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Let The Dead In

Robert Burdette Sweet

I

TRIED to explain to the Inspector that he had no right to accuse me. After all, I insisted, his main evidence was based only on a story I had imagined and been impulsive enough to write down.

His only response came as a slanted smile, his teeth snagged by an unkempt mustache.

So I went on, “All my life I’ve been unusually honest, even trustworthy. Never missed an appointment, stood up a friend, or lied except to protect someone. Your suspicion, Inspector, says more about you than it does me.” I had decided to attack with some force.

I wanted him to realize that it is not unusual for a novice such as myself to conceive a story fabricating how, behind the walls of the narrator’s living room, there moldered a skeleton or two. The idea is accessible to the untrained mind, a trite joke at best. That the Inspector and his meddling cohorts found them—it’s not clear yet whether there were two or three, because one body apparently had been beheaded and another so trussed up in a burlap bag that I have to wait for the coroner’s report—that he discovered the bodies precisely where I had fancied them to be, the animal bones as well, flatters my sense of clairvoyance. “But the unfortunate exposure does not;” I assured him, “make me feel personally responsible, guilty or what have you!”

“Coincidence?” The Inspector rearranged his considerable weight as he lounged against my open door. “I suppose that’s what you’d like to call it.”

I struggled to clarify the workings of my creative self to this dunce. By his own admission, he never read anything more than an occasional newspaper. “Could you, Inspector, presume to understand how a symphony, for example, might be composed?” When he only coughed behind his tobacco-stained fingers, I pressed the issue: “If all the music you hear is heavy metal on Sundays, while your head is stuck in the motor of your car?” He lives a mere quarter block away from me up the street, so I have more than once been witness to his weekend amusements. I’ve
had to cover my ears with my hands when I hurry past his driveway.

But, then, these days it's difficult to explain to anyone the workings of the mind that can accept dictation. Even allow itself to be commanded. "My intuition predisposed me to assume the skeletons might be there. My story came to me spontaneously, like a dream." I eagerly leaned toward him. "A mathematized dream."

"So why don't you tell me how you put them there and whose they are, if you know so much, Mr. Baggley?"

The ends of the Inspector's mustache must be congealed in toothpaste. I hoped the pale stains were toothpaste.

"In answer to your accusation, Inspector, you'll have to realize the bones were put there by the part of me that I understand least."

"I'll drink to that," he chortled.

His ridicule made me remind myself that even after the exhumation of the bones—my house is still a mess, plaster bits in my woven rugs, part of the wall ripped away, and dirt, dirt everywhere, sifting over my chair and desk—the Inspector has had no reason to arrest me. I am free, as it were. However, since the newspaper article, I am not welcome at work. A temporary leave, they've called it. Until my name is cleared. "But how can you clear what is unsullied?" I wanted to know.

I feel always that no one will hear me out. And, too, it is difficult for me to recall how I first committed to paper the fiction that has managed to throttle my existence. I believe the story began when I first moved into this house and smelled the awful odor. But the previous owners had dogs, so, other than to toss out all the carpeting, I reacted to the problem with no more than a slight irritation. I spread Lysol everywhere, even on the walls, and then went about arranging the rooms to my own liking, pretending that no one had ever lived there before. An idea that grew in importance to me, because my own life had come to an emotional hiatus, and the move was to help me start again. Yet the smell continued, though more subtly, much as did the disturbing memories of the existence I had left.

You simply can't bury a thing, I've finally concluded. The past sticks to you, in my case, like a hair shirt. I had written the story to free myself. A kind of breathing out so you can hold yourself in.

"Skeletons Found in Local Man's Closet," the newspaper blared. The article that followed was as untrue as the headline. The suffering that word "closet" has caused me is inestimable.

The skeletons were found beyond the wall, I reminded the Inspector. "There's not a closet near the area. Look!" I said, rapping on what remained of the knotty pine partition with which the previous owners had sealed off an archway, presumably to give the room more wall space. Sawdust and the still foul odor of an open grave caused us both to choke.
“It’s unfair to insist I remain in this house,” I gasped.
“Either stay here or in jail.” The Inspector held his nose. “But for God’s sake spray the place with more deodorant.” His big hand spread to mask half his face. He looked pale, his eyes wide. “Until we can clear you of this mess.”

“Or incriminate me.” I tried to stare him down.
“This is your house, your skeletons,” he said. “By the way, the bodies were female. I’d forgotten to tell you we confirmed that. And some cat bones...”

I slumped into the easy chair where I’d originally written the piece that caused the problem and turned the lamp down to obscure the startled expression I knew must be on my face. “A cat?” I muttered.

“Rather a large one, judging from the skull.”

“And the women?”

“One was old. Extreme curvature of the spine. Arthritis. And the one who had been decapitated... But I’ll spare you that.” I rose to my feet. Smiling, I held out my hand. “I assume our conversation is over for this evening?”

He shrugged his shoulders and then touched his fingers to my palm. “We have time,” he said. “There will be other evenings. Why are you grinning?” he inquired abruptly.

“Because my story, if you will recall, was primarily about a younger woman...”

“Oh, yes,” he said.

“So the evidence shifts to...”

“The previous owners of the house. Of course,” the Inspector bowed slightly, “we’re checking that.” He pulled open the door. “But there was a cat in your story? True?”

I could not refrain from laughing outright. “A little one,” I said. “A little cat. But then there’s a cat in many a story,” I assured him. “It’s a sign of inventive persons to link themselves to life through a pet of some sort. And you understand how that can get reflected in their work.”

“More stories about dogs,” the Inspector mumbled as he started out the door. He paused in the yellowish bug light I’d lit for him on the porch. He cleared his throat. “Because there’s more dogs in more people’s lives. Am I following your logic?”

There were veins on his cheeks that I wished the orange light did not cause to stand out. “You understand that much at least,” I said easing the door shut. I listened on my side of the door for his feet as they scraped down the steps.

The Inspector’s girth caused him to scuttle sideways like a crab, the crepe soles of his shoes rubbing, grating on the cement and my nerves.

The story that altered my existence could not, as I recall, be particularly good. I didn’t bother to keep a copy of it. It was published by
acquaintances of mine from a small town near me but up in the mountains where a cluster of rather mediocre poets live blotto on hallucinogens. They only managed to organize themselves once, and that due to a sudden switch from hashish to something more energizing, which inspired them to Xerox their efforts and mine and staple them together in a yellow cover sporting shakily sketched pine trees and the title, La Honda Poets, Praise and Lore.

They had, as I recall, pages to fill and included my script without reading it. It was doubtful they could absorb more than several sentences at a sitting. For instance, the verse that followed my story was a mere three amphibrachic lines entitled "Yeast!" And referred either to baking or a vaginal infection, I was never sure.

I'm grateful I have no need to write any more. Which is another proof of my ordinariness that I should offer the Inspector. And I would not be writing this were I not incarcerated in my house with nothing to do and unable to leave except under the Inspector's sharp eye. I need to explain how I've done nothing wrong. Indeed, I'd describe myself as a person of special and intense sympathies. When, for instance, my cat, my only companion, grew ill from cancer, I fed that dear animal with an eyedropper for months before I had him put away. No man could have done more and it was best he die at my hands, God's dalliance with mortality being often slow and sleazy.

Also, it has struck me that since a story got me into this mess, a truly composed document of my present feelings might get me out. Especially when I record what began to happen some twenty minutes after the Inspector left and I was isolated in the silence of my house and had to confront the effects of facing the gaping hole and breathing the lingering odors of the bodies that had lain there.

First I eased myself into my reading chair and began going through the want ad column in the newspaper. I am a salesman by trade, and there appeared to be no lack of possible jobs. I even wondered if I shouldn't study for a real estate license and try my hand at selling people wombs. Certainly, I'd never get my present job back with all the publicity I'd inadvertently engendered. And did anyone care much about a real estate agent's past? I was in the act of circling the blurb for a licensing school when I first heard the steps.

The steps sounded very soft, not human, yet the floor between the kitchen and the den seemed to give slightly and squeaked. Without thinking, I stared over the top of my paper and called, "Tom, is that you?" The steps stopped and I heard nothing. But, before my voice finished echoing, I realized I'd spoken impulsively to my dead cat. As though he weren't dead at all.

Since the explosive departure of my wife—"You care only about your own damned self," she'd finalized her opinion—Tom Cat became the son
I never had and possibly the lover I believed I was learning to live without. I slept with the cat, gardened with the cat, shared with him steak and chicken. I believed Tom to be the only being with a four-chambered heart that relished me. Actually, it was Tom's preference that we become nocturnal, and he ducked along through the bushes and up an occasional tree as we nightly stalked the quiet block.

It does not surprise me that I could still hear him, that—how best can I put this—his essence was still there. Or that I should talk to it.

I put down my newspaper and glared at the area of the floor where I'd just listened to him walk. Though I strained my ears, I detected nothing more and felt relief that I had not got caught up in some Bermuda Triangle of the mind.

That was when I heard it again, but from my bedroom this time, the featherly stomp, the slight give of the floorboards.

I got up, suddenly angered, went toward the dark bedroom, shouting, "Do I have to bury you again and again?" The thick blue covering on my bed wheezed gently the way it used to when Tom jumped on it, before he'd gotten too weak and before I'd hired the vet assassin to shoot his veins full of whatever they do, or hit him on the head because it might be cheaper. . . . I don't know what really happened because I didn't look, didn't want to look.

I flicked on the light hoping I'd see him, licking the long hairs on his back, pulling with his teeth at what he always seemed to find between his toes. And at first I did make out his form. I blinked, and then he was gone. Had I not blinked, would he not have gone?

I walked back through the living room, opened the front door, and stood on the porch for a breath of air. A street light near the house made the oleander bushes and bougainvillaea that wreathed the door shine richly. Despite disapproval from the neighbors, I had planted all that blooming vegetation when I first moved there to seal myself in, a kind of growing wall. Since the world out there seemed increasingly unsatisfactory to me, I'd decided to form my own habitat. Across the treeless and bushless dried lawns up and down the block, I noted one light burning. The Inspector's! I felt comforted that someone else was awake, but sat immediately down on the porch chair when light streamed from his front door and I saw him rushing down the steps. My chair was half hidden by a stucco wall, so as he approached I only heard his crepe soles sliding down the sidewalk. This was California, and no one walked more than a block if it could be avoided. Besides, the Inspector's corpulence precluded much physical activity. I heard him puffing and then push through my vine-clogged gate.

He didn't see me sitting there in the dark, and when he rapped loudly on my door and I spoke from behind him, he jumped and sucked air in through his teeth with a whistle.
"What are you doing back here?" I wanted to know, honestly puzzled.
He spun around with that quickness big people are often capable of. I'm thin as a stick, so I find this capacity for speed among the plump quite amazing. "I heard you screaming," he blurted. "Clear over to my house I heard you." He bent toward me through the dark, his face catching the street light round and white as a moon flower.
"Here, have a cigarette." I crouched forward to offer him one. "Surely, you heard someone else. I've been sitting here breathing the night air, calm as a clam since you left."
I decided not to tell him about hearing my cat's footsteps. Besides, it could be none of his business. It was a certainty, however, that I had not screamed. I am too much acquainted with ghosts for that. This was not, come to think of it, the only night I had come in contact with strange maneuverings of space and time.
"Uh huh," was all the Inspector said as he took the cigarette and lit it with a lighter of his own. His hands shook. "You're quite a responsibility for me," he finally added.
"Because we're neighbors?"
"The office thought I could easily keep an eye on you, and when I heard the screaming... As you might know," he cleared his throat, "I've only recently been made an Inspector. Mr. Baggle, you're my first big case."
The Inspector arranged his voluminous behind on the top stair, leaned his head back against the portico, and might have been watching me. His face was shadowed.
I chatted on, "I wonder who it could have been? I heard it too. Up the block, I think. A blood-curdling sound, wasn't it?"
He didn't reply, just shifted his weight on the steps. "I couldn't sleep," he finally admitted.
During the silence that passed between us my mind's eye focused on the house he lived in. I'd never been inside. In fact, we'd never spoken any more than in passing before by sheer accident he read my story, got the warrant, and, with his cohorts, bashed out my wall in what I first assumed must be the misguided notion that there could be a truth to fiction.
The Inspector's house struck me as ugly in a special way. It stood across the street and three houses down from mine, a small white rectangle jutting from a treeless apron of mowed grass. The stark monotony, though not surprising in this neighborhood, was intensified by the large mirror windows that blocked all sides. I could see my reflection day or night in those windows and once caught myself absently pausing to comb my hair before I realized there might be someone peering at me from behind the glass, and I hurried on.
"Do you have a wife?" I suddenly thought to ask through the silence. I
was unaware of anyone’s entering or leaving his house except the Inspector himself.

“Divorced,” he said.

“Oh. Almost like me.”

“We’re not in the least alike, Mr. Baggley.” His head jerked to the side, his lips pursed as if he might want to spit. Though I had initially been pleased by his unexpected company, I now wished he would leave. I’m that way about people: if I sense they don’t like me, I retaliate in kind.

“I’d like to grab a little shut eye,” I inched forward in my chair. “I appreciate your concern for me, but . . . .”

“I did hear you shouting, crying out . . . .” He crushed his cigarette with his short, fat shoes while smoothing his palms together.

“I didn’t scream,” I protested, “but that’s no thanks to you. You’re trying to make a monster out of me . . . .”

He stood. Dusted off his behind. “It’s just that I know that members of your family have died within the last year or so. That your wife ran off with someone else. I’m concerned for you;” he added lamely. “Maybe you had a right to scream,” I thought I heard him mutter.

“What did you say?”

“I wish you’d try to find out why you wrote that story.” Clearly he tried to be helpful. “It contains all the information we need in order to . . . Goodnight, Mr. Baggley.” Without a glance, the Inspector shuffled down my walkway, worked his ponderous way through my gate, and lurched across the street toward his mirrored rectangle.

I stood watching and waiting for his light to go out. It didn’t. Couldn’t the man sleep at all?

Sleep has never been easy for me either, and I often don’t bother trying. I felt that this was going to be one of those endless nights. The Inspector’s question as to why I had written the story kept going through my mind. The story’s premise, skeletons in the closet, was so simple. Only I had removed the closet and replaced it with a hollowed-out wall. The newspaper reporter’s resurrecting the closet rounded out, as it were, the exhausted humor of it all.

I wondered if I might be able to reconstruct the offending story, and to this purpose went to my desk and scratched quickly on a piece of note paper: I tried to explain to the Inspector that he had no right to accuse me. After all . . . . But my pen stopped, and though, in the hours that followed, I chewed a hole nearly through the plastic end, no further words came to me. From a busier street not far from my house, I heard an ambulance siren wail, and far overhead an airplane groaned through the summer fog, and crickets scraped their knees in my greenery. Why couldn’t I remember what I had written!

I stared at that beginning sentence again, curious as to where it must have led . . . . other than, of course, my perdition . . . . when I heard my cat
crying on the doorstep to be let in. The cry came very faint, very plaintive, but beyond doubt it was my Tom's plea. I didn't go toward the door, I didn't even move. But, as the whine intensified, became more yearning, I began to sweat. I wore a soft summer cotton shirt and felt the moisture run cold and glue the material to my ribs. "Why don't the dead stay dead!" I complained, not loud, even the sharp ears of the Inspector couldn't have heard me. My fingers curled tight, almost into a fist around my pen. Then the pen began to move across the page as if... How can I make a rational explanation of this even to myself?... some other and more vital principle instructed me.

The soil felt dry, I wrote, but it wasn't caked hard. Morton had dug out the small hydrangea bush, and now he and his wife were trying to shovel down through other plant roots to make the hole big enough. Morton paused a moment, trowel in hand, to stare at Nan. "I'm grateful you're here," he said, and weakly smiled at her while thinking: Don't ever leave me. Don't leave.

I leaned back in the rickety chair I'd bought from the Salvation Army and chuckled. I could recall something of what I had written, yet it was not the content that stimulated my humor but the inaccuracy of Fran's presence at the event I would recreate. Apparently, I only wished my wife had been there, whereas in truth she'd left me some months before. The description of her I went on to pen seemed particularly fantastical. Nan tossed her long, glistening brown hair and blinked at Morton with her almost black, sympathetic eyes. Beneath her low-slung peasant blouse her breasts were clearly outlined, the nipples pert under the flowered decorations. "Let me help you," she murmured, reaching for the trowel.

The real Nan (her actual name being Fran, as you, Inspector, must already realize, the slight change in spelling attesting only to my lack of imagination) had black, lusterless hair streaked with premature grey she refused to henna out and breasts like fried eggs. And she hadn't given me a sympathetic look since the third year of our marriage, after her doctor confirmed Fran's suspicions that my low sperm count prevented her becoming pregnant and not her inept ovaries, which my pride had insisted upon. I assume she is by now gravid as a femme guppy.

I hunched over my desk and wrote on, trying to recall as accurately as possible:

Since Morton insisted upon keeping the trowel, Nan reached into the hole to scoop out the crumbled soil with her hands as Morton scraped down along the sides, with each scrape attempting to enlarge the hole. The afternoon was very hot. Perspiration rolled off their foreheads. On the walkway near where they dug, wavering flashes of sunlight caught on the lacquered wicker of the picnic basket. "I think that does it," Morton said. "It's deep enough." But as he looked into the oblong hole, he did not really believe it was deep enough.

"We'll lay the basket on its side," Nan said.

And, yes, Morton realized they could do that, but he felt suddenly fearful about
what they were burying. He wanted to dig further. He started again with the trowel but abruptly stopped and said, “No more.”

Nan looked doubtful for a moment. “But we can’t plant anything over it. We’ll need to plant the hydrangea.”

Morton had already pulled the glittering basket over to the edge and dropped it in, adjusting the basket so it lay on its side. They both began throwing dirt over it. And Morton kept thinking that they ought to say something. But there seemed nothing to say because he, at least, couldn’t believe in anything. He wished he did, but you can’t call into being a belief to suit a circumstance. They plunked earth over the wicker until the wicker began to disappear. Before they’d finished, Nan inserted the hydrangea bush. She carefully snuggled it into the hole. In silence they mounded the earth over the wicker and around the hydrangea, and then Nan went back into the house, and Morton collapsed in the dappled sun on a lounge chair.

He felt he couldn’t move, as though the sky were a glass lid that he could not lift off of himself.

I had managed to record that much, Inspector, when the first of your telephone calls began. The phone must have been ringing for some time before I became aware of it. When you really write, you go into a trance, the world outside turns off, and you turn in. You breathe only through your left nostril, to be accurate, and only your right mind burns. The time it took me to answer was not because I had fallen asleep, as you accused me. I only masturbated memory with my pen.

The Inspector’s tone sounded gruff, as without an initial pleasantry he asked, “Do you know where your former wife is? Do you know who she ran off with?”

Sputtering with confusion, I responded inanely, “I’m writing the story again. So I can understand. If . . . if you’d cough up the original, I wouldn’t have to stumble through this absurd labor. It’s all really your fault. That I’m not sleeping is your fault.” My voice rose to a pitch of irritation. “Why in hell do you care if I know where my wife is?”

“If you can question her about me?” the Inspector droned, his voice sinking, “if you knew who she’s living with. It might be important.”

“So you can question her about me?” That was the only motive I could imagine for him. “You want her to help incriminate me? Well, you’ll have no trouble . . .”

He broke in on my growing tirade: “And your mother’s death certificate . . . do you have it?”

I held the phone away from my ear and stared in astonishment at the little holes. Though I held the phone far from my ear, I heard him breathing in that agonized, panicky way fat people do. At my front door I became aware again of the cat crying now in a low whimper. “Let the dead in,” Tom’s feline plaint seemed to insist. When his claws scratched at the door, I shook my head to clear it and bellowed back into the phone, “Of course I have the certificate. Somewhere. Perhaps in a drawer or in a
box. It’s easy to misplace the paraphernalia of death.”

“Oh, is it?” the Inspector wanted to know.

I glanced behind me at the broken wall. A board near the ceiling hung slant-wise across the aperture, supported only by what appeared to be one bent nail. I had as little courage to approach and carefully examine that crypt as I had to recall where my mother’s death certificate might be.

“Check with the coroner!” I shouted and hung up. “I have my own story to recall,” I muttered.

But when I returned to my desk and reread the sentence the telephone had taken me away from, I knew I didn’t want to go back under that sky that was like a glass lid I could not lift off of myself. Memory may be who we are, but there is much about ourselves we best not dig back into.

Were I not certain the original La Honda story was more an exoneration than an exhumation, and had the Inspector not insisted, I would not have dared to proceed with my recollection. After all, though the theme of death is a universal, my first example—being the demise of a pet—must seem trivial, especially to the Inspector. And, I will admit, an embarrassment to myself. No wonder the ladies of La Honda neglected to peruse the story. They would have glanced at the description of Nan’s nipples and, being themselves of uncertain sexual persuasion, unconsciously approved of the story’s inclusion without reading further.

I tried to insert myself back under that insufferable blue and bald sky:

That morning Morton had awakened knowing this would be the day. The sun shone full, strong. Fall was coming, and the warmth even early in the day felt delicious. Tom said his usual hello when Morton walked into the living room where the cat had been sleeping on the sofa since he’d been sick. His voice always sounded like a bird’s, never like a cat’s. He’d stretched, scratched, gotten down off the sofa and led Morton into the kitchen. The man began scraping cat food into the disposal that hadn’t been eaten the day before and the day before that. He ran water from the sink faucet over the coagulated half-and-half Tom would not drink. When Morton leaned over to pet the cat, his fingers felt through bony knobs. Tom’s eyes looked yellowish in a dirty face. The tongue lolled swollen, part way out of his mouth. “Hi, bush soul,” Morton whispered, holding Tom’s head and staring into his eyes. “Are you ready to die today?”

The animal smelled bad. He’d smelled bad for a long time, despite the sponge baths and the bluing to try to make him white again. But when the cat drooled on Morton’s arm the man sniffed the familiarity, rich, damp, welcome and somehow fecund. Like his own sweat. Nan came behind them and put her arms around both of them. “Let’s go into the garden and wait. You did give him the tranquilizer, didn’t you?” Nan took the cat from Morton’s arms and arranged the haired bones efficiently on a pillow.

Women know so much about death because they give birth to it, Morton thought.
I threw down my pen, knocked the chair over in my haste to stand. If I had in fact written that and called it a story, I should be glad that it would be my first and last attempt. Whatever a story might be, it was not life, and that happened to be my life I rerecorded. Life is too hard, too sentimental, too blunt and senseless to be encompassed by an abstract form. The only fictionalizing I'd done was to invent the calming presence of "Nan" when, in fact, Fran had already left me. "For a lawyer," I now remember she had admitted. I reminded myself to inform the Inspector of that.

I glanced at my watch. It read four in the morning. A slight wind blew, scratching a pine bough across the window. I listened for Tom's cry, but presumably he'd gone back into time for I didn't hear anything of him. When my mother died and I returned to her house where I'd been raised, I kept hearing moaning and the dry brush of her crawling down the carpeted stairs toward me. Though the hair on my arms rose, I sensed she wished me no harm. But then she never had wished me any harm. And yet she had caused me a great deal of it. How could that be? I gazed at the huge gap in my living room wall, at the space within where the skeletons had lain. From that hole seemed to rise only dust and silence; and I knew that despite the lateness of the hour, I could not stay any longer in my own house, just as I had not been able to stay with the spirit of my mother that had reigned in hers.

And so, Inspector, I flung open my door, slammed it hard, fled down my own walkway and nearly bumped into you, who I discovered hidden shamelessly behind an oleander, a crouched shadow within the cascade of white blossoms, spying me out. At least this time you made no pretense to excuse yourself. "Can't you leave me alone!" I demanded.

"I—I'm sorry," he stuttered, while keeping his head down and dusting off his knees. I had watered recently, and flecks of mud clung to the man's knees and lodged between his puffy fingers. His pants, of a thin, amber-colored material, seemed large even for him and flowed down his thighs like a viscous syrup. "It's difficult for me to kneel like that," he admitted. Only an undershirt covered his bulbous stomach and his concave chest, and the street light shone through the black hairs bearding his arm pits.

"Maybe next time you'll have the decency to rap on my door." I set my lips into what I presumed to be an appropriate sneer. The sweat from his forehead leaking down along his jaw made me dislike him more than any other characteristic. "If you'll excuse me," I said, "I'm about to take a walk."

"At this time of night?" His thick lips formed an astonished O as he held one arm out as though to restrain me.

"I can't do that?" I backed from him, freshly aware of my life's constrained condition. While trying to recreate the story, even if it had been solidly based on fact, I felt free, almost boundless. The Inspector's unwel-
come presence shocked me back into the very real walls that enclosed my lesser, but conscious being. “I—I’d almost forgotten. . . .” I struggled with my words. How quickly I could be thrust back into my restricted self!

Yet I must have begun to sense what moved him to pursue me, because I heard myself guess, before I realized its import, “You really want to know why Fran left me. Well, it wasn’t all her own doing. I helped.”

I noticed my comment alarmed him, but I didn’t grasp why. His pudgy arms pulled tight against his chest. After a pause he protested, “That is no concern of mine. No concern whatsoever. I don’t believe it’s your wife we found walled up in your living room. I can’t tell you how little interest I have in. . . .”

“How do you know her bones weren’t hidden with the lot of them. How do you know she wasn’t mixed with the cat bones. In my mind at least.” I tried to tame my anger.

He took a step toward me. A cloud of oleander blossoms furled beyond his head. “She’s not dead!”

“But I haven’t heard from her in a year!”

“Fran is not dead,” the Inspector insisted. “She’s about to have a child. Surely, rumor has told you that much.”

“Fran’s dead to me,” I shot back. “There’s nothing about death that restricts itself to physical decay. There is loss. . . .”

“Shut up, Henry,” he cautioned with a hiss.

Abruptly, I turned my back to him and started toward the front stairs of my house. I felt stunned because that was the first time, Inspector, you used my first name. This uncalled-for intimacy bothered me even more than your kneeling in the oleanders to spy me out.

Through the window I watched him waddle across the street to his house with its reflecting glass. His hams slouched, grinding hugely together, like Yeats’ rough beast. It’s not as if I majored in English for absolutely nothing. Though that turned out almost to be true. As my mother had commented, “Hen, if you’re going to end up in sales or computers anyway, why waste your energy and our money studying neurotic authors?”

Morton couldn’t imagine the why of anything: of what he had done or would do.

Before realizing it, I had slumped back down in the chair at my desk and penned the next line I felt certain I had written. It was going to ramble on and on about the cat. Why couldn’t I have just buried my animal connection and be done with it?

In the garden chair, Morton closed his eyes to the sky wondering why he must be cruel. He was about to cross a boundary, a firm one. But, then, never had he loved like this, been so driven. And love translates into loss sooner or later. All Morton knew was that this love was not tainted as his love for humans had always been.
Nan pulled a chair near him. They did not look at each other. It would take the tranquilizer at least half an hour to work. They waited. Morton almost slept until he heard something scuffling in the soil. "What? What?" Apparently, Tom had gone out the open front door and wandered back toward the garden to be near them.

Morton stared, alarmed, at the cat weakly curling himself to rest in the dirt under a rose bush.

Nan had seen the apparition and gasped. They both watched Tom readjust his position and slowly blink his sallow eyes. The sun must feel comforting to the bones which had almost broken through his skin. The cat sniffed the air. Should he have three smells of air, four? Somehow the enormity of time and death had become Morton's decision. He tensed forward.

"Now," Nan said. "We've got to take him now."

Am I the one who is going finally to be free? Morton thought. Morton said aloud, "I'll have to get him something to be buried in, a basket and a towel."

"So, you do have it all planned," she said briskly. Recently, Nan had begun to sprout a wisp of moustache, and Morton watched her tongue curl up over her lip and slide through the light hairs.

Plan? Outline? He'd never planned anything in his life.

I leaned back in my chair, relieved I'd recreated that much at least. Birds sang, whistling, twittering, fighting in the gutters. The sun already spread raw over the Inspector's house. The La Honda story proved to me I had merely killed what was already dying. Enlightened people believe in the happy death, as I believe it's called.

I got up, stretched, walked out onto my front porch to yawn through the already hot white sun in the direction of your house, Inspector. And, while doing so, the thought abruptly struck me hard like a blow to the head: Since all that lives is dying, had we the right to euthanize any of it? Had I broken a sacred covenant?

That was when, through the sparse bushes near the back of the Inspector's house, I noticed a door open and a woman in a blue dress hurry along a walkway toward the Inspector's garage. I heard a car start up. The flash of blue was so brief, so utterly unexpected, that at first I questioned if I'd really seen her. But the sound of the car shifting down the alley came toward me loud enough to authenticate the woman's presence.

That, Inspector, is when I first admired you. It is impossible for any male not to respect, at least, the sexual maneuverings of another. Little wonder the Inspector had been up all night! He must have phoned and visited me between bouts of philandering. Bravo, Art Mondragon!

Inspector, that was the first time I referred to you by name! You were a person to me now, a complex one, no longer merely my shadow, my interrogator.

I lay on my bed, naked in the heat, hands cradling my head. Did I sleep?
I know part of me remained awake as I felt the sun move through the hairs on my chest and thighs. Fran had always called me her "ape in essence" and finally came to be repelled by my mammalian coat. Before the one dream I awakened to remember, I drifted off thinking of how even more hirsute than I the Inspector was and how easily she could despise him.

The dream disturbed me, but only fragments could be retrieved. It had to do with a barren island where gyre falcons lived. I stood on a rocky beach holding a box of costume jewelry such as I used to give my mother. I rubbed a certain medallion and a magical movie flickered over the waves, an abstract documentary about barbed wire—staggered and angled fences all made of twisting barbed wire.

Are dreams computer-exhaust or are they fraught with heady meanings? If there should be no reality, since possibly we invent both our waking and dreaming lives, then the skeletons behind my wall must be real or unreal as anything else. After I woke and dutifully jotted down what I could recall of my dream—because whatever machinations of law that were about to be foisted upon me will insist (via psychiatrists) on taking the total victim (myself) into account—I, for the first time, felt a need to phone the Inspector. Friendless and wifeless as I was, being made to reside in a crypt of perhaps my own creation, I sought friendship, or at least to hear a voice.

"Inspector," I laughed after he'd answered, "I hope you had a wow of a banging time last night."

He cleared his throat in obvious confusion.


"What woman?" he finally asked.

"Listen here," I said, "if you're not honest with me, how can I be honest with you?"

He took this in between heavy breaths, as though he'd run to the phone, and I thought I heard his thick lips smacking. "She's living with me," he admitted. "For quite some time now."

"Really working her over," I heard myself respond—as if I were still in a dream state. I swear, I never would say that were my wits intact.

"Why, really, did you call me?" The Inspector yawned audibly over the wires. "What do you want?"

I thought that what I wanted was understanding, communication, some sort of proof that I, Henry Baggley, could echo off another being. But, since I'm rather calculating and subdued in my rare relationships with others, I excused my call by telling him the dream that I claimed might bear upon his discovery of the bones.

He was uninterested. And yet, "The barbed wire," he decided to ask about. "What kind of battle are you in?"

I dropped the phone back into its cradle. From a height of perhaps a
foot, I simply let it fall. Inspector Mondragon, there are questions that have their time and place. Ill-timed, they are anathema!

I boiled water for some instant coffee. I lit a cigarette. So what if they're bad for your health. So is old age.

I poured the hot water over the tiny pebbles I was, to my perpetual amazement, wont to drink. As the steam fogged my glasses, I realized with a start that I had just hinted to the Inspector that the skeletons beyond my wall were related to me and not to some former occupant of the house. I incriminated myself with every word I spoke!

It was night. A soft rain fell outside, sliding, opalescent, across the windows of his mother's house. A lamp by the chair Morton sat in glowed onto the drops as he watched them merge into a silvered rivulet beyond the sill.

Is that the way I had originally written this segment of the La Honda story? The words seemed heavy to me. I quickly scanned my attempt to recreate my fictional offense. I sipped coffee, wondering why the syntax came out so outmoded, as if that abscessed area of my mind were tasteless and could only speak from a century earlier than my own. "Silvered" for instance. "Silvered rain." I had heard that before. And "rivulet"... that would have to be reworded before this entire document could be turned over to the Inspector, lawyers, court psychiatrists, or whatever functionaries of the legal establishment will seek to vandalize my integrity and name.

My final hope is that the judge, at least, if not the entire jury, should, as representatives of the people, read and realize that I had, in fact, traveled to my mother's house after being informed of her death, and, that since I had been raised in that house, the carpeting, the furniture, every inch of every wall and floor, even the strange hovering smell of yeast, obsessed the dusty stairwells of my mind.

He held in one hand a glass filled with rum—his mother's favorite, and all he could find in the liquor cabinet. She had never drunk much but always snickered behind a cupped hand before finishing the first one, as though any excuse to be girlish were welcome. In her eighties, she was still capable of a ribald joke before slapping her drink glass, always wrapped in a paper napkin, onto a cork-lined coaster. "And when I screamed at the telephone man as he shinnied the pole if he had on his rubber, so he wouldn't get electrocuted, you know. And..."

Morton still heard her voice, scraping through the rain, the rasp of it tearing at the veil of water. Her taste in pictures and furniture was so ordinary, he thought, looking around the living room. She had spent her life cleaning, vacuuming, polishing what had no meaning. Like Morton himself. Morton felt he had no meaning except to counter her and, now that she was "gone," as they say, the neighbors finally finding her dead, slumped on the floor next to her bed without her teeth and in a soiled nightgown... He tightened his fingers around his glass filled with her rum, shut his eyes waiting for the rum to grip him and the memory, even of what he had not seen of her death, to go away.
As he stared at the rectangle of shadow imposing itself over the entrance to the upper rooms, he thought he heard the stairs creak, as though something were beginning its way down through the dark toward where he sat bolt upright, pressing the rim of the glass hard against his lower lip. Morton's father had died screaming, "Mommie, Mommie," the name he often used for his wife, in that chair with its plastic head rest. Morton sank back into the chair's arms, quaffing the remains of the rum with a quick gulp, nestling in there, shaking, allowing at last his father's dead arms to hold him. "They're everywhere," he said to himself; mumbling, beginning to breathe hard. "The furniture, knickknacks, even plastic and every inch of earth erupts with them."

Morton need not be a native of New Guinea, whose ancestor skulls were shrunk and sewn with wrinkled skin and hung from a loft, to experience...

That line about New Guinea will have to go. I stood, stretched, wondered if I should boil more coffee. Besides, I didn't recall, Inspector Mondragon, whether the New Guinea image had been in the original.

I watched through my window the lady mailman push cursing through my white picket gate. As she inserted, along with the usual bills and advertisements, what looked like a letter addressed by hand into the slot on my door, she must have caught sight of my stretching body beyond the window. Her eyes swirled under her tinted glasses, and she backed in clumsy panic toward her cart.

"Wait," I wanted to say, "I mean you no harm. I'm merely a man relaxing behind the window of his own house." That, Inspector, is when I really grew alarmed at what the newspapers might be reporting regarding my case. And may I admit it now, and then repress it for as long as possible, the worst of all human conditions is to be reviled by a stranger. For her attitude, Arthur Mondragon, I do not thank you, because you've seen to it that no journalist ever interviews me. I must, therefore, assume all misinformation comes from you and/or that woman who shares your bed and who must also act as your confidante. I can imagine it: "Detective's Wife Reveals Murderer's Secrets." She'd naturally bow to public pressure and falsely legitimize her relationship to you. How did I know she had not married you yet? Because, Inspector, you were always so eager to run home!

As I opened the door to fetch the letter, I trembled with anger and realized my anger was irrationally focusing on that woman I'd glimpsed in the blue dress and whom I didn't even know. But when I recognized the handwriting on the letter before I picked it up, I froze. My knees weakened as I stuffed the letter into my pocket and stumbled back into my prison.

The simple bold script with its sculpted H and the jutting curves of the B belonged to Fran, my wife. I started pacing like a wild thing, scuffing the still plaster-encrusted rug that ran along the wall near the ghastly opening. If I had claws, I'd rip the house to shreds. Repeatedly, I reached
into my pocket to assure myself that the letter I’d hoped to receive for so long was not some cruel hallucination. My heart slowed when I felt the crisp coolness of the envelope.

Gradually, I came to two contradictory conclusions regarding Fran’s need to write: either the letter would be a plea for divorce or—and this is what caused my whole body to become racked, as though some constrictor snake of hope squeezed me—the letter might well be announcing Fran’s return, her offer to defend my character at the trial.

Fran, should you read this, can you guess with what secret faith I preferred not to know the content of your letter, how I wanted to believe that with real love you sought to offer me loyalty and trust? Inspector, forgive me, for so long as that letter lay unopened in my pocket, I felt released from my isolation. Even self-doubt felt conquerable.

Fran, I wanted to hold you, hug you. Screw you senseless.

I almost ran back to my desk, picked up my pen, and prepared once again, but this time with jubilation, to reannihilate the wraith of my mother, who I had written, was descending the stairs of her house through the center of her own shadow. But she appeared first as a cat and not a proper human spirit-specter, not as a succubus at all.

Out of the shadow poked a pointed, white face with slashes of black across the ears and entirely smudging the lower jaw. The slanted eyes glowed at Morton, slowly blinking, the mottled body slinking down one more step when it paused, black tail curling around white paws, spotted ears straining toward Morton’s every breath. Morton eased his drink glass onto the end table without breaking the mutual stare. The cat raised one paw, held it poised in the air, but whether the paw was pitifully arched in toward the shaggy chest or gesturing toward him in an accusatory fashion, he could not be certain. The light was too dim that far up the stairs, and the shadow too deep.

“Kitty is my only friend,” his mother always said. “My life is Kitty’s and his life is mine. He takes the awful cold out of my days. We talk about everything.”

So it was no accident that Morton too had a cat, that he’d tried to save it with eyedroppers of milk, that Tom crawled into his being and crouched there. Nothing in Morton’s life had been by his own plan, nothing had been by accident. His mother had lived a three cat life, they all existed well into their twenties, not children any of them, but lovers, as his father had never been for her. Morton felt his lips opening wide in sorrow and remorse. And in fright, because his own animal spirit had died, been killed by him, and he now confronted, unprotected, his mother’s being... who arched a back, clawed at the carpeting, and descended languorously the remaining steps to stop five feet in front of him, head tipped to the side.

“When something happens to me,” his mother had said, “I worry so about Kitty. Animals are very needing. Morton, you know I can’t care for him from the grave. Morton, promise me... promise....”

Her words had broken off, the plea poignant and heavy. Morton appraised the
cat from head to tail. Old but healthy, he decided. Somewhere in the kitchen a clock ticked. A wind had come up and the rain smacked the windows.

"First the soul," Morton heard himself say. "You've got to get that first. But, you don't understand, do you," he nodded, addressing the cat.

That was when I heard the car door slam, not once but twice; otherwise I'd have paid the sound scant attention. Glancing out the window, I noticed the street lined by automobiles of all makes and sizes, trucks, campers, and even a trailered boat or two. What day could this be? It must be Saturday, and someone was giving a party. I walked out on the porch and heard the monotonous, sterile beats of rock music thump dryly from up the block, the rhythm hopeless, unclimactic, but driving like a nervous man who couldn't finish. The influx of guest cars made it impossible for my neighbors to park in front of their houses. The door slamming was committed by a woman who had edged her gray Pontiac between motorcycles near my driveway. Her back was to me as she fumbled with her keys in the lock, but, by the respectable nature of her clothing and her less than youthful stance, I assumed she could not be heading for the raucous rhythm. I stood, hand slipped in my pocket, fingers touching my unopened letter, absently observing the woman's awkwardness with the keys. As she leaned over, her smooth behind sheathed in a kind of luminous silky material, I sensed I knew her but could not at first place where or how. I sank into the porch chair and jerked my head in time to the sounds that shattered the street.

The woman straightened and started to click down the sidewalk on high heels. I hunched forward in my chair. Just as she stepped off the curb, directly across from your house, Inspector, I understood that her walk, the haughty yet somehow girlish manner of her carriage, reminded me of no one so much as my mother.

A mottled car, teen-driven, swiveled and roared, hurtling down my street toward the heel-clicking woman. She plunged forward. Through whirls of blue exhaust, I saw she had made it safely to the other side. She turned, her fist raised as though to curse the teens. There was something about the curve of the arm over her head, a distinct and yet flirtatious bend of the wrist. . . .

Is there ubiquity among ghosts, do they appear and reappear everywhere even in the guise of persons younger and superficially different from themselves? I had to blink to remind myself that the woman could not be my mother thirty years before. However, Inspector Mondragon, when she turned to click up the sidewalk to your mirrored house and did not rap but nonchalantly pushed open your front door, I shivered.

I strode quickly to the telephone and dialed you, Inspector. You must have thought grief and fear had driven me mad because I recall insisting, "Is that the woman you're living with?"

"Oh, Henry," he said. And then, after a pause, "Are you all right?"
voice rang with concern. There is nothing more difficult than making a demand when the person hints he cares about you.

"Quite well," I lied to him, determined to return to my attack. "Who is the woman who just entered your house?"

"Is that any of your damned business?"

I felt relief that his voice returned to its usual subdued anger. "It is very much my business," I insisted. "I know her. But I don't know why I think that... I didn't see her well." I stopped. Wound the telephone cord around my wrist. "It is very much my business;" I insisted. "I know her. But I don't know why I think that. ... I didn't see her well." I stopped. Wound the telephone cord around my wrist. If I'd only not over talked I might have discovered something. I never should have admitted not seeing her clearly, for instance. "She, somehow, is the reason you're pursuing me!"

Mondragon seemed to take that in with the infernal smacking of lips habitual to him. "And the discovery of bodies buried between your walls..." His words caught in his throat, as though he were beside himself, "... has nothing to do with it?"

"That was in my story;" I said. "That was in what I concocted."

"Well, then," he said, "apparently, you're not able to separate what's real from what you imagine any more."

"Please, please give me a copy of my La Honda story. You can Xerox it at that place around the corner..." How had he so rapidly reduced me to begging? He'd even deflected my interest away from the woman and onto the story. "Give me the evidence back so I don't have to rewrite it. I can't tolerate... ."

"Facing it all over again?" he finished my sentence for me. "But that's precisely what you must do. Excuse me, Henry, but I have a busy day ahead of me."

"With that woman. You're doing something with that woman... ."

He hung up. The receiver, which I still held pressed to my ear, buzzed. Defiance forced me back to my desk after I replaced the phone. But not defiance against you, Inspector, because it was your dictum I cooperated with. I wrote as a form of defiance leveled against myself.

Morton left the cat to feed itself on the can of liver he'd opened and slumped back into his father's chair. He faced the stairway and its hunched shadow. All he heard was the tiny bell his mother had tied to the animal's flea collar as the bell hit the food dish, ringing high and clear.

"But you're dead," he addressed the shadow where it crouched low, spreading its canopy over the stairs. He flinched as the cat, apparently finished eating, stalked by, ignoring him, and solemnly climbed into the semidark.

"I've been sick ever since you sent me to the doctor who churned my stomach, my heart, into a medicine bowl. Why couldn't you have left me alone, you who were never here when I would have enjoyed you. You let me rot with isolation, and then when it was already too late, you made the doctor insult my body... ."

"Shut up! Shut up!" Though Morton clearly heard his own voice shout in protest, he only thought he heard hers. And yet something vibrant stirred inside
the dark hood covering the stairs, as though a lovely face that had belonged to a 
deva, before she turned pinched and disgruntled, churned within the shadow's 
folds.

Then the cat's bell, frail and pure, trembled out through the suddenly tossing 
black as though the animal were being pummeled, breath knocked out of it, shaken 
in fury. Morton rose, the palms of his hands slippery with sweat, his only thought 
to get out of the door, run into the raining night, hide somewhere, anywhere so she 
could not find him . . . when he realized the darkness moved gradually down the 
stairs toward him and he understood: If I don't go to it, it will swallow me. If I don't 
go through it, I'm consumed. "To the extent, Mother, that I did kill you, I have to kill 
you that much again?"

He sat back down in the chair and wanted to laugh. Surely, none of this was 
happening. The cat, somewhere near the top of the steps, merely scratched fleas, 
and that made its bell tinkle furiously. And it became easy to see that a streetlight 
shining through the window had got covered by tree limbs hurled by a gusting 
wind, that act of nature momentarily extending the shadow. Because, after Morton 
blinked and stared again, all appeared as it should be. Even Kitty stopped digging 
for fleas. There was nothing to hear but the wind, nothing to see but the softly 
lighted room, and the steps leading into the unlit bedrooms.

"You see, Mother," Morton began to chat, just as they always had on his rare 
trips home, "terror is just a mix between guilt and the suspicion that the dead don't 
stay dead."

"Have you heard from Fran? Such a sweet girl."

"You didn't think she was sweet when I married her. As I recall, you referred to 
er her as a whore. How come she got sweet only after she left me?"

"God only knows what you've been doing since you've been living alone," she 
said. "God only knows what you've been doing with your . . ." She sipped her 
rum and and coughed. "Even when you were married."

"With my what!"

"All I ever wanted was grandchildren, so that my life . . ."

Morton remembered smiling pleasantly. "I've always tried . . ."

"Legitimate ones!" she snorted, blowing smoke into his eyes.

"What makes you pry into my life this way!" At least that's what Morton 
wished he'd said.

He settled deep into his father's chair, smiling contentedly. Pretending he'd 
defied her, he decided he would go upstairs, march through the black zone, and 
enter the room where she had died. He would face the unmade bed, the curtains 
avry where the coroner's gurney had knocked them, her teeth in the glass set on 
folded newspaper.

Where the stairs turned and the shadow was darkest, the cat crouched in the 
middle of a step. As Morton approached, the cat hissed, hunched flat against the 
carpeting. He edged around the animal, hand sliding along the bannister, back 
pressed to the wall. If he could only see! The hall light switch was around the turn 
in the stairs, five steps behind the cat, where the upper floor of the house lay
wrapped in night. It would be so easy not to penetrate the shadow, never see his mother’s room. “But I can’t not do this,” he spoke to the cat. “If I don’t go through to her, she’ll never be dead for me. Understand, Kitty, I prefer she not be dead. But she is. And I have to . . .”

Morton pushed upward as he spoke, the balls of his feet searching for the next step. “If I had a choice . . . But when do we really ever have a choice!”

He took hold of the bannister beyond the cat who lashed out quick and sure at his ankle. There was blood; he felt it. Stupid, if he had only bounded up the stairs crashing and oblivious of meanings and trepidations, the cat would have run. “Go! Go!” Above the animal now, he smacked his palms loudly and watched the creature in fright struggle arthritically down the stairs away from him. He touched along the wall for the light switch. At last he found it, the hall glowed from a bulb subdued behind a ceiling fixture of frosted glass.

His old room at the end of the hall remained dark, but the light managed to diffuse into his mother’s and father’s room, their twin beds mute in the filtered light. His father’s bed shone from the plastic that covered it, and as Morton approached, he saw that the blanket tucked around the wrapped pillow was coated with cat hairs. His mother’s bed looked disheveled, the white sheets heaped, the rose comforter pulled half off and trailing onto the floor, as though the last to be frantically gripped as she fell.

“A peaceful expression on her face,” the neighbors who found her told him. “Don’t leave her teeth in the glass,” they warned.

“Why not?”

“Just don’t,” they said.

Morton ran his fingers over the rose comforter. After wondering how and precisely where her body had collapsed to the floor, he began draping the cover back onto the bed. As he arranged the comforter over the tumbled mound of bed clothes, and his hand sank into the covers, he felt her there, not merely her presence, but her body, thin and bony. Her shoulders seemed to move as though she cried, her frail ankles pressed tight across each other.

He glanced at the curtains draping the French doors that led to a sun deck. He had to assure himself they were half pulled off their hooks, just as the neighbors had explained. “The men were anxious, you see, to get her out. There were two of them. Awkward, both men were. But we left it all for you to see . . .” The neighbor women bowed as they left, apparently unable to say more.

Morton pressed his hand hard down upon what he knew he experienced under the covers, yet kept his eyes staring at the wrenched drapes. On that porch beyond the doors, during his adolescence, he had lain in his bathing suit baking in the sun when his mother often paused behind the screen (he still sensed her breathing there), “Hi, handsome,” she’d often croon when he stretched as he realized she was watching him.

Now, with his hand against his mother’s back, he announced aloud to the vaguely lit room, “What’s wrong is that I grew up to believe that your desire was wicked. What good did my believing you were wicked do me? What good did it do you?”
"Don't, please don't..." he heard her say, voice muffled under the bed clothes.

"Don't what, Mother?"

"Press down on me so hard. Your hand, your hand."

Morton straightened and went to stand at the foot of the bed. "You're dead," he said. "What difference does any of it make now?"

"It makes more. More," he heard her say.

"Didn't they take your body out on that gurney?"

"Did they? Oh, Morton, I wanted them to."

"But you're still here. We're talking..."

"And waiting;"

"For what?"

"For me to tell you..."

"Then tell it."

"It's something I must... confide. Come close to me. Bend over. Walk your fingers lightly through the sheet."

Morton returned to the side of the bed. He touched the cool rose covering.

"When you find my head, pull the covers off." As she said this, and the caressing of his fingers felt toward the nape of her neck, the body beneath him moved and then rose up. Trembling, he folded aside the sheet and saw that her eyes were wet, the pouches beneath them shaded and purple, her lips cracked and dry. Is pity love? He hovered over her.

"What did you want to whisper?"

"The sight of me, the sight of me you see, that is my... confidence."

"And what do you want?"

A liver-spotted hand, bony and knobbed, scraped across her fallen cheeks. Once she had called him into the bathroom where she soaked in a tub of scented oils. Conversing with him casually, she slowly stood, foam clinging to her perfect breasts and the glow of her perfect thighs. Before wrapping herself in a yellow towel, she arched her long neck to let a fall of black hair wreathe her shoulders. She tossed her head, dark eyes heavily lashed. Had that been her first confidence, he now wondered? If the haggard, gaunt desperation of death were a revelation, then so had been her loneliness.

"You know what I want;" her hand struggled to find his and held it tight. "Let me in. Let me in."

"For your sake or mine!" Morton felt a flush of anger.

"Oh," she winced. "They're coming again. With the gurney. With the inhalator that will be too late. I can hear the neighbors, turning their key in the back door. Kitty? Where is my Kitty? Who will call Morton and tell him? The wheels of the gurney are banging up the stairs, knocking the plaster walls. I have just fallen to the floor, dragging the rose comforter after me. Did I manage to get to the phone?"

"For your sake or mine, should I let you in?" Morton demanded.

Through the half dark Morton watched her eyes widen, rheumy and stained. Gnarled white strands of hair stuck to her mottled forehead. Her body shook,
struggled, and then slumped limp within the bedclothes. "For you. For you," he heard her say. He pressed down, tentatively at first and then with insistence, deep into the blankets. He contacted nothing. No bone. No dust. Nothing.

He flung the covers aside. Nothing. He yanked the bedclothes entirely off. Nothing. Only her electric clock whirring. Her teeth in the glass. The drapes over the French doors wrenched aside.

Inspector, I can't remember much more of the story than that. Let me see . . . bits and pieces still float in my mind. I recollect that Morton went to his mother's jewelry box to take out what might be precious and that among her wedding ring and trinkets (and his baby's milk teeth still there, the original discovery of which shook his child's belief in all the mysteries, from tooth fairies to God, except for that most marvelous mystery, the only one left to him, of why she had interred his teeth as jewels in the first place) he found the medallion he had given her. The inlaid metal oval opened, within which he was stunned to see that she had inserted a picture of Fran, whose long black hair and dark lashed eyes and haughty turn of head reminded him of how his mother had looked when she was young.

There is much in my story, Inspector, that I particularly don't understand. But I'll declare to any jury how that is the way it should be. To ask a person why he imagines what he does is to assume that the brain can explain itself. I don't know why my wife's picture found its way into my mother's medallion.

The doorbell is ringing. I may be lonely, but this is no time for an interruption. I was just about to make clear how the bodies got behind my wall, how I built the wall around them where an arched entrance to the back hall had been. My intent was to cooperate with the original architecture, not defy the basic design.

I can't seem to remember how the bodies got there and what the Inspector read in my La Honda story that made him suspicious enough to obtain a warrant to search my house. What I really need to know about my narrative self eludes me! And the incessant ringing of the doorbell robs me of the coherence of my deepest self, the self I trust . . . as though somewhere behind my eyes a strut had broken.

"Henry! I know you're there. You have to be there. It's Fran, Henry. Please, dear, let me in."

I stopped writing, pen poised in the air. Could that really be my wife calling? I felt for her letter in my pocket. Still there. I experienced an awful embarrassment. It's a breach with faith not to read a letter addressed to you.

I opened the door onto an evening sky, the oleanders pale against a violet streak beyond the telephone wires. She was in shadow. "Is that really you?" I said. Hand still on the door knob, I pressed it tightly. "I haven't read your letter. I've been cooped up here so long. . . . Come in.
Come in,” I backed off nervously. “If you’ve been living across the street for God knows how long, why did you send the Inspector over in your stead?”

As seemed to be happening with increasing frequency, I had stated what I knew intuitively but could not admit to myself as fact. It came then as almost a blow when she laughed easily, brushed past me into the living room, announcing, “I left you, Henry, for Arthur. Of course, Arthur and I had known each other for some time. It was sheer circumstance you moved into this house across from us. At first, I couldn’t know what to do about the awkwardness…” She seemed to choke. Pressed against the wall, half slouched, she blinked toward the splintered crypt where the bodies had been. She kept shaking her head, clutching a black pocket-book to her stomach. Clearly, she was pregnant.

“I didn’t realize how vast the tomb… I’m sorry, Henry. I actually am. It’s not a tomb, just a broken-down wall. Arthur hasn’t told me everything…”

“Sit down.”

“I can’t.”

We stared at each other: your lover, Inspector, my wife and I. Then slowly with one hand Fran pulled back the black hair that had tumbled over her forehead. She disliked the fact that her forehead was high, so I was surprised she revealed herself. “I can’t believe you’ve done this thing!” She turned toward me, apparently so she would not have a view of the hollowed wall, her head sinking toward her chest, chin touching the black coat she wore.

“Should I turn on a light?”

She scrunched further back against the wall. “No.”

“Well, then, what after all these years do you want? Certainly, it’s not me!” I snickered. “Explain what was in your letter. You knew I couldn’t open it. It was cruel of you…”

“I want to help, Henry. Now. That’s what my letter said. After the first shock…”

“Of finding out?”

“Yes. I can’t accept…”

“And you were right not to accept it.” I took a step toward her. Her dark shoulders flinched under the coat. “I’m no more a destroyer of life than you are. Than anyone is. Can’t you understand? We’re all filled with the fear that makes us callous… enough:’” I stopped. After all, I still couldn’t understand what part of me had fictionally interred the bones I knew to be planted elsewhere. Or hadn’t I reburied anything? I began to shake at the thought. You see, I had not been in the house when the bodies were found and removed. They held me in jail that night. I had only been told about the bodies. Have you, Inspector, all along wanted me to believe in what really was, rather than
in what I wanted to be true?

When I address the jury I'll try to explain, "We all have living rooms lined by corpses. Am I the only person who relaxes in a chair whose back rests against a partition that hides the unspeakable? Hear me, ladies and gentlemen, I am not in the least unusual. What was discovered behind my wall lies rotting behind your walls too. Tear off the paneling of knotty pine, break through the plaster, and accept that there is more behind the partition separating the rooms of your lives than mere space and electric wiring!"

I watched as Fran caressed her stomach, holding the pocketbook close to the hard bulge.

"Are you sure, Fran," I kept my voice low, muttering the accusation, "that I am not buried behind one of your walls? The skeleton you made of me?"

She propelled herself away from the wall and into the middle of the dark room. She must have felt safer since the splintered wood and yawning hole were no longer visible to her.

"Arthur will wonder what's keeping me so long."

"Away from your mirrored house?"

"Aren't those windows crazy," she smiled, starting for the door. "Arthur likes them. Can you imagine that? To like mirror windows?"

Her black coat edged out of the door. The street light caused her form to appear so ghost-like, were ghosts clothed in black, as surely they must be, Inspector, or we'd see more of them, especially at night, because they are everywhere. Don't you realize how they're everywhere?

"You're one of them..." I began to say. And then my voice took a more definite turn. "And you know that after the autopsy report is finalized, it will be proved, beyond doubt, that your body was found in my wall. Your skeleton, Fran. Isn't that how my story ended? With the revelation that one body belonged to my mother, one to Tom, and one to you?" I shook her shoulders, not strongly, just yearningly. "You must have read the story that incriminated me. Isn't that how it ended? Tell me. Tell me. I can't remember..."

"Henry, don't touch me. Just let me go." Her voice sounded flat.

"Back to my investigator?" I tried to pull her tight against me.

"Arthur! Arthur!" she began calling, tearing herself out of my grip. Her black heels clicked excitedly down the stairs.

As I guessed all along, Inspector, you were lurking behind the bushes, waiting to rescue the lady from me. "Tomorrow we'll make the arrest!" you bellowed at me as you hooked your arm through Fran's. "We've done all we could for you, Henry Baggley."

I watched as you bundled Fran close in your enormous arms, whispering something I assumed to be consoling into her ear, as though her brief meeting with me had been horrific.
Can you conceive how I quavered when you gestured with your fist at me: “They’ll come for you in the morning. There’s no sense resisting...” And then, under your breath, Inspector Mondragon, but I heard it though it was addressed to Fran, “I know you shouldn’t have gone to him. Unredeemable...” is the last word I caught as you escorted my wife away.

It is late, very late, and I am tired from fighting through this all alone, though how I thought it could be otherwise proves me naive. I’ve tried, Art Mondragon, to validate my last days. And I thank you for that opportunity at least. But can you believe, despite what a jury will decide, I have not committed any act or thought that is the least extraordinary? I am as condemned as anyone. And as decent.
"The Nightmare View of Life"

Philip E. Davis

In his address, "Is Life Worth Living?" 1 William James begins by repeating a joke which was current at the time ("it depends on the liver"); then quickly invites his audience to turn their attention away from the "buzzing and jiggling and vibrations of small interests and excitements that form the tissue of our ordinary consciousness" to the "profounder bassnote of life." He has in mind an inquiry into the reasons which might be given to convince a potential suicide that despite all adverse appearances and personal suffering, life is still worth living.

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes was confronted with a somewhat similar problem when he wrote the opinion in the U.S. Supreme Court case of Biddle v. Perovich. 2 Perovich had been convicted of murder and sentenced to death. After several appeals, President Taft, by executive order, reduced his sentence to life imprisonment. Perovich argued that the President had exceeded his constitutional authority. He alleged that by commuting his death sentence to life imprisonment President Taft had not only substituted one kind of punishment for another but had in fact increased the punishment. A federal district court judge in Kansas agreed, saying, "To an innocent man, imprisonment for life might well be a life of torture, a living hell, compared to which death might be a kindness." 3

It is well known that Mark Twain, at least in his later years was a pessimist. Repeatedly he expressed the view that death was a "boon." 4 In "The Death of Jean," a memoir written upon the death of one of his daughters, he says, "I am content: for she has been enriched with the most precious of all gifts—that gift which makes all other gifts mean and poor—death." 5

In what follows I wish to examine what James aptly called "the nightmare view of life" from the perspectives provided by Holmes, Twain, and
James. These three American thinkers share a generally pragmatic approach to the problems of life and death. Their diverse professional backgrounds—of law, literature, psychology, and philosophy—provide concrete illustrations of a topic that is all too often treated in abstruse metaphysical terms. My object will not be to assess their individual judgments on the value of being alive—for, as I shall suggest, in the case of each author a certain ambivalence is noticeable—but rather to analyze their arguments in order to ascertain whether certain types of reasoning with respect to the question, “Is life always worth living?” are logically or morally more persuasive than other types of reasoning.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.: a Prisoner’s Fate

The case in which the U.S. Supreme Court decided that imprisonment for life was a lesser penalty than death reads like the script of an old Gold Rush movie. On July 17, 1905, Vuco Perovich was indicted for the murder of a certain Jacob Jaconi. He was subsequently tried, convicted, and sentenced to be hanged. The evidence in the case, however, was entirely circumstantial; it was even in doubt at the commencement of the trial whether there had been a homicide. Jaconi, a fisherman, lived alone in a log cabin about midway between Fairbanks, Alaska, and a town named Chena, a distance of about four miles each way. When last seen alive he had in his possession several gold nuggets, a Yukon gold ring, a gold chain, watch charm, and some money. On the day his body was discovered, a former partner heard Jaconi’s dogs barking and two gunshots coming from the direction of the deceased’s cabin. Investigating, the man found the cabin almost completely destroyed by fire and a partially cremated body in the rear bunk. According to one trial witness, the defendant, some two weeks before, had said that he was broke but knew where he could get money. He mentioned a man who lived about five miles from Chena who had $500, a watch and chain, a ring, and a gun. Perovich had been a frequent visitor to Jaconi’s cabin, and according to another witness, had said of Jaconi that someday he would “lick him with an ax and throw him in the water, or make a fire and burn everything up.” On the afternoon of the day the deceased’s body was discovered and identified as Jaconi’s, Perovich showed up at a camp about 20 miles away with a rifle, a canvas bag, a Yukon ring, a gold watch, and a nugget chain. Perovich made several different and contradictory statements about the watch and chain which were later identified as the property of Jaconi.

Despite all the obvious discrepancies in the evidence, Justice David J. Brewer, later reviewing the decision in the case, could say:

While it is true there was no witness to the homicide and the identification of the body found in the cabin was not perfect,
owing to its condition, caused by fire, yet, taking all the circumstances together, there was clearly enough to warrant the jury in finding that the partially burned body was that of Jaconi and that he had been killed by the defendant. (205 U.S. 91)

It is tempting in a case like this one to wonder whether, as Judge Jerome Frank once observed, the facts are "only what the court—the trial judge or jury—thinks happened," and whether perhaps the facts are more accurately described as being "made" than being "found."

Part of the difficulty in deciding whether President Taft's reduction in sentence was within his constitutional authority was traceable to an ambiguity in the document that the President had executed. In it he purported to "commute the sentence of the said Vuco Perovich." The relevant passage of the Constitution (Art. 2, Sec. 2) says nothing about commutations: "The President... shall have Power to grant Reprieves and Pardons for Offenses against the United States, except in cases of Impeachment." The solicitor general argued that the rule cited by Perovich's counsel that an unconditional pardon or any other such act of executive clemency requires acceptance by the prisoner "had no real basis in reason or (except for Burdick v. United States, 236 U.S. 79) in authority." Both sides agreed that President Taft's act was a commutation, not a pardon, and that the consent of the prisoner had historically been required only for pardons and not commutations. Counsel for Perovich contended, however, that since the President was not otherwise constitutionally empowered to substitute one kind of punishment for another, the consent of the prisoner was required for this act of commutation.

Something of a stalemate was thus presented to the Court. Relying on precedent, the solicitor general could argue that in no case before Burdick, and apparently none after, either in this country or in England, had consent been adjudged necessary. Counsel for Perovich, also relying on precedent, could cite not only Burdick, decided by the U.S. Supreme Court just 12 years earlier in 1915, but also numerous cases which held that the President could not substitute one kind of punishment for another.

Justice Holmes' opinion in the case initially appears to lean toward the position of the solicitor general; Holmes applauds the "very persuasive argument that in no case is such consent necessary to an unconditional pardon, and that it never had been adjudged necessary before Burdick v. United States." (274 U.S. 486) Holmes wholly neglects to consider the statement of Justice Joseph McKenna in the latter case that "The principles declared in United States v. Wilson (7 Pet. 150, 8 L.Ed. 640) [the case on which Burdick in turn was based and whose opinion, incidentally, was
written by Chief Justice John Marshall] have endured for years; no case has reversed or modified them.” (236 U.S. 91) Briefly, without argument and without actually overruling Burdick, Holmes remarks, “We are of opinion that the reasoning of Burdick v. United States ... is not to be extended to the present case.” (274, U.S. 488)

It is quite obvious that Holmes regarded the argument from precedent persuasive as presented by the solicitor general but insufficient by itself to establish the claim that consent is not required in cases of commutation of one kind of punishment to another. He neatly sidesteps the authorities cited by Perovich’s attorney, on the other hand, by resorting to an entirely different and essentially utilitarian kind of argument, as follows:

We will not go into history, but we will say a word about the principles of pardons in the law of the United States. A pardon in our days is not a private act of grace from an individual happening to possess power. It is part of the constitutional scheme. When granted, it is the determination of the ultimate authority that the public welfare will be better served by inflicting less than what the judgment fixed. ... Just as the original punishment would be imposed without regard to the prisoner’s consent and in the teeth of his will, whether he liked it or not, the public welfare, not his consent, determines what shall be done. (274 U.S. 486)

Since a reduction of the term of imprisonment or the amount of a fine would not be thought to require the prisoner’s consent, why, asks Holmes, should it be thought that consent has anything to do with the commutation of a sentence of death to imprisonment. The answer to this question, of course, lies in the fear that the commutation will result in a greater punishment than that authorized by law. Holmes counters by arguing that “by common understanding imprisonment for life is a less penalty than death.” (274 U.S. 487)

By “common understanding”? Such an appeal has a peculiarly unlegal ring. Judicial opinions do not often cite considerations other than purely “legal authorities” (statutes, precedents, constitutional clauses, executive orders, and the like) as bases of decisions. Legal Positivism—one school of legal philosophy—regards all such references to extra-legal considerations as illegitimate because they are not officially authorized. Since Holmes was in his thinking much like the English positivist, John Austin,9 it is especially strange to hear him cite “common understanding” as the basis of his legal judgment.

But as one might expect, Holmes doesn’t simply leave it at that. In good positivistic fashion,10 Holmes immediately goes on to report that the
common understanding he cites is indeed already incorporated into the
statute under which Perovich was tried. The Criminal Code of Alaska,
Chap. 429, Sec. 4 (1899) provides that "The jury may qualify their verdict
[guilty of murder] by adding thereto 'without capital punishment'; and
whenever the jury shall return a verdict qualified as aforesaid the person
convicted shall be sentenced to imprisonment at hard labor for life." Holmes's decision now stands duly clothed by enacted legislation and
not merely by vague references to "common understanding" or "positive
morality."

Yet Holmes does not seem altogether content with this positivistic
rationale as the final authoritative reason for his, and the Court's, decision that life imprisonment is a lesser penalty than death and therefore
better than death. He adds the still further consideration that if the President were permitted to reduce only prison terms and fines without
consulting the convict, he would be deprived of the power of commutation "in the most important cases." Such a position would "require him to
permit an execution which he had decided ought not to take place unless
the change is agreed to by one who on no sound principle ought to have
any voice in what the law should do for the welfare of the whole."[1] Holmes' own independent moral judgment finally just would not be suppressed
by Austinian positivistic orthodoxy.

Mark Twain: a Tortured Conscience

The sometimes labyrinthine paths of legal reasoning from fact-finding
and precedents through principles and statutes to final judgment have
led to Holmes' moral, yet also legal declaration that being alive, even in
prison, is better than being dead. Perhaps the circuitousness should not
be a surprise. Courts of law do not ordinarily confront, head-on, moral
issues of this nature. When they do, it is because some other more
specifically legal issue, such as whether the President exceeded his
authority or someone's legal rights have been violated, has forced a deter-
mination with respect to those specifically moral concerns.

In Mark Twain's case, the problem can be approached from a different
angle, beginning instead of ending with the value judgment, working
backwards, so to speak, to his reasons for it. Interestingly enough, his
evaluation is diametrically opposed to that of Holmes and the Supreme
Court and indeed shares more in common with the view of the prisoner
Perovich. According to Twain, "The most precious of all gifts [is] death."

But for what reason, or set of reasons possibly, was Twain a pessimist?
The attempt to answer this question must proceed cautiously. It would be
easy to get bogged down in a controversy which has persisted for
decades—even since 1920 when Van Wyck Brooks published his now
classic book, *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*. In opposition to accounts that Mark Twain became a pessimist because of the recurrent illnesses and deaths of those he loved or because of the burdens of debt under which he labored as a youth and later during his bankruptcy or because of his lifelong hatred of tyranny in all its many forms, Brooks alleges that Twain's "contempt for man . . . must have had some far more personal root, must have sprung from some far more intimate chagrin." Brooks argues that it was "some deep malady of the soul that afflicted Mark Twain," something "gravely amiss with his inner life."

But from a purely philosophical point of view, little would be gained from exploring Twain's psychology; it would sidetrack the original inquiry, which is to examine the reasons that one might give for favoring life over death, or death over life, as the case might be, not the causes of such views.

The distinction is important and can be expressed another way. Some reasons explain actions and beliefs; others justify them. Explanations sometimes justify but not always; and justifications do not always explain. Many impolite acts, for example, might be explained by the fact that the actor was physically or mentally ill, perhaps intoxicated, at the time; but such a fact would hardly constitute a reason which would justify the behavior. On the other hand, a reason for doing an act (e.g., maximizing happiness in general) might not really explain why the act was done, which might have been merely to satisfy one's own desires. Here the concern is only with the reasons which one might give to justify a given point of view and the rational process by which it might be acquired, not the causal process which might explain it.

A difference also sometimes exists between the reasons for a belief and one's own reasons for such a belief. There may be many justificatory reasons for certain acts or beliefs but they may not be "my" reasons. Determining what reasons a given individual has for his or her beliefs is a slippery business, especially if that individual is not now available for interrogation. For example, in the cases under consideration, Holmes appears to hold a view that upholds the value of life even under the most adverse circumstances, and so does William James. Yet, sometime after his wife's death, Holmes confided to a friend that the reason he had had no children was that "This is not the kind of world I want to bring anyone else into." William James seriously contemplated suicide. Mark Twain, on the other hand, seems to hold a contrary view; yet, except for a time in his youth when he deliberately contracted measles and fully expected to die, he never seriously considered taking his own life, and, in fact, died peacefully in bed at 75.

Twain's own life, however, as well as his observations of life, provide plenty of reasons for him to be disappointed—even morbidly depressed—and these feelings are reflected in his criticisms of the types
of things which most persons regard as valuable. In “The Five Boons of Life” Mark Twain lists the chief human goods as fame, love, riches (which he equates with power), pleasure, and death. He dismisses all except death: pleasure is short-lived, disappointing, vain, and empty; and love is the cause of grief; wealth is a temporary disguise for meanness and poverty; and fame is a cause of bitterness and misery and is a “target for mud in its prime, for contempt and compassion in its decay.”

The first thing to notice about Twain’s argument is that it appears to be an attempt to determine, not what things are good or thought to be good, but which among those thought to be good is the highest good. Second, he provides us with a finite list—a rather small one at that—of things which are thought to be good but unfortunately fails to tell us where or how he obtained it. Third, he provides specific reasons for discounting certain of the goods, but gives none for esteeming death among all the others.

Although apparently defective, his procedure is actually quite legitimate and compares favorably with a somewhat similar attempt by Aristotle. In the Nicomachean Ethics (1095a–1098a), Aristotle undertakes a discussion of what he calls the “highest of all goods achievable by action.” After finding that there is general agreement that the highest good is happiness, Aristotle reports that opinions differ considerably about what happiness is. Some identify it with pleasure, some with wealth or health, and some with honor. Frequently one’s view of the highest good even varies with one’s condition, e.g., with health when one is ill or wealth when one is poor. Aristotle comments that “to examine all the opinions that have been held were perhaps somewhat fruitless; enough to examine those that are the most prevalent or that seem to be arguable.”

His evaluation of the “goods” of life proceeds then not merely seriatim, but in the light of several criteria of what the highest good must be. Aristotle does not argue for these criteria but assumes that they would be generally accepted by any rational person. The criteria are that the highest good be (1) humanly achievable; (2) self-sufficient, by which he means that it alone would make life desirable and lacking in nothing; and (3) final in character, in the sense that it is something we always choose for itself and never for the sake of something else. Pleasure and health fail on grounds of self-sufficiency; wealth on grounds of finality; and honor on grounds of achievability—its receipt depends too much on those who bestow it. Aristotle adds the comment: “But the good we divine to be something proper to a man, and not easily taken from him.” After a lengthy discussion, Aristotle identifies the highest human good with a rational activity in accordance with virtue and eventually with what he calls the “contemplative life.”

Twain’s list of human goods differs only slightly from Aristotle’s. Their respective judgments regarding the nature of the greatest good and their
argument procedures differ significantly, however. Although both provide specific reasons for rejecting the most popular goods as the highest or greatest good, Aristotle also gives further positive grounds for nominating rational activity and finally the contemplative life as the pre-eminent good. Twain's approach is negative in character, but its logic is impeccable. In fact it takes the form of a complex disjunctive argument in which all the candidates for the highest good are denied that status, except death, which he then proclaims (without further reasons) as the greatest "boon" of human life. The only challenge one might make is that the set of initial possibilities (i.e., conceptions of the good) is either incomplete or arbitrary; but, like Aristotle, Twain could quite plausibly defend his list by maintaining that it is sufficient to consider only the most prevalent and arguable opinions.

But can anyone in their right mind claim that death is a human good, and the highest good at that? Let us test the claim by applying Aristotle's own criteria. Certainly death is (1) humanly achievable, by suicide as well as by natural means; (2) self-sufficient, at least in the minimal sense that if one were dead one's life would not be wanting in anything; and (3) it is about as final as one can get, except, of course, in those cases where death is chosen in the hopes of gaining happiness in an afterlife or escaping pain in this one. Interestingly enough, and by his own admission, Aristotle's conception of the highest good—the contemplative life—fails the first criterion entirely. As he puts it: "But such a life would be too high for man; for it is not in so far as he is man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him." (1177b) It also fails self-sufficiency. We cannot live by pure thought alone. So Twain's conception of the highest good appears to fare quite as well as Aristotle's even when measured against Aristotle's own criteria. Furthermore, death appears pre-eminently to meet Aristotle's further qualification that the highest good be "something proper to a man and not easily taken from him."

William James: a Religious Disease

William James calls persons "tender-minded" if they take a "daylight" or generally optimistic view of things. Such persons also tend to be guided more by principles, intellect, and ideals than by "hard facts," their senses, or natural experiences. Those others, whom he calls "tough-minded," tend to adopt a "midnight" or generally pessimistic view of life. (Mark Twain clearly fits the latter category.) But James denies the suggestion, mentioned earlier, that misfortune and tragedy alone can account for tough-minded pessimism:

It is, indeed, a remarkable fact that sufferings and hardships do not, as a rule, abate the love of life; they seem, on the con-
trary, usually to give it a keener zest. The sovereign source of melancholy is repletion. Need and struggle are what excite and inspire us; our hour of triumph is what brings the void. Not the Jews of the captivity, but those of the days of Solomon's glory are those from whom the pessimistic utterances in our Bible come. ... The history of our own race is one long commentary on the cheerfulness that comes with fighting ills.

Pessimism, or the "nightmare view of life," has plenty of "organic" sources, says James, but its great "reflective" source has always been the "contradiction between the phenomena of nature and the craving of the heart to believe that behind nature there is a spirit whose expression nature is." Natural theology and the poetry of nature are two ways of appeasing this craving. Unfortunately an intimate acquaintance with nature reveals that "every phenomenon that we would praise ... exists cheek by jowl with some contrary phenomenon that cancels all its religious effect upon the mind." James cites as examples, beauty and hideousness, love and cruelty, life and death. In the face of these paradoxes, the natural religion of the poets and philosophers, if simply and naively taken, leads inevitably to moral and religious bankruptcy. "Visible nature is all plasticity and indifference ... To such a harlot we owe no allegiance." He concludes that "if there be a divine Spirit of the universe, nature such as we know her, cannot possibly be its ultimate word to man. Either there is no Spirit revealed in nature, or it is inadequately revealed there." He suggests that "an initial step towards getting into a healthy ultimate relation with the universe is the act of rebellion against the idea that such a God exists." 22

Mark Twain apparently took that initial step after much brooding upon the apparent inconsistency between the pains and sufferings of this world and the belief in an all-powerful and benevolent deity. Innumerable passages from his writings are à propos, but perhaps the following is as explicit as one might desire.

It is curious—the way the human mind works. The Christian begins with this straight ... inflexible and uncompromising proposition: God is all-knowing, and all-powerful. This being the case, nothing can happen without his knowledge beforehand that it is going to happen; nothing happens without his permission; nothing can happen that he chooses to prevent ... Then having thus made the Creator responsible for all those pains and diseases and miseries ... which he could have prevented, the gifted Christian blandly calls him Our Father! It is as I tell you. He equips the Creator with every
trait that goes into the making of a fiend, and then arrives at the conclusion that a fiend and a father are the same thing! 23

James calls pessimism "essentially a religious disease" because it consists of nothing but "a religious demand to which there comes no normal religious reply." 24 He dismisses the hollow response: Thou shalt not commit suicide because God alone is the master of life and death. "Can we," he asks, "find nothing richer or more positive than this?"

James is acutely aware that the "initial step" of abandoning a faith in a worshipful "God of Nature" may seem blasphemous to some ears. Yet he maintains that to shed oneself of that metaphysical burden, to realize that one "may step out of life whenever you please, and that to do so is not blasphemous or monstrous, is itself an immense relief." From James Thompson's poem, The City of Dreadful Night, he quotes:

This little life is all we must endure;
The grave's most holy peace is ever sure,—

Mark Twain's praises of death, his "contentment" in the thought that his loved one is at last dead, can only be explained by some such recognition. Even though some, such as Twain, may have progressed only so far in their "emancipation" from natural religion, James suggests that further progress toward an affirmative answer to the question, "Is life worth living?" is yet possible.

From the awakening of vital curiosity ("We can always stand it for twenty-four hours longer, if only to see what tomorrow's newspapers will contain"), it is possible to progress to the rekindling of pugnacious impulses (setting "one's heel on the tyrant's throat") and to enlisting one's sense of honor ("Are we not bound to take some suffering upon ourselves, to do some self-denying service with our lives, in return for all those lives upon which ours are built?").

It may appear that James' "cure" for what he calls a "religious disease" consists in the abandonment of religion and the substitution for it of certain naturalistic attitudes and instincts. But that is not his intention. The naturalistic "stage" may be denigrated as a "poor halfway stage," he says, but it is at least "an honest stage," and "no man should dare to speak meanly of those instincts which are our nature's best equipment, and to which religion herself must in the last resort address her own peculiar appeals."

What then are religion's own appeals—her reason specifically for regarding life as superior to death? James suggests that it is the bare assurance that the natural order is not the ultimate order but a mere "sign or vision, the external staging of a many-storied universe, in which spiritual forms have the last word...." Destroy this inner assurance, he
says, and "often enough the wild-eyed look at life—the suicidal mood—will then set in." But if only we could be certain that our bravery and patience would bear fruit in an unseen spiritual world, then, he says, the most adverse life would seem worth living.

James illustrates his point by an analogy with a dog undergoing vivisecting in a laboratory.

He lies strapped on a board and shrieking at his executioners, and to his own dark consciousness is literally in a sort of hell. He cannot see a single redeeming ray in the whole business; and yet all these diabolical-seeming events are often controlled by human intentions with which, if his poor benighted mind could only be made to catch a glimpse of them, all that is heroic in him would religiously acquiesce.

James then applies the metaphor to human life:

In the dog's life we see a world invisible to him because we live in both worlds. In human life, although we only see our own world, his within it, yet encompassing both these worlds a still wider world may be there, as unseen by us as our world is by him.

But is "may be" good enough? How can a tough-minded person, particularly one who is scientifically trained, subscribe to a claim to which no natural experience can attest and for which no hard facts can be given?

James, who finds nothing compelling about traditional proofs of God's existence and scoffs at Liebnizens who attempt "theodicies," is highly sensitive to the above complaint and yet completely unsympathetic with it, because he believes that despite the lack of evidence, we have a right to believe that a superior, but unseen, order of things exists. The ground of this right? The human will. "Believe that life is worth living," he says, "and your belief will help create the fact." From the moral rather than from the skeptical point of view, life is to a large extent simply what we make it.

James' ultimate reasons for rejecting pessimism and opting for life, no matter how adverse, are thus not entirely within the scope of what is traditionally thought to be rational. They lie rather within the scope of the voluntary, or as he also expresses it, within "the deepest thing in our nature ... this dumb region of the heart in which we dwell alone with our willingnesses and our unwillingnesses, our faiths and our fears." Clearly James agrees with Pascal's dictum: "Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas."
Final Assessments

The simple unqualified question, "Is life worth living?" is not particularly difficult to answer. Probably most persons would answer it affirmatively. But if qualified in the manner in which we have been considering it, namely, "Is life worth living even under the most adverse circumstances?" then the question becomes problematic for almost everyone. And it may well be that no single final answer is applicable to all the imaginable cases. As the discussion so far has suggested, and as I now wish to confirm, there are only more or less persuasive reasons for thinking one way or another.

The appeal to "common understanding" is one reason that has been offered. But how persuasive is it? Frequently such general opinions become incorporated in our laws and legal decisions, and it seems proper that they should be. Still, general opinions tend to shift with the times. Not even Justice Holmes found them ultimately persuasive, no matter how clothed they were in existing law. He seemed to prefer utilitarian appeals to the general welfare and to the moral right of a president to determine what modifications in the judicial process ought to occur.

Yet it is clear that even these latter types of considerations might not convince judges such as Judge John C. Pollock who thinks that life in prison under some circumstances would be a "living hell," or someone like Mark Twain who takes a "midnight" view of life, or a poet such as James Thompson who finds comfort in the thought that "the grave's most holy peace is ever sure." On the other hand, Twain's own disjunctive argument regarding the ultimate goodness of death does not convince, probably because of a suspicion that other important human goods have somehow been overlooked. The criteriological tactic of Aristotle, which, as shown, might be used to argue the superior merits of death, also seems arbitrary and inconclusive. James hints at similar flaws in the arguments of "natural theology" and "theodicy." Indeed, there is in general something quite disappointing about strictly rationalistic approaches to value questions such as the one under consideration.

Is James' voluntarist approach, then, the way to go in attempting to answer the question of whether life under even adverse circumstances is worth living? The usual criticism of James' notion of a will to believe is that it promotes pseudo-belief—believing whatever you want to believe. James quite agrees that we have no right to believe on insufficient evidence what by its nature can be decided on purely intellectual, scientific, or factual grounds; but he insists that it is a mistake to suppose that the relation between beliefs and facts is always unilateral and asymmetrical. That is to say, the usual assumption is that beliefs are, or always ought to be, created or justified by facts, not facts created or "justified" by beliefs. His position is that there are cases in which beliefs help create the facts
and in those cases at least we do have a right to believe without "sufficient" evidence or even without any evidence at all. Another way of putting this is to say that in such cases (particularly in the normative areas of human life such as morality and religion) it is perfectly rational, or at least not irrational, to believe without evidence.

While this is not the place to assess James' entire argument, is there anything in the arguments so far considered that might support his contention? To some extent there is. Holmes' reasoning in the case of *Biddle v. Perovich* finds him asserting a right of the President to commute a sentence that the President believed should not be carried out. The basis of this belief? Presumably another belief that Perovich was innocent or at least that he had been punished unjustly. No facts presented at the trial or on appeal supported either belief. How then are we to explain the President's belief and his alleged right? The only way is to conceive the President's belief as helping to create the "fact" of Perovich's innocence and/or the injustice done to him.

Mark Twain's case offers a somewhat similar substantiation of James' reversal of the usual way of thinking about the relation of facts to beliefs and the "rights" which in special cases these relationships tend to confer. Again this case concerns a belief in the normative sphere, not the scientific arena, and one which does not lend itself to decision on purely intellectual grounds alone. Although he might not have realized it, Twain takes what James calls the "initial step" in overcoming his pessimism: he rejects the idea that the natural world with its suffering reflects the presence of a benevolent deity. What reasons did he have? Although some have attributed Twain's disbelief and general negativism to certain facts about his personal life, that explanation is oversimplified. Not antecedent facts but something in his mental attitude—perhaps a morbid reflection on the discrepancy between the belief in a benevolent deity and human suffering—helped create the "fact" of a morally bankrupt natural world.

The instances of Holmes and Twain are only illustrative of what would be needed to substantiate James' belief that life under even wretched circumstances is worth living and that committing suicide is not ultimately an acceptable option (although, James says, one may do so without blasphemy). The Holmes and James examples, however, do suggest several important points about these troublesome questions. The first is that the questions are not the kind to be settled on "intellectual grounds" alone. Second, the relevance and nature of many of the facts which might settle the matter depend on how one looks at them. Furthermore, how one "takes" the facts does bear directly on what rights one has. Nonetheless, James seems to go too far when he suggests that with respect to beliefs that cannot be settled on intellectual grounds there is nonetheless a "right to believe." Perhaps there is only a right to act in certain ways—
for example, to rectify an injustice or to protest a state of affairs.

James would probably not be impressed with this distinction between a right to believe and a right to act. He thinks of belief in pragmatic terms—as involving a willingness to act—and action as entailing a willingness to believe. As he puts the latter point, "... there is some believing tendency whenever there is willingness to act at all." For him the distinction between the two "rights" would be a distinction without a difference.

But can James rationally maintain that view and, in any case, does it support his view that life under adverse circumstances is always worthwhile, if only we believe that it is? For even if we could suppose that a person in a position roughly comparable to that of the dog in James' analogy could willingly believe (despite a total lack of evidence) that his or her misery serves the cause of science, it is equally possible to imagine a person who, like James' dog, cannot see any merit in the whole business and chooses to believe otherwise.

Since we are assuming that no intellectual grounds exist which could settle the matter and that one's rights depend to an extent on how one "takes" the facts, each person has an equal right to their respective beliefs. On James' view, therefore, depending on how we view the situation, we have a right either to believe or not to believe and correspondingly a right either to acquiesce or not to acquiesce. Although this view does not reduce simply to believing whatever one wants to believe irrespective of the facts (because it presupposes belief and action consistent with one's understanding or "taking" of the facts), still in itself it is totally indecisive with respect to which disjunct (believing or not believing) is the more rational. To be told that one has a right "to believe it or not," although a tolerant position, tells nothing about what one ought to do. Perhaps all James should have said was that a person in unenviable circumstances, like the dog's, has at least a right to fight back, to claw, or to scratch, in an attempt to ameliorate his or her life, to make it worth living. To say that there is a right to believe that life is worth living, no matter what the circumstances, and that that belief will make it so, claims too much.

Yet, among all the types of arguments and styles of reasoning which have attempted to rebut the "nightmare view of life" and its perfectly consistent implication of suicide, James' approach seems to come closest to providing reasons for choosing a different point of view. Nightmares are not ordinarily dispelled by reasoning but by actions, and James' theory takes the therapeutic value of action fully into account. And although one solution to life's problems will always remain the act of suicide, James has clearly pointed out that often (if not always) the logic of life-affirmation can be as convincing as the logic of self-destruction.
Notes

2 274 U.S. 480, 71 L.Ed. 1161 (1927).
3 John C. Pollock, District Judge, 9 F.2d 124 (1925).
6 The following summary is based on Justice David J. Brewer’s extensive review of the facts in Perovich v. U.S. (205 U.S. 86) as well as Justice Holmes’s restatement in Biddle v. Perovich (274 U.S. 480).
8 Biddle v. Perovich, 274 U.S. 480.
10 "...[C]ustom is transmuted into positive law when it is adopted as such by the courts of justice, and when the judicial decisions fashioned upon it are enforced by the power of the state. But before it is adopted by the courts, and clothed with legal sanction, it is merely a rule of positive morality.” John Austin, The Province of Jurisprudence Determined, Lecture I.
11 274 U.S. 487. Italics mine.
13 According to Judge Learned Hand in a letter to Mark De Wolfe Howe in the latter’s biography, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Vol. II, The Proving Years (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 8 fn., Holmes also once said in a letter to John H. Wigmore, “Doesn’t the squishy sentimentality of a big minority of our people about human life make you puke?” He had in mind pacifists and others “who believe in the upward and onward—who talk of uplift, who think that something particular has happened and that the universe is no longer predatory. Oh, bring me a basin.” Quoted by Howe, Vol. I, The Shaping Years, p. 25.
16 A couple of episodes seem contradictory. His literary executor, Albert Bigelow Paine, reports him as saying, “If I live two years more I will put an end to it all. I will kill myself,” which his friend, William Dean Howells, characterizes as a mere “pose.” On an earlier occasion, Paine reports, “Clemens once declared he had been so blue at this period that one morning he put a loaded pistol to his head, but found he lacked courage to pull the trigger.” Also a pose? Cf. OMT, pp. 313, 114.
17 Twain’s reputation suffered the usual vicissitudes of famous people. His books did not always sell as well as he would have liked. He eventually had to
declare bankruptcy. He knew the grief of losing loved ones—a brother in a steamboat accident; his first born, Langdon Clemens, at 22 months, of diptheria; his daughter Susy, at age 24 years, of meningitis; his daughter Jean, of epilepsy; and his wife, Livy, after a lifetime of illness, of heart failure, six years before his own death.

18 CSS, pp. 472-473.

19 His reasoning is expressed somewhat rhetorically (Have a carpenter or a flute-player functions, but man as such has none? Do the parts of the body have proper functions, but humans as such do not?). It has often been regarded as fallacious, or at best as inconclusive. Frederick Siegler points out that “it is not clear what sort of implausibility or absurdity would be reached by asserting that carpenters have functions but man as man does not.” See his article, “Reason, Happiness, and Goodness,” in Walsh and Shapiro, eds. Aristotle’s Ethics: Issues and Interpretations (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1967), pp. 33–34.


21 “Is Life Worth Living?” WB, p. 45. Next five quotes are from the same work, pp. 40–43.


26 “Is Life Worth Living?” WB, p. 42. Next two quotes are Ibid., pp. 56, 55.


28 Cf. “The Sentiment of Rationality,” WB, p. 72: “Cognition, in short, is incomplete until discharged in act.” Also, p. 76: “… the test of belief is willingness to act.”


30 Considering the advanced state of medical technology and that “right-to-die” legal rulings have been handed down only in a few states such as New Jersey, it should not be too difficult to imagine persons who are forced by circumstances and against their own wills to submit to artificial and often experimental means of being kept alive.
Dreams and the "Poor, Bare, Fork'd d Animal"

SOME poets are given, when young, a great image that they spend the rest of their lives trying to understand. Great poets are given several. I am going to explore one of the images that run through Shakespeare's creative life, an image dealing with the subject he was most interested in: the nature of the "piece of work" that is man. To present the image most clearly, I will begin in the middle of Shakespeare's consideration of his gift, Lear's comment on the almost naked Tom 'o Bedlam (who is really Edgar in disguise):

Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow'st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha? here's three on's are sophisticated. Thou art the thing itself: unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, fork'd animal as thou art.

(III.iv.102-108) 1

The image then is, in part, "the thing itself," the "poor, bare, fork'd animal," and in part a mysterious something else here called "accommodations."

In the play, just moments before, Lear has been stripped as naked as Tom by his "cormorant" daughters. His 100 knights, who have become in his mind the clothing of his kingliness, his dignity, his manhood, have been torn from him and in his nakedness and helplessness he speaks of the nature of human want:

O, reason not the need! our basest beggars
Are in the poorest things superfluous.
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man's life is cheap as beast's. Thou art a lady;
If only to go warm were gorgeous,
Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st,
Which scarcely keeps thee warm.

(II.iv.264-270)

So, allow not one's "human nature" more than what one's "animal nature" requires and there is no difference in value between animal life and human life; the "poor, bare, fork'd animal" is nothing other than a "poor, bare, fork'd animal."

Shakespeare had worked a long time to come to this awareness, although the striking image which calls it forth was present in his earlier
work. He is 40 or 41 at the time of the writing of *King Lear*, a difficult time in life. His creative powers have carried him into a dark place, a dark place that stretches out over several years, for *King Lear* is preceded by *Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, *Othello*, and is followed by *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, and *Timon of Athens*. This group of plays stretches out over eight years, an incredible output, an incredibly intense output, perhaps the most extraordinary period of time in any writer’s life ever.

Yet even in a brighter time, in the sunny days, drunk at the wedding of language and life, Shakespeare found himself wondering about the relationship between what is in the human irreducible and what he calls in *King Lear* “accommodations,” for what is Christopher Sly in the “Induction” of *The Taming of the Shrew* but an early comic model for that later tragic consideration:

Lord.
What’s here? One dead, or drunk? See, doth he breathe?

2. Hunter
He breathes, my lord. Were he not warm’d with ale,
This were a bed but cold to sleep so soundly.

Lord.
O monstrous beast, how like a swine he lies!
Grim death, how foul and loathsome is thine image!
Sirs, I will practice on this drunken man.
What think you, if he were convey’d to bed,
Wrapp’d in sweet clothes, rings put on his fingers,
A most delicious banquet by his bed,
And brave attendants near him when he wakes,
Would not the beggar then forget himself?

(Induction.i.31–41)

Here are the elements used for the tragedy of *Lear*, but the tone is comic, partly because of the author’s identification with the position of the Lord and partly because Shakespeare has not yet felt his way far enough (For is this not his way? Does he not see things “feelingly?”). Sly is for Shakespeare as well as for the Lord someone to play with, spy on, make fun of, although something in Shakespeare makes him grant Sly a low vital energy and a name, while the Lord is an anonymous, undifferentiated figure of power. But Shakespeare in this scene sides with the rich, the noble, those who use others as relief for the intolerable itch of boredom. It is, perhaps, a young man’s vision.

This same young man’s vision is still present two years later in *1 Henry*
IV, although now it begins to be colored by Shakespeare's consideration of the nature of rule, the nature of a king's responsibility to his kingdom.

In act two, Hal is whiling away the tedious hours in the tavern boozing with and observing his future subjects. He has become a drinking brother with a group of waiters by learning their language and, during the "action," a young underskinker, a waiter's assistant, overcome with love for his future ruler has pressed upon him a gift, a lump of sugar used to sweeten certain wines. Hal, not knowing what to do with it, gives it mockingly to Ned Poins whose legs and values seem to be of the same bigness as his own:

But, sweet Ned—to sweeten which name of Ned, I give thee this pennyworth of sugar, clapp'd even now into my hand by an under-skinker, one that never spake other English in his life than "Eight shillings and sixpence," and "You are welcome," with this shrill addition, "Anon, anon, sir! Score a pint of bastard in the Half-moon," or so.

(II.iv.21-28)

Hal and his friend then set up the poor serving man for an elaborate kind of joke. Poins is to be in the next room calling "Francis, Francis" while the Prince questions his future subject about the why's and wherefore's of the gift. So, the joke:

Prince. Come hither, Francis.
Fran. My lord?
Prince. How long has thou to serve, Francis?
Fran. Forsooth, five years, and as much to—
Poins. [Within.] Francis!
Fran. Anon, anon, sir.
Prince. Five year! by'r lady, a long lease for the clinking of pewter. But, Francis, darest thou be so valiant as to play the coward with thy indenture, and show it a fair pair of heels and run from it?
Fran. O Lord, sir, I'll be sworn upon all the books in England, I could find in my heart—
Poins. [Within.] Francis!
Fran. Anon, sir.
Prince. How old art thou, Francis?
Fran. Let me see—about Michaelmas next I shall be—
Poins. [Within.] Francis!
Fran. Anon, sir. Pray stay a little, my lord.
Prince. Nay, but hark you, Francis: for the sugar thou gavest me, 'twas a pennyworth, was't not?
Fran. O Lord, I would it had been two!
Prince. I will give thee for it a thousand pound. Ask me when thou wilt, and thou shalt have it.
Poins. [Within.] Francis!
Fran. Anon, anon.
Prince. Anon, Francis? No Francis; but tomorrow, Francis; or, Francis, a' Thursday; or indeed, Francis, when thou wilt. But, Francis!
Fran. My lord?
Prince. Wilt thou rob this leathern-jerkin, crystal-button, not-pated, agate-ring, puke-stocking, caddis-garter, smooth-tongue, Spanish-pouch—
Fran. O Lord, sir, who do you mean?
Prince. Why then your brown bastard is your only drink! for look you, Francis, your white canvas doublet will sully. In Barbary, sir, it cannot come to so much.
Fran. What, sir?
Poins. [Within.] Francis!
Prince. Away, you rogue, dost thou not hear them call?

Here they both call him; the drawer; stands amazed, not knowing which way to go.

(II.iv.39–79)

Poins, despite his part in it, does not get the joke. Nor will the Prince explain the point of it when Poins asks “what’s the issue?” Hal responds instead with, “I am now of all humors that have showed themselves humors since the old days of goodman Adam to the pupil age of this present twelve a’ clock at midnight,” which has been glossed in various ways, but, perhaps best comes down to something like, “I felt like it.” But, a moment later, Hal philosophizes “That ever this fellow should have fewer words than a parrot, and yet the son of a woman! His industry is up stairs and down stairs, his eloquence the parcel of a reckoning.” Here, then, is a kingly figure wondering about one of his potential subjects who is “accommodated” as well verbally as Tom o’ Bedlam is sartorially, whose humanness seems to the prince small because his language has been reduced to an “Anon” between reckonings. He cannot even grasp the opportunity that the Prince seems to be thrusting on him to become a thousand pounds richer.

Where are the sympathies of Shakespeare? A complicated question
throughout this play in more areas than this small one. Certainly they are for language and, therefore, perhaps for the Prince; yet there is the love of Francis for his future ruler, the drawer's desire to have his own vision, his own dream of himself, caught up in the "accommodations" of the larger vision of Hal, a desire symbolized by the giving to Hal of the sugar which is both Francis' "widow's mite" and his badge of office; his heart and his livelihood are at the disposal of the prince. Hal uses Francis badly, but bemusedly. He is learning things, and learning, in the case of kings, is often costly for subjects.

Back now to King Lear. Lear too has been learning and his also has been costly for his subjects, but he has learned at last the essential thing about himself and his responsibility as king:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are, 
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm, 
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides, 
Your [loop'd] and windowed raggedness, defend you 
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en 
Too little care of this!

(III.iv.28–36)

Nor does it seem unfair to suggest that Shakespeare too has learned something about the nature of human responsibility towards those whose "accommodations" of "the poor, bare, forked animal" are but "loop'd and windowed." Gone is the sense of frivolousness. Gone is the justifying of the use of the poor and the powerless for amusement, gone is the identification with the whims of the powerful.

Yet the rich image of the human being as something irreducible surrounded by something inexplicable is not yet done with Shakespeare, and, as he turns from consideration of the first part of a human's life—who am I and how should I act in terms of the world—to consideration of that life's second part—who am I and how should I act in terms of eternity—that double image survives as a continuing energy. To illustrate this point, I turn to one of the most original and interesting of Shakespeare's thinkers, Mark Antony of Antony and Cleopatra. Perhaps he is not a natural philosopher, but, when driven into philosophizing, he is very good at it. When it seems as if all the things he desires on earth are lost to him, he turns to his friend and asks:

Eros, thou yet behold'st me?

Eros.

Ay, noble lord.

Ant. Sometime we see a cloud that's dragonish. 
A vapor sometime like a bear or lion, 
A [tower'd] citadel, a pendant rock,
A forked mountain, or blue promontory
With trees upon't that nod unto the world,
And mock our eyes with air. Thou hast seen these signs,
They are black vesper's pageants.

Eros. Ay, my lord.
Ant. That which is now a horse, even with a thought
The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct
As water is in water.

Eros. Ay, my lord.
Ant. My good knave Eros, now thy captain is
Even such a body. Here I am Antony,
Yet cannot hold this visible shape....

(IV.xiv.1-14)

Throughout his play Antony has been as passionately trying to define himself as was Hamlet in his play, and Antony, like Hamlet, has been trying to define himself in terms of action, as if one made one's self by shaping the world to one's will. But now, at the end, we find Antony imagining himself as a continually changing cloud, not a solid thing, for now when the world will not respond to his will, he cannot by his will seem to hold his "visible shape." He cannot say "I am this Antony," or "I am that Antony." Antoniness shifts and changes as the world watches it from the outside and as Antony watches it from the inside. He is conquerer, lover, husband, betrayer, leader, Roman citizen, Egyptian King-God, conquered and foolish general. In his first scene he said "Antony will be himself: 'What, then, will he be?"
The play is in a large measure the working out of that question. And now, before Antony's death, there is this great puzzlement. There is an Antony and there is something that I have called "Antoniness" which is something like the accommodations that have been made, put on, worn, by Antony, that "poor, bare, fork'd creature" who lives at the center. It is, in part, the clothing of personality and possibility, luck and vision, success and failure which surround us like a cloud, "an insubstantial pageant" of changing shapes. Surely this is a sense of things reflected by one of the least philosophical of women, Cleopatra, when, right after the death of Antony, she is addressed by Iras as "Royal Egypt! Empress!" She replies "No more but [e'en] a woman, and commanded/By such poor passion as the maid that milks/And does the meanest chares." "Egypt" and "Empress" are but dresses that a woman wears, and the "poor, bare, fork'd animal" beneath the royal dress is driven by love in the same way that the "poor, bare, fork'd animal" beneath the simpler dress of the milk-maid is.

Is Shakespeare saying only that "The colonel's lady and Rosie O'Grady are sisters under the skin"? No. Shakespeare is not one of those writers
who turn our lives into a “nothing but,” in the phrase Carl Jung used to sum up the understanding of those whose theories reduce life’s mysteries into cliches.

In The Tempest, the last play that engaged Shakespeare’s full creative powers, Shakespeare thinks his last public thought on what it is to be human. When the wedding pageant is interrupted, Prospero tells the young couple perhaps more than they are yet able to grasp:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors
(As I foretold you) were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air,
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp’d tow’rs, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And like this insubstantial pageant faded
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

(IV.i.148–158)

When I first started teaching Shakespeare years ago I used a text that glossed the “on” in “We are such stuff as dreams are made on” as “of,” yielding “We are such stuff as dreams are made of.” This in paraphrase is, human beings are the substance out of which dreams are made. I do not want to argue that Shakespeare never used “on” in such a way. Rather, I wish to suggest that in The Tempest, Shakespeare’s last wrestling with the whatness of being human, he meant exactly what he wrote: that it is the nature of the human creature to have dreams, that we, the irreducible stuff of “poor, bare, fork’d animal,” are accommodated, are clothed finally in our dreams which surround us like an aura, a nimbus, a cloud. Nor is it something over which we have control. It is what we are. It is the nature of the stuff that is human to have dreams made on it; our lives are spent in trying to bind the dream to the body; and what can hold them together seems to have something to do with the nature of language.

In The Tempest, Shakespeare, who, like all poets, loves to take his metaphors literally, has given us the most graphic presentation of the “thing itself”—Caliban. Directors who emphasize Caliban’s animality over his humanness miss the whole point. Although he has learned the language and says that his only profit from this knowledge is that he knows how to curse, it is also true that he knows the stuff of dreams and that his language can convey it:
Be not afeard, the isle is full of noises, 
Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not. 
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments 
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices, 
That if I then had wak'd after long sleep, 
Will make me sleep again, and then in dreaming, 
The clouds methought would open, and show riches 
Ready to drop upon me, that when I wak'd 
I cried to dream again. 

(III.ii.135–143)

What are Caliban’s dreams? He dreams of love (for what is love but a dream of language put upon our urge to reproduce, our itch to “people” the “isle with Calibans”); he dreams of revenge; he dreams of the kingdom he thought his mother wanted him to have; he dreams of something worthy to serve (a “brave god” bearing a “celestial liquor”); and he dreams of those riches beyond ordinary human utterance which sometimes seem to fill the universe. In short, he dreams the dreams we all dream.

When, at the end of the play, Prospera calls out—“this thing of darkness/ I acknowledge mine,” who of us can do other than sigh, yes. And when the “brave monster” says “I’ll be wise hereafter,/ And seek for grace;” is he not dreaming our most human dream?—for Prospera is a dream of Caliban’s as Antony is a dream of Cleopatra’s—that man whose “legs bestrid the ocean,” whose “bounty had no winter in it,” whose delights were “dolphin-like.” And when that great lady who is herself a dream of herself asks Dollabella “Think you there was or might be such a man/ As this I dreamt of?” he must answer “Gentle madam, no;” but she who is speaking (in Arnold Stein’s marvelous phrase) for “the lyric imagination asserting itself against brute fact,” must cry “You lie up to the hearing of the living gods!” (Not that Shakespeare ever left brute fact for long.) When Hal becomes king, he is able at Agincourt to find the language to flesh out the dreams of all the underskinkers at his command, dreams of brotherhood and a nobility that is an achievement of the soul’s longing:

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; 
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me 
Shall be my brother; be he ne’er so vile, 
This day shall gentle his condition.

(IV.iii.60–63)

And to finish now with the beginnings of this image, when in the “Induction” of The Taming of the Shrew Christopher Sly wakes up bathed
and clothed in silks surrounded by food and servants and a lovely young wife, he asks:

Am I a lord, and have I such a lady?
Or do I dream? Or have I dream’d till now?
I do not sleep; I see, I hear, I speak;
I smell sweet savors, and I feel soft things.
Upon my life, I am a lord indeed,
And not a tinker, nor Christopher Sly.

(Induction.ii.68–73)

Now while it is true that the lord seems to have arranged for Sly “a flatt’ring dream or worthless fancy,” that “fancy” raises real questions about the real difference between a tinker and a lord, questions about the nature of human life itself, questions that Shakespeare explored for the rest of his creative life as he dealt again and again with the image of the “poor, bare, fork’d animal” and his dreams.

1All quotations from the plays are from The Complete Works of Shakespeare, ed., David Bevington (Scott, Foresman and Company, 1980).

Coda

Letter to Paul Cantrell

Dear Paul,

Saturday morning, the Hangout, after-class coffee with John Aden whose comp class I am flunking, you join us mug cupped in both hands, stare at it, blow in it, look up and say—

O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth....
John is amused, but I watch your face light up with the pleasure of saying, and it is that I now remember. It had for me "no slight or trivial influence." I've said those lines myself—once to a pretty girl who'd magicked my tongue—and it worked, a charm against witchcraft, and once in a cold place, in a cold time, I heard in them some deep longing of mine. Now I see you in the alumni paper dressed up as Lear, playing that last role before you retire.

I am twenty years older than you were when you joined us for coffee, have taught Lear for lots of those years, always with uneasiness, with a sort of apology for making the class read what was uncomfortable, unpleasant, its magnificence my only excuse—that and the schedule—telling them that though I was certain Lear was something they needed to read, it was not clear to me they needed to read it now when learning to free in themselves the energy of doing, wondering if I should tell such unmarked faces that on the road to Dover, the best of us are blind or breaking mad, if I should explain how easy it is to be old before one is wise—how the word one wants to hear is the word to distrust—how virtue does not pay off in any simple coin, and wondering if that were my job or the arrogance of one too long paid to talk while others must listen.

Paul, what was it like to get caught up in the wail of that great storm puddering and spouting about our lives? I remember playing old men for West Hill my shoulders slumping further with each production until I was ready for the rocking chair before I could buy legally the bourbon that floated Saturday night at the SAE house, so I know how even ordinary language enchants the soul. Did the rage of things possess you? Did you start in the night to the rock of wild words true but beyond sense? at last, play's end when you carried Cordelia's tipped and empty body, what in you spilled? what knowledge came to you when on the stage you lay dead.
and the world's unbelievable ongoingness kept on going
about your open ears, and when you woke to applause—

I see West there, and Charley, and their lovely wives,
and Barbara Hanson, I see them rising to their feet
that fine new theatre filled with the sounds
of clapping hands, and from the balcony
your students, self-conscious, first one
faint "bravo" then another then an ocean
at last one wag cries "author" and all
subsides in a rustle of laughter and a shuffle
of feet towards the the exit doors.

what did it mean?—what does it all mean?

Well, Paul, my 30th reunion this fall. I guess I will
not make it. Broke and busy—yet your joke and those years
are not yet done with me. Strange.

With thanks,
Nils
The other day in Washington a total stranger told me about what I suppose was the most important moment in my life, and you know something? I still don’t remember it, I don’t remember it at all.

I had got out of the lunch with Horrocks and all those people about three, and I had nothing more to do on the Hill so I came back to the hotel.

It was the kind of thing that makes me look forward to retiring. To me nothing is more boring than talking to a bunch of lawyers and their attaché cases full of insurance legislation. They know more about the bills than the people who wrote them up. Personally, I couldn’t care less. They do their job and I do mine, and the only reason I come down to Washington at all any more is to show the flag for Chapman, Morrison, as my father would say.

By the time I got to the room it was almost four, and DeeDee was out shopping, so I went back down to the bar. What do these women do with all this stuff? She can get all the same things in Boston, same stores, same labels, and anyway she already has just about everything there is, but she has to go down to some place called The Shops, such an imaginative name, and walk till her ankles puff up and maybe buy one thing or not even that. Oh well, we love ’em.

My father used to come here when it was still the Statler with the great 20s lobby, and even I remember when it was the Statler Hilton. Being an old geezer, I still call it that, and DeeDee tells me no, I’ve got it wrong. She has been telling me that I have things wrong ever since she was DeeDee Morrison and I was invited to a house party at her house the year after I joined the firm. You don’t think they have arranged marriages in America anymore? The bar is called The Bar. Another great name. I bet a committee named it. There was no one in it.

I swung onto a seat in front of the bartender. “You got Glenlivet?” I said. He did. I made a study of malt scotches a few years ago, a very thorough study indeed. Brooks Eddy and I went through just about every malt they
export and some they don't. We had the empties lined up in his study all across the wall, and it got so bad that Patricia wouldn't let us discuss them at dinner any more because it really is boring. I have to admit it myself. It's worse than wines. DeeDee never minded but she never pays much attention anyway. Half the time she's thinking about her Grey Lady work at the hospital. She reads to the blind people. A lovely voice, I'll say that. The best malt scotch I came up with finally was The MacAllen, which is aged in old sherry casks and you can just catch a whiff of the nutty sweetness of a fine amontillado around the edges as you swallow. I lay in a few cases every year, get it from my dealer in London.

But in a hotel you're lucky if you can find Glenlivet.

"Good stuff," I said. The bartender ran a cloth along the polished wood and nodded in an easy way. Big guy, about two-fifty, big in the chest and neck. He had white hair but cut it short. I would bet he was pushing retirement age and wanted to look as young as he could without dyeing it. You wouldn't catch me dyeing my hair. But mine's only gray so maybe I shouldn't talk. Then again, I don't have to worry about being let go.

He was still nodding as though considering my words of wisdom. Finally he decided to agree.

"The best," he said.

"I tried 'em all," I said.

We were silent for awhile. I sipped the drink. It's a great winter drink for in front of the fire with The Times crossword puzzle on your lap. The place for drinking whisky is London, of course, and I always remember a weekend I spent there in a wonderful old house the Morrisons rented one year. It was January, when the sun goes down about three o'clock and the air gets raw and wet, and you are oh so glad to be inside by a roaring fire, and you're launching into Pickwick Papers and the butler is waiting in the pantry to bring you a refill. Washington in January isn't quite the same, but it's cold, I will say that for it.

The bartender looked around the place in a proprietary way. It is a circular bar in the middle of the room, with tables along the walls. "I get some calls for this. Just this last year."

"They big on malt whisky in Washington?"

"Now and then you get a group in," he said politely. His arms in the olive-green jacket were pushing at the seams. "This is still a bourbon town, basically."

"What was it? Southern efficiency and northern charm?"

"Yeah." He laughed.

Then he turned to put his cloth down and I saw his left ear. The top half-inch had been sheared off straight as a ruler.

I almost dropped my drink. I sat there a minute watching him wipe out an old-fashioned glass that was already clean. I finished my drink and set it down on the napkin in front of me.
“You could do me another, I guess,” I said. “Have one yourself.”

“Why, I thank you.” He nodded at me, tilting his head in that easy, practiced way, and poured himself a bit of the same. He took a sip and set the glass down behind the bar. For a moment I wondered if there was some house policy or other, but I figured he could take care of himself. He had a certain insolence about him that you don’t find in the insurance business.

“Were you in the Marine Corps?” I said. He glanced at me quickly.

“Yeah.”

“Were you at Tarawa?”

He reached down, picked up his glass, sipped, put the glass down again, and looked at me. “Yeah.”

“I was in the Second Marines,” I said. “First Battalion. I think I remember you.”

“I was Second Battalion.”

“You hit Red Two.”

“Right.”

“I remember your ear.”

He sort of smiled and reached up and felt along the straight edge. “You knew I was at Tarawa because of this?”

“I remember it. I remember you.” I was almost as surprised as he was when I heard myself saying this. I don’t normally chat up bartenders.

He looked straight at me. “Well. Could be. It was a while ago. Nobody knows about Tarawa anymore.”

You hear about Iwo Jima because of the picture. And Okinawa, and maybe Guadalcanal. But not many people remember Tarawa. I hardly do myself. God knows, it was the last place on earth I expected to be or wanted to be when I got through boot camp. I only went into the Marine Corps because my father was in it in World War I. He went in a private and came out a major, so of course I was supposed to do the same thing. I came out a PFC.

The first three waves went in in amtracs that could climb over the coral. The rest of us came in Higgins boats, and the tide was so low we ran aground 800 yards out and had to walk in under fire. I heard later there was a guy who actually had lived on the island and he told Washington the reef would be almost out of the water at low tide that time of year, which was November. But Washington said Oh no, they had their own tide experts right there in an office in Washington who said there would be five feet of water. So they used Higgins boats.

There were 5,000 Japs on that little island. Two miles long and not a half-mile wide in the widest part, and they had this network of pillboxes and concrete blockhouses that their admirals said couldn’t be taken by a million men in a hundred years. I heard that afterwards. They didn’t tell us those things when we were circling out beyond the surf in our Higgins
boats waiting to go in.

It was a beautiful day, I guess you would say that, but all I remember is that you couldn't look at the sky, the sun was so blinding bright, even the blue hurt your eyes. I remember being so scared out there in the boat, staring in at the beach with the men scattered all over it and the long pier just to the left.

It was Red Beach Two, the center of the attack, and when the boats started blowing up all around us I don't remember being scared any more, just extremely busy. I wanted to get to shore, you see. You could either walk and slosh right through or lie down in the water and dog-paddle across the little pools that were maybe a foot deep, six inches deep. Your hands got scratched to pieces. That's one thing I do remember: the goddam coral being so sharp. Everybody had scratches on their noses. You'd try to make yourself so low, you'd try to creep into your helmet like a turtle. You had to crawl across the places where there was no water at all, and then finally you'd gather your legs under you and make a run for the seawall.

It was made of palm logs three feet high. I don't remember getting there, not at all, but then there I was, pressed up close to it, hugging it because the bullets were coming right over the top, kicking up the sand and making a constant little spray on my helmet. I am told we were stuck there all day, the first waves. Hours anyway.

You could look back and see bodies all over the reef, smashed amtracs, barbed wire with bodies on it, places where bodies had been piled up to make little forts when we were still trying to get up to the seawall. Beyond the coral, more Higgins boats were circling and coming in in rows, but most of them didn't even get to the coral. What we could see of the atoll itself was very little: a junk heap of blackened concrete, crazily twisted reinforcing rods, ripped fronds, everywhere tattered palms and devastated foliage and white powder dusting over everything.

Except for a few quick pictures like that, which could easily be something I saw in a movie, about all I remember is lying there and hearing the sand raining on my helmet. I heard there was a sergeant named Bordelon who jumped clean over the seawall and ran up to a pillbox and threw a satchel charge into it, and went on to do two more, and came back, picked up more satchel charges and then went out again and got killed. He won the Medal of Honor. I do remember—or do I?—some guy down the line staggering back to the seawall from out front with a big dark stain blossoming on his dungaree jacket. I thought it was sweat.

I was suddenly aware there was a guy lying next to me. I have no idea how long he'd been there. A big guy, older, a PFC—I was still a private at that point—hunched over his rifle and ducking down like I was, curled in the lee of the wall. His helmet was cocked slightly sideways and he kept fingering his left ear, and then I saw that the top of it had been sheared off.
He would touch the ear gingerly with his fingertips and then stare at the fingers, which were bloody but not very. I remember being surprised that there wasn't more blood, because usually when you cut your ear it bleeds all over the place. I figured it must have been seared by the bullet. I was just surprised to see how neat and clean and straight the cut was.

I guess the reason I remember it at all is that this was the last thing I remember at Tarawa. I woke up in a transport called the McMahon that was doubling as a hospital ship. I had a concussion and a broken arm and a terrible sunburn from lying around in the sun for I don't know how long. The fighting lasted three days, but I couldn't have been out there that long.

We had to go all the way back to Honolulu, 2,000 miles, and I remember being encouraged to get out of the bunk very quickly because the place was jammed. There wasn't enough of this or enough of that, and the gutshot people were dying because they hadn't been got to soon enough and the medics had run out of first-aid kits almost on the first day, and soon after that they had run out of corpses that still had kits on them. I would watch the bodies being tilted over the side, slipping out from under the spread flag like toothpaste out of a tube. The smell was everywhere. It was on the bottoms of everyone's shoes and it got rubbed into the deck and scraped off on the pebbled steel steps of the companionways. That's all I remember of Tarawa.

"I was behind that seawall," I told the bartender. "On Red Two. I was right next to you, and you were holding your ear."

He looked at me for a long time, mouth hanging a little open, eyes narrowed. One hand still held the drink, resting on the work surface beside the sink.

"A kid," he said.

"I was 18."

He lifted his glass, still staring at me. Then he smiled. "You were that kid." He put back the glass without looking.

"You being there is the last thing I remember."

His smile kept growing. He was looking at me as if I were a different person altogether.

"This kid came barreling in there like a ton of bricks. Almost landed right on me."

"You were first wave?"

"Second. We were froze. We weren't going any place. For a minute I thought you were some kid officer who was gonna roust us outta there."

The man leaned forward almost confidentially. "You know what you said? You said, 'Lovely day, huh?' I'll never forget it."

He shook his head, still smiling, and poured us both some more whisky, casually, not like a bartender at all.
"Lovely day. I'll never forget it."
I tried to remember.

"You were grinning like a little boy, all excited. You had some blood on your chin. You got your breath and looked around like you owned the place and then you said, 'Well I'll be seein' ya!' and you jumped up and stepped right over the goddam wall."

"Really? My God."

"The officers were yellin' at us, tryin' to get us moving. I think a couple others went out too. Not me. Not me." He grunted and picked up his bar cloth and swabbed vaguely at the varnished wood.

"What happened?"

"Oh, something went up. Artillery, I don't know. They had us zeroed in there pretty good. Time the dust settled everybody was back behind the wall. I didn't see you again so I figured you were either out there or you came back to a different place."

Two men strutted in, as men will do in a bar, and sat a few seats away. The bartender went over to take care of them, and I got out my wallet. DeeDee would be up in the room by now, and we were going to dinner at the Senator's. I gave the guy my card, and he wrote his address on the back of a check. I found it in my wallet the other day. His name is Rohrer and he lives in Wheaton.

DeeDee had discovered a neat little silver picture frame that folds up so you can have it in your luggage. Only $75, she said. I asked her whose pictures she would put in it and she said, "Why, Sally and Bill's." They're our children. Then it turned out she had a fullscale fantasy about having a photographer come to the house when they're home next Christmas and making formal portraits of us all. "We don't have any really nice ones, you know. Not really since our wedding."

I don't mind it, you understand. It's just that she talked the same way when we were engaged, making plans to spend my money and following through on them with great energy. She just doesn't have the slightest idea what money is, never did. When I asked her father for her hand—we did that, you know, back in the 40s—he said, "Well, Bill, I wish you luck. She's used to getting her way. Afraid her mother had something to do with that. But she's a good girl."

Words of wisdom from the great Charles Morrison. He did one intelligent thing in his entire life, and that was to make my father a partner and let him run the business. Now I run it, still, along with a couple of guys you never heard of. My son wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole. He's a television writer, makes about five times what I did at his age. I reminded him when he was in college that I couldn't do a thing for him in that field, we had nobody in the family who was in it, but you know how kids are. I remember when I was his age I used to think about getting into something that wasn't insurance. But what?
"Oh do come on, William," she said. "We're going to be late. We'll never get a taxi."

She was scolding me because she wanted me to hire a limo while we were in Washington but I refused. Frankly, I find them a nuisance. You're tied to them just as much as they're tied to you. You have to tell them where you'll be, and you can't just change your mind.

I got my hat and we went out and stood in the corridor waiting for the elevator.

"You look lovely, my dear," I said. She is getting a little chunky, but God knows so am I. She still has that very blond hair in little curls.

"Do remember about mixing," she said. She was reminding me that the Senator always throws a lot of wines at you during dinner, and if I have more than one scotch beforehand I get a terrible headache and am impossible to be with all the next day. I can't hold it the way I used to.

We stepped into the elevator and stood facing the door. Such a funny life we lead. Here we are, going down at a rate that would burst your heart if you were running on stairs. If we were in a plane we'd be squinting behind our goggles and gritting our teeth in the wind. But we just stand there looking straight ahead, looking at nothing while all this work is being done for us by a bunch of machines we don't know a thing about.

"They've just been to Indonesia," she said.

"Who, the Senator?"

"You haven't heard a thing I've said."

"I have."

She didn't say any more. The elevator was taking forever. I was thinking about that kid I didn't remember, the laughing kid with the bloddy chin. What was I trying to do, to jump up like that? It didn't seem like me at all. I couldn't get over it, the grin, the bravado, that eager young person who exists now only in the memory of a bartender from Wheaton, Maryland; the person who used to be me.
Loving Mama

Judith Windt

I am on a difficult journey this summer, serving time in the East where thunderstorms boil up long after you have lost hope for them. I am visiting my mama, who is tiny, Hungarian, and Jewish. She and my daughter and I are all pressed into the hot little spaces of her apartment. Four days ago before I left for the visit, they vacuumed out a baby that died in me. My mama is a meticulous housekeeper. She dusts and scrubs and sprays against the smells, and vacuums twice weekly. I come clean to her and unassailable.

Today is like all the other days of this visit, clamped-down, suffocating. It is always before a thunderstorm here. My mama has flung open the windows to catch the steaming gritty air, but when the rain does come, slanting horizontally, she shuts the windows down tight, and the cool remains outside.

This is the third day. We have gotten through the chicken, the rice, and the cold Hungarian green bean soup that she had prepared for us in quantities before our arrival. It is time to cook again.

In the grocery store, beside the broccoli, my mama, who has been cooking all her life, faces me helplessly, all the lines in her cheeks drawn down. She asks me, "Is it fresh enough? Is it all right?" My daughter jets up and down the aisles, demands grapes and blueberries, talks to every stranger, abruptly sings and dances in the blessed coolness of the produce section. Wonderingly, wearily, I say, "Yes, the broccoli is good."

Mama says, "Then pick. You pick out a bunch."

We carry the groceries the six blocks home. My daughter, intolerant of small discomforts, whines every step of the way now that we are in the heat again. Mama and I wear our stoicism like generals' stripes. Inside, we unpack the bags. Then the child runs ahead of me down to the courtyard to splash in the other children's rubber swimming pools. Clusters of mothers stand under the two trees and watch their children. There are no benches to sit on and it does not occur to them to bring chairs or to sit on the grass. The children splash, shout. The mothers shift from one foot to
another. One of them occasionally bends to support a newly-walking baby by its upreaching hands before catching him up to her hip again.

I come back inside, into the steaming air, and walk stiffly through the living room and the dining alcove to the kitchen. It is about the size of a walk-in closet. When you open the refrigerator door, you can't walk past it. If two people work in there, they end up reaching under each other's elbows. So I let my mama cook. From the kitchen, I pace back to the living room and kneel on the couch to check on my daughter outside. She's splashing with the others. I go to the bathroom and uncrank the frosted window to its fullest and peer around it to catch a glimpse of the Hudson, or is it the rails of the city train? It's the flash of something pouring onward at breakneck speed. Between the buildings I can see where someone has opened a hydrant. Skinny brown bodies leap in and out of the torso-thick stream.

I pace back to the kitchen, where mama is already plunged into the cooking. She works with her elbows out to the side, sending up clouds of steam as she parboils cabbage leaves, drains rice into a colander, stirs ground beef into the warped old pitted skillet. Peering into the alcove, I can hardly see her through the clouds of steam; coming closer, I see that her lips are parted; she is panting slightly and her skin is shiny and damp. She is stirring up an egg with the rice and meat; now she is rolling the mixture up into the cabbage leaves and dropping them into a pot of simmering tomato juice. The food is going to be red again; if there are no tomatoes, there is always the paprika to give it a bloody touch. The smell of the food makes my stomach clamp tight. I am always hungry, never want to eat.

Mama has clamped down the pressure-cooker lid on the cabbage rolls. In 20 minutes, the meal is ready. I go downstairs, dry my protesting child, and bring her upstairs. Daughters and mothers, the whole crowd of us, sit down at the table together. I refuse the apple sauce and the clotted tomato juice. I eat a cabbage roll and some potato. My mama wants me to have more potato, my mama wants me to eat some broccoli, my mama says there is a little of the bitter Taylor wine left in the refrigerator. I eat only what there is room for in my clenched stomach. My daughter eats three bowls of oversweetened applesauce and refuses anything more. She jumps up and wants to go down and play again.

"Let her," my mother says. "She has eaten well; all that good healthy applesauce."

"Yes," I answer. "The only reason she likes it is it's all sugar."

"No, no. She will stay healthy and keep her figure if she likes fruits so well." But to me she says, "More potato? A little leftover rice in the refrigerator? I could warm it up. Some chicken soup? You could eat it cold. Now would you like some chocolate cake for dessert? Cold coffee? Or a peach? Have some grapefruit. Have a little whipped cream on your
cake, you need to bring your strength back up, I think you are weak now, you need sweets and rich foods." My stomach twists firmly.

I have been trying to hide from her that the suctioning and subsequent bleeding have worn me down, weakened me. Now I wonder if she can actually tell, or if she simply assumes the weakness.

My mama continues to sit at the table, suffering with the heat, saying, "You know me; I love the heat. It never bothers me, but this is ridiculous." And she takes her fourth cabbage roll, eats another potato, helps herself to vegetable. Her face mourns at the heat. She says, "This is terrible for you. That it should be such terrible weather for your vacation."

Later I wrestle my daughter to bed in the stifling room, and then sit by her in the roar of the ineffectual wall fan until she has fallen asleep. It's peaceful in the dim room. Reluctantly, after I have listened to her loud, even breathing for a few minutes, I walk out into the living room, almost swimming with my arms, hunching up my shoulders to make my legs walk, my own marionetteer. Mama instantly puts the newspaper down and smiles. She seems to be sitting underwater in a yellow pool of light.

"Let's talk," she says.

She is wearing a very old mid-length gown that is torn up both side seams to the tops of her thighs. I glance at her lap, because she is holding in it an unusually long cabbage roll. Thinking that I am looking disapprovingly at her scanty dress—it looks as if she is not wearing underpants because the hip portion of her thighs is exposed—she says comfortably, "Oh, I have underwear on."

There is a paper napkin under the cabbage roll. It is not covered with gravy. It looks as if it has been baked in the oven for a couple of hours on low to dry it out and give it a leathery consistency.

She begins to talk. She says, "Why hasn't your husband come with you? Never have I heard of a husband and wife going on a vacation separately. What have I ever done to make him hate me so? Do you hate your mother-in-law as much as he hates his? How does she feel, that you have not come to visit her? It is as if you both are simply copying the funny-papers. All those mother-in-law jokes. When I became a mother-in-law, I thought it would be different for me; my children would never act like that to me as they do in the jokes. But now it seems that I am wrong. I have never been anything but kind, generous, and loving to him. I have been willing to forgive him for everything. Don't you have any power over your husband? A woman should have influence over the man she married. You think you are so woman's lib—are you afraid to tell your husband how to behave properly? You have to force him to love me!" I feel as if she has put me on a subway car dipping under the Hudson, and I helplessly grip the swaying seat.

She says, "Families should stay together. I am alone. First, your hus-
band, never, never has he been civil to me. Then my sisters. All I give them is love and gentle words, and what do I get back but abuse. If I had just one good friend. But I am alone. Entirely alone."

I do not answer. I am responsible for her loneliness as I am for my husband's deep hate.

She says, "If not a friend, at least my children. My son could take me twice a year to a symphony, a nice restaurant, a movie. He knows I love to go out. But never would I complain. Never would I tell him. Of course he is busy with his work, and still he is short of money. But once he could spend a little less on his hobbies. And you. You are so polite to me during this visit. So polite and so cold. Secretly, you must have deep hate for me too." She pauses for my denial, but as I don't speak, she goes on.

"You know, you spoil that child too much. You let her wrap you around her little finger. What is this business at breakfast, you tell her she needs to eat protein? Three years old. You explain too much. That is the fad now. Treat your children like they are human beings. There will be time for that when she is older. Don't explain!"

Escape is impossible. I cannot answer. I cannot say how I hate her. She would be hurt. She would refuse to believe it. She would be angry at me if I let her know.

She says, "You probably turn her against me. My own granddaughter, just like the rest of her family. No love. No respect for anyone. She won't sit on my lap for a minute. Her own granny, and shows no affection. What have I done to make her hate me so deeply? I show nothing but love for her. Next time she shouts at me, I will show her I do not care."

I do not answer. I sit patiently, waiting for it to be over, but it has never gone on for so long before. The lamplight is blinding hot.

The cabbage roll still lies in her lap. It has not fallen apart. Somehow, I had thought she was going to beat me with it, as with a leather truncheon. She takes a hearty bite out of it.

My limbs feel bruised. Outside, I hear a faint swishing of breeze, something we have not felt for days. I feel a sudden drop, then a fresh trickling into the pad between my legs. I excuse myself politely, go to the bathroom and change the pad. Dully I wonder why it is suddenly soaked. Blood even shows on the other side. I use three handfuls of toilet paper. Outside the wind is gusting in several directions. I flush the toilet, and when I come out, my mama has closed the windows in the living room, bedroom and kitchen. She sits down again, demure in her blue ragged nightgown. She takes a hearty bite out of it.

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She says she doesn't like the way my hair is. Tonight it is hanging limply; I have never worn it in a way she likes—uptwist, waved, straight, behind the ears, loose in my face, back from my face, long down my back, cropped to my head.

Finally, I try out an answer.

“Well,” I say, hoarse and hesitating, making my voice an expressionless antidote to the poison words, for all words spoken to her are poison, “You usually... you never... you just haven't liked it whatever way...”

“What is this? What do you mean, ‘never’? I only want your best interest for you. A little bit of advice I give you, and you condemn me for my whole life. This is the way you have been during this whole visit—always sulking and gloomy. Well? So what is it? Is something wrong?”

There are no words for me to use. She is oppressed, and she is my oppressor. I have to protect her and care for her against my hatred. But I want her to stop. I am too tired for any more of this night interrogation.

“Well,” I say, “I have been feeling bad. I have been depressed about the—” The word “baby” burns my mouth; I am afraid to say it. She must not know that I am woman enough to grieve for my lost child, for my womb to bleed, even for me to choose what to eat. If she did, she might explode hugely in a dying, and at that instant of the world’s dying, I would be responsible for it all.

“Oh, the D. & C. Well, then you need to get some rest;” she says.

“Have I been telling you, you overexert yourself. You never listen to me.”

The rain has stopped swinging and flying and is now pouring steadily, I’m pouring, something has let go. I excuse myself again. Dully I note that I have passed a blood clot far bigger than the dead child who had to be sucked out.

I come out hastily and stand before her, swaying.

“I think I’ll go to sleep now,” I tell her. “I’m bleeding again some.”

“Yes, go to bed. Drink a glass of cold tomato juice before you go. Here, let me get it for you. Anyway, it was a good talk. I feel better now that I have gotten it off my chest.” She hugs me as if it meant love and goes to sleep on her bed.

I pour the juice back into the pitcher and go lie down on the double guestbed beside my daughter whose stentorian breathing is audible even above the roar of the wall fan. The blood seems to flow slower when I am lying down. My whole body is bruised but there are no giveaway marks on it. I wonder if she is the one who pulled the plug in me. The rain outside diminishes, comes back in gusts, stops. Inside it is as hot and humid as before, and I feel as if I’ve been worked over by gangsters, but it was only my tiny mamafia. I sob, as I’ve sobbed for the past two nights,
into the gale of the fan and my daughter's heavy breathing. I expect to fall asleep exhausted. But, sobbing finished, I find I am wide awake. It is impossible to phone anyone, husband or friend, for the polished white phone on its short cord is three feet from her open bedroom door. She leaves it open to catch the cross-ventilation, to keep track of us.

Coming out to the living room, I pass her lying neatly on her back, small and dangerous in her blue gown. I stop and listen, monitoring the evenness of her breathing, and continue on to the kitchen. Careful. Vigilant. I open the refrigerator door and the bulb lights up the kitchen in a chilly moon color, the only suggestion of coolness in the hot night which wraps around me like a wet quilt. A cockroach suddenly runs behind the cabinet, moving abruptly as if guilty, caught in a wrong act. In the city, they harry the cleanest housewives. Avoiding the salty red tomato juice, I drink iced water, then iced tea, dousing my anger and grief for the night. Then I close the refrigerator door, wash the glass, dry it and put it away. I lie down again, terrified that I'll bleed away before I catch my plane home.

But in the morning I call a gynecologist and get leave to go to the hospital. The three of us take the subway and I find the waiting room. Reluctantly, I let mama take my daughter back to the apartment. But I am also relieved to be alone.

The receptionist types up my form and tells me to wait for the aide to take me down. After a few minutes, a large young woman ambles in and calmly leads me down to Emergency. We go into a little locker room where she helps me on with a green gown. She lets me keep my watch and glasses. Neither bored nor concerned about all the blood that continues to leak out of me, she neatly slips a pad under me as I get onto the gurney. She wheels me into the emergency room and leaves. I lie there observing the pipes criss-crossing the ceiling. Suddenly, several nurses converge on me, along with a pudgy short man of 60 with his operating mask and cap already on.

"Hello, I'm Dr. Cohen," he says. We have met only over the phone. His eyes behind pink-framed glasses are all that show of his head and face. They are humorous and interested, expressive the way a nun's eyes are. He reaches out to shake my hand. At his touch, my tears suddenly well up and drip absurdly into my ears.

"What are you crying for, heh?" he asks with mock sternness.

"I'm just getting tired of this."

"Who wouldn't? Who wouldn't? And you think this is the end of it—you still have to see me at my office Tuesday. Then you'll find out what I really look like under this monkey suit. Save your crying for that."

"Why? I was about to compliment you on your beauty." I laugh, surprising myself.

"That's what they all say before the operation. Save it till after—then I'll
know you’re sincere.”

The nurse beside me flips out a little tray attached to the gurney, and, laying my arm along it, inserts a needle.

“What’s that for?” I ask.

“I.V. needle,” she replies. “We have to give you a sedative and a pain killer.”

Quickly I say, “Oh, no, you’d better not. I’m going home alone by taxi right after, so I can’t have a sedative. And maybe I’d better just try to manage with the local.”

“She’s right,” barks Cohen. “The lady knows what she needs. Get it out, get it out.” The nurse withdraws the needle and tapes up the puncture, then wheels up the vacuum machine while Cohen scrubs and dons gloves. He gets to work on me, breathing heavily the way old fat people or children do when they are concentrating. He is rougher and brisker than my doctor back home in California. It hurts, and I grab the hand of the I.V. nurse who is still sitting beside me.

“That’s O.K., honey,” she says, squeezing back and keeping her eyes on the dials of the vacuum machine. “He’s almost done now.”

“Yup, I’m done,” wheezes Cohen. “There was still some material in the uterus. Products of conception, as we say in the trade. Such things happen. The aspirator can miss some of the materials. The womb thinks it’s an ‘incomplete’ and tries to bleed it out.”

Within a few minutes, I have put my clothes back on, found my own way upstairs, and called a taxi. I ask one of the pink ladies for a pair of scissors to cut off the hospital bracelet. Scraped and hollowed out, chinking like stemware, I make my way to the hospital driveway and sit on a low wall under fragrant lindens, waiting for my taxi. Too soon, it comes.

It is days later. The whole family is finally at the airport. The air-conditioning struggles with the wet hot air; we alternately sweat and dry, salt-grained. Together, we go to the gate. My daughter, crackling with eagerness to get on the plane, still finds time to pester me for candy from the machine. Mama’s face is stoical. I am gracious with relief. We exchange a round-robin of family hugs. Mama says to me, “We had a pretty good visit this time.”

“Except for my little problem,” I reply, using a euphemism for the hemorrhage.

“No, what do you mean? We didn’t have any problems. It was quite a pleasant visit all around.” She kisses me with her faintly oily cheek. From long practice, my face shows no change. She stands, innocent and forlorn as I walk down the ramp with my daughter. She never knew how I grieved about the baby, how I raged at her. She never knew how she cooked me into chicken paprikas until the drumstick flesh fell off the bone. I feel relieved, and also outraged. How dare she not notice? How dare she
react as I'd meant her to? And now, in her anxiety to establish the formality of love, even the hemorrhage has slipped her mind.

As we go up the ramp, I picture her small oriental eyes, watery now, set close to the surface above the high yellow cheekbones, how they look off always to the right or to the left. We walk past the crisply smiling stewardesses. Helplessly, I forgive my mama.
I thought of heavy spokes, their solid turn,
A sturdy tightness held from core to rim,
From center out committed, as outward in,
Connecting small to large in strict concern,
In touch with what will roll at either end,
The cling, the pull, the locked-together stretch,
An equal length to every part in turn,
The stronger lent no more, the weak no less,

And saw the caskets roll in Arlington,
The heroes drawn through flags and guns to graves,
And felt a stiffness give against the sun,
A slouch of noon perhaps, a shrug of fate,
A sag of God in the heavy sky revealed,
Or a sudden turn of mind, a spokeless reel.
Spread Eagle

It lured a talon from half a mile,
Teased like a long feather. It brought,
Straight up with noon, a dot on Idaho’s
i, joining two countries, then me
To a wing, the wing to a brown pulse.

Whatever it was, it gathered a yellow
Stare at a thousand yards, wishes
Wetter than guillotines, a hook
That read this braille, this bumpy life,
In a throb of leaves at river’s edge.

It emerged in inches, budged to the tail
End of things, Stygian grey.
It didn’t see me, brown as my log,
Or him up there, squeezing, cocked
As Cagney, dirty-rattling the world.

A scowl at a hundred miles an hour,
Velocity’s wile, gravity locked
In his beak, a rip with no sound.
He was ready as a fist, his great knuckle
Strict as a bullet, falling now out loud.

The rat was quick to its hole but covered
With hover, its spine cracking like candy.
Thuds, like shot puts, tearing
Of tough seams, Gestapo noise.
A blur of wings; and I, as left as a sentry.

Rigid from whiplash, from the hard
Halt of his dive, that should have shed
His wings, his speed driving his nail
A foot in the marshy ground. He opened
My mind like a stake claim; owns it in part.
Goats

Rag and bone, down at the pits,
They hook with destiny and win.
By all that's Darwin they should be dead.
Defeat cries uncle and lets them rut.

Two pairs, they clank through potluck and munch.
Panzer-tough, their cuds. Billys
Are kids who love what glints, that toy
Badge, or can, to shoot their teeth at.

Over our junk they go, their butts
To you, Fogeys, reeking and free.
And caught, hauled in to shelter, kicking
Like urchins. Their city dump is moving.

J jerking away like a dirty rug.
Safety-first is killing them.
They're deep in soft soap, protective smells.
Survivors, they eye the wire and gnaw.

Sisyphus

Regard my calves. How they round! See
What pain, with deepest chisels, did for arms,
The perfect curves. Once, in Corinth, to please me,
I shamed a God, great-membered Zeus, alarming heaven with his bloody girl.
My shoulders Grow against the strain, what swell and surge,
Immortal hold. No sculptor's art, no,
Nor God's, could add to these. I carve alone.

My tools are slope and stone. They give me mass.
From will's hard pit, I draw my widths, my tapers,
Long and clean. Where no time is, a clockwork
Pride becomes me. My ache, to bone, will last
Forever. But how it serves me, heavy with worth.
Prevailing, I banish hell. I crave more weight.
Bjorn(1980)

He's brutal, smacks of the Norseman, named for a bear. His smile's in hibernation; rumor of fangs. This day of the blow drier and sculpted hair-
Cut, his strands are just plain long, bangs
Askew. Rumpled, scratching a crust through wisps
Of beard, in clogs and bags, musky, a tale
Told by a misfit, the champion sits and sits.
One thinks of futures, those Howard Hughes nails.

At Centre Court, immaculate at Wimbledon,
The fancy Dans are falling, swatted away.
Borg is back, puts pressure on like tons.
He brings his grip up slowly and bows, thumb
To nose at all things civil, stretches, and what comes
Is primitive, ruinous art. He slams an ace.

Steeler

Frenchy Fuqua walks on water.
His high heels, three-inch glass,
Rock their lavender tides. Goldfish
Bump for holes, nosey as halfbacks.

He's cleat-tapered, snug in fuchsia
And green. Smooth honeys ogle
His swash. His halo, afro style,
Tilts at a scar, knocked cocky.

Sundays, against stone walls, he puffs
Like a knuckle; linemen blitz, speed-reading
His braille. Cornerbacks know what gives;
Their urges build, ugly as Newark.

Saunter and sass, coming toward you—
Broadway, French Quarter, Main, Elm,
Spanish Harlem with your slashy streets—
Is Fuqua, riven, risen dude.
Miler

for Steve Prefontaine, American distance runner and Olympic hopeful, killed in a car crash, 1975

Drumming up birds, the rising
Swivel of bears, sudden
Bumping of rabbits, his gait
Went wild on Oregon trails.

His stir was tribal, flattened
The long cats, breezed
A fang, His run stammered
With hooves, primitive code.

Through stares, around the bob
Of lilac, he struggled up
Where thighs balloon with clouds,
Among the doe, upwind.

His slope brought rain, full-bodied
Cry; skinflint gravity
Searched him. He paid his steep
Dues, left his shine.

He urged his craft through lanes
On tracks with smoother men,
Slickers with oily strides,
And polished them off like trophies.
Ungainly class, all angles
And pump, he stylized
Pummel and raid, such land:
His surest bound was heart.

Victories climbed like salmon
But around the turns his lean
Went wary, as if he feared
Head on an opposite speed.

They shortened his name to yell
It faster, Pre, Pre;
What hammered him home split
His seconds, lodged like pride.

Brief as an eagle, its talons
Rushed to laurel, he took
The hard way round. Wide open
He gripped us like awe. God speed.
William Derge

Big Bull Falls

It moved through the woods and fields
The way you might move sweaty sheets
Off a sweaty bed, then give the rest
To gravity. Formed by a circle of rocks,
The river sought escape through rifts in
Red granite, and on that point
It could be said to fall.

Downstream on some rocks,
Hung the green carcass of a deer,
Killed by a lazy or stupid hunter,
Who did not dream
That what he sought to fell
Would run, or did not care.
Not our fathers.

You could see
The deer deteriorate from where
We swam, and who knew what
It did to the water beyond it?
We knew that farther on
There was a county park, where
Overweight campers from Illinois
Teased on grills sizzling weiners
With long pronged forks,
Where a swinging bridge moaned
While children tortured it for fun
And did not think of falling.
There was that afternoon,
When we watched from the bushes
Above the river the clothes of
Two couples fall to the rocks
And lay in the sun, as bodies
Moved from air to water to air,
As in a blinking of wonder and disbelief.

We ambushed from the rear,
Each with a green stick
In his hand, silent as deer,
We poked white bras and shorts
Into the water, where they floated
For one brief moment and sank.
We never thought there would be a chase.

Where we finally stopped, the water
Was green and warm as blood.
Exiled from our camp, we waited
Til nearly sunset and found
Our sleeping bags face down in the water,
The matches bobbing on the surface,
Like victims of a tidal wave
Who had thought they knew all there was
To know about the sea.
That First Christmas

There was that first Christmas, when we went to see them light the Plaza de Armas, and we passed the row of wooden stalls selling Christmas toys. You said how cheap it all appeared in the heat, all plastic, all about to melt.

How cheap the soldiers were, all painted the same color; the dolls, navelless and naked, face up in the straw. The stores were all open. In the central market they were selling mangos and chirimoias, green and bumpy like grenades, only sweeter.

The butcher shops with row upon row of sheeps' heads and cows' heads and pigs' heads hanging over the counters, the street dogs fighting over black bananas, the blond gypsies promising fortunes for a cigarette; then, saying, d' tu madre, d' tu madre.
The blessed virgin nodded under the cathedral, where the beggar children came down on us out of the night of the living dead, scabby shoes growing around their feet. They looked as if they'd eat your hands off. We gave and we gave and we gave.

When the lights came on, we saw them reflected in the eyes of boys, who should have been out in a field somewhere, holding inflated plastic sandwich bags to their droning mouths and noses. You could almost hear their brains leaving their bodies. Hark the herald, we sang, angels sing. Glory to the new born.

Then, the crowd went back to a soccer game on the television. What were these lights compared to that one? Old Indians in rumpled hats and police lingered by the fountain. Then, there were only the boys, immobilized in dreams they would not remember, and we, who were neither Herod nor wise.
A Green Grasshopper

a green grasshopper licked his four front feet and leaped onto my head getting tangled in the hair

I suppose I could have thought of you deep in the mud brushing aside the tall grass with your rifle butt and the tall antenna from a radio pack

showing fear the way an insect shows it your face a mask of passive curiosity when really every cell is as tight as sex is

but I brushed off the thought for when they blew you off your feet you did not land the way an insect lands and ramble off for something green to eat

but you lie upon my head and bleed and scream for me
Walter McDonald

The Days Before Roundup

Steers shove to the fence,
grass stubble best at the fenceposts.
Coyotes keep grass green, and wolves,

and dogs that claim our barbed-wire
as their own. Something in north wind
we can't feel—first sleet, smoke

from the slaughterhouse—
drives steers from post to post
like goats until even the weeds

are gone. At dawn, riding on mustangs
half-asleep, we find steers
bunched at the barbed wire,

face-down as if already
at troughs in the stockyards,
far from green pastures.
At Port Aransas

Cars towing boats move ten car-lengths an hour, a single ferry, the scenic way to the mainland. We could backtrack to the bridge, but we have come so far.

Girls bronzed and bikinied pose head-back by sports cars. Muscles from nowhere start flicking frisbees. The sun rises above the Gulf.

The line moves up. Muscles carry Corvettes like barbells. They lean on the girls' hoods, and girls cling to their biceps. At noon, we buy fish and chips from a vendor, eat greasy food in our oven of a car. Gulls glide and sidle in the breeze like albino buzzards stalking a caravan. All day we nag and forgive each other, take turns napping and reading the same flat map that led us here. Sun going down, we hear the ferry's foghorn, but know we're trapped forever. We listen to waves rush and recede, and strain to find boats falling off the horizon, even the great ships sinking toward open ocean.
Hazards of Flight

We see them fold
like schools of fish
in blue waters,

starlings and cranes,
Indian pheasants
intent on mating,

ignoring death
in the fire of engines
on takeoffs and landings.

Nothing drives them away
for long, not shotguns
or nets, they wedge

in the rotors of jets
designed to fly
faster than sound.
American Primitive

Deer crisscrossed my way to work at dawn. That was in the Rockies, before Saigon. At dusk, sometimes a fawn. Soft speckles camouflaged it safe. Never in all those years a mountain lion, seldom a hawk. Our main birds of prey, owls in the piñons. Walking those woods, brooding on rumors of wars, we heard claws in the bark overhead, and listened. At times, a far-off squeal of mice, and sudden thump of wings. And then the news, and silence on the porch outside, the midnight sky so clear, so close we could hear stars burning,
Sunday Paper

It lay on the kitchen table, cold and substantial as truth, beside my father's thumb-printed glasses, which were to be lifted only when necessary and with two hands. He wore his suit all day and nervously fingered his tie, brushed his blue collar free of superfluous scalp. My mother said, "I'm ready, all but putting on my clothes," and he shook his head. What did it mean? A man is ready when he's clothed. He lifted the glasses, wrapped them round his ears with a diligence a dentist would admire. Then he sat and mused: "There's nothing in the paper anymore."

Freshman

She holds a book like a sack of potatoes; her father wears Red Camels and a tie on Sunday. You see her check the rusty mailbox by the road. She is home from college; he has not written again. Her father's old pickup is hateful to her now.
By the Wood Stove

Hotter than you can imagine, the stove hummed.
They shouted jokes, surrounded by cans on shelves awry, never straightened, seldom dusted.
They toasted Democrats with six-ounce Cokes, shot fleeing rabbits with pistols fired from the hip, created worlds which their wives at home refused to recognize. Their cold, vehement Southern conservatism, a virtue proclaimed at funerals, was as true as their flannel shirts, worn year round, for what kept heat in also kept heat out.
The Power of Political Myths

Lawrence R. Godtfredsen

In modern politics, the creation and exploitation of myth have become the most effective ways for the state to establish and maintain unity and order. Limiting and directing the experiences of the masses to that of the officially recognized set of principles and ideas that seem to make sense reduce the reliance on force and compulsion. Conversely, myth has also become a critical element in the destruction of the power of the state. Georges Sorel, the revolutionary theorist, argued that it is difficult, if not impossible, to mobilize the masses with purely rational principles. A revolutionary movement must tap the most basic emotional responses in humanity. A myth that calls forth these emotions can arouse sentiments of courage, enthusiasm, and sacrifice. Once the revolution is over, these same irrational forces can serve and sustain the new state. Plato so understood and respected the power of myth that he took great pains to restrict the expression of it in *The Republic*. The story tellers and poets who convey false stories in Plato's city must be censored lest they corrupt the minds of the youth.

R. D. Laing, psychiatrist and social critic, sets forth both the objectives and the means of the political myth-makers when he says:

All those people who seek to control the behavior of large numbers of other people work on the EXPERIENCES of those other people. Once people can be induced to experience a situation in a similar way, they can be expected to behave in similar ways. Induce people all to want the same thing, hate the same thing, feel the same threat, then their behavior is already captive—you have acquired your consumers or your cannon-fodder. (R. D. Laing, p. 95)
A number of important novels of the past two centuries, some still
important, some almost unknown today, echo similar apprehensions.
These anti-utopian, or in this essay dystopian, novels teach us much
about the creation and exploitation of myths for political purposes. The
works cited belong to two basic categories: dystopian writings, the works
of A. B. Dodd, J. K. Paulding, and Richard Michaelis written essentially to
discredit the economic or political idealism of utopian literature in the
19th Century (as in the case of Michaelis' satirical response to Edward
Bellamy's Looking Backward); and dystopian literature, exemplified by
George Orwell, Ray Bradbury, J. F. Cooper, and Aldous Huxley which,
while not negating utopian visions per se, utilizes utopian fictional style
to illustrate the dysfunctional nature of political developments of a given
period.

Dystopic novels have singular relevance for our time. Although for the
moment we may be mesmerized by the political masters of deceit who
wield the myths to which we are most vulnerable, these novels force us to
look at ourselves and examine the predominant political myths in our
societies. Enabling us to identify and empathize with characters set
before us by the authors of political fiction, these novels seize our inter­
est and plunge us into a world so real, while so still fantastic, that we are
moved by the powerful events and themes to rethink the actual world. In
particular, dystopian writings are relevant to the examination of the myth
of the state for several reasons. First, because they focus essentially on a
particular state or community, they are likely to provide a clear and com­
plete picture of how myth can possess a political system. Second,
although such writings are fictional, their authors' perceptions and con­
cerns about social and political events in their worlds of experience seek
to warn society of current and dangerous political or social tendencies.
Paulding's The Man Machine (1826), Ignatius Donnelly's Caesar's Column
(1890) and, in recent decades, the works of Huxley and Orwell are
examples.

The authors examined here express an understanding of the primitive
power of myth, an understanding presented in another form most com­
prehensively by Ernst Cassirer in The Myth of the State. Cassirer writes,
"... in myth man begins to learn a new and strange art: the art of
expressing, and that means of organizing his most deeply rooted
instincts, his hopes and fears." (Cassirer, 1946, p. 58)

The political myth generates a sense of nexus, to use another of Laing's
concepts, in unifying the masses to support the state and give them a
sense of belonging as part of a greater entity. In so doing, the myth under­
mines the expression of the rights and privileges that have come to be
associated with democratic political traditions. As it is centered on
obedience and loyalty to the state, the myth disdains open discussion, dif­
fferences in ideas and styles of life, and tolerances of minorities. Myths
create scapegoats, both within society and externally, in order to strengthen the power of loyalty to the state.

In the 20th century, the power of myth has reached its zenith. Totalitarian rulers, masters of myth-making, blanket their nations with the most irrational and preposterous arguments imaginable. They are not just lies but fully developed ideological systems that provide answers and explanations for all contingencies. In the process they stifle individual creativity and expression in every aspect of human activity.

To a certain extent all polities require an element of myth to consolidate the experiences of individuals, to establish loyalty and national identity. To the extent that the myths allow some dissent and the expression of individual thought, they can be considered for our purposes eufunctional; when they require absolute obedience to a rigid ideological path, we deem them dysfunctional. It is characteristic of our age that novelists have concerned themselves essentially with the dysfunctional aspects of myth, confirming their worst fears about the exploitation of societies by malevolent leaders and their ideological weapons. Citing especially the influence of certain 19th century theories about hero worship (Carlyle), racism (Gobineau), and the supremacy of the state (Hegel), Cassirer maintains that the leaders of totalitarian movements in the 20th century have adopted “all those functions that, in primitive societies, were performed by the magician.” These leaders are like the medicine men who promised to cure all social evils.

Our modern politicians know very well that great masses are much more easily moved by the force of imagination than by sheer physical force. And they have made ample use of this knowledge. The politician becomes a sort of public fortune-teller. Prophecy is an essential element in the new technique of rulership. The most improbable or impossible promises are made; the millenium is predicted over and over again. (pp. 363-364)

There is a seeming paradox in that in a time when science and technology mark the ascendancy of rationality, our political experience has been fraught with the most irrational and demonic forces, chiefly but not exclusively in Germany and the Soviet Union. In fact, several of our authors argue that technology itself and philosophic thought as well have provided perverse assistance to totalitarian rulers through such innovations as electronic surveillance, monopoly of the dissemination of information, and, still more dramatically, psychological control over the individual. Indeed, these authors suggest a bleak prospect for humanity. Even though Paulding early in the 19th century anticipated the age of cybernetics in his dystopian novel, *The Man Machine*, he could not foresee...
the impact of the totalitarian myth-making combined with technology in our century.

As indicated, democratically-based societies, where the powers of the state are restricted and the rights of the individual to dissent are protected, also rely on the organizing properties of myth. In such societies, myths do not pervade every characteristic of society, and, as Cassirer points out, competitive myths are "permitted." Yet, even in those systems with constitutional guarantees for individual freedoms, the myth-makers prepare their smoke and mirrors, awaiting times of crisis and unrest. As the McCarthy era demonstrated, no system of government is immune from the myth-maker. The political power of myth, Cassirer asserts, "has not been really vanquished and subjugated. It is always there lurking in the dark and waiting for its hour and opportunity." (p. 352)

The dysfunctional or totalitarian models, although espousing democracy officially, do not allow competitive ideologies to exist or permit any challenge to the absolute authority of the state. In fact, the nature of myth and how it is marketed distinguish it from the eufunc­tional archetype.

A review and comparison of nine dystopias will help to identify myth as a principal catalyst in the creation of dysfunctional political societies. Five are from the 19th century: Paulding's *The Man Machine* (1826), James Fenimore Cooper's *The Cramer* (1847), Dodd's *The Republic of the Future* (1887), Michaelis' *Looking Further Forward* (1890), and Donnelly's *Caesar's Column* (1892); four are from the 20th century: Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and *Brave New World Revisited* (1959), Orwell's *1984* (1948), Ray Bradbury's *Farenheit 451* (1953), and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1959).

**Paulding's Trilogy: Part One**

James Kirke Paulding's *The Man Machine*, the first novel of a trilogy entitled *The Merry Tales of the Three Wise Men of Gotham*, attacks utopian thought and experiments which, though based on good intentions, "strike at the root of the whole frame of society, and in their operation go to unsettle the very fundamental principles of religion, morals and government. . . ." (pp. 129–130) More an anti-utopian novel or satire than a dystopia, *The Man Machine* exhibits disapproval of Owenism and of the concept of the perfectibility of man. It reflects at least one man's revolt against the possible applications of Europe's industrialization to the social order: the transformation of the individual from a man into a machine, a flawless and perfectible commodity. This transformation, as Paulding reveals, cannot be, because "counteracting principles", i.e. passion, avarice, envy and ambition, cannot be overcome. "You must place man in the grave" argues Mr. Ashley, Paulding's alter ego, "before you
can place him beyond the reach of the pass—I beg pardon, the counteracting principles.” (p. 134)

Yet The Man Machine does not address the political or communal quest for the perfectibility of mankind. One scholar notes that Paulding’s work focuses primarily on how the machine age contributes to an obliteration of all moral responsibilities and denial of free will. Paulding is interested in exposing danger inherent in a system which would “lead to anarchy if implemented in society in general.” (Nydahl, p. 157) To the extent that people are dehumanized, the process does not bode well. Perhaps the chief interest that Paulding’s work holds is that his fears of a mechanized man and society to some extent prefigure the technological Leviathan developed by Orwell, Huxley, and Bradbury.

Cooper’s Observations

Of the 19th century dystopian novels none is more contemporary than Cooper’s The Crater. Probably because of his travels and observations of political systems in Europe, Cooper knows how a political system can be corrupted by demagogues and “democratic” mythology. The heroes of Vulcan’s Peak in the The Crater were a virtuous and benevolent aristocracy who founded the community and set down the rules for the increasing number of settlers. Cooper sees this form of rule as the natural order of things, as he might suggest, ordained by God.

The decline and ultimate fall of Cooper’s utopia are brought on by the corrupting influences of what might be called pseudo-democratic activities. One truth among mankind, observes Cooper’s hero, Mark Woolston, is that all “unequal associations lead to discontent . . . [and] keep them more or less alienated in feeling.” (p. 403) Cooper’s definition of democratic rule is instructive here: “[T]rue democrats, and not canting democrats [are those] willing to give the people just as much control as they know how to use, or which circumstances will allow them to use beneficially to themselves.” (p. 442) Cooper considers the doctrine of majority rule a corrupting practice, for it leads to a dirty game of politics in which demagogues pander to the public and delude it into thinking that its decisions are right and virtuous. His perception of majority rule is in keeping with the philosophy of the Federalists who regarded the majority as ignorant of and rarely able to determine the right. Cooper considers electioneering a means of imposing the tyranny of the majority on all. He writes, “God help the man whose rights are to be maintained against the masses, when the immediate and dependent nominees of those masses are to sit in judgement.” (p. 472)

In The Crater, the corrupting demagogic elements are cast in the roles of newspapermen, ministers, and lawyers. The newspaper, “that palladium of liberty, had worked the minds of the masses to a state in which the
naked pretension of possessing rights that were not common to everybody else was, to the last degree ‘intolerable and not to be endured.’” (p. 459) The minister, Rev. Hornblower, used his sectarian position in the community to aggravate the differences between the various religious groups and to cause a mob mentality that had much to do with the overthrow of the patrician governor. The lawyer, by intrigue and demagoguery, convinced people that they had been wronged by their neighbors and encouraged them to use the courts to weaken the power of the founding settlers. The law was now used for the purposes of “speculation and revenge.” (p. 453) One passage portrays especially well Cooper’s disaffection with newspapers because of their tendency to corrupt a community:

Whenever [the paper] offended and disgusted its readers by its dishonesty, selfishness, vulgarity and lies—and it did this every week, being a hebdomadal—it recovered the ground it had lost by beginning to talk of the “people” and their rights. . . . The great theory advanced by this editorial tyro, was that a majority of any community had a right to do as it pleased. (p. 457)

With this community, as with all communities and states no matter how well conceived, argues Cooper, the fall is inevitable. There is no perfect state, no utopia. There cannot be, for “good contends with evil, and evil still has its day.” (p. 466) And so, after having enlisted so much of himself in the development of his fictional island community, Cooper brings it to a swift and horrible destruction. He seems to suggest that once the political balance is upset by the seductive appeals of mass democracy, there can be little hope for a just community. The demagogic appeal of rule by and of the “people” is a dangerous myth; it becomes the opiate in the subversion of the natural order of things. The totalitarian myths of the 20th century, expressed by the absolutist parties of Germany and the U.S.S.R., owed their powers to the promise of a democratic state in the name of the “people.”

Dodd’s Satire of Technology

Dodd’s The Republic of the Future, published just prior to Bellamy’s famous work, satirized the technological world of the future and the movement for sexual equality. Since machinery did all the work, everyone was put on the same level. Gender equality destroyed motherhood, the home, and enthusiasm. No one was happy in the republic of the future:
The entire population appears to be eternally in the streets, wandering up and down, with their hands in their pockets, on the lookout for something that never happens. . . . Have they not come to consummation of everything, of their dreams and their hopes and desires?

Dodd's apparently socialist state arises after a period of anarchy and civil strife caused "the people themselves . . . to cry aloud for some form of government which should include at least order and decency." (p. 55) The socialist doctrines were accepted as closer to the demands of the people than the theories of the anarchists (Germans, Irishmen, and Russians). Dodd's political world is a direct democracy in which citizens share power and responsibility via rotation. All struggle is gone, competition abolished, and life "dull and aimless." In her imagined world, Dodd saw the end of the arts: for the government has made imagination illegal because it is the enemy of equality. Even travel is forbidden; it breeds dissatisfaction.

Michaelis's Attack on Bellamy

For the most part, dystopias of the 1890s sought to satirize both the political reforms of their era and the fictional political utopias such as Bellamy's Looking Backward. Michaelis' Looking Further Forward in particular attacks the society anticipated by Bellamy. Michaelis creates a world of the future marked by a rigorously enforced, economic egalitarianism in which everyone is taken care of by free use of credit cards. The government, an oligarchy with absolute power, guarantees economic equality but establishes a hierarchical reward system based on loyalty to the state. Nepotism prevails and opponents are enslaved. The key to the maintenance of the state is in the hands of "the bookkeepers" who hide the corruption by doctoring the accounts. The author's hero, supposedly the same Julian West who was Bellamy's hero, engages a former professor, demoted to janitor for disloyalty to the state, to reveal the nature of the system to him. When the professor describes the system, West responds: "But, I cannot understand why the people tolerate such a corrupt and tyrannical government as you describe. . . ." The answer is that the government, in permitting publication of the journals of the "Radicals"—a group apparently in favor of prohibiting marriages, imposing free love, openly denouncing religion, and calling for restricting property ownership—created such a panic that "the mass of people [have been frightened] into submission." (p. 58)

In the socialist society, the industrial army is inefficient and produces goods of poor quality because of the abolition of competition. The workers, as a result, "are taking life easy. . . . Their mental and physical
ability has decreased." (p. 85) Michaelis covers the society, sector by sector; everywhere he finds corruption, laziness, and restriction of individual opportunity and of wealth. At the conclusion, his hero resolves: "I would rather work harder at liberty than remain idle for a number of hours every day in a prison-like life, for work is not an evil. And I would rather work a few years longer and miss some commodities of life than to submit to communistic slavery..." (p. 122)

**Donnelly's People Assent**

In contrast to Michaelis, the world that Donnelly creates in *Caesar's Column* reflects an idealistic, socialist/populist community where, in "The Garden in the Mountains," cut off from the rest of the world by walls, a man of superior intellect and goodness structures a government to which the people assent. The government, a quasi-fascistic system of distributing power based upon occupation, somehow operates harmoniously while abolishing money and private schools and fixing compensation for work and other state-controlled activities. Donnelly's utopian vision, however, is but a footnote to his book, which is mostly an account of destruction, revolution, and death not only in New York but throughout the civilized world. In this sense his work is dystopic. And in another sense as well.

The constitution of Donnelly's fantasy utopia calls for a government "to ensure a pleasant, happy life." But at the same time, it allows for a jury to have power to punish a man who cannot be convicted because of the absence of "direct and positive testimony" (that is, actual proof) by declaring him incapable of voting or holding office for several years. Corruption and bribery are considered high treason, punishable by death. (pp. 302–304) Of relevance to this section is R. D. Laing's discussion of the family or group nexus, in which he illustrates that in order to preserve the collective entity the individual can be exiled or excommunicated if found guilty of betrayal, treason, or heresy. Essentially such an individual violates the prevailing myth of the group. The group, in order to create a strong sense of internal loyalty, might manufacture an external threat to the community. "If there is not external danger," he observes "then danger and terror have to be invented and maintained." This process holds the group together. (p. 87)

**Commentary**

Of course, it might be expected that the 19th century political novels under review would reflect the authors' attitudes and concerns about their political world. Most of them clearly satirize the utopian visions of the late 19th century; the anti-utopian stories portray with dread the
Onslaught of democratic or socialist influences upon traditional American society.

In particular, by attacking Bellamy’s utopian work, Michaelis underscores the American commitment to competition and free enterprise. But Looking Further Forward is unconvincing. Although he recognizes the political leadership’s efforts to utilize the enemy outside—the Communist Radicals—as a symbol to maintain order and compliance within, Michaelis provides little evidence about the use of power to keep the system together. The reader knows only that the political system is tyrannical and corrupt and that it pays off the people with credit cards and other economic benefits.

Dodd argues that the dystopian socialist society functions only because the masses fear the anarchists and chaos more than the regime. Apparently the citizenry was lulled into compliance by the seductive appeals of egalitarian democracy. Dodd recognizes that leaders of such systems could enhance their control by labeling the arts by a subversive activity that unleashes the imagination and undermines equality. In this way, she provides us with a re-interpretation of Plato’s fear of poetry. Poetry and the other arts, however, are not a threat to the good state but to the authoritarian one. To allow the arts and imagination to run unchecked would be to endanger the prevalent political myths by subjecting them to scrutiny. Dodd, however, only hints at these matters. Essentially, the system she created operates only because it somehow has lulled the people into a state of ennui.

Of the 300 or so pages of Donnelly’s work, a scant 13 are devoted to the utopian solution. The bulk of the novel suggests his version of a pentecost in which all political leaders are inherently corrupt, megalomaniacal, and violent. They will pursue any means to sustain themselves in power. Only a bloody revolution can overthrow them and, in turn, it too becomes corrupt and violent. The great column of a quarter-million cemented bodies who were killed in revolutions and wars is constructed by the vicious revolutionary Caesar Lomellini to symbolize the “death and burial of modern civilization.” It appears that only after such a pentecost can there be hope for the human political community. As with Dodd and Michaelis, Donnelly gives no clue as to how the “good, kindly government—their own government—which so cares for humanity and strives to lift it up” was created or sustained except by the threat of severe punishment or death.

Only with Cooper’s The Crater among these novels is there evidence of a utopian socio-political system that is constructed in sufficient detail to command attention. The aristocracy that founded Cooper’s island community is not unlike the aristocracy that dominated the first three decades of the American federal government. The original settlers who discovered the island ran its affairs benevolently albeit undemocratically. In
this sense, Cooper is relating the story of early America. In contrast to Donnelly’s work, the founding and development of Vulcan’s Peak (the alternate title of *The Crater*) continues throughout all but the last 30 pages. Cooper then illustrates how the island succumbs to the corrupting influences of the democratic myth. Under the demagogic incantations of three men (a lawyer, a clergyman, and a newspaperman), the more recently settled inhabitants vote the initial founders out of office. Dismayed by the political practices of their successors, the original aristocracy leaves the island. Years later, they return to find the island submerged into the sea, an apparent victim of a volcanic eruption. In this final chapter Cooper envisions the apocalypse as he unleashes an angry God against the atheistic democratic community:

Let those who would substitute the voice of the created for that of the Creator, who shout “the people, the people” instead of hymning the praises of their God, who vainly imagine that the masses are sufficient for all things, remember their insignificance and tremble. (pp. 481–2)

The “people” symbolizes the mythical element in democratic ideology where majority rule can tyrannize an educated and responsible minority. To this extent it may be argued that Cooper is but a step away from the statist incantations of 20th century fascism and Leninism.

Both Dodd and Donnelly recognize the central role of myth in socio-political systems. The public in both works is seduced by the appeals of egalitarian socialism. By introducing the Radical Communists, Michaelis provides an additional element. They become the scapegoated mythical enemy, the “them”, that deflect public awareness away from the problems in the system. The Radicals’ solution to their problems is altogether unthinkable: they conceive that the only alternative is to accept the system as is.

In sum, as will be shown, the powers of myth identified in these 19th century novels never reach the zenith achieved by the states-sponsored myths which the 20th century authors develop in their dystopian writings.

**20th Century Totalitarian Myths of the State**

Although we do not find the details of the development or organization of a political system in Huxley’s *Brave New World*, the evidence he provides about this society and its culture suggests the presence of a monolithic system of government well maintained by a comprehensive set of political symbols and myths. At the outset we notice “Over the main entrance the words, CENTRAL LONDON HATCHERY AND
CONDITIONING CENTRE, and, in a shield, the World State’s motto, COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, STABILITY.” Huxley sketches a society with a rigid caste system, total social and political conditioning, rampant economic consumerism, pacification through drugs, and political power concentrated in the hands of a few controllers. Peter Firchow (1984, p. 82) suggests that the ideal way of wielding political power is to make that power invisible and to obfuscate the power, so that people may not perceive or even conceive of that power. The political myth is well suited for this task. In Huxley’s world the individual is subordinated to the collective: the class, the business economy, the technologists. Stability becomes the primary and the ultimate goal. Combining drugs, incantations, and the “Greater Being,” the individual becomes lost in the crowd:

Feel how the Greater Being comes!
Rejoice and, in rejoicings, die!
Melt in the music of the drums!
For I am you and you are I! (Huxley, 1946, p. 55)

The way to power becomes essentially the control of minds, wills, and emotions.

Huxley has moved the concept of Rousseau’s Social Contract from the philosophical to the mythical. The very idea of a General Will implies that there is one kind of political-social system good for all—even against their individual wills—and that those who deviate can be “forced to be free” or happy. Huxley has empowered the state, already capable of mystifying the population, with advanced eugenic technology and psychological conditioning in order to guarantee an ordered, secure system. The “solidarity circle” forms the nexus to destroy individuality and wrong thinking:

Man, woman, man, in a ring of endless alternation round the table. Twelve of them ready to be made one, waiting to come together, to be fused, to lose their twelve separate identities in a larger being. (Huxley, 1946, p. 53)

The rituals and symbols are designed to worship that Greater Being who could be real only to the group, not to the individual.

The novel goes beyond 1984 in that Orwell’s Newspeak is unnecessary in Huxley’s society because there are no words with which to think thoughts. While in 1984 O’Brien must invoke Big Brother, the slogans, Newspeak, and the like, in order to maintain the myth of the state, the conditioning is complete in Brave New World. In Huxley’s work, there is no struggle; the state has already arrived at the apex of total control. The myths serve to anesthetize all consciousness except for that which allows
for total submission to the will of the state.

In *Brave New World Revisited*, Huxley discusses how the dictatorships of the 1950s echo his earlier dystopian ideas (his "prophetic fable" as he calls it). Although he does not discuss the role of myth per se, his reference to the propaganda wielded by the state implies the use of mythical elements:

> In their propaganda today's dictators rely for the most part on repetition, suppression and rationalization—the repetition of catchwords which they wish to be accepted as true, the suppression of facts which they wish to be ignored, the arousal and rationalization of passions which may be used in the interests of the Party or the State. (Huxley, 1960, p. 35)

Huxley's references to the masses in Germany underline the importance of myth in social life and the irrational forces behind it. Mass behavior, he writes, "is determined, not by knowledge and reason, but by feelings and conscious drives" and the use of "stereotyped formulas" repeated time and again. (p. 39) Strangely, Huxley finds himself in agreement with Hitler's assessment of humanity as a mindless crowd. He is greatly concerned that over-population and mass communication may make the herd mentality more and more common.

Two forces collude to bring about the success of the mythical powers in modern totalitarian societies and in *Brave New World*: on one hand, the state monopolizes propaganda and controls the access to power and truth; on the other, the people as a mass choose to remain helpless and undiscerning in accepting the symbols and myths the state promotes. Hence, "herd-poisoning" operates symbiotically. In Huxley's words:

> Meanwhile impersonal forces over which we have almost no control seem to be pushing us all in the direction of the Brave New nightmare; and this impersonal pushing is being consciously accelerated by representatives of commercial and political organizations who have developed a number of new techniques for manipulating, in the interest of some minority, the thoughts and feelings of the masses. (p. 4)

Elsewhere, he stresses the role of the non-rational that

is not consonant with anybody's enlightened self-interest, but is dictated by, and appeals to, passion... [it] offers false, garbled or incomplete evidence, avoids logical argument and seeks to influence its victims by mere repetition of catchwords, by furious denunciation of foreign or domestic
scapegoats, and by cunningly associating the lowest passions with the highest ideals, so that atrocities come to be perpetuated in the name of God and the most cynical kind of REALPOLITIK is treated as a matter of religious principle and patriotic duty. (pp. 31–32)

**Greatest Threat to State Myths**

Bradbury’s *Farenheit 451* is based on the idea that the greatest threat to state myths is the individual’s access to other “truths” through the written word. The suppression of books and the decline of reading literature create a dependency on the electronic media, which control and direct the collective experience. Bradbury’s story suggests that the stability and perpetuation of the political system can only take place with the total abolition and destruction of the written word. Individuals may get private ideas and thoughts from books that can destroy the myths that cement the society together. Books and articles create dissension within society, allowing the individual to express a contrary thought that ultimately leads to a weakening of the socio-political mythos. Bradbury’s character, Beatty, argues, “If you don’t want a man unhappy politically, don’t give him two sides of a question to worry about; give him one. Better yet give him none.... If the government is inefficient, top-heavy, and tax-mad, better it be all those than that people worry over it.” (Bradbury, 1953, p. 55)

In one sense, Bradbury’s “solution” to the problem of political harmony is resolved by the book-burning itself. After that, there is no need for a political theory of the state or unifying myth at all, for all controversial issues are destroyed since they cannot be communicated to a sufficient number of people for organizing and amalgamating opposing factions. And to what end? Peace and harmony and happiness, of course. “You must understand” argues Beatty, “that our civilization is so vast that we can’t have minorities upset and stirred.... People want to be happy.” (p. 54) At another point, Faber, insists “[so] now you know why books are hated and feared? They show the pores in the face of life. The comfortable people want only wax moon faces, poreless, hairless, expressionless.” (p. 74) If you read a few lines, he continues, “you’re ready to blow up the world, chop off heads, knock down women and children, destroy authority.” (p. 96)

Whereas Huxley controls the process of thought as much as possible with eugenics and cloning, Bradbury’s firemen systematically search out and destroy the written word altogether, guaranteeing peace and unity by protecting humanity from itself. The message is clear: to think is bad enough, to communicate philosophy to the many is worse; for they will inevitably destroy the world and all civilization with their distortions,
prejudices, and myths. Cooper would appreciate the problem, for it was the newspaper, The Crater Truth-Teller, that incited "the people" on Vulcan's Peak to destroy the hitherto harmonious community.

Savages without Culture

By setting his story on a deserted island where the youths are out of touch with English society, Golding creates the conditions in which man's primitive instincts, uninfluenced by culture, turn human beings into savages. In The Lord of the Flies he pits what remains of English civilization, symbolized by the characters Piggy and Ralph, against the myth-making and primitive instincts for survival in a hostile environment. Only Jack, who effectively arouses the fears of the "beasty" among the boys in order to control them, can offer security and food in return for their obedience to him. So complete is his power to translate the will of the Lord of the Flies—the "beasty," a beheaded pig on a stake—to a believing following that he is able to get the boys to think it their duty to kill Piggy and Simon and to hunt down Ralph with fire. The pig represents the island's ultimate, mystical power that has to be obeyed at all costs. Intuitively, Jack understands the savage mentality and its amenability to mythical forms. Only by total obedience to the "beasty" can the boys hope to survive isolation and death. Golding's story touches directly on Cassirer's discussion of the antecedents to myth:

The standing miracle and the standing terror for man—both for the savage and for the philosopher—was at all times the phenomenon of death. Animism and metaphysics are only different attempts to come to terms with the fact of death.

(Cassirer, p. 10)

Orwell's 1984 stands as the quintessential political novel on totalitarian regimes. As such, it contains almost all the essential elements that have come to be associated with such systems: mass society, centralized propaganda, organized political terror, absolutist bureaucratic control, and party hegemony. Perhaps the one factor that Orwell fails to develop in the novel proper is the role of an all-encompassing collective belief system or ideology that embodies the predominant state myth. Nevertheless, Orwell develops all the accoutrements of the myth-dominated totalitarian state: hero worship of Big Brother, the denigration of individual thought and action, the dominance of mass mentality through the institutionalization of state rituals and slogans, the formation of "Newspeak" and "Doublethink" to serve as a means of preventing creative thought, and the creation of scapegoats (Goldstein and Eurasia) onto which internal frustrations, fears, and anger may be projected. By these
means, Orwell insightfully portrays the ability of totalitarian states to impose the collective myth in order to guarantee their monolithic monopoly of power by isolating the individual and destroying any possibility of subversive thought. As Hannah Arendt points out,

[T]otalitarian government like all tyrannies certainly could not exist without destroying the public realm of life, that is, without destroying, by isolating men... [It] bases itself on loneliness, on the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of man. (Arendt, 1951, p. 475)

In Orwell's words: "[F]rom the age of uniformity, from the age of solitude, from the age of Big Brother, from the age of doublethink—greetings!" (p. 27) The modern totalitarian state has mastered the technique of subverting the consciousness of mass man. The myths are the forces that move people by imagination and fantasy more than by mere force. As O'Brien in 1984 argues: "Nothing exists except through human consciousness." (p. 218)

But Orwell does not confront fully the essential myth itself. "Newspeak," "Doublethink," the obliteration of undesirable consciousness are indeed essential means in maintaining the party's monopoly of power, but they lack the philosophically based myth to justify their development. Nor does he appear to appreciate adequately the influence of ideology in sustaining order. He mentions the necessity of a "primitive patriotism," but never provides the philosophical basis for it.

Conclusions

It is too much to expect any single novel to provide all the evidence and experience needed to comprehend the complexities of totalitarian myth systems. Novels can offer us bits of what seems like reality as the pieces emerge from one imaginative person's reaction to the world. An entire system of myth in the non-fictional world does not come from the mind of one person; it must arise in the real political world where collective human needs may be worked upon, articulated in "explanations" and "truths" that speak to people's primitive urges. The writings of Karl Marx—to mention only the most influential of 19th century theorists—had to be re-written, transformed, distorted, to satisfy the political interests of the state makers as they have sought to appeal to the hopes, needs, and fears of mass societies today. Indeed, the origins of National Socialism may be found in the writings of sundry thinkers, those writings then twisted and bastardized to appeal to a mass audience which might never have responded so irrationally if its members had read and under-
stood the originals.

Nevertheless, the dystopic or anti-utopian novel can play an important part in the awakening to real political possibilities and dangers in the age of mass society. Readers of such novels will discover what Weltstein, the narrator in Caesar's Column, observed:

Having taken all steps necessary to protect ourselves from others, we then began to devise means by which we might protect ourselves from ourselves; for the worst enemies of a people are always found in their own midst, in their passions and vanities. (Donnelly, p. 301)

Is this idea what the comic strip character Pogo meant when he exclaimed, "We has met the enemy, and it is us!"? Bringing the message still closer to home, Laing writes:

We do not live in a world of unambiguous identities and definitions, needs and fears, hopes, disillusions. The tremendous social realities of our time are ghosts, specters of murdered gods and our own humanity returned to haunt and destroy us. The Negroes, the Jews, the Reds. THEM. Only you and I dressed differently. The texture of the fabric of these socially shared hallucinations is what we call reality, and our collusive madness is what we call sanity. (p. 73)

Throughout history, myth has always been a handmaiden to politics. In one sense, its presence is crucial in the formation of common values and beliefs around which people rally to work together to satisfy their needs and wants. But, in another sense, the myth as portrayed in the literature here can be destructive of these ends. The fallacies and illusions found in totalitarian systems, for example, enslave masses of people and undermine the development of human potential, individually and collectively. Dystopic fiction with its vivid account of political myths enables us to see and understand more clearly the destructive power of myth. In so doing, such accounts can awaken us to recognize the demonic mythical developments not only in our culture and others, but also within ourselves.
Works Cited


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