

Traversing Dry Gulch

I don't know how it begins, that's the point. Try as I will, I can't seem to forget how it ends. If in going back, step by step, retracing a path of crumbs to find the beginning -- if in doing that I had any hope of changing it, I suppose that is what I'd be trying to do. But mostly I'm trying not to have hope. It. It's only a way of making the here and now the important thing. Here. Now...just keep slipping away from me, in spite of myself. In spite of really systematic attempts to not hope, to not remember.

I've done all I can today to exhaust my body, a little iron man, run/bike/swim thing I like to do when I have time; I've numbed my brain with alcohol, pot & a couple of hours of stupid nothing on TV; holed up, shut the blinds on the daylight, and still: it happens...the wandering away. Going places in your head, & finding you're not alone there can be disconcerting. More than that, after that most intimate betrayal of yourself you save for solitude, finding trace evidence that someone has been there before you, with yes, just this bloody knife pen in hand to drip words on a page, lover fucker: this is what it is, really.

Maybe exhaustion and numbness was not the way to go. Maybe I should try being sharp, on top of it, take control -- but that is exhausting in itself, and at most lasts less than a moment, before, there it goes...

Away is where I'd like to stay, I suppose. It's the coming back, the eternal return to the painful present that I'd avoid, if I could.

So that's the title, I think: A Void

There's something about this place I don't like. I'm always on edge, feel something

coming down the hall to get me, though I've had no trouble sleeping. There's a dog whose intermittent sharp bark I need to silence, but it seems like too much trouble to find him, in his brushy hideout atop the ridge above this apartment complex. He's chained in someone's backyard all day, yapping out his frustration off and on, radiating his irritation to the irritable in earshot. I picture shooting him, strangling him, hoping some telekinetic power I never knew I had could close on his throat. Punk ass dog. There he is now, then the sound of someone peeing, toilet bowl echoing a sudden torrent of urine.

I don't like the light from the hall that comes in under the door.

Some monster comes down the hallway to get me, how hokey is that? Much worse is the reality: wanting only to not be, yet I am; existence itself the weight I carry through the day.

Or, this: having prayed for death, finding that the one prayer god chooses to answer. Ha!

Eyes on the horizon, always stumbling over my own feet, I find my way to you. Musing again, amused even; it seems to take over & goes off on its own. Own up, in other words.

Engaging then in silent dialogue with you, thinking how I come to you in solitude, when, alone with my thoughts, I feel your presence, I realize what I am, that it's you alone with your thoughts (me) -- I wonder then if the pen & paper I take up are others joining us, or just a more fully elaborated self deception.

First coffee, magazine on the toilet, a nice, big, loose shit (red beans and rice yesterday, heavy garlic). Then zone out on the stationary bike. Not feeling the effort any more than the roll of the hill walking down to the work out room, or the fresh morning air of October. Not straining, not powerfully feeling the muscle, no; more like this is the new status quo, like

standing still at a slightly increased pace, the heart, the breathing are just at a faster pace than your normal sluggish lump of flesh state. You just push the shopping cart along at a faster rate, to get to the party. But the party's still a long way off, miles. Twenty minutes of that wandering zone and the bike is done, then it's time to put your feet on road and watch the scenery, though I need to watch my feet more. I'm always floating along head in the clouds & almost stepping on a rattlesnake stretched out in the sun to snooze.

The canyon where I run makes me think of Ambrose Bierce, whether I want to, or not. Then, I disappear myself, into the pool, slicing coolly through the liquid reflections. Again, no strain at all, the road is the only place I actually sweat and work. Well, after the pool, I sweat in the sauna for twenty minutes. Then what is the optional part of each day.

Shall I tell yesterday, plan today, or predict tomorrow?

Recursively, it's get stoned, watch TV; drink, eat, smoke dope, watch TV. Coke it up, go out to the job.

I guess I work nights, is what I'm saying. Reason sleeps and I go to work. I like the suit. I like wearing a good suit out at some fancy so cal party scene, standing along the dark perimeter with a flashlight. Security.

Charcoal wool blend. Nice. I like the crisp cuffs and collars, too, fresh from the cleaners.

Belted & suited, I am prepared for the hallway, I open the door with sunglasses already on, though I'm 50 feet of fluorescent lit corridor from sunlight. And twelve hours. After dark, remember? In the dark you don't need sunglasses.

Someone somewhere is laughing.

You got what you wanted today, someone is thinking: you wanted to see that she had forgotten. That's what you saw.

The really funny thing of course is how disguised it is. The disguises are fun, as we approach Halloween.

The address, 66 Sixth Street was a tip for sure. Rosemary's baby shower, maybe. Yes, ha, ha. Not lol, no not me. This is a purely mental, sardonic, slightly vindictive ha!

An intermittent breeze rustles the palm fronds high up, spot lit from below, tall palms along a sidewalk. Positioned, you groove on the night breeze, shifting your weight from heel to toe in anticipation. You can't even hear music. Not much of a party after all. The sidewalk curves down a hill almost steep enough for steps, to a street lined with oleander and eucalyptus. They must have parked the cars on the other side, or, like the lack of music, this signals a very private party. One discreet limo at the door, ready to take some really important person to somewhere even more alone. Down a hundred feet or so the ocean swirls kelp around rocks. You don't have to hide your eyes here; here is friendly, happy dark, energetic, cool night. Late. Hands in pockets, you stroll across this dark lawn, listening to the small sounds of bugs and vermin. Leaves in air. Ocean or distant traffic? Thinking about *Day of the Locust*, and "nothing happens" as not a bad thing. Nothing happening is what you should hope for, you idiots. Because when it happens, it's not good, and you even know that, going in. Yet in you go, perverts, counting on some author to protect you with fictions.

Maybe I tried to tell you but maybe you weren't understanding. My fault for not picking

up on that. Let's see if I can give you something you can use.

Here it goes: from the other side, away from the house I'm guarding, I hear screams. A group of would-be actors, or just punk kids, the screams are well calculated, but convincing: stage screams. Because everywhere is Hollywood, now.

She pulls up in a limo; among the small sounds now the mild electric whir of the window sliding down. No, not a limo, it was a blue sedan, nothing special, a Mazda or Nissan. The sound was that of a match being struck, one of those big, kitchen matches out of a box. What's being lit on fire is of course me.

No, that's not right, either. She would be there, at that party. Bored. Finding the security guy skulking along the perimeter the best meat on the table. Her point of view would be coming out of that warm glow of light toward the darkness, coming upon me.

"You have been dead to me, Lazarus," she would say if she were here. Her tone is what I can't predict; happy or sad, threatening or seductive, acceptance or denial, accusation or a realization of innocence at long last, I can't tell.

"In my dream," she goes on, "we met for lunch at George's Top of the Cove. I said to the hostess, 'I'm meeting Mr.—,' and I was shown to your table with a view. You stood and we shook hands, bodies shy, though our previous, mediated intercourse had been intimate. We did not hug, but I was feeling for, fearing, clamminess, an unpleasant mooshiness in your hand or mine.

"I sat, uncomfortably schooled into the table by the waiter, awkwardly divesting myself of the bag slung across my chest on a leather strap, trying to drape the strap over the slender,

smooth back of the chair. The strap slid and the bag dropped with a thud—heavy book inside?—onto the floor, where I left it, while the waiter recited specials, from which you selected, while I declined and the waiter, with just a suggestion of peevishness, offered a menu.

“We deferred ordering the wine, and the waiter retreated while I slowed things down tremendously by attempting to simultaneously peruse the menu & mumble something about seafood. The specials had all been fishy & I wanted to say I don’t eat fish & then that led to diving, because I then had to say I only eat fish I have personally killed & there were divers below us, just coming up from the underwater depths of the cove; cold, murky depths I can compare to the warm, clear blue of the Sea of Cortez—spearfishing in Baja, haven’t talked about that in years...

“We begin to see the weakness of dreams. I can easily, endlessly imagine what I would say, while you are mostly mute. Jerky. Shall we look at the view a moment? fill an awkward lull in the conversation with looks at the sky, the sea, the rocks, the gulls wheeling in swirls of cool ocean air? our eyes will begin to glow with the reflected luminescence of the clouds.

“Somehow after I have settled on medallions of beef & together we have ordered a bottle of zinfandel, I get in some questions, oh, yes, that’s how: Baja & diving are in the past, haven’t been since the divorce, or actually quite a while before that, ‘What about you, what’s your marital status?’ (Thud) You are divorced, of course, but from your discourse I am finding you better bred than I—one child, you & your ex are good, cooperative, caring friends; your son is at Duke. You seem privileged & upper class to me. In good shape, for your age. Far from dickless, I think you have hot young mistresses lined up & I have no chance.

“I want to work it up to, ‘now we have determined we are both available; you adore my work & I adore how you adore my work, shall we fall in love?’

“You’ll answer only, coyly, flirting eyes laughing at me until I’m experiencing once again the clitoral hard on I distinctly recall—how many years ago, in a philosophy class—I remember the blue paint of the room—‘shall we?’

“My eyes will answer back, and indeed, as in a dream, our life together ever after lay before us—all the wonderful times we’ll have, the food, the wine, the fucking, the fine family holidays with our lovely happy children going on to populate an entire fuzzy blue dimension where it will be my job to think about dinner & plan travel & I’ll be a well dressed old woman, riding the el to the Cub games every day—we’ll meet in our seats, me coming from a Joyce seminar I teach at the University of Chicago & you from an office in the loop where you do I don’t know what, but bring out of it loot enough—and interesting conversation—to buy the old hotel at Mendocino, so when we’re really old, wheelchairs & diapers, we can sit together and watch the even more ancient sea until it stops.”

No, she is the warm glow of light away from which I wander into a screaming night.

I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do.

And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was.

I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world: thine they were, and thou gavest them me; and they have kept thy word.

Rest Your weary ones.

Bless Your dying ones.

Soothe Your suffering ones.

Pity Your afflicted ones.

With sobs for his job, with tears for his toil, with horror for his squalor but with pep for his perdition, lo, the boor plieth as the laird hireth him.

You will horrify me in heaven; you will begin the play which I took from you.

And never, my child, humiliate yourself without me, without the sorrow you lack without me after the nothing that will be.

Repeat with incremental distinctions.

Going into the dark, then, finding there the dim glimmer of another light, I follow it to peer between bushes and over a window sill to see them, a group slumped on sofas and chairs around a coffee table. I can't hear what they're saying, but it's them because all of a sudden one chick sits up & belts one out, her face showing no emotion other than attentiveness to the sound, which is, as they used to say, 'blood curdling.'

The screaming one looks maybe 16, dressed halfway punk, half goth, dark circles of eyeliner around her eyes, her hair a faded red dye over brown. She's wearing black, of course, with chains and studs and paper clip tattoos of marijuana leaves on her bare calf, a decayed techno look. After she screams the others talk. She just sits back & rests, but seems to be somewhat listening to what the others are saying, maybe they're critiquing her.

There are three others, two more teenagers, a fleshy girl with long, straight, dark hair and wide dark eyes, and a guy, skinny, with brown hair sticking out from a beanie. The fourth I can't see much of, his back to the window, partially obscured, but I can tell someone is there, the

others are talking to him; it's certainly a large, man's hand I can see, gesturing with a cigarette.

The room is well decorated, a little beige, if you know what I mean, so that it looks rented furnished.

Then it's daylight & I'm in my car, a midnight blue '68 Camaro, cherry. The V8 purrs as I slide up over the hill out of La Jolla, onto the 52, but then it's night again. And just to burn gas I'll cruise the Golden Triangle, weaving in & out of fast moving traffic: the 52 to the 805 to the 5, riding the jump cut into a reversal of direction there at the merge/split wormhole. Eternal, this triangle of pavement, chrome, light, red and white, a glittering flow through the night, kids getting high in the car ahead of me, spending their parents' money. Then it's day & I've followed their car off the freeway to where the trail climbs up out of the canyon, I've followed them down the scraggy gravel brush hill, then up the rocky mound to the track. Acheson Topeka Santa Fe.

At daybreak, finding remains.

Analyzing them in this lab, this the report. Or what the report would say if it only could.

Going into the room would be tricky. One door directly across from me, through which I see only the wall of a hallway; a mirror is there, only dark, don't see myself.

It's like watching a TV show, bored all afternoon, just watching some dumb show building to its obvious climax, which I forget to watch—I come back to it & it's over, missed the revelation again, it seems. Identity remains ambiguous: killer? victim?

Or like cruising in the car, Oingo Boingo on the radio, I close my eyes, asking who am I?
close my eyes and dream.

Because on the track, standing, facing, feeling the oncoming roar, the machine unable to stop, blind, I find myself stuck in that moment evermore, all this the extenuated roar oncoming, ongoing, on. It is with the joy of immolation that I surrender my soul to my body's disintegration. But the moment just keeps going on, no mercy is shown, because then I'm just sitting over a scotch? bourbon? in that dismal little bar, wanting again just not to think, to be the void. Instead piecing together the mystery, you & I together at last, what'll you have?

the undertone of quake
day to day underfoot
echoing becomes
the oncoming roar through which all reverberates
--a babble of voices, not a series of stories—
conversations, soliloquies
murmuring on
naming the names

Because fame is my subject I must of course remain anonymous.

The bird by the door, his cage draped with a beach towel, in my shitty apartment, is the horrible descendent, decayed relic? distorted echo? muted parody? of birds in the bushes signalling the approach of the predator via the landed estate, with dogs stationed at the perimeter to give alarm of society's invasion into the pastoral. Let us party.

The bird shrieks, recalling me. The coffee has brewed long enough.

The creation of desire is a sacred task now, as well as a boom industry, a chemical

formula, achieved precisely when the mechanics fall away again & the lame, tired, old rocket springs forth.

when will we bring
these sacrificial rituals
to an end?

We will celebrate instead
the passing even of this,

the end of the world, watched on TV by those of us who want the universe to be a well constructed moral drama, in contention with those of us who want it to be a warm bath, with those of us who fear it is—not random, that’s not the worst; perverted by cruel demons would be so much worse than the forgiveness that randomness would shed on this night, mere foolish chaos not dreadful at all, but comforting, somehow—funny even. Most dreadful must be to be at the mercy of the merciless: a deity omnipotent and evil, hopeless to fight against, first cause lost from the start. Is there no opposite of monotheism, something between polytheism and dualism, no way to cube manicheism? The opposite of gnosticism is not an agnostic agony, after all, but salvation in ignorance—only the uninitiated remain standing at the end of judgement day. Knowledge is just desire, for immolation as much as mastery, you know. Just re fuckin lax about it man... the axis of chaos & order intersects with the gradient of significance/insignificance. Repeat with incremental distinctions.

Pushing the heavy glass door open, I stepped out onto the balcony. Immediately cool air suffused my head with a licorice like scent; the hill, fragrant with evening, rose before me. A fluffy bit of cloud scuttled across the lavender sky, a slim, silver, crescent moon hung above the

tops of trees, pine and eucalyptus, black against the sunset sky. On a branch sat perfectly still a large bird, a hawk or raven, a black silhouette, looking, like me, at the evening glow sliding away behind the hill, pink receding into orange. I arched my back, hands on the rail, leaning forward, nose in the air, taking it in, thinking, “this moment, this one, this, just this” and it doesn’t really matter if it was a thousand years ago or a single breath since, it doesn’t really matter anymore, or in which direction the story goes from here: all we know about anything else is that it’s not It. It is over.

Sneaking silently through the slightly rustling brush, not dry, rather damp from sprinklers, actually, breathing the cedar scent of the wood chip mulch in which the bushes have been carefully embedded, I duck below the window sill. Looking blindly into the darkness, I can only hear, maybe, what someone is saying, “Getting away with it consists only of succeeding in pulling it off, after all; ‘away’ is anywhere, everywhere, after It.”

Then nothing, a clink, soft thud. I peek. The older one is leaving, walking out the door opposite to me, his back telling me nothing much about him, 6 foot maybe, well built, jeans, a dark T shirt, dark hair, a man’s body, not a teenager like the others. They almost immediately start passing a joint the screamer takes out of her pocket.

A shoot up ensues.

Cops will later deduce the trajectories: a .32 Walther from 2" above the coffee table at a 40' angle, pick the slug out of the lintel; a .22 Beretta at the window puts a bullet through the lampshade, stopped by the sofa. By then I’m long gone, it having long since become my strategy to come as close to doing, being nothing for as long as I can.

A sore back & the need to urinate gets me out of bed eventually, body itself the master that drives us from day to day, whatever our foolish minds think they are doing about it, no matter how systematically we extinguish mind. Could I, zen-like, exert ultimate mental control until, lying in bed in a self induced coma, I die of uremic poisoning, or is this a sort of suicide denied me by the roommates insisting on rent? Will the rent come due before my kidneys, my transcendent will give out? As the man says, it's all out, now. Out has already been given.

And then, days later, the same show is on & it's a chance to see the part you missed, and you do see more, but of course you keep missing the same part.

Even later, in the car, we sat in the parking lot, listening to the song on the radio—hot mid-morning sun, green iceplant tipped with orange, translucent, running up the steep slope of the bright hill to an Aztec sun in a mercilessly empty blue sky. *Ball and a Biscuit*, White Stripes. How many songs can be ours, still!

It's quiet enough when you can hear the shuffle of your slippers on the rug, old man, or Time to Make Some Noise, maybe, while we still can.

Seeing on the news the tweaker who took in and disarmed the killer, the black guy who, on the lam, found his way to her apartment, I'm thinking, like us: if it had not been for the night, we wouldn't have found each other. And then someone suggests: abandon this constant questing after the sacred every moment, your merely human head can't take it. Well documented is the misery inflicted by those who hear voices, those who are sensitive to the spirits accumulating all around us—seeing the infinite every moment will literally crack your skull. Take some time to nod off, while “in time” as Faulkner puts it; leave eternity for heaven.

Let me describe this night then, where I wait for you, this noonday parking lot where I think of you, this dream where I search for you, let me look at something else, not you, let me be someone else, let me forget. Let me remember something else.

“From his point of view, he’s fragmented his personality not to protect himself from trauma, but to absolve god of ultimate responsibility for suffering.”

A smooth, lineless blacktop road leads past lawns, through trees to a curved drive, gravelled with fine, gray pebbles. It’s just sunset, and the air is rapidly chilling; the trees, stripped of leaves, stand black and motionless against the dying light, pink, receding into orange across a flat horizon. Greenish is the light around a wide oak doorway in a brick wall where two steps lead up to the polished, gleaming oak floor of the foyer, a rich oriental tapestry a few steps inside, awaits us. Over the shoulder of a guest arriving before us, I can see fresh white flowers in a glass bowl on a marble topped table to the right of the door; a round, beveled mirror in a gilt frame on the wall above multiplies the blossoms.

Stalling there in the door, keeping us waiting outside for a moment, he had handed the keys of the chocolate Bentley to the parking valet and taken the two steps up to the door when he stopped, instantly recognizing the diminutive Mexican girl just inside, dressed in a demure black maid dress, a cotton shift, three buttons down the front, a white lace collar high around the neck, sleeves to the elbow—positioned there to divest guests of hats and coats they would be wearing on a chilly November night—he recognized her as the street corner prostitute he’d paid for a blow job, was it weeks before or days? and stopped awkwardly for just a moment before, handing her his coat, he straightened his tie, recovered and moved forward, across the foyer to a large hall with a staircase curving grandly up on the right, a spectacular chandelier hanging above the few

guests who loitered here, chatting above the music from the farther room.

It is Proustian: the small groups of people in the hall perhaps are “feigning an ecstatic admiration” of the chandelier, while actually “at a loss for something to do” and worried about how to approach, whether to approach, people they don’t know, the hosts.

Parties of this sort are as a rule premature. They have little reality until the following day, when they occupy the attention of the people who were not invited.

In memory, I find one can no longer distinguish between the dreamed and the observed. Dreamed, was it, the long gallery onto which the hall opened, at the end of which a quartet enthusiastically cranked out baroque chamber music? I seemed to walk through the room, observing the gowns, the bags, the shoes, the hair and make-up, judiciously evaluating the quality of these guests, then realized I had lost you and spent the rest of the party restlessly stalking from room to room, looking for you.

Opening the mahogany door at the end of a dark hall on the second floor, I came upon an opium den worthy of Monte Cristo, but then it started to seem more Kerouac than Proust, “the wine flowed down the hill like a river...the party went on for three days.” Fashionable people engaged in polite conversation with naked poets while someone played jazz now downstairs, the bird like tones of the clarinet a reference to Keats, too, somehow, a nightingale song.

“How are you?”

—it was only a perfunctory politeness, but I answered, grinning, talking fast, “Great! But, have you ever had such a happy, productive day that you suspect you’re manic & about to plunge?”—perfect for backing off a perfunctory interlocutor.

“uh...,”

BUT HOW DID THE CLOCKS ALL GET SYNCHRONIZED AGAIN?!

Not everything wants to mean something. Some of us wish to mean nothing—nothing the hardest to accomplish, after all, some say impossible.

How did I get so fried again already? That was wrong of me, wasn't it? OK, note to self: next time you're wondering whether you should or not, whether there's time—don't! There isn't.

Everything that's alive kills, kills to live—so suggesting only god has, only should have the power to give & take life, *c'est ridicule*...but one should honor what one kills with all the poignancy of one's consciousness of one's own death, obviously. Less obvious, less awkward and wordy perhaps, is the significance of this construct.

“I'm bored,” the children complain.

Everything's boring after a while, even torture—even ecstasy, I'm thinking. Should I tell them, “Nightmares come true, never dreams,” or let them find out for themselves?

Waiting in line at the Housing Commission, she's thinking, “prove to me the resources of the HC are not reserved exclusively for mistresses of City councilmen, by having mercy on broken old me & my wild, pretty children,” or, “who do I have to fuck to get benefits, because I'm already getting fucked.”

Still at the party, the morning of the third day, sitting amid rubbish like the opening sequence of Kubrick's *Lolita*, I found you again for a moment.

So I'm suffering for something I did that I've forgotten. Am I supposed to be trying to remember what it was so the suffering will end?

No, you are analyzing remains; you are the hourly employee of a knowledge gathering institution, with all the disinterest and dispassion of a disgruntled flunky. Pathology is a much more detached interest than psychology, after all; as is this, the artistic.

Going to bed, who is thinking, *I don't want it to be tomorrow when I wake up, but yesterday?*

When she was little, she was very shy & often people took that as rejection—especially because she was both pretty & smart, they thought she must be full of herself, when she was actually empty, longing for their touch. Tender innocence long gone now, along with the shyness, now she is all gaudy, grotesque, bawdy display of sensual indulgence, damn the torpedoes...

The imminent “end of the west” is announced on the news. I change the channel.
or so the inner dialogue goes

“How could you be so taken in?”

“There was an elegance about her, in the shabbiest of situations, what can I say?” She feared valet parking and had a deep seated distrust of the undersides of sofa cushions.

Maybe it isn't as good as I think it is: they were wrong when they said I had talent; what I had was ambition—a desire to write something they couldn't make out—*is there one who understands?* no one

While staging a disappearance, she mysteriously went missing.

You'd rather be doing it than reading about it when you're young; when you've nearly had enough, reading is much easier, or better yet, watching it on TV: I'd much rather watch a nice hospital show, or courttv than be in one of those scary, grungy real places. Much rather.

a lot of tension in that foot

forever is what frightens, when I've only ever known for now

all things and nothing now forever

I've glimpsed the mind of god

& turned away in terror

to this moment

heaven, where everyone has its own room, precisely

thank you lord for this my room where I get at last to meet you all

in rooms off the corridor called time

Problems of textuality, codification: the sacred text is a book written by humans, after all, only containing the wisdom of the ages, sages who speak metaphorically as often as not—does that make it any the less true? Could we find a quiet corner and discuss metaphorical v. literal truth?

Perceived reality, the only kind we can know, through senses tinted with desire, turns out to be untrue, or at least our understanding is often altered by later perceptions—what I thought was the case turns out not to be quite often—like the blossom that reveals itself as a collection of insects when you try to touch it (*Marnie*). Reality can only be *conceived* of as unperceived, existential; divinity begins at the moment of conception.

I feel a presence, a power greater than me, forcing me by presenting me with the demands of this situation, forcing me to choose, to act. Is it a god or a devil? I can not know. My only check is myself, do I acquiesce or resist? The knowledge of my forebears is all I have to follow—a community of wills not altogether yours, a community which communicates by leaving traces in bloody brute matter, this.

It's always those one god people who are the most divisive.

Lose this necessity is the mother of invention approach, adversity as the handmaiden to creativity stuff—try luring a muse with satiation, friendship, and get not the mother of terror nor the wasted pale saint, but the fecund rebirth you were needing all along.

Or, back to the party, small talk: “He was pitching a script with a cgi e coli for a villain, had a roll of tape that was unbelievable.”

“I’m in the electronic forgery division,” murmured a man in a hat standing behind me.

“How do we know each other?” the girl in the green dress leaning in a doorway asked laconically, one large mascaraed eye on me, the other side of her face in shadow.

“Got me,” I want to say, but it is a scene that leads nowhere, a non sequitur in the otherwise linear progression from murky, obscure origins to that remorselessly apparent end awaiting us all.

When did the trauma occur?

Is this it?

“I want to be remembered as outspoken,” she whispered shyly, then, winking.

I find myself longing nostalgically for rough weather, an emergency, the electricity to be off, so we can pretend it's olden times, light candles & forage for more primary relations than these, but he doesn't like camping, fears terror still, unlike I, who only meet again a dull familiar; I, who am constant only to change.

Light is sacred, as is the dark

food is good, as is shit

all things in their turn

cohere & conflict

all humiliation is public

death to the aristos I always say

several times that day, I would look up to see a pair of birds in flight

who can this represent but you & me

babies must be taught how to sleep

the dry joy of teaching the *Anabasis*

Day of the Locust: two types of people, whores & locusts

whether you want to know about it or not, you were born into a several thousand year old culture that constructs how you see and what you strive for. The only true freedom from history lies in

deconstruction; predicted demolition date: now.

Copy cat sex crimes echo a collective unconscious frighteningly receptive to every suggestion of pain.

The Green Dress is a novel she writes about a homeless woman who wanders the streets, imagining she is mad Lucia, the failing patriarch's daughter, to keep it from happening. Write your worst fears to make them safe & inhabitable.

What god can't know: what it is to be mortal.

"Oh, yeah, I forgot, I'm just faking the amnesia."

Coming upon a fire in the dark.

You are with me when we love the same thing. I am with you as I am with it.

...he whose coming heralds a return to the epic...

Is this a harmless delusion, that after I die, I will be "discovered" by hordes of acolytes, my work will be priceless, the base of a new industry, I will be named a saint, I will enter the afterlife & sit around in heaven till I come to my senses again?

Only in the temporal can I partake of the eternal. Not the eternal that is time going on forever, but the eternal that is the end of time at last.

Wheel in the sky

I inhabit you

you embody me

was she decorating a room
or staging a crime scene?

lying in a Proustian ecstasy
of thought
poor old mother
calls on god
give me money she says
and this is what she gets

It was my usual Friday morning walk in the canyon; Rose Canyon, though I've never seen a rose there. A Santa Ana had pushed in from the east early that morning; the air was hot and dry, oddly still. The constant rush of freeway traffic roared in the distance, but we seemed in a remote wilderness, walking the dirt service roads along the train tracks. Mo, my dog, ran ahead or lingered in the brush behind. Having lived in various apartments in various complexes along the edge of this canyon for going on ten years, I encounter ghosts of my younger self on these trails: I used to run in this canyon until arthritis in an ankle injury slowed me down. Now I walk with Mo, a little brown dog of no discernable breed, literally left on the doorstep years ago—a box of brown puppies left in the pool area of our complex, or so said the maintenance people who let us pick one to keep before they took the rest to the pound. We thought she would get bigger, but she's stayed small and sleek, loves to run and still acts like a puppy. She is a thing of beauty when she runs, bounding with all the joy of life itself, her taut muscles lifting her in swift arcs,

and it would be a shame not to run her on a regular basis, though the canyon walk is weekly now, instead of the daily jogging I used to put in.

It's also literary, this walk, *du cote de chez*...I have different ways I can go if it is muddy, or I want a shorter or longer route. Seeking inspiration in Joycean perambulations, I often stop to scribble lines in a little black notebook I carry with me, things like "if all suffering were voluntary or self inflicted,"—writing always about writing, developing the room metaphor, thinking of Jean Rhys, and scribbling, "not just a room, Virginia, but a room with a view."

I'd seen the train going south from the street above the canyon, before climbing down the rim to a junction of trails, before choosing the low road—the long way—and so was expecting another one soon, going north—they come in pairs, and partly because my forefathers were railroad men, and something to do with an old lover and train metaphors in general, the train means something important to me, too. But there was no second train that day. The canyon seemed more deserted than usual, for though entire communities regularly move through these corridors of wilderness in the so cal urbanscape and wandering in the brush can bring you unexpectedly into someone's home, shacks and hovels, encampments that I suppose the cops roust once in a while, on a hot Friday morning the trails can be quite empty. The air was still, the dry brush not even rustling, not a breath of cloud in the hot blue sky. No telling how long ago this road had been muddy; now the deep rut made by a truck wheel was crumbling and dry. We crossed the tracks and turned east, making what has become our usual loop, and, uninspired, I was only thinking perhaps about my younger self, how thin and in shape I was, less than ten years ago, when I first explored these paths. From week to week the vegetation changes; from year to year the geography of this drainage along a fault line changes, too.

I could see Mo stopped on the trail ahead of me, looking at something invisible to me, around a slight bend in the road which disappeared behind thick brush on either side. Her tail made tentative wagging movements, then stopped. She was just very still and alert: this the dog that blithely stepped on rattlesnakes stretched across the sunny path, or who would puppy like greet any stranger with friendly enthusiasm. So, curious, I took the outside course, to sooner see whatever had her so uncharacteristically mesmerized; maybe another dog, I thought, and she's not sure it's friendly.

It was a man, stretched full length on his back across the path. I approached slowly. He wore what seemed to be a gray jumpsuit, like the uniform of a maintenance worker of some kind, very worn and frayed, but no name tag, no logo. His hair was gray, his face seemed gray, his eyes, glassy and gray, were open, looking at me.

“Are you ok?”

His eyes seemed to rest on the sweating water bottle sticking out of the bag on my hip. His dry lips moved slightly, “oy.”

I took the water bottle and held it out to him, but he didn't move. His eyes remained so fixed and glassy that after a while I thought maybe he was dead. I didn't want to touch him, but looked him over intently until I was pretty sure I could see respiration, a small pulse in his temple, and once in a while he blinked.

I think I talked to him some more, and perhaps tried to pour a bit of the cold water on his lips before I put Mo back on the leash and used my cell phone to call 911. Even before I gave my location, I could hear a helicopter overhead. Squinting up, I couldn't make out any markings. It

didn't seem to be either a police or a news chopper. It took only about twenty minutes for an ambulance to find me, driving slowly up the trail. The operator had said not to touch him, if he seemed to be breathing, even though he remained unresponsive. His eyes seemed to follow me, sometimes glassy and unseeing, but at other times, if just for a moment, meeting mine with an intelligent look.

I had expected a cop to respond, but instead a paramedic and an ambulance took the guy away. The driver took my name and address while the paramedic put the guy on a stretcher, then they both lifted him into the ambulance and slowly drove away.

As I continued on with my walk, heading east through the canyon, I could feel a light, cooling breeze on my back. I stopped to drink my water at a place I have come to think of as Dry Gulch. Maybe once a year there is water trickling through this rocky ditch at the bottom of Rose Canyon, but mostly it is bone dry. When I got to the place where I cross the tracks again, to climb out of the canyon and back through the watered grassy lawns of the neighborhood, not a train, but one of those trucks fitted out to drive on tracks, was moving slowly along the railbed, two guys in sunglasses in the cab, tanned, muscled arms resting on open windows as the truck slid along with a high pitched whine.

That was on a Friday, and it was on Sunday that a fellow knocked on my door around 10am, showed me an official looking id, and said he had a few questions. It wasn't much of a story to tell, but I told it. Repeatedly this agent asked me if the guy had said anything.

"No," I said, thinking that it would be too much trouble to explain that I might have heard 'oy.' It didn't seem like much of a lie. Mostly he'd said nothing.

Only when the agent asked, “have you ever seen him before?” did I suddenly get a flash, he had looked oddly familiar, like an aged version of that old lover of mine, the one I think of when I hear the train. Now, when I remember it, he does look like Brian, only older, grayed and worn, and Brian would be older, but not that much older, unless some tremendous, aging catastrophe had taken a heavy toll after we parted. He’d never promised to come back, so I hadn’t really thought about what might have kept him from coming back. He’d been my post-divorce fling, a younger man, a brief, happy relationship that I had only let myself engage in because I knew it was a throw away. He was too young and I certainly wasn’t ready for another serious commitment, still caught in the painful divorce process after a twelve year marriage; we’d had ten weeks of hot sex and warm romance and then, just one of those things, he left town so I could ever after remember it as a happy time, untarnished by failed expectations; the abrupt end of our intimacy unmarred by recriminations. That was just after I had moved to this part of town, when I first ran through the canyon, and I came to associate the train whistle with my wandering lover; when I would hear the distant train whistle I would remember Brian, and it was a happy thought because I was remembering myself young, beautiful, adored by an enthusiastic lover. He remained my imaginary wanderer, sending the whistle to me on a regular basis as if to say, from far off, yes, I, too, think fondly of you, or just, yes, that did happen—you were beautiful and adored once, no matter what you eventually become. Ok, it’s kind of a hokey, we’ll-always-have-Paris sort of thing, but it’s *my* hokey we’ll-always-have-Paris sort of thing—and I’m trying to age gracefully by maintaining a consciousness of past glory, rather than carrying embittered grudges around, as some do.

Maybe something of these reflections flashed across my face when the agent asked me, had I ever seen the man before, so that, although I said, “no, I don’t think so,” he seemed

suspicious, and left me his card, “in case you remember anything else, anything at all.” And then, after that, I seemed to be being followed. A white panel truck parked out on the street all hours of the day and night followed me to work, it seemed. I started to imagine someone sitting in the back of the truck, listening. Surely they would have bugged my apartment, and this poor guy was stuck in this truck for hours, for days, listening to nothing, following my quite uninteresting and predictable movements. I started to want to say something just to liven things up for him, something mysterious and provocative purely to keep the intrigue going. I started to picture my shadow as looking like Brian; not the old man in the canyon, but young Brian, with his blue eyes and thinning hair.

I began to identify with him. His tense, almost unendurably mundane waiting for something to happen when nothing ever actually happens except we all get older was so like my life as a writer, taking walks, sitting in a room, scribbling, always scribbling. I never think I’m writing enough, but I’m churning, a paper mill, though most of it’s shit, of course. I could paper over the actual world with these scribbled on pages no one wants—and I always am tensely waiting, looking for the story that never reveals itself, that only accumulates in these piles of scribbled pages, typed into the word processor to become pages of manuscript that I scribble over again, and then correct and print again, and eventually there may be a story here, but in the actual act of day to day writing—living—it remains imperceptible, like the snake to Mo.

On another walk, a while ago, a snake had been stretched across the narrow trail cutting through the meadow between Dry Gulch and the tracks. It didn’t move, and I didn’t want to step over it. Mo was off, deer leaping, racing in circles through the tall, golden, dry grass, enjoying a last fling before we crossed the tracks where I would put her on the leash to climb up out of the

canyon. I called her over, and she obediently came and stood before me with her paw nearly touching the snake, oblivious of it. I took her muzzle in my hand and pointed it down, held it inches from the snake and still she could not perceive it. At the time I wondered if this is how God feels, holding our noses right up to something that clearly is there, yet we do not sense it.

And I also often think it doesn't matter, if the story is shit or shinola, after all.

It's only an imaginary audience I might delight or disappoint, imagining myself discovered, maybe after I'm dead—I even make sure the kids know where the manuscripts are and urge them to try to get something for them, dead authors being more marketable than living ones—oh, yes, I imagine an entire college seminar of the future devoted to my work, my place in Literary History, but though for the kids' sake I wish they could get some money for the manuscripts, that won't help me here and now, and it won't ultimately matter either, if I am dead and never know, when the sun goes super nova and humanity is over, we're all dead, what difference will it make if I had written it or not?

But I know these are just ways of trying to take the pressure off myself, and that nothing ever mattered more.

I had done just that much, and had no idea where it was going, though I felt a need to pull away from the dead end of writing about writing and get back to the mystery—but also, gleefully imagining “a tour de force!” review quote—and then, when I went to the closet for the light hiking boot I wear only on my canyon walks, I noticed, after I had them on and sat on the toilet (always go before you go), a muddy trail I'd left across the tile of the bathroom floor. An odd, grainy yellow mud was on the bottom of the shoes—but there had been no rain for months—we're at the

height (depth?) of the dry season. Suddenly I got it that my narrator is clearly insane—for who could have been in my closet and applied this substance to the bottom of my shoes? Like the day I came home to find closed windows I'd left open. Who would come in and close a window and nothing else? So I checked the train schedule—the obvious next step, but realized I had only a vague idea of what time I'd left the house that day. And when I got to the canyon, I noticed water in the rut near the junction, in the deep tire ruts on the low road.

I thought it must be some sewer drainage, because there certainly hadn't been any precipitation since I'd last been in the canyon, and the ruts had been dry then. And Mo stank like a sewer after the walk, though that might have been from something dead she'd found to roll in; I'd had to call her repeatedly from the other side of the tracks, while she rolled enthusiastically in something nasty. One of these days she'll get hit by the train, or die of a heat stroke, leaping and racing on deadly hot days. This is the nature left for us, treacherous, virile, no Wordsworthian niceties. A rag hung on a branch in the brush was clearly a sign. So I turned right to Is There A Bridge instead of left to Dry Gulch, and found water, a flow even, making the quiet trickling sound through a lush growth of grass.

Mo is a fool—her exuberant joy in fulfilling what she was designed to do, by the implied consciousness of time itself, is not unlike the joy I find in writing. I had been reading Zola's *L'oeuvre* & noticing how I am his opposite: instead of getting a vision and then struggling in fits and starts to realize it, always ultimately failing because of the fundamental gap between object and idea, I operate from a complete lack of vision, but never cease working and love everything I do. While Sandoz admits he's never satisfied, ends up hating his story, glad when it's over, I am enraptured by my work, like Mo racing through the grassy field, perhaps stupidly, foolishly

expending myself to no purpose, but thrilled to put to use what time has, consciously or unconsciously, given me.

Yet, lately I have had a vision, or at least an image, a setting: a Venetian style palazzo across the street from the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco. It is night, and I lie on scented sheets in an upstairs bedroom; stars glint in the purple pre dawn sky let into the room through tall, curtainless, arched and painted windows. Starlight and firelight reveal the mirror finish of the floor. Smoldering embers crackling in the grate of a large fireplace across the room from the bed is the only sound, but I am terrified. I think this is the pathologist's home, and I am a ghost.

My actual room is an 11' x 15' rectangle, one small, painted, curtained window on the west facing wall, looks through a tall stand of royal palm, across a green lawn to the street. Another, larger, unpainted window with blinds but no curtain on the north wall gives us a view, through well trimmed trees, of the office of this apartment complex. A comfortable chair with a footstool and the bedside table with lamp flank the bed, a double bed with soft, red flannel sheets under two blankets and a quilt, pale green with a pattern of small pink roses. On the opposite wall is the desk with its chair, a small file drawer, bookcase and, opposite the foot of the bed, the TV. The floor is covered with an ugly, beige carpet with prominent stains. The furnishings are shabby and feminine, but comfortable and homey. The lampshade is a floral pink print, decorated with randomly glued on buttons and large safety pins stuck into the stiff fabric. The art on the walls is largely of my own making and not something I would attempt to describe in words. As I used to say to students: if the author could have summed it up in a sentence or two, why should he have bothered to write an entire book? The greater the author, in fact, the more one feels the crucial importance of every single word, no more, no less is necessary to complete

the meaning; if I could have said it in words, I wouldn't have made it a picture, now would I?

But the description of the actual room must include some mention of my memory of another room, because when I arranged my furniture and hung my art here, I had a strong sense of how similar this room is to the room I remember, so that when I am in this room now, I am also in the remembered room, mostly just because of its orientation with respect to the horizon, I think, the light and the shape of the room and the end of the bed with respect to the TV. The room I remember is from early childhood. It was a motel room, and I have no idea where we were or why, just that my family must have been on some little trip or other, not far from home, but far enough to stay in a motel, which is probably one of the reasons I remember it; it must have been unusual, an adventure, staying in a motel room with my brother, sister, mother and father. There were two double beds, as I recall, one for kids, one for parents, and I'm sure I was excited and up later than usual, but what I remember most vividly is watching the TV. That was the first time we watched "Saturday Night at the Movies," which was a new show, a new concept, showing movies on TV. I even remember the movie we watched: *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.

Humble digs, for sure, this real room, but I'd been happy enough here, imagining the other.

Suddenly wondering about the reality of it all, I spent most of an entire day looking for the card the agent had left, "in case you remember anything, anything at all," but could not find it.

After we had finally had some rain, you could still see the flow of water on the surface of

the road, which must have been a flash flood river during the downpour. Mo was more frenetic than ever, as we hadn't been out in weeks, waiting for the rain and mud to subside into this dust again.

If you have never appreciated the exuberant beauty of an animal running, “sportive as a fawn,” and have no image from your own memory, or your cultural history, to insert here, no sense for those “mute insensate things,” to get what I’m referring to, I fear we’re shit out of luck, because I do believe that my words, no words on their own, without help from what’s already in a reader’s head, can capture it exactly—words won’t do that; words can flash sometimes with exuberant beauty, or clunk and obstruct, but only with metaphor and sound, distant references to the thing itself at best. The thing itself is only in the world, not in the words. But the beauty of Mo running was already a metaphor for the writing, the act of writing, which is only in the world for these moments the pen is scurrying across the page—the words left behind on the page fail, miserably, I fear, to re-enact the act of writing them.

Another motel room, in Irvine, forty years later maybe, overlooked a massive tangle of freeways, the 55 intersecting with the 405, a very blank room, clean white linen on a large bed. I turned out the lights and opened the drapes on the glass wall so that the silent rush of red and white lights all night could enter my dreams.

He came to his senses in what appeared to be the middle of a high speed chase. Only slowly, piecemeal, did he become aware, his body’s weight shifting with the swerving g-force as the steel frame of the sedan wove insanely through light mid-day traffic on the 405, the chorus of

sirens not quite piercing the wall of heavy metal music cranking out of the sound system—no, not piercing shrilly, more like a background only slowly emerging, like the rest of it, out of a gray fog, not so much like waking up; more like coming down. Perhaps because of the distracting danger—he had to close his eyes as the Jag threaded the needle’s eye space between a stake-bed truck loaded with landscaping gear and a mini-van full of car-seats with a panicked driver who slammed on the brakes when she should have veered out of the way and came within half an inch of bloody shattered chrome and glass disaster—perhaps because of this he only slowly became aware of the smooth silver metal of handcuffs on his wrists, of the fact that he seemed to be suffering from amnesia.

But then, very quickly, in just the instant between zooming around a pair of suvs coming up rapidly in front of them, as fast as the ground comes up at the end of a long fall, passing them on the left shoulder to then slice across six lanes to an exit on the right, deftly, if only momentarily shaking the patrol car pursuit if not the helicopter—in just that instant there was time for him to marvel that he could be aware of having amnesia: the illogic of knowing that he didn’t know his own name but that he knew what amnesia was, that he recognized the 405, could calmly analyze, all in an instant, cultural figurations of drug-crazed drivers—Neal Casady flitted through his head, followed by this thought: how could he know so completely what his name wasn’t—it wasn’t, for example, Neal Casady—and not know so completely what it was? His awareness of his amnesia so suddenly and completely right in this middle of this intense distraction seemed itself preposterous.

Drugged out driver associations aside, he was not in fact driving, nor at this moment feeling anything other than utterly sober. He was the passenger, well groomed in a nicely tailored

suit and handcuffs, what he could observe about himself all he could know right now—manicured nails, no watch or rings, but a lump of something in his front pants pocket—with only another moment to examine the woman behind the wheel, as the car sped down the quiet, hot streets of a seedy, deserted, industrial area. Her face was impassive behind opaque sunglasses, her body visibly relaxed as her hands lightly spun the wheel in a 40 degree turn: a slender, elegant blonde in a good gray suit, sleekly eluding LA chase for the moment it took to skid to a full stop at the mouth of an alley. The door on his side swung open, then did she snarl and kick him out, or did she sigh and wish him luck? It happened too fast for him to later recall accurately. Either way, he found himself standing on the crumbling pavement in an unexpected silence as the car darted off.

Helicopters and sirens, now distant, did seem to be approaching, so he decided to just stand there and wait, holding his handcuffed hands awkwardly in front of him, when, from behind, down the alley, he heard, “oy!”

Turning, he felt something hard clip the back of his head and must have lost consciousness again, because then he was lying on his back, looking up into the pimpled face of a paramedic, who said, “hey buddy.”

“Hey,” he answered, and the paramedic nodded at him encouragingly, removing a blood pressure cuff from his arm.

“Vitals good, no visible trauma, responsive,” the paramedic spoke into a radio, then helped him up, lead him to an ambulance, saying only, “let’s take you in and get you checked out, anyway.”

He rode on a jump seat in the back of the ambulance, while the paramedic sat in front, not

talking to the driver, working on forms on a fat clipboard. They pulled into the curved drive of an innocuous looking building that might have been a clinic of some kind, walked him through an empty reception area and left him in a small examining room. Twenty minutes later a guy in a white lab coat, bald, glasses, big nose, walked in and introduced himself as Dr. Carnevale. A plump fortysomething woman in scrubs accompanied him, although she was not introduced and wore no name tag.

“Let’s get these off,” the doctor said, and produced a small key from his front breast pocket to unlock the handcuffs.

Rubbing his wrists and wondering how he was going to tell them about his amnesia, he suddenly realized that no one had yet asked his name.

The doctor produced a small flashlight, which he flashed briefly in his eyes, nodded and then said, “just follow the nurse, down the hall, we’ll run a few tests.”

The doctor turned right while the nurse lead him to the left, down a lengthy corridor past a series of closed doors, finally to another slightly larger room with a bed, a sink, toilet and a window with thick, glazed glass. “You can put your clothes in here,” she opened the door of a small cupboard, pulling out of it a gray jumpsuit, which she lay on the bed, and then she left.

He obediently hung up his clothes and waited patiently, sitting on the edge of the bed. Eventually, when no one came, he tried the door and found it locked.

It started to get dark outside. He could find no light switch. He climbed under the blanket and slept.

Dreamed.

When he woke, there was a breakfast tray, perfectly scrambled eggs, toast and coffee in a silver carafe, elegant silver and glass salt and pepper shakers, linen napkin and heavy silverware, a delicate blue pattern on the white china plate, a tall glass vase with a single yellow rose bud on the bedside table.

He ate, then took a shit.

Just as he was wiping his ass with the soft, top quality toilet paper—

After an early morning spent writing prayers, I took Mo to the canyon again, and walking down a red rut road through dry brush, she alerted at something ahead, around a curve, just as I had made her do in the story, but when I rounded the curve, nothing was there. She stayed close, seemed tense and afraid while I wrote this down on the small pad I carry on walks. Was she perceiving something I couldn't? Something terrifying? Significant?

Trains come in pairs, from opposite directions.

Death is always sudden.