must come with the ease of instinct, or at least is well rehearsed. Perhaps founded upon their mutual complimentarity, two dominant personalities pushing and tugging at the boundaries of the other? This is what Keegan says. I'm not sure I know exactly what she means but I remember learning something similar in Pop Psychology, aka Into to Psych, aka the class where I fantasized about my professor instead of taking notes: thin, nearsighted, ski-slope nose, mango breasts and dinosaur allure, who mentioned on the first day of class she specialized in sexual research. Ah, you don't say something like that to undergrads if you're attractive. All I could focus on was what her research might look like, if I could volunteer for her, or what I wanted to learn the most, *with* her.

I have sex too much on the brain. Why? I'm glad you asked. I made a date with Keegan! If by date I mean dinner at Yummi Thai BBQ #8. It's for Saturday. She was completely into the idea, but I sleep next to her a handful of feet away every night. It would be much more awkward to say no. Now, depending on her comfort threshold, which I might infer from dinner-banter, I might or might not try for more than a food evening. I just hope I don't get carried away and, you know, talk about how I once had a crush on a girl because I had fetishized her clubfoot. Aren't you a winner, Livy. Write about your stupid fantasies, don't tell them to people. So maybe tomorrow night I can write about falling for handicapped girls. Right now, I'm too tired and excited to do anything but fall asleep dreaming I had the balls to walk into the next room and say what's on my mind.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 27, FULL MOON

It's nearly midnight. Where do I begin? Holidays stopped being all the same once I stopped spending them with my parents. But this, this I never expected.

Beginning: I drafted a beginning downstairs on a napkin. But I can't use it. It's too . . . amorphous. I was trying to articulate a throbbing in my chest that ended as ambiguously as the throbbing still continues to be. I'm afraid my hesitation – my emotional hesitation? Or simple

lack of ending? – tumbles me into a whirlpool of meaning, myself dead-weight and heavier than all the parts, where I'm easily sucked to the sea-bed, or the nothingness at current's end. But this is my napkin-draft, in short:

. . . clichéd as all the other feel-good self-help do-it-or-don't truths, I admit, but one begins . . . with the first word. In. The beginning. Was. The Word. Its meaning quickly changed to fit its enclosure. Its enclosure closed off its meaning from what was meant, at least, in the beginning. But what can never be closed off, as long as language still requires organic things to parse and make sense of, will be what we do with that enclosure. Never to rely completely on the dictionary when the context tells you not to. Rigidity ultimately tampers cutting-edge signification. Refusal to slip as language slips slides you back to the dinosaurs.

How did it begin? Blazej surprised us by coming again today. He and Wallace spent hours in the office. Inside their voices were loud but unidentifiable. At times I could tell a lisp from a growl, but any articulate noise quickly devolved back into a roar. I spent most of the day inside, playing with Kingsley and reading Bellow, outside all arctic snow. Keegan said that Blazej's visit was odd, not in how it played out but in how he even managed to show. I asked her about his family but she knew as little as I did. He and Wallace had worked together in what she called 'The African Project.' The African Project. She said it as if the words were poison. They made her pretty face ugly, thinking about it. She spoke of Blažej again as soon as she could without making the pause sound awkward. I gathered that his absence of the past few months made her life more cumbersome. Blazej was Wallace's exercise, without which his natural ebullience would spill over, loudly and meanly. Wallace scares even Kingsley when he's in his state. Perhaps I didn't know Wallace well enough to gauge his character, though now that he has laid his history on my mind, I'm no better off definitively than yesterday, whereas now *all* I have are snap-reactions and questions. When his mind is working well, he enthralls me. His quirks, ease with words and single-mindedness – there must be some way for it to stick to me, maybe some shaded process of thought he knows that I don't. Though I'm getting ahead of myself. What

he's said of himself is most of what I know about him. Tonight, I'm not sure what I'm feeling for him – pity, admiration, regret, awe?

Around six the sun fled and I was in my room writing a letter. I had just written to Holly:

Did you ever feel as though you were a passenger on an automated sidewalk? I'm afraid even if I re-tooled my life, began anew or everything fell apart or came together it still would feel as though I observed but did not touch, tasted but never put anything to my mouth. I think I've become too meek -- complacent, blind, content, foolish and overbearing. But I don't need a sub-terrestrial test explosion to prove that I can fire, or to prove anything at all, really, inside of where I believe my strengths lie. Lie. Do they?

What makes heroes? Circumstances or will? My guess is both, but extra heavy on the former.

Dinner tonight: rice pilaf with almond pieces and steamed broccoli. Not classic thanksgiving eats, but I wouldn't dare even an advertisement for a turkey dinner to make its way in the mail. Do you ever add a bit of lemon juice to your pilaf? You should try it -- not too much, though. Just enough to hint. Hint.

But I didn't have enough time to go on about my desert, the cranberry chocolate chip oatmeal cookies I made, nor the terribly opaque sexual metaphor of adding sour juice to things. Wallace thought screaming at me from downstairs was normal and completely expected to somebody you've known for less than a week. I'm not sure where Keegan went; Blažej had left hours ago; it was only Wallace and me in the loft. His call began as a moan. I thought Kingsley had poached another sock, emitting an inverted meow – *woem* – that's more vibrated than projected – but this was too strident, too . . . pathetic? A cat doesn't wrench my heart like that. Could I call it then a lamentation? For Wallace seemed drunk on the cries, to the dead or the past or whatever, I didn't and don't know; and as the night aged, my latter guess proved apt: we were no longer synchronic partners.

‘If you intend to spend all night holed away, then goddamnit carry me up!’ He sounded frantic. What was I to do? I had to go downstairs, not that I wanted to. I was in no mood to study the man, as is my normal angle, no mood at all to bobble-head to his pique. I felt to go downstairs would be out of place, as if I were voyeur to something intimate and clandestine. But it was just me there, here, nothing in the loft more private than my attempt at invisibility which dissolved as I descended the stairs. I sat on a barstool as Wallace moved across the living room. He is never still. No wonder Kingsley avoids him. And after an involuted pause wherein Wallace nearly started, it seemed, to speak, then would stop, then almost start, then stop a start, for five arduous minutes, the words that began to tumble out lacked substantive coherency or grammatical sense. But they felt. Does that make sense? Do I even understand it? His green eyes were seeing the world from under tears streaking his face from locution to locution. He had rolled up his sweater’s sleeves, his always-sweater, melted, flat silk, to wipe his eyes on bared arms only spreading the moisture across his cheeks to his forearms. ‘*Infinite . . . infinite thought, loss, gain, jest, infinite . . . circularity of painful time . . . yes! What, meaning, Livy? Will this be the way? Will it? Somewhere, it goes. Somewhere we all go, go, go, a nowhere if nothing changes but a here under a new name.* This *must be it! Livy! Be will be seem! At the cost . . .*’

I had had enough of this. I can’t confront people, but somehow I said, ‘Wallace, what have you done to yourself?’

‘Blažej!’

‘Blažej did what?’

‘Provided the answers.’

‘To what questions?’

‘To this!’ He shook his arms, his knees with his arms, then ran his hands through matted hair. ‘To this all, Livy!’

I thought I would push a little harder. ‘If I am to listen to you Wallace, there you need to be more clear. The question, then – this is a question of yourself? Is that what has you in such a state?’

‘I am not *in a state*. I am not *manic*, or *deranged*, or *broken*. What I am is tired. Of impotence – physical impotence, functional impotence, life impotence. Everything I am is mediated by hospitals or Keegan. By this chair or the layout of our home. Then all the rest of me is mediated by a past-self that I can hardly remember but whose fears I fear and whose pain dissolves me from my chest out. He is inside me, killing me. But I can’t help but think there’s a part of him that in*vigorates* me, that as he dissolves my insides he keeps the other parts alive. Would I suffer as much had I not been that man? Of course not. I cannot escape his shadow. But removed from its eclipse . . .’ tears had welled on his mustache, ‘there would be none of me, nothing of me left!’

I forced myself into patience. Was this a put on, a selfish act, or was Wallace really breaking down? I needed patience, patronizing patience, not that I had become accustomed to this level of emotional output, but to this level of drama, grandeur – it cloyed – and I realized my reaction originated from Keegan and her complaints. As soon as he started I reacted as Keegan reacts. Though can’t help but pay attention to his stories. You’re always waiting for the next word, hoping it will lead the conversation homeward, and if no matter if you had planned on finishing it out, if it doesn’t seem clear initially, you complain.

But I realized this. I realized reacting against his lines voided my very presence. I couldn’t follow because there was no history. I figured it was a contextual lack, not something he missed. In hindsight, at least, this makes sense. Because perhaps he sensed my waning care, he started from the beginning. And now, as I try to vitiate its effect upon *my* insides, my pen shakes, my fractured focus studies the dancing drifting dust across the air above my paper.

He began explaining that his parents had accumulated a decadent fortune consolidating neighboring family farms in the Midwest into mega-farms, run by themselves, which on average

produced 20% to 70% more profit per acre than when they were independently managed. You could see the practice as rewarding farmers who had spent the best years of their lives keeping their land or livestock viable with six and seven-digit rewards for their hundreds of acres of property, or as a temporary or putative shift of capital into 'independent' hands before it's fed back into a centralized power once they visit the grocery store. And that centralized power itself found embodiment in Cass and Dee Sammler. They were never farmers themselves but as a small-town lender Cass discovered the general inefficiency of small farmer's investments during crabwise growth attempts. The Sammlers purchased their first 'investment' just after the second world war, their fifth by 1951, their fifteenth in '58 and by '62 they were the richest agricultural investors in America. Cass and Dee groomed Wallace to work in the business as early as possible. He was 19 when he began working with watchdogs and national newspapers who had begun decrying some of the Sammler's practices. I can't recall all the specifics but it had something to do with 'the pollution of a well-oiled machine,' meaning it wasn't the idea of the system itself that some people reacted against but in practice trouble arose out of isolated abuses in meat production, and disgruntled family-farmers who found contending difficult realized their payoffs forced them into the city to get completely foreign jobs.

But Wallace was a darling with the press and a boon for his parent's images. Young, handsome, rich, gifted, as he traveled around the country people never forgot the grand character with bushy hair who painted his parent's agricultural firm with roseate lenses so fine and trenchant colors so bright he became the progenitor of 'business aesthetics.' A few years after he took control of his parents' public relations, and smart investments in real estate and an even smarter stock portfolio later, Wallace had become independently very wealthy. 'Person' magazine hailed him as one of the youngest American multi-millionaires in history, becoming the clichéd young-man-about-town, featured in magazines and newspapers for not as much his business mind but his flamboyant personality, advantageous for selling copy and bolstering his celebrity, which of course sells more copy. As his work with Cass and Dee, Wallace only

accepted large projects. One of those included work they were doing with African investments hoping to cultivate failing farms and arid lands, to sustain local interests but more importantly, and lucratively, for inter-African transport of meats and vegetables.

In the early 1970s Cass and Dee sent Wallace to Progressive Nation to attempt to convert some of the governmentally protected lands into farm tracts managed by the Sammlers. In a large long hall, Wallace financed a formal dinner party for the president, high-level officials and invited famous people from around the area to sweeten the political favors and his business interests. Before dinner began he met Heavenly Hammond, a woman a few years older, a film-maker, who was in the process of traveling from village to village documenting the effects of big-game poaching on the villagers' day-to-day lives. She was one of the more famous attendees, particularly for her recent award-winning movie exposing Lemming suicides as a myth propagated by nefarious filmmakers. The selective-editing choices had made a splash on American public television.

The hall's ceilings rose over twenty-feet high, dangling crystal chandeliers above gauche red gold Persian rugs. Four long tables were arranged like a W in the hall's front. The middle two tables held the food, the side two the guests. Wallace moved the nametag of an oil company CFO to his own place next to a manufacturer of water-treatment machines. 'She confused me,' Wallace said. After the dinner began she wouldn't speak unless spoken to, but then after so many kept speaking to her, her presence began to seem like a mistake invitation – she wasn't afraid to volubly critique the local demand for ivory, endangered pelts, and the general greed of the newly-emancipated Progressive Nation officials whose corruption doubled or tripled after assuming power.

He was supposed to be the life of the party, but next to Heavenly he maintained curious modesty. Before the meal finished a movie began facing the tables. Wallace himself had put it together to advertise his parents' ideas for African factory farms, turning villages into little productive nodes. Images of giant schools, healthy children, families immunized, and food

dispersal throughout the region – the attendees seemed to receive it well, standing to clap after the credits began over pictures of healthy families at a co-op dinner.

Heavenly had left during the applause. He left everybody in the hall who wanted his attention and Wallace found her outside climbing into her jeep. ‘A dissonant thing,’ he said, as Heavenly got into her muddied dented jeep wearing a beautiful long black dress. He yelled to her that it was she herself who couldn’t stand not being the center of attention. ‘She smiled, that fulsome tit, and left me behind in a dust cloud.’ He followed in his own jeep. She turned off the main dirt road onto the plains. He chased her almost thirty minutes until her jeep made it through a patch of mud in a copse and his didn’t. He trudged on foot through the rest of the copse until the plain opened up again. As the sun set he saw Heavenly standing in the middle of a field. But once he took his eyes off of her, he saw at all sides around her lay piles of bones, flies, rotting and fresh-killed flesh. She had taken him to a poacher’s din. Five stacks of tusks, all higher than his head, lay behind her.

Heavenly told him that the poachers couldn’t leave the elephants where they had killed them – even though all the elephants were probably killed within ten miles – because they didn’t want unwanted attention. Rumors had spread that local villagers were starting to come together en masse to resist the poachers. The poachers had shot and killed six people in the last three years that had gotten in their way. She equated their organization to the mob – including entrenched government sympathizers whose pockets were lined in Ivory.

Wallace couldn’t speak. Flummoxed not only by falling ridiculously for Heavenly but because he had never experienced such devastating death on a scale as what lay before him. Heavenly pointed out that he had, in fact – his family owned dozens of poultry farms across the world, cattle farms, pig farms, all of which systematically slaughtered the animals in a way redolent of the systematic elephant poachers.

The connect-the-dots nauseated Wallace. Heavenly led him swooning back to her jeep. Talking all night in his rented house, they watched the sun rise and Wallace could never be the

same again. He proposed an idea: to sell his shares in his family's business, to liquidate most of his foreign accounts, and to sell off most of his apartments across America. The fire-sale should net him close to five million dollars. He told her that with the money he wanted to not only sponsor as many of Heavenly's films as she wanted to make, but most importantly to erect an anti-poaching army. Heavenly didn't believe him until he carried her into his room so that she could listen to the call he made to his asset manager. He refused his parents call minutes later. He asked Heavenly to marry him, and shocking Wallace, she consented.

Wallace spent the next two years negotiating with Progressive Nation's president for permission to assemble a private autonomous anti-poaching army and deploy throughout its ostensibly protected parks. Once everything was agreed, Wallace began his non-profit army by recruiting from outlying villages. Soon volunteers contacted him from all over the world. Wallace's army became his passion and obsession. He built a compound in which he lived with Heavenly and logistics were run. Success came swiftly. Over the army's first month they had killed over twenty poachers. By the end of the first year, they had killed a hundred. All over Africa and the world press debates arose between his army's validity and their ability to protect the elephants, the substantial risk for the 'soldiers' and, of course, for the poachers themselves. Many simply traveled to different regions where they found elephants but not armed anti-poachers. He said his actions were justified by the provable fact of a stable local elephant populations for the first time since records had been kept of herd sizes.

One night Wallace receives a tip that a squad of heavily armed poachers are stalking elephants a few miles much. This isn't uncommon: local support has contributed to much of Wallace's success in Progressive Nation. Wallace and his strike-team boarded their helicopter. It was 11 p.m. They approached a group of about twenty flash-lights, which from the air seemed to exhibit poaching intent: their huddling together after hearing the helicopter intimated defensive positioning, . The squad set down their helicopter. Immediately they heard small-arms fire shot into the air. Late, dark, cool, everything had become too magnified in the air. Wallace fired first,

followed by his squad, until all twenty figures fell. With the threat neutralized, Wallace crept up to the first person from the group he found alive. He said he thought Wallace's squad was its opposite, a poacher death-squad, rumored to be stalking Wallace's soldiers in retaliation for unchecked poacher-killing. The group Wallace had just killed were afraid they would be mistaken as *Wallace's* group by the death-squad. It wasn't a gun shot in the air but a dud flare. The group was a local night-tour given by young men from the village who were no longer getting money from poaching to get easy money from tourists looking for an Africa less mediated by corporate planning. Wallace's throat closed up, forbidding air and speech. It opened enough for him to vomit, then it closed and he passed out.

But when he finally returned to the compound, everything was a wreck. *It* had been raided by the poacher death-squads. Heavenly had been murdered. Stockpiles of guns were stolen, three guards were killed. The fallout of the event was horrible. Progressive Nation revoked Wallace's army's right to function inside Progressive Nation and the government was forced to send in military units to quell the death-squads, created as reaction to Wallace's poaching army, terrorizing villages.

Wallace tried to kill himself. He found the highest cliff he could. He drove for days until he discovered the right one, five-hundred feet high. He jumped . . . and landed in an animal pit-trap. He horribly broke both legs, fracturing his lowest vertebrae. His legs healed incorrectly. Walking became intolerable, functionally impossible, a dream.

This is Keegan's hinting, his 'used to be into animals' and 'The Africa Project.' A past like this allows for some mental quirks. I wonder why he never tried to kill himself again. The specter of his wife must be terrifying. Unless she became a good spirit, guiding him or, maybe, listening to him talk. I can't stay awake. Goodnight.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 28

But then I couldn't go to sleep, either. I went to work sleepless. It felt like I had been drugged. I hallucinated that all the painted, represented animals in the zoo came to life. I was obsessing over last night. Over all the terrible sacrifices people make for each other, for animals, for safety, but as human sacrifice gives way to animal sacrifice, we think up creative ways to sacrifice them. I understand why Blažej speaks about people shutting off their minds by saying activists 'like animals more than people.' It strikes me that there are more figures of animals in the zoo, more instances of animals-as-crafted than animals-for-themselves. It's a factory-farm for sentiment-poachers. Though I must remain partly dubious; the zoo's not, it can't be, completely evil. But what *is* evil is the when I fell asleep during my lunch break the Tournado tour recording haunted my nap. And the kids haunted me. And the scared kangaroos. And cave-paintings that come to life, frogs talking about light bulbs, lizards talking about hotdogs, and buffalos running alongside rollercoasters.

Tomorrow should be a much better day.

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 29

My theory for why Thai joints are so popular and always crowded in Dunn contends that no matter what kind of shit is falling out of your mouth, there's always spicy complex gushy goodness on the inside. Sort of like the spiritual core of Christianity.

Yummi Thai BBQ #8, my old faithful, hadn't accepted my suggestions for a new name, which could have been something impressive for me to talk about whenever I took someone there. So to continue my love affair with the place I associated their tepid response to their own weakness, not to any witlessness of my own. Besides, nobody in Dunn has any better *Bplah Meuk Gkratiem Manao* (which is more fun to write than prosaic Garlic Squid).

Keegan arrived dressed like a comfortable bed. Soft green jersey skirt with a black lyrca spaghetti-strap top (the lyrca pillow shams Holly gave me still sham my bed). She wore a red coat

over her outfit. I like that idea, of dressing however you want underneath, for any season regardless of fashion mores, as long as there's a red coat on top. I can't be the only one thinking epidermal red hasn't yet had it's moment in the, er, sun.

So dinner itself: inveterate culinary wit. The conversation: inveterate embarrassing broken-down-on-the-side-of-the-road wit. You see, right there, that's an example of where I'm always going wrong: hurkey-jerky hyphenated German-wannabe words flop out my brain like a brained chicken's flopping body flops post-decapitation. Solid formation, I once read they were called. So I actually mentioned this as I started to give her my theory of chest-speak. Stringing words together into one word is like using ten hammers to crack a granite block instead of a stick of dynamite or pound of thermite. The idea is to keep your opinion of something hidden from yourself until you say it, like you're not going to know what kind of rock shards you'll get before you whack at it. Mildly mixed metaphor notwithstanding, I told her 'it's a dirty way of getting at a thing, but this is the era of kinky methods. Dirt and sweat simply add taste for the tasters.' I hope that got across what I was getting at, involuting my metaphor to relate a woman's naked body to the granite shards, and post-modernity to my growing (ba dum) desire to bed her.

Sometimes I think that with the right decoder ring, Livy's a very dirty boy.

It might be easier instead of trying to remember what we talked about to just try to remember what we said. Let's see. After obliquely relating my desire to do some things to her Wallace probably wouldn't condone, I started talking about my proclivity for grand statements, hence why I like Wallace so much.

'So I have a proclivity for grand statements, hence why I like your father so much. I figure that since nobody's got a hold on the truth, we're all a bunch of truth-creating machines. Then if you're not trying to spin some web, you know, go be a spider or something where the webs are literal. But us, we're a brand of personal philosophers if we didn't know it or not. And we don't want to seem as though we keep talking about ourselves, so we just abstract from experience to sound as if we had some tie-in to a meta-truth. But, you know, everybody knows

nobody's got that, so we do it for fun instead. We know the truth probably extends as far as our own noses, but sometimes a grand-statement can make you think a second, force you to refute or agree. So it's active participation. That's the idea. You don't just trade stories and call it a conversation, you trade truths and call it *becoming*.'

'But it's not true that "everybody knows nobody's got" a grip on whatever you're calling truth, Livy. Just on TV, not to mention spam e-mails, people make a lot of money proclaiming truths that a lot of people pay for. There's a quack on every channel. Or each one, if you look hard enough. It's not as benevolent as you make it seem.'

Yes, she was right. And because she was right I nearly said something straight-on, something like 'do you want to go back home and screw?' but, alas, I'm too weak for grand-statements of *that* order.

But then I had the idea that maybe I could lead *her* into talking about how much she wanted to come back home and . . . So I asked her what types of people she was most comfortable with.

'I'm awkward with people. But more so with people I know than strangers, actually. Hence why I like strangers better. Isn't that weird?'

Let's see: abandonment issues, intimacy issues, daddy issues, broken-child-of-a-broken-home issues, all combined with a catastrophic inability to love. Someone could apply all the silly stereotypes here. Sometimes I wish I had paid more attention to Mrs. Snider's lectures than her lascivious professional interests. I might remember which of these theories had been debunked and which ones I could use to get Keegan's clothes off.

Jesus, that's a terrible thing to write. Good thing I wasn't thinking that at the time. I was just really happy to know I was a stranger to her, one who happened to live in the next room. I thought I might be able to capitalize on *that*.

So I asked a question any stranger would ask a bright beautiful roommate: do you love bodies? The obtuseness of some questions provide very acute answers.

‘Bodies? I love bodies as much as sex! And I'm fascinated by sex. I love watching bodies move, and then feeling them held; to feel like the other body feels what I'm feeling, I'm in love with that. And to watch bodies move you always need light, at least from a night-light or the moon. To kiss with my eyes open, to laugh when I come – ah, but you can’t do that around people, you can’t laugh, it upsets them. But I love to laugh!’

I laughed.

‘You know what’s weird about how I have to keep my eyes open? I hate how I look when I come. I can’t imagine how terrible it looks. But then I catalogue in my mind everybody else’s coming-face.’

I tried to look as though I knew exactly what she was talking about. To catalogue people’s reactions when they are so much intoxicated by everything themselves that they become selfless, absent a conscious self capable of feeling other than pleasure. Obscene and lovely. I tried to bite off a leg of my squid and for a moment thought she’d take the toe part of it into her own mouth and we’d share a special Disney moment of closeness. But instead the leg burst before she noticed our ideal circumstances. And it more popped then burst. Luckily sheer black easily hides squid juice.

It’s too late to keep writing. I’ve spent the best part of the night writing reflections and what I remember from the part of the night that was supposed to lead up to the best part of the night when I'm not at my desk writing about how the best part of the night is in my head. I don’t sleep with my door open anymore. Keegan might think I'm a perv for how much I practice my coming-face for her. I sure hope to god one day she’ll get to catalogue me. If at least journaling I aped a Don Juan persona, like visualizing a goal before kicking or the bull’s-eye before throwing, I could fare better when its time for be Don Juan. But alas, pretending is too painful when your Melusine is full-sized next-door.

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 30

Had coffee with Holly. I had intended to deliver my letter outlining what I thought of her and Strobe's new arrangements, making opaque allusions to my disappointment of her acceptance of Strobe and the Shit Dump. On the surface it seemed politic and cordial, but that's only if all the meatball and lemon-juice metaphors were misunderstood.

Keegan pulsed me upstairs when I got back over concerns about Wallace's recent demeanor shift. That he hadn't been speaking to her, or a lot less than normally. I mentioned his grand display a couple nights ago, but that he hadn't spoken to me much since then either. She wondered if Blažej was still a good influence. Something about Blažej had started uneasing her, something about his always-clandestine temperament and always needing Wallace alone before speaking to him. My first reaction was to argue for the opposite, that in fact I myself felt Blažej's company provided what we both couldn't, namely equally tilted responses to Wallace's pin-ball associations. I thought that if Blažej had been helpful in the past, perhaps Wallace's change was the change back to where he had been before Wallace stopped coming so often, back right-side up in his head, or wrong-side, whichever was normal side.

8:43 p

Blažej interrupted my previous paragraph. He had walked upstairs and knocked on my door and asked for me to the office. When I sat down on the cot, Wallace spoke first:

'First thing, Livy. You're not to write about this, about what happens inside this room. I know you have a diary and I know you try to recreate something of your experiences and the world in it, but Blažej and I are going to ask you something necessarily different than your normal grist. You will need to faithfully keep it un-reflected in your book.'

'You can be a part something,' said Blažej, 'though this something is something only when you're inside it and not outside of it trying to recreate it, creating evidence through its

recreation. Do you understand this? That we need you here to embody the seconds as they occur and not as they later retrospectively dissemble themselves.'

Obviously at a loss, I agreed. Then they opened up. Oh. Boy.

So *should* I keep silent to you, dear diary? What these last three days have been! First with Wallace's exposition, then a date with Keegan, and now this, this . . . heist! Righteous heist. But this is ridiculous, a truly unfathomable prospect. Then why does it invoke such a reaction inside of me? I'm giggling. I can't put my head around it. To not give the page specifics is to keep everybody involved safe, easily understandable. Of course that supposes someone is to read this! Do outside-eyes mean I should hold things back, or the opposite: that I should open things up, to assert the truth of the event, the genuine record. When they explained their preliminary outline to me, Blažej reiterated how important I was to be in the execution it.

'But it is still preliminary, to be sure,' added Wallace.

'But we also foresee a high probability of the right elements –,'

'—but even with everything arranged we must keep in mind –,'

'—we will do our best to maintain his safety –,'

'—we *will* maintain his –,'

'—but his ultimate purpose is *past* himself –,'

'—and baseless if he's harmed! If there's any real chance that he would not survive his trip then we will –,'

'—we will make sure he can –,'

'—we will call it off!'

Their inspiration has come from me, actually. The first afternoon I met Blažej, mentioning Dorothy's imminent freedom qua death. Add Rock Hyrax's glossy face and fixed smile on flyers and T.V., and says Blažej, 'let the things themselves inspire you, the B to C without asking A, and that is how ideas are sprung.'

11:58 p

So how to steal the keys. Senlin's not arrived yet, so Rocky's in and out of the habitat all day, running errands and scraping poop, learning the bureaucracy by doing elephant paperwork while he still can. Probably five to seven times a day I see him walking past me toward the office building. Therefore there are long gaps wherein missing keys wouldn't be conspicuous. There's only one door in the back area of the elephants. I remember Rocky telling me that the other keepers, Ellie and Herman, hate to be inside the habitat with all the doors, front and back, locked. It will be much easier during the day to get the three keys I need copied. What I can do:

1) Somehow steal his key ring during lunch, leave to get them copied, return and say 'hey, you dropped these!'
2) The wax block Blažej mentioned. But I will still need Rocky's entire chain.
3) Invite Rocky over for dinner after work, drug him, steal the keys, copy them, return the keys, administer anitidote, say 'too much wine, friend!'
4) Stay after the doors close. Rocky's normally last with the elephants, after Allie and Herman give Dorothy and Buttons their drops and last meal and then they leave. If I combine #2 with this one, I'd have opportunity and enough time. Thirty seconds a mold x 3 = enough time for Buttons to cover me while I make the copies.

This sounds like an idea so terrible I could really get into it!

MONDAY, DECEMBER 1

Where has this blizzard come from? I don't remember when our snow has lasted this long, longer than five days on the ground. I think the air above Dunn City finally felt comfortable with the idea of snow, not embarrassed or annoyed by her as he so easily becomes. He didn't feel the need to hurry away. Now they're together. They won't leave the bed, the rest of the world be damned.

We’re having to keep many of the animals inside, and without a compliment of cold-weather loving exhibits many disappointed people dislike our naked displays. Take the chimps, for instance. People choose to ignore the ersatz rock faces that make up eighty percent of the rocks in their habitat, or the lemurs and the giant plastic trees that make up two of their four. But not until we remove the animals do people actually *notice* the composite rocks and recycled-plastic oaks. And when people notice large amounts of the exhibits are manmade and not just man-shaped, they think that telling us that they noticed will prove that they paid attention and have caught us in our swindle, or maybe even they’ll grow indignant and question the necessity of plastic trees when in all the surrounding parks there are dozens of mature oaks or willows we could transplant, and not more than an hour away, they say, giant rock faces, pocked by road-carving dynamite blasts, await more exploding. As the monkeys apparently are epicures with a strong distaste for fakery, why hadn’t we considered this? Or so Mere basically told me during his rounds, as I ate an apple under a willow, that five people today had asked if we had always used plastic so extensively.

‘But everything here is fake,’ I replied.

‘Is what?’

‘It’s fake. As in elephants don’t live in sandy parking lots, gorillas keep out of Playplaces and Kori Bustard doesn’t live in my backyard, despite what her pen suggests.’ Uh oh. What has gotten into me?

‘Well you know you’re just pointing out the obvious, right, you know? I don’t need to tell you this, Livy, that we are *re*creating habitats as completely as possible in order so that we might and the animals might and our patrons might *have an experience*, you know? You can’t bring the Serengeti here, as much as I’d like to, ha! Right? But we can bring *ourselves* to *it*. This is our promise to our patrons, and you should have already known this as our Tour*nado* guide!’

‘Don’t you find it just a *little* strange,’ I said, ‘that the tour barely covers Dunn Zoo animals? That we see only *three* animals and we still pass by *five* places where people can spend

their money! And for hotdogs? For hotdogs?! What are hotdogs to us or us to hotdogs that we should reach for them in a *zoo*!'

I started screaming and cudgeling Hamlet and it felt transgressive and wonderful. I spat *hotdogs* as I would *Hecuba* and felt like everything around me had slowed to an adagio while me the melody twirled and dove like the Devil's Trill. That's how it felt, not how it happened.

For Mere nearly fired me. He excused me saying that I had been stressed by something, by the holidays or bad cranberry sauce, apologizing to *me* for my impudence. I should seek an outlet, he said, whereby I don't choose the workplace for venting of what should fiscally responsibly occur during personal time. We are all stressed, or something like that, but please we can't have the customers seeing this, you know?

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 2

My cell rang a few hours ago and it was Keegan asking me to bring Wallace downstairs if I weren't busy, but even if I were, could I somehow bring him anyway?

He was in his office flipping through *Celebrity Weekly*. Stacks of them covered his counter-desks, many of them stood up displaying full-page headshots.

'The internet,' he replied to my unspoken question about their origin. 'I told someone I was doing art projects and needed disposable faces. They had subscribed to this chintz and could part with their last three years of them without hesitation with a promise they were to be put to use.'

'Are you –,'

'What projects would I make? Paper friends? To talk to when I get lonely? No, it's for Senlin and Hyrax. Their movie is mentioned six times over the ninety editions I have. I have discovered the brand of protein powder Hyrax uses, Proteintiation Plus. And Senlin's preference for peanut butter *with* honey. So obviously my search has yielded ample data.'

'You searched through – ?'

‘The Internet. My hands and patience are not match for these. The copy is searchable online.’

‘What are – ?’

‘Behind-the-scenes editorials and interviews. Mostly the interviews. I think Senlin’s to be the biggest animal-celebrity since that monkey who danced around Times Square in high fashion.’

‘Bi-curious George?’

‘Or perhaps even the bear who ate the forest family but was then adopted by the city once it a hunter shot him in the face and he crawled down the main street screaming.’

As we road the elevator down Wallace asked me what kind of surprise this was. I said I didn’t know.

‘How many times in history have surprises proved to be hideous gifts and worse sentiments? Lott’s two visitor’s were no good surprises. Had he stayed behind he wouldn’t need to watch his wife die, even if only for the few seconds before he himself was judged. What if Lott had taken a moral stand to God, saying that forgiveness for many might still be possible if there were pains taken to *find* more righteous – for I'm sure the whole city didn’t congregate around Lott’s own house. But if God knew how many righteous there were, why would he play questions with Abraham? No, surprises are no good. Jane Austin says that surprises are foolish things. The pleasure is not enhanced, and the inconvenience is often considerable. She missed a lot of things, but this I can agree with.’

He spoke so fluidly that as I bungled and bumbled a response he would start to catch my words again and move them around to fit himself but so I slammed the elevator-stop button (yes, there’s an elevator-stop button) and said ‘Life *is* surprises! And if life *is* foolish and inconvenient and not very pleasurable then she’s not completely wrong, but she’s certainly not right. Don’t the two ends need balance, life and surprise, pleasure and delay, inconvenience and dedication? We can prepare, we can invest, and maybe our fate’s *are* our character, but if you’re kidnapped

tomorrow or lose your wits or wars break around your street then what's your character then? Support, maybe, but your fate's completely changed.'

'Exactly!'

Wallace has a way of destroying a debate by agreeing with his debater.

The elevator opened to the parking deck. Twenty seconds after his *exactly*, twenty seconds of shifting back and forth, for me, while he sparkled and the elevator hummed, he giggled to himself. Was this a test, then, to teach me something about what we were going to do? For our plan, built upon surprise, not just in the application but importantly in the depth of the consequences of the deed itself? Or was he mocking me for my nonreply?

But Keegan, pleasing Keegan and her dark wrought shimmering golden streaks between independent strands of lambent blonde, luxurious Keegan in square-heeled black loafers and brown skirt, buxom Keegan in jelly-purple sweater, Peanut Butter And Jelly Keegan stood atop the red and white striped parking deck entrance-way, smiling to us both. I felt light and anxious and a bit fidgety. I've being feeling very anxious and eager lately. There are obvious causes, of course, but then I also haven't been masturbating or smoking or getting out much or talking to people but these half-deranged ones and Samaritan younger ones and other ones that ignore me and who I have to Act around, capital A, Acting to maintain report and retort. Has my relationship with Holly corroded to the point where all's now artifice, sentiments and scribbles? Can I rely on Keegan to be my female-support, my Holly?

As for Wallace's surprise: keys to a legless-person's van. What?! That was his reaction. What?! That was mine. Keegan bought ungrateful Wallace a big, expensive, tricked out automatic everything van controlled entirely from the steering wheel and even including an automatic platform for his chair that once it levers him inside, in the chair, it even helps him *out* of the chair to the driver's seat! What?! I kept thinking this assassinated his excuses for staying locked-up inside and always needing me or Keegan or Blažej to spout on. He can *go* places now and probably still feel alone there but with all his new walls to talk to and to bore and to intrigue and

to captivate who were we going to be now, what were we going to be without all that reliance and need, now that he actually had some place to go, that he could go and *buy* Celebrity Weekly without ordering it first or first ordering us to take him?

But I *hate* being *his* captive and yet I'm unsettled at *his* independence!

I need to think about this differently.

I need to remember that he's only independent insofar as his mobility. He's no different than me inside his van, but he still needs people when he's among people and not machines.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 3

Wallace has asked me to find out as much as I can about Senlin's arrival. I talked to Rocky, who told me Senlin's scheduled to arrive on the 9th. His public premier has been scheduled for the 13th. Wallace wants to wait until Dorothy is dead – which should happen any day now, according to Rocky – before Senlin's taken.

Senlin's arrival being immanent, I realized the Dunn Zoo prefers housing already-celebrity than just any normal animal. Most important, or at least helpful to the long term health of the zoo, is a reconciliation with monetary investments for certain high-value or rare or lovable animals, and with their capital return of capital. In other words, if an non-famous animal comes to live with us, it better be famous soon. The zoo is an expensive place to run. It is true that certain animals are more famous than others, and that once you purchase your ticket the zoo needs to make sure you return or send others to return, and there being no reason why you wouldn't tell a friend about that certain well-placed pop-cultural animal-beacon which led to your visit, but people tire of animal celebs as quickly, or maybe even quicker, than they do of their bipedal coeds. Because celebrities are so flakey when it comes to love-relationships, perhaps, for the most part what keeps famous people (animals) famous outside of films (exhibits) is their relations with other celebrities and the headline generating power of recursive love reminding us these people (animals) are still alive.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 4

I heard on my radio in the early afternoon Dorothy was throwing a tantrum in front of a handful of patrons. Rocky said she had been 'itching' recently a lot more than she normally has, 'itching' meaning seeming agitated, scuffing up dirt clouds and quickly raising her head up high, as if she were to gore something. But oddly it only happened during her feeding time. It wasn't somehow territorial, either: she didn't mind if Buttons came up and took her food, but as soon as Herman tossed her lettuce or apples she would immediately grow defensive. Allie put Dorothy's food into a bucket and pushed it toward her so she could eat. Dorothy had had mostly hay for the last few days, worrying everybody who works with her. An elephant needs about three-hundred pounds of food a day to keep their health properly on track. Her back-left foot, flaring painfully off and on, has been stuck in the on position since her demeanor shift. Rocky theorizes the two are related. Iris, Mere's new assistant in charge of running the non-staff positions when the non-staff was away, took over for me about twenty minutes after I heard the commotion on the radio that was Rocky doggedly calling for Herman, who had been with Mere in the admin trailer, calling for Herman to help them lead Dorothy back into the elephant's house from the outside exhibit area. They had been trying to feed her outside despite the weather because she needed to remain active with her infected foot, but things today had gotten out of hand. Dorothy almost thrashed Rocky, or seemed intent to, which for him would have been a great shame because he wasn't even yet on full pay.

Rocky told me the Zoo had a press release in today's paper regarding Senlin's arrival. I bought one over lunch for Wallace and Blažej, and paste a copy here I took from the internet:

December 4, 2008, Zoo Dunn, ST: Zoo Dunn asks Dunn City to greet its newest citizen on December 13th, Little Baby Senlin, in a star-studded gala featuring mega-celebrity Rock Hyrax. Festivities include a showcase of Little Baby Senlin's Hollywood-talent followed by a

meet and greet with Hyrax himself, who will gladly answer questions and discuss Clarity Communication's newest sensation "Dr. Pachyderm". He will also discuss his wonderful and life-changing experiences acting alongside international sensation Little Baby Senlin. After the meet-and-great, there will be a drawing for tickets to showings of "Dr. Pachyderm" and will also include a secret grand prize not to be revealed until it's awarded!

Zoo Dunn has a long history of bringing together the best of Hollywood and the animal kingdom by nurturing an environment in which the animals learn to appreciate close and safe contact with humans. This intimacy sustains a "pack-like" relationship with the staff of Zoo Dunn, one which translates well for educational and public showcases, and even the big screen. "I would prefer to work with a Zoo Dunn chimp over any privately-trained chimp on any chimp-project I have in the future!" says acclaimed actor Rock Hyrax. "Dr. Pachyderm" follows Hyrax as psychologist Adam Grey as he turns his back on Manhattan high-life to support emotionally scarred villages in war-torn Africa with the help of a one-of-a-kind and lovable young elephant he meets on the way. Tickets on sale now.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 8

'Livy, why would we want to tell Keegan? You must realize that everybody involved is seen cracked somehow, that the public cannot understand something of the scale of our idea without categorizing us for their safety, without distancing us from themselves. Everybody believes in something, if not the facticity of their own existence then the facticity of their dream-world and if not that then something like gravity, everybody can believe in gravity, the invisible force that *does* something for everybody. To deny gravity is clinical and pathological because everybody says it exists because for everybody it does. We might as well stand on the balcony railing and tell her we're about to prove gravity's a mythical beast due for poaching and then fling ourselves off. Her reaction would be comparable. And it's *because* of her reaction that we're doing all this; Keegan's reaction will be on the same scale as everybody else's. Little Senlin's

like family to them, they might have spent more time watching him then they have their parents for years.'

'He might even be more so, more real in the sense that he's always absent in his presence, that the 'real' him is exactly how he's manifested in the movie and advertisements. There is no "other" him when the camera's turned off, unlike parents who never go away after you've forgotten their birthday cards or ignored their phone calls. Thus he is allowed to live untarnished inside your fantasy of him, a fantasy which *cannot* conflict with "reality" because his "reality" is entirely your fantasy.'

'Until that fantasy is altered, no longer following the "official" fantasy which so far has been dictating.'

'Precisely, until we act to change it. You can say that we're "acting" a new fantasy, subverting the one which was acted only in the sense of how a painting is acted.'

'Contingent upon a new intelligence.'

'Until he no longer needs our intelligence at all.'

'A bit like communism, Blažej?'

'Call this the December Revolution.'

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 9

Senlin arrived today. Everybody thinks he's the cartoonist cutest specialist elephant ever. There were literally more empty posts around the zoo than filled ones. Iris wasn't pleased. Like the coming of a president or king, to glimpse or feel the aura around Little Baby Senlin would fecundate months of conversation. But I myself never left the train. I even felt a little sick when Rocky ran over to tell me Senlin's out, inspecting his cage, that his trouble-less transfer was completed, and that finally Rocky would get full pay. I'm not invited to the weekly staff meetings, but after I got off and smoked outside front gate, and Rocky separated himself from baby Senlin for his own, he told me that Dorothy's departure had been moved ahead. Painkillers and

injections no longer killed her back-left foot pain. She hadn't been free in the exhibit for five days now after her tantrum, contributing to her foot trouble despite the sling they had chained her into and the extra Macintosh apples.

My disposition is changing. From the stress, anticipation, or internal debate that rages whenever I'm not writing in this to relax my mind's verbal pugilist. I can't tell whether when I imagine what Keegan's doing I'm wistfully agitated for her sake or for Senlin's. The demarcation between related things is dissolving; emotions evoked by certain concepts and people either churn exactly the same, or I can't think things separately. Their equal-feeling is not a feeling of consecutively but of one-feeling. Wallace and The Plan. Keegan and Senlin. No, I'm not falling in love with an elephant-fantasy, as Blažej says, but I believe I *am* falling in love with Keegan. How does one know if one's already fallen? If one believes they've got the freedom to fall, the safety-net of the other's affection? I can't help thinking that if I were braver I wouldn't wait to fall. That requited or not it's my pain and pleasure, why the reticence? I'm afraid of my bared beating heart? That's as cliché as if I had a whiny voice and tinny guitar and sang of my fear, universal enough for wrist-cutters and star-tattooers and suicide boys and girls. But that's doing from not doing. And this is my purpose, to *do*! To hurt! To write about *doing*, or rather to force myself into doing from writing. Writing is also doing from not doing. Unless of course I'm doing. But I don't. But I will! Nobody can say, once this is over, nobody and not even my head can tell me I haven't done. I have helped, I have caused, I have exploded things (metaphorically . . . . there are no bombs in The Plan).

Now why can't I fall asleep? Not with Keegan a wall away. I've already told her goodnight. We didn't speak much today, or rather tonight for the couple hours she spent out of her room. Wallace is figuring things out, Blažej is making calls, I'm sitting tight, too tight, sentimental for nothing and everything and wanting to put on a mask or cow suit or blue coat and tear off Keegan's shut door, I want to stand in front of her and tell her that yes, now I'm just a body, strange beating sweating body who moves no differently than the rest, to say that I am pre-

historical man, at the biological step on which we're still standing but with intelligence, and that I am frightened because I cannot speak but through my heaving chest instinctually, that I follow from sense and cannot understand abstraction while I speak in universals – that in short, I could be everybody, every stranger and pulsation and laugh and action, that I could be Emerson's universe, Heraclites' pond, that I can be Wittgenstein's broom sweeping Plato's cave and her own stupid heart toward mine.

But sleep comes, or teases. I won't play coy with her tonight.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 10

The truck arrived from the Sanctuary and its hospital was there, waiting for Dorothy to get upright enough to travel, spending the last three days preparing for her departure, waiting for her head to clear and her temper to temper, waiting on Dorothy– and as they waited, plotted, fed her tranquilizers and antibiotics, she curled her trunk around two bars in the elephant house, the two centermost bars, dented, scratched grey lines in black, she tensed her trunk around the bars, lost the strength of her infected leg, threw her head to the side, gasped, and stopped fighting. They kept Senlin in the back of the house with Buttons, but I walked into the exhibit and heard loud shuffling on metal coming from where they were kept and they knew Dorothy was dead. Four people had come from the sanctuary and stood over her, she must have died hours before I arrived but nobody had left her. That she died in the most public place inside the house really monkey-wrenched the exhibit today, and now they're to use a crane or backhoe or something to clear her 1500 lbs and Rocky doesn't know when it's to happen but they can't keep here there.

But something else happened.

Rocky had arrived not long before I did, about seven am. Senlin's morning feed and walk-around, eye drops, feet and ear check, practice with basic commands, Rocky did first thing every morning. But he was standing around Dorothy when I came in, one in a circle of people discussing the shock of her, that she was old but not that old, sick but not that sick – he stood in a

circle of people who had constructed around the body a makeshift crime scene, charts and papers and gloves and needles and vials of blood I guess for later testing.

Behind Iris, raptly staring at the dead elephant, behind Iris' right foot lay Rocky's ring of keys. I was invisible, I mean when I came in they flipped their eyes toward me but only how you glance a twirling leaf, nondescript, caught in the wind dancing across a yard. Dressed as an employee, I belonged there, or nobody but Mere could probably say I didn't, though for me not running the train perhaps Iris should have said something. I wanted to be invisible, and I think I pulled it off, so they really couldn't. I walked into the pen and tied my shoes invisibly, serendipitously next to the ring, placing my foot at the correct spot where nobody could even tell there were keys there, or that I was tying, and then surreptitiously slipped it into my coat. When I stood up I feared I might keep rising off the ground, or fall over. The weight of the keys might as well have been hung from my ventricles for the way I felt like no blood moved through me. Understandably I had become hyper-aware of myself all at once, Dorothy's visage, the artificial warmth in the house. I made due with how I thought I should be looking at a dead elephant when I took a few steps backwards before step by slow tedious step led me to the exit.

I spoke to no one, noticed nothing, heard nothing while walking straight out of the gate to my car. Since Wallace and Blažej first talked to me I scouted my way to work for close and independent locksmiths or a small tool store who could really do what amounted to the most important part of what I was supposed to do. I found one the first morning I paid attention for it, Dunning's Locks and Key, whose front sign was hand painted in yellows and dark oranges on about a 4ft x 4ft whitewashed and weathered wooden board. The building itself was a little white wooden-siding house left over from when residential houses lined the road leading to the zoo. Not much money had been put into its exterior to assimilate it to the clean lines and pert colors of the real estate offices, gas stations, boutiques and lawyers who finished off that side of the street before the highway.

I removed the three keys I needed – for the zoo's back entrance, the elephant house, and the house's back area – as I walked up the steps, waiting outside the door for a beat, only entering once my foggy breath obscured my reflection in its window. They were specially sized keys, the lock smith said, like they were zoo keys.

'They paid me some years back to set up a key-copier and teach a few people how to use it,' he told me, and raised his eyebrows to show how blundering zoo workers must be for not recalling there stood a key-copier somewhere in a workroom or supply closet.

Dissembling my horror I said, 'Well it's jammed so the resource manager sent me to you, obviously knowing you can make keys well for them since your machine worked so well for so long until somebody probably new and fat-fingered jammed it up. So many new people they hire! I'm still surprised by how many people I don't know and how many faces I forget.'

I had had to raise my voice for the last part because he began cutting the keys, which let me accent just how many new people there were (albeit not recently) who must be up to nefarious selfish aggrandizements on zoo time and dime.

I felt each second as I stood there as a pulse-and-a-half on a big loose drum, the vibration welling slowly and too deeply to not push into the next beat.

My god how it took forever! I've never been so nervous, not even when my nervousness shut me up the other night from Keegan like a turtle when we were talking about moving bodies.

I used the back employee entrance, unlocked, to avoid meeting someone who had an idea of where I was supposed to be at the moment. It was ten to nine. I had ten minutes to prep and gas the train and return Rocky's keys to the Indian lady's heel but looking through the front windows to the elephant house I saw that everybody – the Sanctuary people, Ira, Herman, Rocky – had gone. And Dorothy was gone. Not knowing how they could move her so quickly, I understood little but feared much. But the keys I knew I could return. I tried the door, felt it locked, but I possessed two copies. Inside I saw smeared blood on the bars and a few drops on the floor by some scattered papers, but heard no sound at all, not even from Senlin or Buttons – and suddenly

the fact of the security camera hit me, that its gaze already hit me. Through the bars I shuffled the papers, as if searching for one I dropped, lifting one as if comparing it to what I lost, affected a pensive evaluation of it, and set it down in a way which obscured from the camera the key-ring I slid underneath it.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 11

More snow, more snow, more snow. Forecasters calling for ten inches. Record snow, straining the memories of old people to come up with stories to top it. Tonight I stood on the porch and surveyed the blanketed city. Sirens rang in chorus from the city center a few miles away, singing melancholy for the people inside strapped onto beds meant for the living, waiting for a brighter chorus to beckon them out of their straps and off of the blanched blue institutional givens, into ecstasy, or nothingness, which might very well be the same thing.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 13

If it weren't for the higher ideals behind our decision, I'd say we should still do whatever we could to get Little Baby Senlin as far away from the likes of Rock Hyrax as possible. Right outside the elephant house a stage had been prepared. Hyrax and Mere had already sat on stage as I pushed Wallace up. Zoo Dunn and Dr. Pachyderm posters hung from the platform, along with Admiral Electric adverts and cafeteria specials. One of those drawing-machines to mix up pieces of paper was filled and spinning when we found a spot behind all the spread chairs, center stage.

Mere pulled a scrap of paper from the machine and used the award, a year pass to the zoo, as an introduction to the benefits and pleasure he felt Little Baby Senlin and Dr. Pachyderm provided. Hyrax kept a smile on during Mere's speech. When it was his turn, he wiped the accumulated snow off his shaved-bald head and stood on the podium self-possessed, regal, and very tall while the snow began gently falling.

‘Dunn City is going to realize very soon,’ said Hyrax, ‘that Little Baby Senlin is the best thing that’s happened to me during my career. Why, you’re going to figure out *why*. I can admit that playing the character of Dr. Pachyderm, we both learned the same lessons. I learned to understand the secret power of animals to educate people. It teaches us caring, respect, honesty. All wise lessons from just a little baby elephant as our teacher, *and* as our friend. And you will notice that he’s got more talent that just hogging all my close-ups! Before our first day of shooting he did this funny trick where he stuck out a front and a back leg and balanced himself, with his trunk up in the air, until his trainer asked him to stop. And this leads me to the most important thing on this special day, and that is, just like Little Baby Senlin, sometimes we need to slow down and make people laugh. Sometimes, we need to make ourselves laugh. And if a baby elephant only needs half his legs to make me laugh, imagine how funny people *without* legs are!’

MONDAY, DECEMBER 15

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 16

Keegan said Wallace has threatened to move out – which she doesn’t know how he can, and I can’t figure how, without her or somebody else helping – if she doesn’t get transferred out of her botulism work. She can’t understand how he can be ungrateful enough to demand this, even after she bought him the van (not to mention, you know, keeping him alive). She says he can’t argue well enough to buttress his dislike of her particular job because, after all, Wallace will repeat his look-them-in-the-eye-to-kill-them philosophy for even a cradled telephone, and Keegan spends all day meeting closing red eyes with her own stuck wide open. And anyway a new position within NIPPs is still *working for NIPPs*. She said Wallace won’t let anybody else have their own ‘purpose’ but only what he says it should be, always some variation of his own mangled past.

She’s leaving on the 19th for an international conference on botulism immanence. If Wallace hasn’t lightened up when she returns, she’s going to sell the loft, move into a single

apartment, and ask her mom to help her send Wallace to a home. Which will be the effective end of Mr. Wallace Sammler.

I hope she doesn't mean any of this.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 17

Should I worry about where Blažej gets this information from? No matter, it seems he's got the security layout for Dunn City Zoo and he's figured that the redundant power system is the only one we need to cut. The security system cameras and alarms don't take power from the main lines. But as soon as auxiliary goes, there's a main-line alarm to alert the Powers That Be there's a problem. The alarm's at the electric company, not at the zoo. Dispatched trucks should arrive within fifteen minutes to investigate and there should be, according to Blažej, no active alarm where we'll enter at the employee gate.

Blažej's first idea was that Wallace would drive the whole time: trucks are by nature conspicuous, but blue handicapped ones less than normal. Space in the van will obviously be an issue for little baby Senlin – the truck's inside about four and a half feet to the ceiling, and Senlin's just over four. Blažej will administer a mild sedative to calm him but will have heavy dosages on hand along with its antidote to bring him back when it's time to move him out, for we have to have him conscious to get him out.

It wasn't until he laid out zoo's floor plan, including marked security routes of the guard and camera focal points, and annotated for quick exits if the power were to come back on, did my unifeeling start to separate. That is, I started to feel Senlin and Keegan separately. I could tell her from the fear – as something I *didn't* want to set free. But that's exactly what I was doing – setting myself free from her as much as Senlin was leaving Dunn City. I don't want to set Keegan free. I think I'm more than a body to her. Hyperbole on her part, serendipity syndrome (that I'm here, captive in the loft for her attention), but she has said essentially the same. Could she be sensing what I've been trying to get from Wallace, that maybe I'm mildly succeeding in learning?

I'm losing strength for this because I'm afraid the sacrifice won't pay off. What of that? What if, for example, a poet spends his life alone, studying his loneliness and the glances of strangers, only to cajole from his deepest self deficient poems, not as much clichéd as just . . . promising, ending at only promising. For some, one lifetime is too short – what if we live to be a hundred but still need five, twenty more years to accomplish our accomplishment? Nobody's going to take up your case and keep you going if you only hint, if you remain at the level of 'promising'. To counter this we'll just look more inside and say, if I enjoyed it, that was enough. I know the questions never end but is *that* enough, the internal life? We're not all Apollo and nobody's got as much in their souls as he does in his broken torso. But then why if this is true do I flinch from Keegan? Can lesser men ape the greatness of greaters without it being mere simulation? Can I really follow Wallace's example? Maybe I don't flinch from it as much as I cannot look at it when it looks at me. I never learned outside the voyeur, outside the seer . . . everything else is too abstracted to really worry over. Ok Livy, come on, come on, come on! You finally have your chance for reification of Wallace's grand ideals, and your own, your own ideals, for they make sense and speak to you as much as to him, just minus the experience to ground it into you: you have your chance for *becoming*.

Do not hesitate sacrifice!

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 18

Blažej has set up a holding area in a storage loft outside Dunn until we can get Senlin on the boat. There's no way to hide Senlin in the United States under non-detrimental physical conditions, but we need to just get through it, to sacrifice for higher reasons. Soon anyway we're putting him outside national influence. Blažej has spoken to a ranger in a large land reserve in Progressive Nation. If Senlin's going to fit anywhere in the world, it has to be there. Wallace can't maintain his excitement until the world's abuzz at Little Baby Senlin. Though he's uncomfortable Blažej spoke to an actual ranger. He said there might be other, less closer-to-

official ways or someone else to bribe. Either way, Senlin will have to be in a cargo crate for the entire Atlantic trip. Blazej said that he'll put Senlin to sleep and travel in the compartment with him to make sure everything's smooth. Wallace hates the idea. 'But this will be the last time Senlin's any kind of freight,' said Wallace. As soon as the ship docks in Africa, Blažej will hand Senlin over to a group of people who'll take him to the rest of the way to the reserve. Wallace still wanted a way to affirm Senlin's health and safety once in Africa. Blažej said Senlin will be as safe as he could be, under the conditions.

Am I supposed to understand from our conversation that Wallace doubts as much as I do? Or more, even? I can't believe this. But can he bear the pain of his sacrifice, his history, what he has lost for his 'ideals' and what he will lose for them?. If he's unsuccessful, he will have destroyed his life for nothing, the poet of grand statements who dies alone, 'promising.' The greatest curse of death: to die only 'promising.'

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 19

Keegan has left. I drove her to the airport. On the way she started crying. I did my best comforting-brother, and hope it was enough. Tenderness can be the most revealing or the most superficial of all things. Revealing is obvious, complete exposure in the language of tears, often leading to verbal revelation. Superficial in how you can refuse the latter if you're the one in rapture, or, if you're in the role of confessed-to, you have assume a stance, or pose, painted in the softest light, speaking sentiments you barely believe.

Meanwhile I am plagued by the impending evening. I found Rilke's "The Last Evening" in a stack of papers. Blind chance sentiment wins again.

> And night and distant rumbling; now the army's
> carrier-train was moving out, to war.
> He looked up from the harpsichord, and as

he went on playing, he looked across at her

almost as one might gaze into a mirror:
so deeply was her every feature filled
with his young features, which bore his pain and were
more beautiful and seductive with each sound.

Then, suddenly, the image broke apart.
She stood, as though distracted, near the window
and felt the violent drum-beats of her heart.

His playing stopped. From outside, a fresh wind blew.
And strangely alien on the mirror-table
stood the black shako with its ivory skull.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 20

I have time to write. Wallace is downstairs, and I will not go downstairs because I have made time to write. I write, this is why I'm writing, I can push myself to write.

Three nights sleepless. Wallace can't drive his van. Actually he *can* drive it but like shit, he's completely terrible, terrifying, the iced-over roads notwithstanding. He's still figuring out the necessary pressure on the steering-wheel accelerator, so it feels like driver's ed where gunning replaces ease and ease replaces the necessary flooring and reaction time to save all lives involved. He manages, managed, but only in the sense that I'm alive to write this.

We had everything prepared before we left. Blažej was to meet us there, having taken the bus to the stop about a mile away. We were to take everything with us, Senlin's food and blankets and Little Baby Senlin himself, to the storage loft Blažej was supposed to have reserved and organized and it wasn't our part so it was supposed to have been already ready. Well.

Wallace barely spoke. From when I loaded the three bundles of hay into the van, the two boxes of cabbages and apples and office-sized water-tank, nothing came out him. We were

feeling the same pressure. I wonder if his felt like two hot irons compressing the sides of his head. Or like we were doing something wrong. I asked him how he felt and he said ‘nothing.’

We stared at the gate to inside while we sat in the back lot inside thick, mucous silence.

A row of small lights visible from the lot, starting from the gate and moving along the short walk that feeds into food storage, was to be our cue: extinguished, and auxiliary had been cut. Then wait for Blažej’s text for when we would move in.

At 1:31 a.m. the lights winked out. A minute letter the text arrived. Blažej was already inside.

We had removed Wallace’s chair gate and auto-install-in-chair mechanism, so I had to grab his chair from the back and unfold it and bring it outside the driver’s door for him to throw himself into.

We he finally spoke, it seemed more for his own benefit. ‘Everybody’s going to look at this, Livy, and say things were never the same afterwards. You believe that, I know you do. This is that moment in history that’s bulleted in all the books. That it wasn’t as much the what we did today *itself*, but what ripples rippled past the ripples lapping at the bank – this spills over! It spills over and the weed grass’ roots are thirsty and appreciative. Where’s the key to this door?’

I fumbled open the door with the copy and led Wallace through. It’s not a long walk to the elephant house. It felt as though it moved toward us, on its own – the whole evening felt this way, not that the Dunn Zoo was, maybe, working for us, but that it was working next to us.

Blažej we met at the house. He pulled out a banana and peeled it as I opened its back exterior door. He took out the sedatives and pressed them into it. They were to loosen Senlin for trip, not to immobilize him for it.

‘Did anybody see you?’ asked Blažej.

‘Only the bonobos,’ I said.

‘They’re not on this side.’

‘So then I guess nobody did.’

‘How much longer do we have the cameras?’ asked Wallace.

‘The trucks were probably sent ten minutes ago, so maybe fifteen more.’

Buttons and Senlin were both shuffling. Senlin lifted his trunk up toward me and his deep eyes sought and found mine, then they bounced around all of us and rested on Wallace in his chair.

Blažej asked that I help him secure Senlin into his harness, which Blažej took out of his backpack. I had to get a leather strap around Senlin’s ears and onto his neck, like a collar. When his ears bent I feared the bending might unsettle him, but he insinuated his trunk around my neck and nestled my ear from behind. Blažej laid on the ground to secure Senlin from the bottom of his belly. Senlin might still just be out of infanthood, but he’s around 400 pounds. He didn’t move his legs with Blažej under him, but stood rigid, moving his head a little if at all.

My chest felt hot, not quite painfully but as though someone were shinning a spotlight at it who wouldn’t move about the stage for the other actors. I knew around the zoo was a private security guard walking and, despite what Blažej maintained, might be near the elephants as we walked to the van.

Wallace and I moved Senlin the four-hundred yards to the van and Blažej went to reconnect the power. So much of what he was doing, what he had done for the evening, everything preparing for the last couple weeks, took place off stage, or off my stage. I find it strange we’ve never carried a conversation together. And not because he’s as conversationally dictatorial as Wallace but because we’ve never had a context to speak to one another only. How many other people who influence my life are as ghostly as he his?

Wallace rented a ramp from I-Haul-It and when we got Senlin to the van I pulled it out and set it up while smartly crunching my right thumb when I connected it to the back. It started to bleed underneath the nail. I couldn’t scream, couldn’t express my pain to assuage it other than scruffing my face up and biting a hole in my lip. So blood began tricking down my chin.

Adrenaline helped, or did something, I shook my head like a paint mixer until Wallace punched me on my ass and muffled-screamed ‘get him in!’

Well I did, a hand on the rains was enough for Senlin to know what we wanted of him and he didn’t seem to mind having his back smeared with my blood.

Wallace’s fat thumbs skidded our back wheels trying to pull out of the lot which did greatly for keeping my heart unpainfully situated. We headed for the storage units at the I-Haul-It, to the heated unit Blažej had reserved for Senlin. This was to be the essential end of my involvement. We drop off Little Baby Senlin, Blažej stays with him for the night, and in the morning taking a truck and cargo-box and Senlin to East Dock to ship him to sanctuary.

But my thumb and lip were unstoppably lustily sanguinariliy interested, which a few hours of perspective shows it augured every next causal moment to extend my commitment to Senlin. The storage loft was a terrible idea.

Ok, maybe not the idea of it, but for the very reason that as we pulled up to unit HU02, we saw a trailer and ten people loading plastic-wrapped grand pianos into Senlin’s unit. Wallace and I were now desperately in a bad way. We had nowhere to put a four-hundred pound movie-star elephant, growing impatient inside the van, and whose stress levels were reaching my own.

I had no idea what to do but Wallace told me to get the men kicked out in the front office. And at the office I learned Blažej had reserved the unit for earlier in the day. The reason the piano men had stolen it was because apparently giant heated lofts are a “hot” commodity in this weather and if you don’t appear during your first loading window, which for us was about three hours ago, they immediately give it away. I'm guessing Blažej bribed someone in the office to make the first appointment, or if he didn’t, he should have, to loosen their window policy.

Wallace had the van moving before I finished with their explanation.

We were headed home. With Senlin.

This was a terrific idea.

In the parking deck Wallace backed into the first spot facing the elevator in which Keegan gave him his van. We weren't taking the freight elevator because neither of us had the key for it.

We had no way of taking the elevator directly to our floor but we *did* have the blanket Senlin stood on while we drove him over. I shrouded him in it for the treacherous and lingering ascent.

Motley is the incredibly wrong word to describe the three of us walking down the yellow carpet to our door. Did us walking down the hallway count as the epochal moment Wallace described?

Or perhaps it was the moment Wallace opened the door and Senlin, now feeling comfortable, voided his bowels between the kitchen and living room. I couldn't shut the door fast enough to prevent some of the pee from wetting the hall's yellow carpet.

It had begun.

And here I am. Writing has calmed me somewhat, but if I go downstairs there will be a baby elephant in my living room and there will be three mounds of shit and most of the floor's already glazed with urine. We ran out of towels before I left them. Blažej is silent on the phone. We have no idea where he is. Downstairs I can't think Wallace is doing much. Maybe they're having a conversation about Eternal Return, and maybe Wallace is saying why he'd do this again.

I'm going downstairs. I might want to hear his explanation.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 21

I can't sleep with an elephant in the living room. He needs so much attention in our living room that without it he might pee on the couch as opposed to everywhere else. Yesterday I moved all the furniture in front of the porch door because we probably don't need the porch with a baby elephant. He has already tossed around our coffee pot, thrown the toaster at Wallace, doesn't keep the fridge door shut and, even if he were to shut it, he'd still leave the salad dressings out. I

realized the mistake of piling furniture up in front of the porch door when the smell downstairs became such that in holed away in my room I couldn't stand it. I've been growing more and more aloof to Wallace, who's constantly in motion for Senlin, sweeping dung and piss piles to the corners and feeding him and, to a certain extent I guess, entertaining him.

I walked downstairs into the main lobby to pick up a newspaper and found that we had made the front page. Not surprising, but still somehow surprising. By the time of press the award had reached $2.5 million but the article said that money from Hollywood was expected to double or triple that amount by this afternoon. The police and FBI had dispatched teams all over Dunn city and outlying areas. It's not easy to transport an elephant, the article said. Yes, you're right, article, transporting the elephant is not easy. Nor is living with him. Every pad hit touch leaves a mark, every move smears a trail – the gloss whiteness of the room accents his presence as if I had spotted him on top of a short hill and the sun was setting. Incidentally, he hasn't yet knocked over Ganesh on the wall, but he's ripped down everything else.

Wallace spent what seemed like hours this morning belligerently wondering out loud where Blažej had gone yesterday, and why he was silent today. Wallace refused to move Senlin until he heard from Wallace. All the easy theories about his whereabouts were on the table: police, power company and then police, security guard, midget hammer ninja monkeys and the like. I thought that he probably discovered his non-help at the storage and was working on getting Senlin less permanent-minded temporary storage.

When he finally called, I guess Wallace and I were both right.

He *had* been working on getting Senlin removed from Loft Street, but then *that* part of our plan is as old as the plan itself. What he called to say was that, just as the storage facility aborted at the last moment, so too is the ship on which Senlin's supposed to leave. Large chunks of ice had to be removed from the shallower water on the docks. Nothing could enter or leave safely. So the *Pinafore* would not be in Dunn until earliest tomorrow evening. I'm glad Wallace had someone to scream to besides Senlin and me, but then Blažej had to hang up on Wallace

three times before they finally nearly amiably ended the conversation but for Wallace cursing the weather. In a few hours Blažej is supposed to bring more hay and apples for Senlin, who, as I write this on the kitchen counter, is staring at me and quite more docile than earlier in the morning, whereas Wallace is by the stairs having a thoughtful conversation with Ganesh. His eyes are more sullen now than I've ever seen, and, as I look, I think his face has become sunken. Maybe like a carved pumpkin after two weeks on the porch. Has he eaten since Keegan left?

I'm not hungry, he says, and are you trying to mock me by interrupting me, he asks.

So he can't take care of himself, for which he might be excused if I weren't staring at one of the most popular elephants in the world while scribbling in my notebook. Making fun? Of course not. But I've grown really, really tired of the part of his brain that knows he's crazy. It thinks indignance does something above bothering the hell out of the rest of the world. He doesn't have patience, why should we extend the same? But then we don't, I mean Keegan doesn't, I don't, Blažej just talks, we're patient while he's butting and bucking and hoping the ivory will stick. Does he want to push us out? For all his talk, does he just want us to leave? Alone means self-sufficiency which for Wallace can't mean anything but death.

But where does that leave me? Do I somehow get to begin from where he stopped, interrogating what he says is never interrogated except by people like him but not really in his way, to offer a 'moral tattoo'? I like what he's hooked in to, the strength required for him to make his will into the world, of course or I wouldn't sit here trying to keep Kingsley from attacking Senlin. I had mostly forgotten the cat until a precision strike swipe and hiss piqued Senlin's little tail. He fled toward me to the bar and it frightened me. I was staring at Senlin the entire time. Dropped my book, fell off my chair, ran-crawled for the cat who met my outstretched hand with his claws. *Then* he fled for the pile of stuff in front of the door. Wallace never moved and after Kingsley bolted I didn't move myself. Senlin made sweeping motions with his back, sweeping his head from side to side at the same time, very careful, very scared, I think. I really hope this doesn't last longer.

6:08 p.m.

The third musketeer is back, looking disheveled, ridiculous, with wind-blown hair and scattered attentions, acting as though he just stepped from a time machine, ruffling his back-feathers from the trip. Though still not enough convincing proof to say he's had to sacrifice what Senlin's forcing us to sacrifice, as in, our loft. Poetic, maybe, as we lose our home to give Senlin a new one. But it's not a competition with Blažej to help Senlin, says my superego. Well, fuck you superego, go back into your chrysalis and never come out again. Sometimes competition is all that keeps people above water. It doesn't matter if you live longer than the thrashing body next to you, but there's still factors of winning and losing involved; the competition has more to do with natural limits, perhaps. As the water splashes, though, you don't want someone's attempts to bother your own, and you don't want their combined sinking weight to create destructive whirlpools.

First thing Blažej says to me is about the smell. I responded by climbing over the couch and the tables and leaning on the television propped on a stool sideways I heaved open the yellow door.

Blažej reminded us that the dock would not be cleared until tomorrow evening. The trip to the Progressive Nation will take six days. Senlin will alternately be sedated and exercised. Blažej rented a storage until at the dock to house the crate in which Senlin was to travel.

'It would be too conspicuous to take him to it now, I agree,' Wallace said.

And then Blazej, 'the cold outside wind is keeping the hideous odor inside –Livy, shut it, the door!' But see, we *can't* shut it. We can't stay inside, we can't air out the room to the porch or the hallway, we can't move Senlin anywhere and maybe it's the four days without sleep but I cant stomach Blažej, his light footloose wrinkled bearded face and annoying smug accent and glib appropriation of English. Architect of what, of our master plan here, or flawless execution and prepared follow-through? Arbiter of global eco-politics? Bullshit! Bullshit! I wish Wallace would

start talking again and get angry and vengeful for Senlin's sake. This is cold feet? Well, literary and figuratively and every other way, perhaps, though we're not frostbitten yet.

I called Strobe for his pressure-washers. I miss Holly. He didn't mention her. She's always growing away from me, it seems, but for the first time I feel like I'm growing away from her. He's going to bring the pressure-washer, won't bring Holly. I can't let him in. I myself will wash the place. But once I do, it will be resignation to the total loss of the loft. Am I ready for this? I feel more attached here in a handful of weeks than I did at the shit-dump after two years, not surprisingly but only in my current depth. What's Keegan going to come home to? I fear not to her loft, not to me, and not to her father.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 22

If I'm to see Keegan ever again, it'll be through reinforced glass during my prison stay. Because we haven't much of an exit strategy from the dock – Blažej travels with Senlin on the ship, but Wallace and I are just supposed to drive home, clean up the shits and pisses and broken couch, appliances, broken bathroom door, then pressure-wash downstairs (I realized I can't clean it with Senlin in the room, he's skitzed enough). She returns, we tell her we had a small fire, or that we were ripped off by pirates. She might still castigate us, but we will still be here. Right.

This is more than wishful thinking, this is not seeing the forest for all the eidolon trees. At any second we're exposed, we're out – completely. Wallace maybe not as much as me, and Blažej – I think Blažej can take care of himself – but I'm the one who's not crazy, with the most to lose. What's worse, losing a daughter for the last few years of your life, or to lose your life after only a few years? The latter the latter oh my god I'm in love with Keegan! It might not be too late to drop it all, show up at her hotel doorstep, gush my love and Blažej's idiocy and Wallace's lunacy and my finally unstoppable core! This is what I want! This – you – only this, no more cloudy ideals, nothing but those higher than freedom: Love! The manacle of manacles! If we have to move to Ecuador and cut down endangered oaks, step on the last frogs in the world

that get you high or stare into the eyes of monkeys who have probably got a better hold on the truth of life than I do, right before we kill them both for protein – I'd do it all if I didn't have to go through with never seeing her after tonight. I no longer understand why we have to make such a point to someone who already has an idea of our idea, but has already made it her own – killing mice! How can such a martyr be the Goering of mice, as Wallace might want her to seem? Can we not call it grand sacrifice for human possibility, and can we not let the sacrifice compel us to live better? YOU MUST CHANGE YOUR LIFE says Rilke. Grand flourishes either invalidate the previous or diminish it – that is, flourishes which can't be repeated like rereading a poem or watching a movie again. Our flourish is supposed to disquiet a country who thinks life lives for manipulation when to counter it we ourselves become manipulators! The grand paradox of resistance!

Afternoon: Driving to East Dock. I will write once we get back. Either that, or I'll pick this up on the wall to my jail cell. It's been fun, diary.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 1, 2009

Hello written life.

I had told myself after Senlin I couldn't handle the burden of concretizing my experiences with words, that the unwritten sense-impressions and fluttering clauses weighed less for their inability to be reflected upon, a sure sign I needed them to be ephemeral despite previous attempts at gravity. But holed away under the egg-white sheets of Dunn General compel reflection. The influence of the same lights and currents of poor souls tired diseased and helpless approaching dusk and their own injunctive reflections before complete darkness. I began to make peace with my affixed overhead beams. It may be said that our conscious striving for the truth of a thing, whatever that means, is our unique contribution to the universe, but our destionationless often blind journey through debilitating forces without subjective events doesn't feel as much like a journey as it does treading water. And so while I feel like writing somehow makes me crazy,

not writing assuredly makes me a crank. But that's only how I'm feeling: to read the plot of my last few weeks, I'd still call myself a crank.

After Wallace drove Senlin and me to East Dock, Wallace said he didn't trust the three port-security cars about 1000 feet from our storage unit. We arrived to Blažej waiting. But before we got out, Wallace shocked me, not that I hadn't run it over in my head but that since he spoke it it might have merit: Blažej set us up. He spent most of our time with Senlin not with Senlin, but then after he had left on Sunday he kept calling in updates on the offered reward. The amount was supposed to indicate the publicity surrounding the kidnapping, as if making British news were too hazy an indicator, or for the cable news shows who normally feature spots on battered stolen rich white women featuring spots on Senlin instead. Blažej knocked on our hood to say we must hurry.

'What of port-security?' asked Wallace.

'I had a nice conversation with them before you arrived. Thought plush mattresses would do well in Progressive Nation.'

'Our cover's mattresses?! I can back the van inside the unit and we can unload Senlin there, but not more than two or three mattresses could fit in my van! Your story is too incredible, you could have come up with something *before* you started talking to the men who're taking us to prison, it's all over, what have you done!'

Blažej smiled with half his face to acknowledge he heard what Wallace had said, the other half remained slack and snide in reply to it. 'Why would they check us? I have all the paperwork for every stage of the trip. They only check if they have reason, and we give them no reason. How is our cargo?'

'Sick,' I replied. 'He's moving less every hour. You can see how sallow his eyes look.'

The unit door began the loud cranking ascent and Blažej walked in behind us. I couldn't take my eyes from Senlin or his limp trunk. I could pick it up in my hand, or lay it around my neck, and his eyes would only move toward mine from a lower angle, as if a film director wanted

to show Senlin were the lesser person. I kept thinking *this is for you this is for you* but Little Baby Senlin was not doing well. I had been feeding him, and the van was carpeted with about three inches of hay, but it must not have been food complaints – he wanted something but couldn't ask for it; if it was up to us to deduce his missing need, we had reached an impasse: by delaying all of his current needs for a quality fulfillment of the bigger requirements later, like space, sociality, "genuine" existence, we forced him to suffer through the present to the point of exhaustion, and we could offer nothing but sedatives besides carrots and hay for comfort.

The box Blažej had constructed stood narrowly tall, enough for Senlin to raise his head, about five-and-a-half feet high, but without much room for him to turn or move, about three-and-a-half feet wide. He had put three metal bars across the sides and connected them to three metal joints at each corner. Apparently, this is the type of box used to ship mattresses.

Blažej got Wallace out of the van and into his chair. Hay stuck to all sides of it.

'I do not like such loose security presence. Livy, did you notice we noticed *no* official cars until we the port's entrance? Nobody on patrol? There aren't even other people out!'

'It's the day after Christmas, what else would you expect?' I said.

'Listen to Livy,' said Blažej. 'The last Christmas ships delivered weeks ago, and only commercial travel sees business today. The stevedores are home eating turkey and discussing Senlin over their sweet potato soufflé and tipsy on eggnog. Please, let's load him and end this paranoia. The ship arrives in four hours. We need to sedate him and secure his weight for when he's loaded onto the ship. We can't allow any shifting that doesn't feel like mattresses. Mattresses don't shift, they're quite firm and secure.'

I fed Senlin six cabbages while Blažej secured a bag for waste into the back of the body harness. Blažej had told me a week earlier when we were still planning that the bag would most likely reach capacity before the ship docked. He would construct the box's back to slide out for him to change it. The trip should take just over five days. He said he shouldn't have to change it

more than twice. Blažej didn't offer one for our loft, a conclusion which began paranoia for I myself when I thought of it. He had had these.

The light was dim in the little unit, and Senlin's skin, porous for shadows, looked more wrinkled than Dorothy's had, more vulnerable to inexorable weathering than what Wallace hid under his long mustache, like carved divots to mark time into a trunk gently turning to scares after years of wind and rain. He himself sat solemn, breathing shallowly and quickly, a hand on his right wheel to move slightly forward, slightly back. I think Blažej was the only one who wasn't reflecting, for it seemed everything else in the room, even the tremulous lights above, waited self-consciously for him to finish.

'And my friends,' Blažej began, stroking the little gristled hairs at the very top of Senlin's head, 'if they are indeed wise to us, there's nothing we can do now but try to continue. We have reached a moment where our options are clearest: assuage our fears, or let fear succor us into failure. And I promise you, what keeps us from finishing now is only our own hesitancy! That is nothing!'

'Our hesitancy might be everything – . . .' Wallace said this having driven around behind Blažej. *Our hesitancy might be everything* he said, after he had already unpacked his packed needle, *our hesitancy* has compelled millions to think of Little Baby Senlin *for* Little Baby Senlin, crazy desperate doomed activist ploys manipulate global media for cracked causes but *everything* comes from *hesitancy*, reaction against as caprice, or reaction for as prudence, but dear prudence does not play with our kind. Wallace said *our hesitancy might be everything* and threw himself lurching half rising from his chair like off an unstable star and I see his palm fall into Blažej's black sweater and it lays flat on his back where the needle must have entered the wound past the needle itself, *our hesitancy* might be all we have not, but Wallace saw fit to plan for the future on hesitant, uncertain terms.

'Help me with Senlin!' commanded Wallace, but I stood stuck dyspeptic paralyzed, not from the black mass of man and hair on the floor, limp and pallid as the crumpled paper of a bad

draft, but from the reified *bete noir*, hesitating activism I thought we marched under cold skies for colder hearts against. This was Wallace's march for the end.

'Get awake Livy, help me untie Senlin! We can get him on the van before we lose time. You know they're coming mercilessly. Go, grab Blažej's bag. Untie Senlin! Livy! Should I crawl under the animal myself or will you help me?'

I put on the backpack, then did backwards what I saw Blažej do. Wallace opened the van's back doors and I slid the ramp up to it. Poor Baby Senlin took revolving enclosed-captivity and exposed-captivity swaying, with equanimity in the absence of passionate alternatives. He needed veterinary help. Blood work, vitamins, fluids. He needed a lot of things, including our attempts for them. But you can't worry over the brand of sneakers when blisters prevent the wearing of socks. I leaned into him to move him up the ramp, and at the top I grabbed a skin fold on his cheek, firmly but not hard, to ease him along his last few steps. He drifted with my hand. He had vital weakness. I didn't lead, I supported him forward. What had we done to his spirit? Were we still saving it? Could we still manage pretensions of revolution?

For the way it ended, dear diary, I think we could.

Remember what I wrote over a week back, that grand valedictory flourishes negate the previous unless they can be repeated and retained with equal pleasure to the body? That even with, say, the twist in mind, if one can still bear it again then it works successfully?

Wallace didn't wait for me to lift him into his chair. He had the door open and as I loaded Senlin he pulled himself into his seat. When I got around to him he was leaning and heaving on the specialized steering-wheel, painfully exhausted. I put a hand on his shoulder, and when he turned his face to me he sent such a culminating shock down each vertebrae and tendon when I reflect on it a week later I feel it stronger now than then. I can barely describe it. Alienating familiarity? That makes no sense, yet it feels right. Or perhaps it was the sense of recognition, in us both, that we had tried and failed. So maybe that's it: recognition that causes the disquiet of alienation from once-held purposes. Right then I could have set down everything and waited for

the dire lights and paddy wagon. But Wallace had a destiny to fulfill and I felt with certainty, especially with Blažej's lump back in the unit, I thought that giving up would be the anti-grand, negating flourish abrogating not just everything we've done for Senlin, but for all the themes of Wallace's life's grand narrative. I was working with big things of importance. I was working with an end-game of a destiny. To attempt and fail, and not for reasons from within, would render the worthy symbolic hopeful line with which any Rilke poem, or any well-lived life, would be honored to end.

Wallace took a right out of the unit to avoid the uniforms we noticed coming in. They had split up and had met up with two more of themselves. The road along the dock, going the direction we were, stretched about half a mile until the gated exit. The first two port-troopers we passed kept still, but the third pulled out behind us. I wasn't sure if it was for us or for itchy electrical impulses and boredom, but he kept back about fifty feet (though in the snow it seemed a lot farther), matching us for speed, pretending nonchalance, frightening me completely.

'Where are we taking him?' I asked once we got to the gate. We waited for the guard to notice us to pass us through. Senlin had fallen to his haunches.

'All we have is home. That's the direction we'll take. We'll see how far we can get.'

There's an access road you have to take outside the port to get to the highway; it's a small two-lane old thing with what might be called ditches on either side – it looked equal height to the road but I could tell from way the elevation dipped severely on our right the embankments must be many feet high with snow – that was weathering the snowstorm as well as the shallow waters outside the docks, meaning the whole thing was ice glazed. It's one thing for the water to ice and prevent the barges and ships from coming in, but, since it's the holiday, it's quite another if the ground roads to the dock were impassible. **We slid and swayed as soon as our wheels hit the road**. The acrobatic, whirling snowing obscured everything. Much of the fear I had for the prospects of capture slithered to those of death.

Imagining scenes of fiery cold meant I wasn't shocked, in any kind of existential way, when we drove over the spike-strip.

We hit it going about 50. The first lurch threw everything inside the van violently forward, Senlin included: it stood him up. The second spun out the back. I was yelling and Wallace sat with erect arms bracing himself; sliding down the road at 45 degrees I assumed all the normal end-time thoughts: bromides of lost opportunities and phone calls missed and lunches never attended and women never explored. I thought of Keegan, a few years in the future, still poking away at mice with Botulism toxin, thinking of me without reason to, seeing in the red eyes in her hands the same frustration in mine at losing the struggle at the worst possible moment.

Of course we didn't know at first that we had hit a spike-strip. It was the flock of flashing lights flying to us from front and back that evinced the spike-strip's existence. They couldn't come from the sides for the heaping mounds of snow barriering everything but snow-plowed pavement.

Shock and the debilitating weight of acknowledgement. Someone could have checked my pulse from any body part for how blood-swollen I felt. Wallace had his head down, deeply inhaling cold air smelling of hay and ammonia. The police were still in their cars. As time in the van slowly realigned with that outside, I surveyed as best I could what we had to work with. I wondered which car would be the one they took me out in. A Dunn City Zoo truck had arrived, and in the distance to my right, which had been angled behind us, I saw a tube being extended from the roof of a white van similar to our own. In shape, size, but also that in both an ecumenical message was evolving for worldwide dissemination. It was our idea that would travel, but in the currents of the cable news cog.

'Livy do you still have the backpack I asked you to remove from Blažej?'

I did, and he asked for it. The doors started opening in the cars and adrenaline-filled we're-in-to-something-big cops pointed everything from 9mms to .38s to a double-barreled shotgun at our van. They were assuming we'd fight back.

‘I’m not fit to sit here and watch them take Senlin away without one more act. We need the final image. The cameras are here, which meant our capture was expected by more than us and the cops. So they are waiting for it, live, our final plea, or reaction, or destruction. To them whichever one has no more value but for drama. Then let’s give them drama *and* an ethical lesson.’

I couldn’t speak. I fought off ten different iterations of a trite statement expressing my a range of envy and admiration. My response was to hand over the back pack. He fingered through the large pocket and removed a cell phone. The police maintained their distance. I listened as Wallace called them. He asked to be transferred to the officer on duty, as if we had just entered the negotiation part of movie, where hostages are traded and snipers reduce all perpetrator movement to furtive glances from behind pillar.

While he was on hold, he a asked me if I planned to come with him and Senlin.

‘I'm already with you,’ I densely replied, for I didn’t want to acknowledge I knew what he meant.

‘You’re still afraid, then. Of going to jail a failure. Of the sacrifice for moral strength and for change.’

‘After everything that’s happened, you can still call this working toward change? Nothing has gone as expected or healthily for anybody involved. That in itself is sacrifice, but our goal is unreachable. How does that color our sacrifice, then? Has it all been wasted? I understand the concept of slow-moving ideological change, but are we really sure that we’re not playing our game but completely inside their rules, which makes then the game theirs? We decry the theft of freedom for entertainment, but is that not somehow what we’ve gotten ourselves into? When people are considered crazy, nobody looks for moral worth in their actions. They see it all as biological misfires. Nothing counts but the chemistry.’

‘A strong character is inflexible to underwhelming evidence contrary to itself. As such, its strength occurs only through its mistaken moment.’

‘How can you say that with fifteen cars of men waiting to imprison you?’

‘Maybe I am crazy for expecting understanding. But I cannot believe the world is entirely deaf to us. We’re not done yet – Senlin’s not done yet.’ The police had taken the line. ‘Our demands are for a peaceful resolution. I have prepared for that: there is a large bomb under the feet of Little Baby Senlin and one strapped to my back. For Senlin to leave this van alive is for you to clear for me an exit path. Move all westbound blocking vehicles.’

He full-stopped the conversation by throwing the phone out the window.

‘They won’t melt the pretty snow.’

Again my response was silence. I watched him place the bag around his arms, heard his door click and open, and watched, nonplussed, as he pulled himself out of his seat and dangled his legs over the icy concrete. Furious wind blew wisps of hay around the cabin. Senlin moaned. I moaned, and passed out, I imagine, from exhaustion, despair, hunger.

Everything I know next I compiled from news accounts and investigators during my stay at the hospital. It seems clear to me now that this was the moment we had prepared for, not for sending Senlin to Progressive Nation as an expatriate of commercial zoos, but to send him with Wallace into the cold blinding evening with the world’s hungry eyes devouring.

Wallace let go of the doorframe and hit the street. But he didn’t crumble under himself. He leaned fully on the van, but still, his legs did not falter. He began yelling commands to the crowd of uniforms, that he had a remote in his hand (our television remote **he had kept in his pocket**) for the van-bomb and his book-bag bomb would explode if substantially jarred. His plan was ingenious, for he had those who came from the zoo, including Mere and Rocky, who had been alerted at the same time as cable news of our situation, screaming to the officers to do whatever Wallace asked, that Senlin’s welfare could not be further endangered.

Wallace vibrated against the van, scaring everybody who believed a bomb attached to his bag. From visceral coldness and weakness he shook, I think, and from the singing swans in his head. He made it around to the back doors, the part of the van in closest to the middle of the road,

where the cops dug in on the east and those retreating in the west gaped at him undisturbed. All the “leaving” cops traveled about a mile west down the access road to a road parallel to ours, to pile up eastside behind those unmoving and allowed by Wallace.

He grabbed the back handles with both hands. He lifted himself up higher to where he nearly fully stood. Since no one could get close, the police made a semi-circular formation across the road, each with guns pointing at the old man. Perhaps once a decision has been made to die, all preceding acts of bravery are blighted in the eyes of the living since they appear reckless and capricious to them – there is nothing, as they see it, left to sacrifice. I contend that the opposite is closer to truth. That *because* all actions are now illuminated by immanent mortality, the choice of one or the other is the choice of truth when nothing is feared – such as the idea that the only moral man is the one who renounces all forms of religion, ideas of heaven, hell, reincarnation, and who lives thusly with moral-law as self-law – by far a starker, rewardless prospect. Inasmuch as we have eternity, actions lit by death and unequivocal time are the actions of heroes, great men, those in the future called gods.

Poor pliable Senlin. Wallace opened one door, then the next. A collective gasp. The clinks of polished metal chambering. The scream of Wallace for distance. Senlin backed against the front seats as Wallace sat down, facing out, legs dangling, trying to work out the ramp from where I had leaned it against an interior wall. When someone yelled to him, he put a hand on a strap and lightly shook it. His frozen beard, the grease in his hair, having already clumped many strands together, splayed out stuck in the various directions the wind pushed and his stressed fingers pulled.

He set the ramp’s teeth on the bumper. He called for Senlin. Little Baby Senlin’s movie training had come in handy since we took him into our care, and now, even as paralyzing singular Dunn City winter kept back all sensitive things, and Wallace’s manic disheveled visage withheld all evocations of sanity, the small shaking elephant cautiously approached Wallace and allowed

him to prop himself up on Senlin's neck, descending the ramp together. Now they stood together on the road. Wallace's legs didn't falter, leaning on Senlin.

'Now!' Wallace barked, choked, struggled to say, 'you do not have us cornered because of my bomb, a switch to death for Little Baby Senlin nobody in the world wants.' Someone from inside the flashing lights Wallace to let go of Senlin to not get hurt. Wallace and the voice traded grand-statements for more demands. Senlin started slowly, one pad at a time, to move away from the rapt attention. Wallace was leading themselves away. Someone stepped forward, with gun angled away and right arm outstretched.

Wallace couldn't summon the air to yell. He pulled himself over Senlin's back, where at the top, lying there like a sack of grains thrown over a donkey, shook his bag, trying to keep the risen officer down. It gave him enough time to use the same arm to situate his face toward Senlin's head, and to throw the other leg over. Thus he sat straddling the elephant. He whispered what must have been a *mush!* Command, but that wasn't one of the ones we had been using or that I knew of Rocky used. Selin turned around to face the empty side of the road, in the near distance dropping down and out of sight for everyone around the van.

'Do not go near him! We can*not* harm the elephant! Whatever you do, don't let him explode his bomb near the elephant!' Mere had broken through many of the ranks, leaving the transport truck, and would have run toward Wallace had not The Voice held him back. According to the papers, this accounted for the 'all sides' in their review of the incident as 'emotionally charged for all sides.'

Next they called the 'dramatic escape.' Some witnesses report that Wallace kicked his legs like a cowboy to get Senlin moving, others say he flapped Senlin's ears until he sprinted, and still others maintain Senlin took to running from his own accord. I can't decide which version I prefer more, the rebel cowboy, the flying elephant, or Stockholm-syndrome Senlin. I like to imagine all three happening at once, as if for a flickering instant everything, the fantastic ideal metaphysical collective-cross-species unconscious, combined like natural and artificial flavors in

your favorite ice-cream in those confabulated dear memories of childhood afternoons where you didn't realize at the time that you'd never be happier, more fulfilled – or tell yourself as much in your own ode for melancholy. Since we refuse Lethe and Proserpine, we maintain memory for remedy; or, as Wallace was apt to say, **what stronger characters call imagination**.

I can't trust the video account of the incident. Cameras on the ground couldn't see through the snow. But you can certainly see when Senlin and Wallace started their sprint to 'freedom.' You can make out the hesitancy of all the officers and cars, not wanting to let a highly publicized kidnapping victim and culprit flee with cameras on them, nor did they want the cameras to capture the bits of elephant and human blown about by the supposed bomb. So they let Wallace run. Everybody knew he wasn't going to get far, not in the weather nor with all exit roads guarded by heavily armed authorities. They thought Senlin couldn't go forever, and that once he stopped, someone could take out Wallace with a well-placed shot, or hopefully, in fact what many expected, Wallace might just fall off dead anyhow.

Once Wallace left their sight the bomb squad inspected the van. They quickly found the van bombless, empty but for some vegetables and hay, Senlin's waste, and my unconscious, stress-drunk body. Twenty minutes previous, across town, Keegan arrived at the loft turned giant toilet qua staging area. She knew immediately that the play-by-play on the radio she had listened to while entering Dunn City, the crazy kidnappers and their van and poor Little Baby Senlin all had at least something, though she feared *everything*, to do with her father. She sped to the access road and after identifying herself as kin to the kidnapper was let through as close as the satellite-trucks. They smelled her attachment like a bumblebee to fear and asked for an interview. She could put all the pieces together, the loss of Heavenly and protective arms, the great fading mind and opportunity to act. She played him up as quirky and lovely, obtuse but sincere, deluded with passionate intensity. In the days following, she would tour the round of national talk shows, in each making her father sound more like the great dad who never seemed to be, a lovable, misunderstood, disappointed man.

About the time paramedics were strapping me onto a gurney, I regained some consciousness and heard, or more felt my throttling my brain, a helicopter passing closely above. If no one on the ground could follow Wallace and Senlin, they could do it, and more dramatically, from the air. I've seen the feed from this moment probably hundreds of times during my hospital week. It's the teaser on news commercial, commentary show, every esurient timeslot wanting to capitalize on the dramatic power of Little Baby Senlin. It shows the access road, lit by helicopter spotlight and dim street light, as the camera bolted over the visible plane. Stalking ahead, it catches sight of little sprinting Senlin, warbling, shuffling following the center-line dashes. But most dramatically viable: snowflakes passed over and through Senlin's bare back. In the spotlight, he ran down the road alone, riderless. And no sign or evidence, no body, tracks, smudges, bag or broken legs belonging to Wallace Sammler appeared, at all, anywhere along the road. As if he just dematerialized.

Now a week later, his remains remain imaginary grist.

My hand is gnarled, neck's stiff inflamed, and my patience, once buttressed by nuclear green Jell-O and vegetable soup, has fled from me. I go to sleep solemn, curious . . . and thankful.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 2

Holly came by today, her second visit. Treated me oddly like everybody I don't know acts toward me, in that they Act, meaning that instead of talking about themselves they talk about me and what they've heard about me. When they do speak of themselves it's somehow related back to me. This is terribly sad. Holly used to be so entertainingly sexily self-absorbed.

Perhaps the personal attention from hospital staff, writers, reporters, zoo staff, detectives, is from my refusal to give public interviews. Declined them all. Perhaps I will in the future, but for serious personal reasons I doubt I ever will. Serious personal reason #1: I will appear to the world however the interviewer wants me to appear. If I attempt a crafted holistic strong-back character type, I can be accused of fabricating myself for publicity. I never wanted to be the five-

minute Caesar, nor do I want to be a personal-fame gadfly. What I wanted was strength of the grand-ideals type, secularized and thoroughly modern. But grand-ideals can only be modern in the sense that antiquity made the Renaissance modern, or hipster garb from eighty seasons ago still looks modern. There are so many ambiguous answers to terrible questions that many ethical conundrums can never be solved. In the land of grey, however, there's still surprisingly much black and white (if we're only to see it that way). And to see it so, we can't mask our options by grounding choices in the atmosphere. Parallax is hard enough on ground-level. It might be the ultimate act of a modern sensibility to refuse technology's easy spoils and power for a feel-better-about-yourself payoff of abstention. It's selfish, so might still be amenable. Blažej had his way of attempting to get people to see this perspective by undermining their detrimental-to-themselves objects of desire (ivory, elephant captivity, animal-celebritizing), while Wallace turned inward after Heavenly died, compacting his relationship to failure with his relationship to his daughter. Thus it was the turning itself that was wrong. Or was the turn unsuccessful? It might be wiser to ask myself: was he a father to her, in the pop-culture sense of the strong shoulder to cry on, warding off lascivious characters and attending plays? Not when she needed it most. Was he a friend to her when she needed one? A middling friend if not for proximity. Then what positive can I say about Wallace and his relationship with Keegan? That it's ostensibly finished?

I can't keep thinking about this.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 4

Wallace is still missing. They let me out of the hospital this morning. Not a bad deal for 'exhaustion' and PTSD, even *if* the nurses were frumpy and talked too much, and even *if* I had to exaggerate my mental upheaval. Holly said I could have my old room back. She'd move her things to Strobe's room until I could find somewhere else to stay. Keegan won't return my phone calls. She's still appears on television. I wouldn't be surprised if she could keep the attention up by being the 'animal expert,' if they ever need any, for all the shows booking her. I wish her well,

even *if* she doesn't want to speak to me. Her silence is as if I had a legitimate hand in the Senlin Conspiracy, as one paper called it. Or, completely oppositely, that she knew *I* was the one who told police when we'd arrive dockside. I do wish she'd answer her phone so I could tell her that it was *Wallace's* idea the night before we got Senlin, not *my* treachery, to keep Senlin as long as we could and claim the reward. Wallace said if I could make it seem I had been manipulated, bamboozled, cajoled hoodwinked enthralled, which, I must admit, probably wasn't *completely* fictitious, they could still pay me off. A languishing week in the hospital later, contemplation time, and some of that injunction stuff I wrote about earlier, his decision makes a lot more sense to me then it did in the moment. I thought he had given up the action, that his alteration to Blažej's grand scheme was the decision of a weakened man. The stress ended up drugging me catatonic, after all. But even as my eyes were curling backwards, and even after the bomb squad called for me by name as the lights finally went out, I felt massive, the arm of an idea, a little cog of unfathomable necessity among thousands of other little necessary spinners spinning underground for some hope of movement above.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 30

I'm sorry for estranging you, diary. What's new? I'm looking for a new place to live. A house, similar to the one I'm in now, maybe closer to the water, maybe closer to the zoo. Finally talked to Keegan. She said she harbored no ill-feelings, despite my treachery. And in the same breath, she thanked me. She also told me she'd accepted an offer on one of those commentary shows that got famous for its Senlin coverage. She's now a part-time commentator. She was quitting the botulism.

I guess this means there's nothing more to figure out trying to get something positive from Wallace to Keegan. But the old bastard's still missing. What's going to happen to all of us once he's finally found? He can't hide – or be hidden – forever, so I'm sticking with common-sense for this one.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 28

Wallace has come back from the dead, back from death and back into my head. Wallace's was found next the road, and only now had the snow melted to the extent to expose his head. I read in the paper that his face was frozen smiling. Not in a grimace, not that imminent death pulled his cheeks taught, but that he knew he had finally made his grand valedictory flourish.

MONDAY, MARCH 2

Press release in this morning's paper: Zoo Dunn buys one-and-a-half square miles for its new elephant sanctuary, three miles outside city. Gift provided by anonymous $5 million donation.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 13

I'm not sure life's supposed to be made into a narrative, not while you're living it. It's too easy to get carried away, and I already look too far into things to make them as permanent as fiction. I have moved into one of the three little houses just built in the Dunn City Sanctuary. I'm working with Rocky to become a keeper and trainer myself. I'm glad the reward money was used for this. Maybe I should have kept some for myself, but giving it all for a sanctuary for Little Baby Senlin and the rest of the elephants feels like the kind of moral tattoo Wallace told me about, that 'strong men aren't afraid of a little white ink.' I'm still a conductor, more or less, ferrying people between Zoo Dunn and the new facility. Everything will work itself out once I can work with the elephants themselves, I think. *Then*, I can accomplish something.

Wallace was right: about Senlin, about the press, about how unsuccessful we would have been if not for his change of plans. He said things would turn out just like this as long as I made him seem enthralling, twisted and obsessed. It was a shame Blažej had to have a heart attack from the sedatives, and a shame that when I finally started giving interviews I had to make Wallace sound so old and feeble, so enchantingly cracked. Last month Keegan gave me one of his chairs on my birthday. Yesterday I had it painted it gold. Today it sits in the middle of our largest field. I

wish Senlin could understand what I meant by putting it there. That I wanted Wallace's last words to resonate over the hundred acres provided by his life to Little Baby Senlin, and all future elephants of Dunn. *Long live freedom!*