The Demon Syllabus

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The Demon Syllabus

By

Barry Voorhees

A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York
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Master of Arts

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Abstract

These excerpts from the comedic novel *The Demon Syllabus*, narrated by the protagonist, Professor Kim Van Vimeshtechten, surround the events at a college where members of the administration have been arrested for running a campus prostitution ring. The effects of the scandal on the college community are intercut with events from Van Vimeshtechten’s personal life. The narrative is extremely digressive; past and present are intertwined to such an extent that they become difficult to separate—both for the characters and the reader. Running parallel to the public scandal at the college are Van Vimeshtechten’s obsession with a course syllabus. Despite the fact that the course has ended, he cannot stop working on the syllabus, to the detriment of his marriage and his sanity. There are a large number of characters who appear briefly and contribute to the novel’s humor. Episodic in structure, these excerpts form a mosaic of contemporary academic life with an accent on the absurd, the sad, and the frailties of human nature.
Fiction writing is an art and a craft, demanding creativity and discipline, active effort and reflection, vision and revision. W.B. Yeats provided a succinct, poetic explication of the incorporation of these foundational elements in his poem “The Balloon of The Mind:”

Hands, do what you’re bid:
Bring the balloon of the mind
That bellies and drags in the wind
Into its narrow shed. (155)

Manual labor (hands) is needed to bring the untethered imagination (mind) down to earth, where (shed) it can be grappled with, given form and content, molded, through the process of trial and error, into a coherent work. While Yeats’ formula is straightforward enough, the specific methods employed by writers to accomplish this task are as diverse and divergent as the individual writers themselves. Or, to put it another way: while the destination is clear, the roads leading to it are many and multifarious.
The paths which have led to the creation of *The Demon Syllabus* are predictable and random, quotidian and unique; are evident in the work itself and occluded by it. These compositional strands include subject matter, style, literary influences, and choice of genre. The discussion below will foreground and illuminate such aspects, provide an overview of the work and, as well, trace the subterranean evolutions of its author’s literary philosophy.

I. An Overview and Background

*The Demon Syllabus* in its current form represents approximately one-quarter of a novel. The project began its life as a six-page composition for a creative writing class at Brockport in the fall of 2014. At that point the work consisted of the annotated bibliography which appears on pages fifteen through twenty. Seeking a non-standard form for my fiction writing, I hit upon the idea of telling a story through a genre which normally is a non-fictional, academic mode of scholarly discourse, and contains writing about writing and books. Both of these elements appealed to my interests and creative impulses: re-situating a form into another context, where generic expectations can be subverted or played with; and writing that is textually-driven, that has its basis in other texts.

The annotated bibliography is the heart of the present work, the center from which the rest of the text has developed and flowed. Voice, character, setting, and storyline all proceed from this section. The narrator, slightly addled and prone to digression, expounds and expands upon a course reading list. And, perhaps most
importantly, the narrative mode is comedic. This is significant because it represents an almost-complete break from past fiction writing efforts, which invariably were thinly-veiled autobiography. Humor was not a central element in these writings, if it occurred at all. I don’t have a direct explanation for the new-found emphasis on comedy, other than to say that it felt natural and came relatively easily. If I reflect more deeply, however, I can see that there is a comic element (from my point of view) in the use of the annotated bibliography to tell a story. In fact, there is a parallel between the recycling of this form and humor: both involve a deflation of expectations and/or a movement in a new, unanticipated direction which, in retrospect, lay dormant in what had come previously.

In *The Demon Syllabus*, comedy is situational, or context-driven: characters act or speak in a manner that diverges from what would be anticipated in such a setting. An example of this is the football officials’ conversation that begins on page thirty-nine. Confronted by the actions of an anthropophagus player, the referees’ disgust gives way to misunderstanding, followed by a brief discussion of the concept of free will. Neither cannibalism nor philosophic debate has a place in a typical football game; inserted in this context, they transgress the boundaries of the probable and lead toward the implausible or absurd.

The humorous scenes and characters are the result of process, not preconception. By this I mean that the comedic element emerges during the writing itself, rather than the writing evolving from a predetermined idea of what will be funny. This “organic humor” is important to the development of my writing practice:
it encourages me to be patient and to continue to apply the seat of my pants to the seat of the chair. As well, it emphasizes the mysterious beauty of the imagination: thinking creatively leads to surprising, unforeseen outcomes that could not have been predicted by what has come before.

**II. Subject Matter and Setting: Write What You Know**

The scenes and events in *The Demon Syllabus* take place at a fictional setting: The University of Molesworth. Located in upstate New York, Molesworth is a conflation of numerous real-life institutions of higher learning where I have worked and studied. This familiarity (beside breeding contempt) provided me with specific, physical details on which to base my writing. This first-hand knowledge has been combined with a number of recent, high-profile incidents which contained a certain degree of outrageousness. Foremost among these was the prostitution scandal which led to the resignation of former New York governor Eliot Spitzer. As the details of the scandal emerged, the hubris of Spitzer’s actions made a deep impression on me: how did the most important public official in the state of New York think that he could get away with checking into a hotel under an assumed name? Didn’t he realize his position invited an intense amount of scrutiny? What led a man, a lawmaker, to become a lawbreaker? It appeared obvious that a disconnection from reality lurked somewhere within Spitzer. The precise locations of this disjuncture were, really, not so hard to determine: his brain and his penis. Nothing was more important to him than sex—more specifically, illicit sex.
Spitzer’s very public downfall provided the inspiration for the opening scene of the novel: students and employees of Molesworth converge to watch in disbelief as top officials of the university are arrested and put on public display. The crisis sends the university community into a state of shock: people are unsure of how to cope with events of such an unseemly and unbelievable nature. The coping mechanisms they employ are both predictable—withdrawal from the world—and ludicrous: trauma centers dispensing comfort food are set up to provide relief and quell insecurities.

The novel’s protagonist, Kim Van Vimishtechten, a professor in the English department at Molesworth, narrates these events. His narration in this opening section is both first person and omniscient third; he repeatedly uses “we” to describe the university community’s reaction to the scandal and its impact on daily activities. This shifting perspective in narrative point-of-view allows him the unique position of being both a part of the action and, at the same time, above it, able to take in and report the cumulative effect of the scandal. This “both/and” style of narration is non-standard; the intent is to create a narrative that is at once singular and both cumulative and encompassing. Of course, authorial intent is a slippery slope, and any judgment as to whether this narrative methodology is successful—or not—is best left to readers.

Van Vimishtechten’s narration is digressive; he interrupts his description of events with a recounting of a past encounter with Karel Karel. This movement between present and past creates a sort of temporal dislocation; the forward, linear progression in time of the narrative is interrupted. This sense of “where are we?” is
exacerbated by the inclusion of Kim's memories of his wife, Chloe. Attempting to resolve, or to bring into harmony, such dislocation was one of the primary challenges I faced as a writer. "How does this all hang together in time?" was a question I repeatedly asked myself. As the writing of the novel progressed, it became clear to me that solving, or resolving, these quandaries could only be accomplished within the logic of the novel itself; which is to say: only by moving forward with the narrative could I make sense of what came before. While such an answer may appear self-evident, it was not my initial reaction, which resembled a sort of authorial hand-wrinking. But such consternation accomplished little in terms of evoking a solution and, in fact, impeded the writing process.

What I've learned from encountering such difficulties is centered upon the notion of trust. First, to trust my instincts as a writer and allow the writing to move forward, and second, to place trust in the process of writing itself. Given that what I've written so far comprises only a quarter of a novel which moves forward and backward in time, it would not be possible to make everything explicit and to resolve all contradictory or confusing elements. Only by continuing in my endeavors could I hope to bring congruity to the discontinuity. Furthermore, as my understanding of what I was trying to accomplish presented itself more clearly, it became apparent that there was a thematic parallel to this question of the movement of time. This theme is the conflict between the irrevocable nature of the past and the manner in which the past, through the agency of memory, pervades the present. Both the university community and Kim are haunted by what has come before; for the former, it is a past
free of questions about the depravity and duplicity of human behavior, specifically
the behavior of those who are seen as leaders and exemplars of what the university
stands for and symbolizes. For Kim it is the dissolution of a relationship that had
shaped his life and identity. In both cases, the parties must confront Loss and Being
Lost, the mystery of how to move forward when shackled by previous actions and
events.

In another context, such conflicts might be the stuff of tragedy; in *The Demon*
*Syllabus*, they give rise to comedy. This statement echoes Karl Marx’s famous
dictum, *History appears first as tragedy, second as farce*. But whereas Marx was
referring to events of world-historical significance, here the events are personal and
local. Life has changed irrevocably, and the characters are forced to react to
occurrences which have brought about this change. That they fail to do so in a
coherent manner marks them as human, as flawed and unpredictable creatures
contending with forces within and beyond their control.

The academic setting of the novel has presented the opportunity satirize many
contemporary trends in academia. Foremost among these is the penchant for naming
rights, which is here pushed to an extreme: even individual courses ("Tasty Bites
ENG 112") are named after products. Everything has been bought and sold;
capitalism and acquisitiveness have reached such a pitch that they subsume all other
interests. Donors to the university exert an undue influence, providing funding for
journals whose content reflects their own, obscure interests and politics. The satire
draws out the comedic element in such trends, adumbrating a future which hopefully will not come to pass.

III. Presiding Spirits

As noted above, I have a predisposition toward writing about writing and books. This predilection is strongly evident in The Demon Syllabus. Character, setting, and, in many instances, the writing itself are deeply informed and influenced by literature. The protagonist is an English professor whose inability to stop revising a syllabus has had a destructive effect on his life. He is aware of his predicament, but helplessly in thrall to his desire to discover another book or piece of writing which will tie his course—and his life—together. Even after the course has ended, he continues to revise; his bibliomania destroys his marriage, and an attempt at suicide is forestalled by the writing of a suicide note—which then becomes a suicide essay, complete with annotated bibliography.

The influence of a number of authors—including Pynchon, DeLillo, Nabokov, and Thomas Bernhard—is decidedly present in The Demon Syllabus. But it is not only their style or subject matter that has impacted my writing; in many cases, it is what I have learned about literature from these authors that has had an effect on how and what I write. An example of this is a scene early in Pynchon’s novel Gravity’s Rainbow in which the city of London is attacked by an adenoid gland. Obviously, human glands do not attack cities—yet Pynchon’s realistic portrayal of the event renders such arguments irrelevant. The lesson here is that if presented realistically, an
incident—no matter how unbelievable or outside the realm of actual possibility—will be accepted by readers. It is a question of how the material is handled, rather than the nature of the material, that is important.

The elegance, rhythm, and melodiousness of Vladimir Nabokov’s sentences—particularly in *Lolita*—have inspired me to instill these qualities in my own work, to raise my writing to the level of art. What is required to accomplish such a goal is, I believe, a very refined sense of eye-ear-hand-brain coordination. Such refinement necessitates patience, perseverance, imagination, and a sort of hyper-alertness to both sound and sense—a fascination with tone and overtone, meaning and melody. A good vocabulary helps, too. One criticism of my work that has repeatedly been voiced in writing workshops is my penchant for using words that require a reader to consult a dictionary; I steadfastly reject such criticism. I am too much in love with language to restrict myself to the commonplace and quotidian. Reading can be many things; from my perspective, learning occupies a prominent place among these possibilities.

The novel that has exerted the most direct influence on *The Demon Syllabus* is Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*. The similarities are numerous: set at a fictional university and narrated by a professor, DeLillo’s novel traces his narrator’s actions in the wake of a crisis. I would be remiss not to admit that exposure to DeLillo’s sharp, funny, succinct prose style has had a lasting impact on my own writing. But I’m not going to beat myself up over such an admission. *White Noise* won the National Book Award (1985) for a reason: it is very, very good. If one is to have models to imitate, they might as well be models that are held in high regard. And, given that my novel is still,
essentially, in its formative stages, to draw any conclusive parallels between DeLillo’s novel and my own would be premature, if not downright presumptuous.

The Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard is not widely known in the United States. His writing is generally considered to be “difficult.” One of the primary challenges confronting readers is Bernhard’s sentences, which are often of great length (a page or longer is not uncommon) and have an obsessive, circuitous quality to them. His narrators are ill or mentally deranged, and often both. There is a very dark humor to his writing. All of these qualities appeal to me, but it is the complexity of his sentences which have left the deepest impression. To understand them often requires rereading, if not re-rereading. I noted above that my use of (relatively) obscure words often drew complaints from other workshop participants; running a very close second in terms of criticism was sentence length. While I valued the feedback, what was—and remains—most important to me is to follow my own artistic instincts, and to model my work on writing for which I feel the most affinity. To navigate Bernhard’s sentences entails intransigence in the face of the not easily recognizable, the frustratingly unfamiliar. I understand that for many readers such qualities are rebarbative; but for this reader they hold an infinite attraction.

IV: The Way Forward

In its current state, the structure of The Demon Syllabus is episodic, similar to a picaresque novel. Whether this form (or formlessness) will be sufficient as the narrative grows in length remains to be seen. Given that the majority of the novel is
yet to be written, making a definitive statement on its ultimate shape would obviously be premature. I do feel that the narrative arc must be more explicit, the chronological order of events made clearer, more easily and readily discernable.

One of the great advantages of the novelistic form is its plasticity. Distinct and disparate genres of discourse, as well as narrative structures, can be incorporated in a single work; the only requirement is that the writing be strong enough to hold the reader's interest for an extended period of time. Perhaps "only" is an inappropriate qualifier; to be able to create work of art that connects one human with another over time and distance is indeed no little task.
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Out of classrooms and lecture halls, from the dorms on the lower quad, frat packs spilling from squalid, stately fraternity rooms reeking of stale beer and high-grade marijuana, scurrying up from the warren of tunnels that run beneath the campus, from Brillo Gymnasium and Recreation Center, we came forth: a motley crew of smartly-dressed students and disheveled professors, graying, bespectacled administrative assistants, casual folks from IT, mole-eyed library assistants from the bowels of Land O' Lakes Library squinting like they hadn't been out in the daylight for months, an enterprising Engineering student who took advantage of the twenty mph winds and was flying a homemade kite: together we formed a goggle-eyed throng, lolling with our mouths agape, faces contorted into rictuses of disbelief, scratching our heads or pulling at our underwear, arms akimbo, rubbing our upper arms and shoulders to keep warm, adjusting hats and gloves, coughing, girls chewing on their braids, everyone yawping into their cellphones or snapping pictures with a paparazzi's glee, a student with an old polaroid camera, her face hidden behind a pair of glasses with lenses in the shape of a large moth, a luminous Polyphemus, aiming and re-aiming her camera with a markswoman's concentration, the polaroid spitting out a series of photographs which would, eventually, come to fetch a very attractive price on eBay.
We had, all of us, emerged to watch a singular event unfold, to gaze with
astonishment upon an outsize perp walk, a ritualistic shaming under the clear blue
April sky, to catch a glimpse of the faces behind a cordon of police officers: the
College President, Dr. Angus Budge; the Athletic Director Jimmy "Big Balls"
Wandsworth; the Dean of the Sunny Squares School of Business Dr. Enoch Schitz,
and a fourth figure, unidentified, a petite woman with dark hair and a prominent nose;
rumors ran wildly through the crowd, jostling each other in their pursuit of
ludicrousness: she was CIA, she was Mossad, she was a Lebanese agent of The
Guardians of The Cedars; someone had seen her on tv, she was a weatherperson from
Des Moines, a presenter for the BBC, a Russian gymnast who had defected; she was
KPK and a host of other acronyms, many of which I didn’t recognize: DFD, LMR,
GZZ, OUP. Slowly, like a baby bird clinging to the edge of its nest and testing its
wings, the truth began to appear, gaining strength and a certain degree of confidence
the more it flapped: she was Dr. Esma Darvinoglu, a Butterbomb Visiting Fellow in
the Department of Microbiology.

The officers and their quarry moved slowly across the upper quad; I had the
feeling I was watching an old Super 8 home movie, Zapruder-esque, a film whose
importance I was not able to completely understand or put together; the colors were
washed out, the images fractured, perhaps even doctored; someone had edited, to
nefarious ends, the film I was watching. The impressive facades of the brick buildings
lining the quad provided a perfectly incongruous backdrop to the events; rectitude and
shame, pride and accusation coalesced into a heady brew, a momentous emotional
intoxication: we were free, we were trapped, we belonged, we were eternal outsiders, guilty in our innocence and innocent by way of our guilt, we took ownership, we skipped town and lived the rest of our lives under an assumed name, taking a job at a golf course and renting a shack down on River Road where at night as you lay in bed the cars would pass not ten feet from your head and terror lay beside you as you drifted off, peacefully, to sleep.

I noticed Karel Karel from Cult Studies standing just to my left. He turned toward me and, in a transparently inscrutable fashion, raised his chin and drew his eyelids together.

We eyed each other warily.

He approached. “Bitter business,” he said, sotto voce, as he jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the spectacle behind him.

“Macbeth,” I replied.

“What are you talking about?” he asked, head tilting slightly to one side.

“What are you talking about?” I challenged.

We eyed each other warily.

I had taken a dislike to Karel Karel even before we met. Generally I prefer a slow boat to disadmiration but in his case had boarded the express. I was at a Department cocktail party, held in celebration of the endowment of a new chair by the Suckling Company, the undisputed leader of the Binky Industry: The Connor Suckling Chair in Discursive Optimysticism.
Suckling was a Normalist with a bent toward the metaphysical; he wanted to fund a journal focused on The Uncanny in anti-dystopian literature. What exegetical scrutiny was being trained on writers in contact with The Other Side, penmen and women who portrayed a non-apocalyptic, transmigratory future, quotidian visionaries who re-presented tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow in quiet, familiar, reassuring earthtones, in hues of blue, green, and brown? he asked. Well none, came The Intriguingly Bewildered Response. *Et voilà où nous en sommes.*

I spied Mimi LaBlonde, elegant, willowy, her long black hair piled on the top of her head in a studiedly disheveled manner, chatting with Maurice Less, the Dr. Dimwitter Total Cleanse! Professor of Literary Dynasties. His monograph on the extended family of Alexander Pope made skeptics of those sympathetic to his cause and believers out of the incredulous. LaBlonde was a tableau vivant of sexually charged ambiguities: feral, domesticated, possessed of a graceful clumsiness that left men happily ill at ease. She could say goodbye in seventeen languages.

The Weir Sisters—Jill, Jennifer, Judy—were huddled in the corner of the room, whispering. They were always whispering. Sometimes late at night, engaged in distressing lucubrations, I swore I could detect the susurrus of their mumblings sweeping in beneath my office door, otherworldly voices engaged in spells, prophecies, feminist critiques of heteronormative hegemony. That the rustle of the voices eventually morphed into the chorus of the Eagles “Witchy Woman” was both disconcerting and, somehow, fitting.

I stuck up a conversation with Nora Quill.
Hi Nora
She smiled.
Semester going well?
She smiled.
Is that cyanide you’re drinking?

“Karel Karel was the pick. I disliked him immensely. I was impressed by that. Do you understand? The strength of my aversion to him moved me. I’m glad we chose him. You’ll hate him, don’t worry. He’s Vee Cee. Very Continental. Has a beard. Your disapprobation will be immediate. Talk to you later.”

So the seeds of disinclination had been sown by Nora’s oracular revelations. I did what I could to nourish and bring them to full maturity, inhabitants of a happy English garden of the disavowed.

And now here we were, Karel Karel and I, locked in a non-staring match.
Or at least I thought we were. I looked up. He had vanished.

* * * * *

But what exactly was this spectacle to which we bore witness?

I doubt any of us could have come up with an explanation that would rival, in terms of sheer jaw-dropping disbelievability, what came to be known, eventually, as The Truth: these four were being arrested for running a campus prostitution ring. The tawdriness of the details was thrilling: Budge was the brains, Wandsworth provided transportation, Schitz was, supposedly, in charge of logistics. Together they had
coerced a small, very select group of nymphic undergraduates into providing sexual services (we are no longer a manufacturing-based economy, but service-oriented, the Sector of Pleasure, Joel Sunshine, a pal of mine in Economics, joked) in return for gifts, gadgets, grades.

Things ran smoothly for a few months until one of the girls, Ama Omu, voiced a concern about the clientele. “Listen,” Ama said to Budge, “if I’m going to give it up I want a Wall Street player, a guy with money a brain and a cock.” Budge looked up, startled. “Schitz ain’t cuttin’ it, if you know what I mean,” Ama said, rolling her eyes. “I can’t see him anymore. And I’ve talked to the other girls. There are no other clients. Only you, Big Balls, and Schitz. This isn’t going to work out.”

Wandsworth had trouble of his own. He had gone bonkers for one of the girls, Trish Truelove, and began to make unreasonable sexual demands; he wanted to ride bareback; he begged her to marry him; he was thirty-five years her senior; so what? She had to be his, he had to be hers, they had to be theirs. Trish was intransigent, unmoved, and increasingly hostile. Big Balls begged, cajoled, made wild promises: free tuition, tickets to every football game, a trip to Barbados, a Gucci handbag, cash and lots of it, a new Buick, his great-grandmother’s wedding ring, 24K gold, seven diamonds in a setting of rubies, worth an ungodly sum and fully insured.

No dice, said Trish.

Big Balls was flummoxed. His decision making suffered. He fired the men’s soccer coach and brought in a whiz from Mechatronics who claimed that he could use algorithms and a 3-D printer to create an unbeatable squad. The team lost the rest of
its games. BB blew up one day at the cafeteria, called the cashier a raging slut, dumped his tray of sushi on the floor and stomped out. Security was called. The college community informed. Seven lesbians, cheerfully plump, fair, from rural Upstate towns, villages, and hamlets, each wearing a crocheted beret in a different muted tone that made me think of the color scheme for a baby’s room, soft, sweet, comfy, held a protest in front of Brillo and demanded Big Balls resign. They held up signs, chanted, invoked Sappho.

But then the whole thing blew over.

We had other concerns.

Or at least we thought we did.

But there we were, riveted, the wind bringing tears to our eyes, toes a bit numb, straining to catch a last glimpse of Budge, Wandsworth, Schitz, and Darvinolgu as they disappeared into black sedans, a community brought together in the spirit of indignation and stunned disbelief, an institution, a culture comprised of the normative and the divergent and infinite variations of the two: jock-stoners with double majors in Linguistics and Zoology, the tall, lithe Korean girl majoring in Economics and Porn Studies, voluble and shy, who works the late shift at the Land O’ Lakes circ desk and does ballet exercises behind the counter, gracefully posing in an arabesque en l’air as she scans your library card and the stack of books you’ll likely never read, de-sensitizes them and then sends you on your way with a smile a tilt of the head and a melodious “they’re due in June,” and well, yes, we all are my darling as you artfully twirl her across the stage—a huge stage, with minimalist set design
striking in its use of expressionistic chiaroscuro—catching her as she completes her
pirouette and the crowd bursts into rapturous applause, a deluge of roses falling upon
your heads, the heights are dizzying, that is until a bouquet rocks you right in the
crotch and you stop yourself and wonder: *jesus christ just where the hell exactly am I
right now?...* students in their seventh year of the Four +1 Program ("The Plus is
You!")*, the cherubic, the demonesque, the arrogant, the humble, those whose
humility smacks of arrogance, the timid and the temerarious, the one and the many,
the we, the you, the us, the them, as the camera crews get it all down on tape and the
moment is, forever, captured.

O but who will set it free?

* * * * * * *
Chlōe, Chloe . . . with umlauts and without, anointed with a diacritical crown
or denuded, your inky diadem despatched by a legion of otiose American
orthographers obviating linguistic nuance with their laissez-faire attitudes and
inaction . . . Oh Chlōe I will restore the crown, be your palace guard, your banker, I
will protect, defend, and spend . . . shall I speak of how my Marvellous vegetable
love does grow?

vaster than empires, and more slow . . .

Chlōe . . . epithet of Demeter, queen of the harvest and mistress of The
Mysteries . . . but you were no coy mistress . . . a coy master, rather . . . I speak your
name now like an invocation, summoning seaside mornings when we rocked in our
bed and church bells rang out in the harbor, how we stitched the days together with
the needle and thread of our lovemaking and I swore the birds outside our windows
were laughing, joyously, uproariously, as we cooed and clawed our way through the
afternoons . . . it was all poetry, the freest verse, our words, like our bodies, rubbing
up against one another and on fire; we coupleted, composed concupiscent quatrains,
invented new forms, simile became smile and metaphor metamorph, we were
polymorphously and polysemously perverse, we danced the sextina, we were poètes
maudits and present at The Creation.

April took flesh in clear September air

when one girl paused upon the colonnade,

turned, and for a heartbeat hovered there . . .
Ah, but that was all so long ago . . . our heartbeats no longer hover, do they? . . . And yes Chloe my dear darling, now it’s even happened to me, I’ve become one of the many, I’ve joined the legions of the lazy and your crown is elided, your throne vacant, unattended, dispossessed.

*   *   *   *   *   *
The fabric of our society had been rent, the scaffolding of our lives dismantled and carted off. We were bereft, unsteady, food dribbled from the corner of our mouths', we wore the same clothes for days. Crying stations were set up, manned by therapists and food trucks dispensing comfort food: mac & cheese, poutine, smoothies, chocolate cake, tiramisu, pistachio baklava. Classes were cancelled; a grad seminar in the Aesthetics of Perusal met covertly and ran until deep into the night, students debating questions of ethics, remuneration, unprotected sex. Hipsters shaved their beards. Lubrious graffiti appeared on campus buildings, neon embellishments, indignant exclamations, puerile puns. The ground shifted beneath our feet and we stumbled, fell, clawed at the earth, lay prostrate feigning death. We were adrift, abandoned satellites wandering through the ether, trapped in an infinite ellipsis, relegated to an oblique orbit around The Scandal. From New York, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Tokyo, London, Albania, Turkmenistan and Tallahassee television crews descended like locusts, conducting endless interviews; hotels and motels did record business; local merchants were aghast, repudiated the college, threw their heads back and laughed gleefully as they tallied the day's receipts. An endlessly looping panoramic shot of the campus appeared on TV screens around the world, announcing our depravity, our sexual license, our odd eating habits. We were put under a microscope and discovered to be swarming with bacteria; we were diseased, decrepit, pariahs to be shunned. We bore the mark of Association and were judged complicit, as lemmings and enablers, morons, fops, and dolts.
I realized that Karel Karel was right: I didn’t know what the hell I was talking about. “Bitter business” is a phrase from *Hamlet*, not *Macbeth*. So he had me there. And he wasn’t referring to Shakespeare anyway; that makes two against me. What he *was* talking about was Leon Bitter, the local sheriff, a Cult Studies ABD whose leave-taking from the college left both sides wounded, bearing grudges, reconnoitering with intent to conspire. Bitter had submitted his thesis, “Spectacular Law Enforcement: Crime as Image Commodity in the Post-Capitalist Visual-Verbal Economy,” no less than seven times. The bottleneck was Budge, who, before wheedling his way into the President’s office, had been the dean of the Bob’s of Vermont School of Arts & Sciences. Now, normally a dean would have nothing to do with a dissertation. But somehow Budge got wind of rumors that Leon had been fooling around with a young professor in the department, Magda Moon, who Budge himself had taken a fancy to. An extra-special fancy. He was smitten, besotted, touchy as hell about the whole thing. But the rumors were only that. “Sure, we went out,” Bitter said, “but I couldn’t get anywhere with that little bitch. I took her ice skating, I even burned her one of the best jazz compilation cd’s of all time; all for nought. I think she’s a virgin, actually, maybe a lesbian. But definitely not a virgin lesbian.”

So, like Hamlet, Bitter wanted revenge against the usurper of his rightful place; and, like Denmark Jr. he waffled, hemmed and hedged, went off to England to study mosses and liverworts, cleaved the air, promise-crammed, wrote out long soliloquies composed of nonsense and non sequitur; he was a baffled bard, a situation
which is fine as long as you have a PhD.; without one you’re no better than some slob with a dissertation on “Carnatic Forms in Melville’s Later Poetry.” So it seemed only natural for Bitter to channel his vexations into a run for public office, leaving the ivory bunker behind and plunging headlong into existential chaos: gatherings at graveyards and donut shops, waiting patiently for a parking meter to expire, enforcing the strict local leash laws: that’s right, Leon entered the political thicket, in quest of a position for which he was unusually unqualified: Police Chief. His experience with law enforcement was limited to the critical viewing of films and tv dramas, the photos of Weegee, early daguerreotypes of whipping posts, the pillory, the public cage, the stocks, and hangings, along with what he termed a deep and perilous reading of the works of Jeremy Bentham, James M. Cain, and Guy DeBord. During his candidacy Bitter portrayed himself as a know-nothing who was open to all suggestions. The public gradually warmed to his tactic of declaring an outright ignorance of what the job might entail. “I’d have to look into it” became his stock answer as well as his campaign slogan. In effect, he was telling the community that he needed education; we were a college town: We Understood. Mostly Bitter tried to keep as low a profile as possible. His rival in the race, Bing Whimmer, was an ex-marine who ran a local day care center, Little Soldiers. He would march his uniformed charges around Mercury Park, or push them in strollers decked to look like tanks; in fact these strollers were frighteningly realistic. The children would be perched inside, faces obscured by fish net stockings in lieu of iron mesh, peering through the eye slits in the stroller/tank’s “cab”; that they evinced such happiness in pushing the button to
make the canon swivel, release a bright red ball and go “pop pop” in sing song was hardly surprising and infinitely depressing. Their inculcation was, at such a tender age, already complete.

Whimmer had the backing of the local gun nuts, the evangelicals, UFC fans, and The Banks; but we were a self-pleased and pleasingly liberal town; we shopped at farmer’s markets for virgin lychee nuts, we looked young for our age. Bitter won in a landslide.

* * * * *

I hid in my office for three days, ordered pizza and Indian food. My body began to emit a strange odor. I emailed my students in Tasty Bites ENG 112 an assignment to write a thirty page paper on a topic of their choice and wished them good luck. At night I listened to the demonstrators, their voices, strained with vehemence and the effects of too much poutine, arcing toward my window on the far side of Tradition Hall. My telephone told me I had forty-three missed calls. I decided that when it reached one hundred I would do something. Exactly what was unclear. But I knew I wasn’t that strong; how long could I actually hold out? I had responsibilities, obligations, a piano lesson with Ilona, a very attractive Russian woman who urged me to penetrate the keys with my fingers, to embrace the piano with limber digits, to apply supple strokes: “penetrate!” she would demand. I wasn’t sure I was willing to forego this week’s lesson. Luckily, the recent renovations to Trad Hall included the installation of full bathrooms. My colleagues and I had
laughed when we first saw them: who’s going to take a shower here? we wondered. Well, now I knew: I was. At night I snuck out of my office and took long, deeply rewarding showers. Even after thirty-five minutes the pressure remained perfect, the temperature steady; by that time I was practically pickled.

* * * * * *

Despite my ablutions, the change in bodily odor remained. I burned incense at home, bought a blueberry ScentMachine! for the office, a pack of those little Christmas trees you hang from the rearview mirror for the car. In short, I had developed an acute case of olfactory paranoia. I became hyperaware of smells, of fluctuations in scent and sensibility. But to really understand a person necessitated a propinquity not normally allowed to mere acquaintances; I had to get close, penetrate (Ah my Ilona!), make raids behind the lines, be threatened with a slap in the face. Really, I meant no harm. Merely engaging in a bit of research, my dear. And in fact my suppositions were proven correct: she, my accuser, had no smell whatsoever; she was an olfactory void.

Dudley Riordan stopped by my office one day and started sniffing around.

“Don’t sniff around,” I told him.

“Something’s changed,” he said. “Hey listen, if I can’t go sniffing around my friends’ offices, where can I go sniffing around. What’s this box over here, under the window?” he asked, prodding a sealed wine crate with his toe.

“Nothing,” I said, “it’s a box of nothing.”
"A nothingness box. I like it. But how do we know whether nothing is really there or not? Perhaps nothing is both there and not there. I think we need to open it."

"Not so fast, Dud. You’d only be disappointed. To gaze upon nothing is to see the nothing that’s really there, and to see the not-nothing that’s really there, as well not-there. It is the vortex of our fears, realized; on the other hand, it’s nothing."

"I like how nothing fits," Dudley said. "I think I need to make friends with nothing."

He lifted the box. "Pretty hefty for nothing."

I took a banana off my desk and aimed it at him. "Listen, put the box down and nobody gets hurt. Understand?"

"Gee whiz, awful touchy aren’t ya. Touchy as hell. And over nothing. Ya smell funny too."

"You don’t like the blueberry?"

"Blueberry curry it smells like in here. It’s disconcerting, distracting. It’s definitely not nothing. I gotta go." He clapped me on the arm. "Listen kid, open a goddamn window, will ya?" At the door he turned: "Just don’t go jumpin’ out of it."

I sat down. Dud had left the nothing box on a chair in the corner. He was right: nothing and not-nothing did share an existence inside the box. And outside it too, I suppose. But it was my nothing in there, my not-nothing: my life and, once upon a time, what was to be my death.
I pried the lid off, removed a stack of papers, and set them on my desk. Yes, just as I recall: I had arranged the sections in reverse order, so that the narrative ran backward—which, at the time, was the only direction I wanted to travel in.

And so we begin—with a suicide note:

* * * * *

"Dearest Reader,

The annotated bibliography below, when complete, will form the final section of The Demon Syllabus, a work, an obsession, a mania, or—were I to join, momentarily, the credulous many who adhere to the idea that some unknown teleological force is at work in our lives (our loves!)—yes, a destiny.

The beginnings of its life (which coincide, I now see, with the end of mine) were relatively quotidian. The idea for the course had been percolating like a Saturday morning cup of coffee in my mind for a few years; I finally took the plunge, a graceful butterfly from the high board, and gave the course a name: "The Literature of Sacrifice." It may appear to the casual reader that this is an inordinately long period of gestation; an appearance exacerbated, perhaps, by the perceived exiguity of the payoff. As if a name weren’t everything!

And from such humble origins, from such a beautiful bouncing little bundle of joy, has come, has sprung—this... this...

(Quickly, an aside, while I still have the time: I first made the acquaintance of Norman, or, as I prefer to call him, Neither Beast Nor Man, at a conference in Wainscotting, Pennsylvania. We were there to hear Nels Fibulon give a talk—more precisely, a harangue—on the sweetly-entitled topic, Subjective Misery as Ontological Advantage: A Second State of Consideration. As I’m sure you’re well aware, dear reader, delicate monster, his First State lecture has gone down in the record books as an attempt at career suicide that failed. Miserably. The coruscating rainbow of praise, outrage, denunciation, retraction, backbiting, ring kissing and sycophancy the lecture elicited was no less than astounding. Having thought this would be his dénouement, Fibulon was faced with an offer of full professorship from the College of The Far Hills. He was a star. I remember speaking to him on the phone six months or so after that first lecture. “How could this happen?” he asked, bewildered. “Fuck me.” I told him he wasn’t my type and tried my best to console him. “Listen, you’re headed to Far Hills . . .” He cut me off with a curt “Fuck Far Hills” and hung up. But let me make my way back to Norman. What I recall most about our first meeting is, in fact, his wife: Helena Skye. Her eyes were of such a translucent and transfixing hue that I half expected to see an exotic fish swimming around in the back of her head. After marrying Neither Mouse Nor Man—which was, if I remember correctly, her fourth stab (oh! how many wounds can a body take?) at wedded bliss, she decided, appositely, to become one of the hyphenated: Helena Skye-Blue.)
(Well, it appears I have more time than I expected. Allow me to deftly, with celerity and good humor, provide you, attentive reader, absent seeker, with a bit—just a dollop—of background: My wife left me one thousand five hundred seventeen days (here I consult my watch) 4 hours and (approx.) 23 minutes ago. I suppose it would be redundant to say that the moment is fixed in my mind. Very well then, I’ll be doubly redundant: the moment is fixed in my mind. The time was 11:43 am. A light wind was blowing from the southeast. I was walking across campus to my office in Tradition Hall. The sky was clear. My mind was cloudy. The dulcet tones of Chopin’s *Funeral March* (third movement of his Piano Sonata No. 2) tinkled in my coat pocket. Chlöe. My light, my darkness, my shade, my mid-day desert sun. I said hello. “I’m no longer here,” she said.)

Blue ransacks the cut-out bin of history, presenting the reader with an omnium-gatherum of ignoble phrases by the lamentably—and, in quite a few instances, the justifiably—forgotten. Odd, untoward, misleading, circuitous, fractured, fumbled, misguided, patently stupid—Blue leaves no tum unstoned. [Ah, a small joke at Norm’s expense. Take out and stick to the nuts and bolts of the work]

(Where doesn’t the time go? I know not. A smidgen more background, depth for a fathomless tale: My immediate reaction to Chloe’s call was, naturally, panic. I took off in a trot—alright, a slow trot—toward our house. (Here I insert, discreetly, my physical specifications: I’m 5’11” and weigh (yes, I’ll get up on the scale for you, dear reader, it’s no problem, I keep it right next to my desk; ah, the spinning wheel
stops at ... 268). In other words, I am not a man who normally, and preferably under no conditions whatsoever, trots. No sooner did I begin this farce than I recalled I had a class at noon. With surprising agility (what unknown resources a moment of terror can summon from us!) I scooped the phone from my pocket and came to a halt.)


(I called Von Schlump. “Vhat ist dis?” a stentorian voice barked harshly in my ear. “Helma, it’s Kim. I’ve got a class at noon. I’m going to be late.” “Vell, vee vill dake gare ov, yez.” I put the phone back in my pocket and began to walk, my head lost in the puffy cumulous clouds rising to the east, my feet in the mud. I looked down. I was walking across a section of what had formerly been lawn; now it was a sloppy slope, a slight incline covered in blue-green goop. Shit!)

Buttinski’s now-classic study examines the discursive power structures inherent in the interruption—or, as the author refers to it—the voxio interruptus. Employing a plethora of methodologies (interviews, lab tests, textual exegesis, speculation) in order to delineate the modes in which such structures manifest themselves, Buttinski . . . [flesh out the rest]

(I headed in the direction of our house, scraping the mud off my shoes as I went. This may sound simple enough, yet it caused me no little difficulty to move forward while
simultaneously holding out the side of one shoe and rubbing it on the grass. When I arrived at our commodious (or so I thought!) abode, I saw that two tire tracks were carved in the front lawn, running directly from the front porch to the street. As I stood there gawping, unable to process the visual information I was receiving, my phone rang again. The Chopin made it all clear: the tracks were two shallow graves.)


[refer to last Fall’s lecture notes; consult May 2007 issue (Vol. XXXIV No. 5a Special Spring and Summer edition, guest edited by Arno Linkvist and Maximillian Flick--?) of Secret Instruction]

(Helma’s voice sounded on the line. “What darr you?” “I’m here at my house,” I answered. “There’s a problem. Actually there’s a lot of problems. Can someone stay with my class?” “Yez, vee vill zee do et.” A word or two about Helma: she is the Party Secretary, a self-applied title in lieu of the more commonly-used department secretary, a construction which she off-handedly (and not so off-handedly) abjured. Once at a small gathering I introduced her as the latter and she hit the roof: resembling a Social Realist statue come to life, she grabbed my arm and shouted “zee Pearly, nut zee Depeardmend!” her eyes raised toward some distant indefinable point on the Historical Horizon). A Bulgarian-German exile, her command of English fluctuates—a matter of horror to many, humor to some, ignored by a select few—a group I am proud to be a member of. Single digits excite me. Helma had the
disconcerting habit of using *What* (Vhat!) in place of all interrogatives. So, for example, getting up from a meeting, she would ask: What will you submit to me the documents yes? (Vhat vill . . . etc.); or, discussing my plans for a new lecture series, she might suggest, "What not have them bring in Gringarten?" (Vhat nuht hev dem . . . etc.). The funny thing is this: a few summers ago I was at a hotel bar in Montreal, slowly yet inexorably drinking myself into a stupor. My mind was elsewhere. My life was right in front of me. I heard a voice from a few tables over that sounded strangely familiar. I listened more closely and then stood up, leaned on my tippy-toes, cocked my head a bit to the left, and caught a glimpse of—Helma. I rapidly sat back down. Was it her doppelganger? The woman was speaking in a very mellifluous voice with a slight, and very charming, Southern—Texan, perhaps?—accent. Did I dare stand up again? What exactly was I afraid of? My bones suddenly seemed to be replaced by cement. I couldn’t move. I listened. It was quiet. I listened more closely—in fact, my entire life force seemed to be lodged in my right ear, allowing me to achieve a level of concentration that, quite frankly, I found annoying. I sat back and relaxed. The seating was plush and pleasantly engaging. I looked up. Helma and her companions passed not ten feet in front of me, heading toward the exit.)


[I can’t think about this right now. The only thing that *does* come to mind is something I read many years ago, a pithy book review that ran: *The author appears to*
have deprived himself of sleep in order to procure it for his readers. I'll catch up with you later, Risenschein]

(But was it Helma? My bones seemed to be bones again and for a moment I toyed, like a contented cat, with the ball of string of following her. But I'm no detective—and even less feline.)

(I now—such luck!—recall the title of the article in *Secret Instruction* I referenced above: “The Tyranny of Discourse: A Pedagogics of Silence,” by Gretchen Rencher.)


(Peter is undoubtedly the filthiest man I have ever met. Once at a party in Amsterdam (New York) he walked up and asked me, “You know what the only trouble is with fucking a sheep?” I indicated, among other things, that I did not. “Ya gotta walk around the front when you wanna kiss her!”) [probably best to leave such anecdotes out. may not sit well with certain readers. stick to Versmerch’s text]

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Our thinking entered a cul-de-sac. The more conclusions we reached the more inconclusive things seemed to become. We occupied an obscure center, the storm’s bloodshot eye. People flocked to film noir reruns at the local arthouse theater; there was a surge in sales of Fred MacMurray and Barbara Stanwyck memorabilia. Local adult clothing stores had a run on handcuffs. A bakery specializing in “adult cakes” added a second shift. There was a spike in divorce rates, accompanied by a jump in the number of marriages.

Even Mother Nature displayed her contempt. The merry month of May brought wild swings of temperature that left us further agley. May 9th was overcast and 88; May 11th clear, bright sunshine, 19 degrees. A polar vortex swept down upon us and was just as quickly swept away by an anti-cyclonic burst of mild air from the Pacific coast of Mexico. In our desperation we took these mysterious atmospheric vicissitudes as metaphors for our lives. Recondite and nameless powers lorded over us, their merciless refrain of “good luck trying to figure this one out, bub,” echoing through the days. Three local tv weather forecasters resigned; one was committed to a nearby sanitarium, where he kept the blinds drawn all day, mumbling about Satanic patterns in the earth’s magnetic fields and claiming that he had personally encountered the Son of Darkness one night in the form of a demoniacal “auric egg” hovering above an abandoned bowling alley in Pittsville.

Cases of “random nudity” were reported. Ed Maas, a local plumber, was found wandering naked on Main St at 4 am. When stopped and questioned, he replied: “if I’d known this was a formal occasion, I would’ve worn pants.” Maas’s
response was a hit with the press and became a slogan of sorts; bumper stickers and t-shirts were printed, his name became a code word, a shibboleth for our sense of mystification, our errancy. Something we were never aware we possessed had gone missing; now we had to account, not only for its disappearance, but for the fact that we hadn't noticed it was there in the first place. What we needed was Direction, a Guide. In other words, we were ripe for Exploitation. And we didn't have to go searching for it; it came looking for us, with a vengeance.

Bhagwan Sri Ramalamafafafa rolled into town behind the wheel of a white VW Rabbit, escorted by two begoggled, leather-clad longhairs on Vespas. He held a press conference and announced his Programme: extended listening sessions to what he called “the whir of the butterfly’s wings,” the Stooges, the MC5, and the Sonics. A woman dressed in a caterpillar costume passed around a VapoBrainBoiler filled with “weapons-grade” marijuana; the press conference devolved into giggling and bouts of severe anxiety, Bhagwan Sri Rama chanting, above coughing fits and the whimpering of those struck by the arrow of primal aloneness, “Kick out the spiritual jams, Brothers and Sisters!” Two days later he was identified as Joseph Moroni, an out of work gutter installer from Hicksport.

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Barriers were erected at the entrances to the college; to pass the checkpoint you had to show proper id and refrain from making any sudden movements. Everyone was on edge or on the ledge; but then an Unexpected Progression took place that
pulled us back, shifting the burden of The Gaze onto The Gazers themselves: the media menagerie, barred from the campus, set up headquarters just across the river and became an Entity unto itself. They dug in, started buying houses, carving a carnivalesque enclave out of the formerly run-down neighborhood. The Site became a mecca for the Absurd, the Laughable, and The Deadly Serious. Among this last bunch was the Texas Hellcat/Crotch Rocker Pure Bred Ted Nougat; He came without warning, employing a phalanx of lawyers and real estate agents to do his footwork. Then, suddenly, There He Was: having commandeered (in common parlance, paid for) a Boston Double just off Radley St., He called a press conference and denounced Bitter as a half-breed dick twirler. “God, Guns, And Country or Fuck You” was his slogan, motto, mantra, his brand identity. He announced a series of free concerts, with all proceeds going to his charity, “Let’s Clean Up Pussyville. Fucking Now Motherfuckers!”

But PBT had made a tactical error when he tossed his Stetson into the hostile, snake-laden ring of the All-Seeing, Relentlessly Devouring Over-Eye of Critical Scrutiny. For The Eye, Biography is Destiny. A man in Detroit came forward and claimed he possessed a vast collection of Vintage Drag Show Memorabilia. Detroit, in the 50s and 60s, had a thriving Drag Show Culture, filled with young chemists with a penchant for polymers, for nylon, latex, silicone, vinyl, thermoplastic, a fascination for covalent chemical bonds leading them on a labyrinthine journey through seedy nightclubs, John bars and Jane bars and basement warrens that smelled of sweat and semen; ad execs clad in the latest Paris fashions; and a host of bee-hived, bejeweled,
and bejangled beauties. One of the Scene’s shooting stars—those brief traces of illumination that enthral and then vanish forever—was Teodora, a tall, strikingly-ugly, luridly-glamorous young minx. But Dora hadn’t vanished. She’d just changed her clothes and picked up a guitar. Hey, it was all Show Biz anyway. Or at least this was the narrative put forward by our Detroit Archivist, Manley Shade. He threatened to put the trove up for auction; Ted threatened to “cut the little pussy’s balls off.” Manley retreated to an undisclosed location. PBT pulled up stakes and announced he was leaving town in order to track, “like a bastard coon hound” Manley’s scent and bring “the scum sucking dick bag pussy fuck to justice.” We were relieved. We were more terrified than ever.

The Site attracted an endlessly revolving cast of delinquent, dubious, and demographically-obscure characters, dust moths dreaming they were men and women dreaming they were dust moths drawn to the coruscating flame of The Gaze and its instrument of capture: The Camera. Which was fitting: We Were A Camera Town. Leo Westman had started Nodek right here, leaving the College an ungodly sum of money when he pulled a Brody and checked out early. “I’m through here,” his suicide note read. Or at least that’s the official account. Some claim this is a redacted version of the full text, which ran: I’m through here—for now, bitches!

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Bitter displayed what can only be called an admirable sense of restraint during all of this. Eventually he did come forward with a plan, or, as he termed it, a Proposal: he would wrap all the prisoners in the local jail in cellophane, document the process on video, enter it in the Biennale. The Response was mixed. A savvy citizen pointed out that there was no local jail and, ipso facto, it contained no prisoners. Leon was nonplussed. He would produce prisoners if necessary. And a jail. It would all be taken care of, he asserted. A purchase order for the cellophane had already been submitted; the course was set.

To assuage the citizenry, Leon announced that all parking tickets would be forgiven, and none issued in the future. A murmur of approval swept through the town; here was a man who understood the real needs of the community: free parking. Thus we issued him a tacit leeway to engage his predilection for large scale spectacle, for mapping the imaginary avenues of desire and capitalist accumulation, to hit the hooch every Friday with a saucy sylph by the name of Rita.

The Proposal moved forward: his first act was to sign a number of warrants for the arrest of a citizen to be named later. Could he really do this? The question was null: he did, and immediately proceeded to take into custody a mail carrier, a reporter from Turkmenistan, and the adult entertainer Betsy Bosoms, who got pulled that evening as she was leaving The Pussy Palace after the 3 to 11 shift. But Leon had nowhere to take the prisoners; for the rest of the night they drove around in his police car, the three perps in handcuffs, stopping at any number of fast food drive-throughs, rolling randomly through the leafy suburbs, Leon pulling over to make disquisitions
on the shadows of lampposts, penumbral sentries stretched across the paving stones—
“and below them the sewer,” added Betsy.

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In the dream Chloe stands at the bathroom sink, naked, a white towel twirled around her head. I watch from behind as she leans in to the mirror to pluck an eyebrow. She is inestimably beautiful. The curve of the clavicle, the tender valley of the spine, the exquisite divots hatched above her ass; I understand there must be a beneficent God. How else to explain a lummox like myself gaining access to such rarified quarters?

I approach, nuzzle the back of her neck, trace a kiss to the edge of her shoulder. She takes no notice of my presence. Then I look up: only Chloe’s reflection appears in the looking glass. I raise my hand. Nothing. I am both present and absent. I disrobe and press my body to hers, massage her breasts, spread liberal kisses; arching her back, she leans forward, puckering her lips as she applies a deep blood red rosy shade of lipstick. With my hands on her hips we move together; or rather, I move. My cock, my movements, my whispered exclamations have no effect on her. She finishes her rituals and turns and exits the bathroom. I’m left with a hard on, the invisible man and his bone.

* * * * *
Well, you get used to it. Living alone, I mean. When I thought about it, I envisioned my life as a sort of zen practice: Doing Alone. But the actual thing was much less satisfying. The Doing wasn’t the problem, it was the bit that followed that seemed to cause so much trouble. Chloe was gone and, in a sense, so was I. And the more time that passed, the less sure I was of who this person had been. When I came home, it felt like I was walking into a stranger’s house; I sat on a stranger’s couch eating Thai food, rummaged through their fridge, chastised them for not taking out the garbage. Changes needed to be made. I called an antique dealer. Rotund and begoggled, he waddled merrily through the house and offered me an absurdly low price for the distressingly stylish Danish Modern furniture and accoutrements Chloe had jammed the place with: lamps, chairs, tables, cabinets, rugs, candlesticks, bookends, dangerous assemblages from the brutalist school, angry metal icons poised to draw blood from a wrong touch; at my immediate acceptance of this insulting sum he blinked; then he took out his checkbook.

When he showed up with his crew to fetch the stuff, I asked if he wanted to take everything. What’s everything? he asked. If it’s not nailed down it’s yours, I answered.

Thus began what I refer to as my Red Period. Malbecs especially, but I was no snob; Cabernets, Pinot Noir, Mourvèdre, Nebbiolo, Sangiovese, obscure varietals, I had time for them all. I spent many hours lying on the living room floor; the wood was cool against my back; it was solid, reassuring, as good a place to rest as any. So I laid down and picked up a glass. Things began to take shape. I discovered there were
varieties I did not, in fact, have time for: Zinfandel was frivolous, like the light jazz of wines. I wanted body. And head. I drank and thought about sex, I thought about sex and drank. A dense Syrah, a menage a trois, la la la. Thus I trilled through the evenings. Occasionally it did occur to me that I could, easily enough—using the time-tested method of payment—avail myself of the services provided by what appeared, online at least, to be a seemingly endless supply of pretty young women, in every imaginable size, shape, and hue. Massage parlors, escorts, a companion for the evening, a ten am tryst, a lunchtime interlude; these considerations led to deliberations which led to formulations which led to a sunny Saturday afternoon spin north to Montreal.

To call the first leg of my journey a pleasure trip would be an injustice to my hourly companion. She was enthusiastic and accommodating; as I bent her over the bathroom sink I looked up and saw my reflection: a huffing, shaggy beast with blood coursing through his cock. Such a happy state.

Afterward, I decided to check into a hotel: the second leg, hypocrite lecteur. I bought two bottles of merlot, turned on the tv, and caught the last half of some dimwit romantic comedy. And, dimwit that I am, I cried too when the tempest-tossed lovers reunite at the end of the film; I was just another schlub, another sucker on the vine of vicarious emotion. But maybe that really wasn’t so bad; at least I did appear to have feelings, possessions whose existence I had, in many ways, come to doubt. They had been put—perhaps for safe keeping—in a sort of cold storage. Now they began to thaw; beneath them formed a puddle of emotional quicksand, and I, like a frolicking
child, soiled my new clothes, my fragile equanimity, with the mud of self-pity. There was only one thing to do: I picked up the phone. In thirty (thirty-three, actually) minutes a charming, vivacious, very petite Korean woman was at my door, then on my bed and then, yes, o my brothers and sisters, once again, at the bathroom sink; or rather, on the sink; she was small enough to put her knees on the sides, leaving her free to move, as I stood, riveted in place, in space and time, gazing at our catoptric doppelgangers: the rise and fall of her adam’s apple, the bulge of a vein in my neck. I put my arms around her and fucked her with every drop of life I had in me.

To hell with feelings anyways.

* * * * *

Of the third, fourth, fifth (oh!), sixth, seventh, and eighth legs of my journeys north I will say little, other than to sketch, briefly, my spiritual state during this time: I was a pilgrim, pricking across the plain, the Milky Way as my guide, the Pole Star leading me some Santiago Compostela of sin; flashing my pilgrim’s passport at the border, with my credencial—a big wad of dough—in my pocket, searching for refugio, I was by turns conscienceless and deeply remorseful; I was a child of the universe who had been put up for adoption, a penitent seeking the way to The Way; in other words, I was still pretty much a chump.

So I gave it up and dove back in to my oenological research. At a wine tasting I met Tina, an interior decorator, whose artistic temperament manifested itself in the creation of what she called “nut sculptures:” tableaux rendered in walnut, cashew,
almond, pecan. “I’m really nuts, ha, ya get it?” she said, and laughed a bit too loudly.

She preferred Zinfandel; I kept an open mind. “But hazelnuts are a bitch, ya know? So I just gave up on them. Fuck hazelnuts,” she confided, conspiratorially, raising a small plastic cup of Chianti to her lips. Her penchant for profanity caught me off guard; I guess wasn’t expecting “fuck” to be the primary component of her lexicon. But there it was: verb, modifier, noun, dangling participle, interjection, exclamation, refrain, resolution. She purchased a case of Malbec (the flame of hope begins to dance, just a little wiggle, boomboom bwh boom); I offered to carry it to her car.

Her condo was nearby—just a hop, a skip, and a hump away. I followed in my car. She used her brakes too much. I tried to make out a code in the random bursts of light, to decipher the luminous evocations of haste and hesitancy. And I wondered about the foot pumping on that pedal; who did it lead to? Where was it leading me? Was This the Way to The Way? Good god I was a schmo.

She lived in an expensive complex just south of the College, facing the river, in what appeared to be a blue box on the second story, stacked on top of and alongside other boxes, all in primary colors: red, green, yellow. I felt like I was walking to a very ineptly rendered Mondrian painting wrought of steel and colorful, deeply vexing lozenges whose material composition remained obscure to me. The right angles made me nervous. I lugged in the case of wine.

The living room’s floor-to-ceiling glass windows looked onto the river, the lights from a bridge undulating on its murky surface. “Well have a seat,” Tina said as she brought two glasses of wine. “I love the river, what it stands for, its essence,” she
said. "And what is its essence?" I asked. "Poetry," she answered with a sigh. "I thought you said you were a literature professor. Or are you one of those dull, dirty old hypocrites who thinks poetry resides in books?" "It can reside in books. It's not absolutely necessary, however." "The poetry or the books?" She raised her glass and plink! we toasted to the pleasures of miscommunication.

"Should I open a second bottle of wine?"

Yes, my dear, my darling, by all means, yes.

I was confused by disappearance of "fuck" from her vocabulary. She spoke like an intelligent person and the peanut sculptures were . . . well, I could write them off. Who hasn't made a mistake or two or six in their lives? But what about "fuck"? Was its use relegated to certain settings, like, say, wine tastings? Or was I dealing with a verbal schizophrenic who assumed and shed linguistic identities at the drop of a hat? I had to be careful, on guard. Luckily I was fairly inebriated and in perfect position to ignore such thoughts.

"Listen," Tina said, putting her hand on my thigh. "I like you. I'll have sex with you, but you'll have to do something for me."

"Do you mean like, fix the sink or something?"

She gave an indulgent smile, tinged with contempt. "No, silly boo boo. Let me show you." She took my hand and led me to the bedroom.

Silly fucking boo boo.

We sat on the bed. She put her arms on my shoulders and we leaned together and kissed.
“There’s something I like, well, when I have an orgasm,” she said. She got up off the bed and picked up an egg carton from the top of the dresser. “When I come, I want you to break an egg over my head. Pretty simple right? No big deal.”

And so began my quest to deliver the orgasmic yolk. Timing was crucial, she informed me. “And don’t slam it in my face, either. Or in my ear. Aim for the very center, my crown.” We got started; she was passionate and began to use “fuck” again. I was distracted and began to lose my erection. “Don’t stop,” she urged, and cracked me a good one on the ass. I did what I could. I decided it would be best if I had an egg in hand, just in case she reached her climax unexpectedly. I reached out to the table beside the bed. “Don’t touch the fucking eggs!” she said, grabbing my hand and pinioning it to her breast. “Fucking not yet. Only when it’s right. Fuck.”

I’m not sure if this last syllable was an order or an exclamation. My erection regained its fortitude. We were covering good ground; her breathing grew more rapid, as did the exclamations of “fuck!” I was sure our moment was at hand.

“Nowwwwwwwww!” she shouted.

I tried, I really did. My aim was off a little, that’s all.

I grabbed an egg and smooshed it into the pillow beside her head.

“No no no! fuck fuck fuck” she screamed, and whacked me an even better one on the shoulder. She pushed me off and rose from the bed, grabbed the carton of eggs from the table, and scurried into the bathroom.

I lay on the bed rubbing my shoulder. Jesus, she could pack a wallop. A moan came from the bathroom, accompanied by a humming, electrical sound, similar to a
razor. I got up, tip-toed across the carpet, put my ear to the door: the moans of ecstasy grew louder, harmonizing with her buzzing companion, until I heard it: the soft, crinkly-crack of the shell, followed by a contented “fuck.” I dressed quickly and grabbed two bottles from the case of merlot. It was a damn good wine.

* * * * *

The Scandal was a lexicographer’s dream: phrases such as “sexual pyramid scheme,” “victimless criminal,” “The Big Balls Defense” (Temporary Sexual Insanity), and “acute genital disorganization” (a psychiatrist’s diagnosis of Budge) took up position in our vocabularies, ready to be launched, to be hurled ironically or with sarcasm, spoken with a sidelong glance or a knowing (or, just as often, not-knowing) nod of the head, spat with contempt or drawled with an intimation of boneheaded stupidity, submissively lisped or chanted with vigorous, thoroughgoing alacrity, to be whimpered, whined, wheedled or whinnied. Our language was richer, more robust, more infantile.

* * * * *

Inevitably the spotlight fell on Darvinoglu. What was her role in the scandal? How had a Butterball Visiting Fellow become enmeshed in the machinations of procurement and the provision of services? Turned out that Esma had no role at all; she was, literally, a walk-on, had been at the wrong place at the wrong time. Bitter had seen her strolling across campus when he arrived to arrest Budge & Company; he pulled out one of his handy anytime, anywhere warrants and charged her with Failure
to Yield. Darvinoglu, who had only arrived in our fair country the week before, was terrified. She had fudged a bit about her English language skills on her application, and had survived her stay thus far with hand gestures, murmurs, and nods or shakes of the head. Leon got distracted and Esma fell in with the police cordon. When they arrived at the temporary “holding cells”—an empty storefront on Main St., which a realtor pal of Leon’s father was the broker for—he brought Esma flowers and, speaking in a quiet, reassuring tone of voice, demanded to see some ID. She shook her head. “Passport,” he said. She nodded. “Now,” he added. She murmured and made a hand gesture whose meaning was not explicit. Leon grabbed a flower and began to munch on it. A struggle of wills was at hand; the tension in the room was palpable. Leon put his hand to his throat, began to cough, fell to the floor, called out for water. Esma, sensing her opportunity, considered for a moment socking Leon a good one in the gut, and then ran out the door.

* * * * *
Squire Gersbach, Poet-In-Residences, popped in. He seemed unnecessarily happy.

“Did I call it or what?” he asked.

“You called it, man.”

“Did I nail that shit, was I on the fucking bitches, or what?”

“Right on motherfucking top.”

“Man, I was on it, no shit”

“Bullseye”

I so fucking called that shit, man, I should be in the I Called That Fucking Shit Hall of Fame.”

“They’d have a wax likeness right at the front door.”

Right? right? They’d know I was master of calling shit.”

“So you’re in with Smears?”

“I’m laid up in lavender, Jackson. Maximum premium. A prebandary at the daylight ranch cathedral of Dr. Ashby Smears. Church of the Assumption. Gone to Nepal for four weeks and I’ve got the run of the place. Carla makes conjugal visits. The stereo kicks ass. Smears’ record collection is quite a bit above respectable.”

About a month ago Squire had taken the stage during a poetry reading at The Hungry Thumb and sprung his plan on an unsuspecting, and for the most part indifferent, world: “Visions and Provisions,” a revolutionary proposal which would bring poetry, not only to the streets, but to the houses as well: For no charge whatsoever, Squi (“Don’t ask Squi”) would install himself at your residence and lend
(but only lend, unless the appropriate papers were signed) a discrete yet encompassing aura of aesthetic delectation to your quotidian to-ings and fro-ings.

Essentially, he would become the house jester: your house jester, your sonneteering slave, to be summoned and dismissed with a wave or a wink, as his crystalline, luminescent projections philtered like so much sunlight through the colliderscope of your azure and tempestuous days: he would be the force and the fuse driving your restless age, would rage, renounce, mollify, ennoble, traduce, dislodge, untumble, predicate, obfuscate, humble, ship-shape you from wine stem to Sterne.

The Squi’s proposal was targeted at a very select demographic: professors emeriti. “Those cats are loaded. Are you fucking kidding me? They’ve been banking the shit for like thirty years, they inhabit expansive domiciles in the leafy suburbs, their kids are gone, maybe the husband or wife too, the library and liquor cabinets are well-stocked, I’m in like Errol Flynn.”

He’d let me in on the details. Most of them anyway. I was at a half-staff meeting a few days after his public declaration of madness at the Hungry Thumb, and had just sat down, when Dimitri Darkbloom, sub-department chairperson, eying me with a smug suspicion from across the table, began to wave a brochure at me.

“So. This you applaud?”

“Wha?”

“It says right here,” Dmitri went on, drawing his finger across a line of text. “Dr. Kim Van Vimishtechten, Professor of Nomadic Literature and Poetry Operative at the University of Molesworth, applauds this Manifesto.”
I had no idea what to say, and, as I usually do in such instances, let my mouth hang open and made whirlly gestures with my hands: a language of movement meant to communicate a benign ignorance of the matter under discussion.

Quite frankly, I was worried where this was headed.

But then madness, a devastating and beautiful madness, intervened.

Karl Snaarlsgaard rose abruptly from his chair and laid an eye-lock on Darkbloom.

"Are you asking," he said with a sneer, "if Vanviminxwhateverthefuck here applauds, like a seal, the manifesto you’re holding?" He clapped his hands clumsily and made what I supposed were intended to be seal-like sounds: Waarmp, waarmp, waarmp, voice rising a major fifth from waar- to -aarmp. "Why don’t you ask him if he’ll balance a ball on his nose?" our hero went on. "Look at the stupid seal, doing tricks for you, oh how pleased you are. But did you ever consider the seal, this indulgent beast who plays along with your idiotic games, just to bring you a little half-assed happiness? And what does he get for all this? A round of applause, sure, and then you go and club his diminutive cousins to fucking death, that’s what he gets, all so you can satisfy some lizard brain thanatotic rapacity . . . Holy shit I’m fucking outta here.”

It felt like the room had dropped about four feet.

Snaarlsgaard scrambled for the door and, as Darkbloom lunged for him, made an evasive maneuver—a deft feint to the left, then a spin back to the right—a move notable not only for its agility and precision but for its clean landing as well—and
was gone. Dmitri crashed into the breakfast buffet behind him, sending bagels, brightly-colored melon chunks, juice and jam sailing through the florescent morning air.

We got up to examine the damage. Darkbloom had cut his hand.

There was blood in the cream cheese.

* * * * * *

We reminisced about the moment. I marveled at Snaarlsgaard’s startling discursive formation, his deft exit.

“Myself, I’m not surprised, not surprised at all,” Squire said.

“You knew Snaarlsgaard was harboring a veritable fleet of dissatisfactions?”

“It’s not that. There are deep, well-protected harbors in all of us, crammed with cruisers and trawlers, caravels and catboats, feluccas, flutes, frigates. Mostly our private flotillas are just that: private. They lie dormant, yet at shallow anchorage, any gust or gale might dislodge them and send them careening out into open sea. And then you know what happens.”

”Wha?”

“Snaarlsgaard, that’s what happens. Let me fill you in a bit.

Squire’s Tale

Snaarlsgaard was a high school All-American halfback, set all sorts of records. That move he made on his way out the door, he’d probably done that a thousand times on
the field. Everyone figured he’d go on to star at the collegiate level, maybe even make it to the Pros. He was that good. But colleges didn’t recruit him. Ah, no, let me correct that—they tried to recruit him, but gave up pretty quickly. Snaarlsgaard had certain personal qualities that turned some people off. Hmm, how should I put this? He was . . . well, he was flamboyantly heterosexual. But not in a macho, swaggering prick sort of way. Karl was smart, funny, blonde, had permafrost blue eyes. He was likable and liked to be liked. Real (eliding earlier explorations of his own and others bodies, desultory forays among crumbless paths) instruction in the ars amatoria began at fourteen, libidinous lessons from his piano teacher, a Russian divorcée whose technique was formidable. The teachable moments were many. Karl proved himself a precocious student.

The first coach who tried to recruit him, from Northsouthern, brought Karl to campus for a big game—you know: Saturday afternoon, shake hands with alumni bigwigs, a seat right behind the bench, crowds of students drunk before they’ve even had lunch, their profanity-laced tirades filling the cool autumn air. Everything just as it should be. And Snaarlsgaard, for his part, was on his best behavior—didn’t flirt with anybody’s wife, tried to avoid ogling the cheerleaders, refrained from pointing to pretty girls in the stands and making humping gestures. But then half-time happened. It always does. Karl disappeared, gave the slip to his escort, Ron-Ron Cronickite—a husky man in his late 50s who looked like he’d swallowed a beach ball, grey hair cropped in a severe buzzcut, twice arrested for tax fraud but never convicted, turned out for the big game in a blue and grey velour tracksuit emblazoned with the insignia
of a Northsouthern secret society, the Boothians, surreptitious supporters of a program to rehabilitate the reputation of the presidential assassin: they claimed jay dub had received one-sided coverage by the press, had been maligned and unfairly characterized in the history books as a gun-wielding lunatic, a cold-blooded killer who didn’t give a rat’s ass if the House was Divided or not, he couldn’t stand the House and didn’t want the House to stand; when, in fact, he was merely the loyal servant of masters who employed a different architectural metaphor for the state: a vast plantation whose foundation was the bent backs of lackeys, losers, and loners, an edifice stretching skyward among parks filled with willow trees, rhododendrons, and night-blooming jasmine in a great shining city on a hill.

Cronickite figured his watch had gone for some French fries or something. But then Snaarlsgaard was located—by the cheerleading coach. He was in the girls’ locker room, shirtless, shoeless, wearing only a pair of tight black leather trousers, telling dirty jokes in a very suave French accent to a group of blushing and vulnerable cheerleaders. The cheerleading coach hit the roof, cleared the locker room, sternly castigated her crew.

The second half was about to start when the cheerleaders noticed their coach wasn’t around. And, for his part, Karl was gone again too. The duo reappeared, separately, mid-way through the fourth quarter. The coach, Monica Santa De Monica, was flushed, had her pants on backwards, a dreamy, languorous air about her.
Word got around pretty quick after that. Male authority figures hated him, felt threatened exactly where they were most vulnerable: their ability (imagined for the most part) to pull chicks.

Then, in the penultimate game of his senior season, Karl suffered a severe pinky toe injury. They say that brain injuries can completely change you and I've no doubt that's true, but let me see a 250 pound lugnut stomp on your toe, tackle you, and then start chewing on your foot, and let's see if some changes don't happen in your life. That's right, a lineman actually tried to gnaw his way through Karl's cleat. The referees didn't know what to do; they huddled, queried, conferred:

Referee: What just happened, is that actually what happened?

Head Linesman: I'm sick of this shit, you know that?

Back Judge: Chomping on the guy's goddamn foot. Fuck.

Side Judge: Why us? I thought shit like this only happened in California, beneath highway underpasses, in penumbratic, detritus-filled zones, catch basins for the storm sewers of society, pcb-laden graveyards—

Umpire: Will you shut the fuck up? Looked to me like Offense put his foot into the guy's mouth.

Line Judge: That's what I saw. Defense had no choice. He panicked and started biting.

Head Linesman: He could've chosen not to panic.

Center judge: Current studies in psychobiology point away from such a hypothesis.
Umpire: Toward Offense or Defense?

Center judge: Experience and behavior have a significant impact on physiological development; to a non-specific degree existence becomes essence, the two locked in an infinite duet, leader led and follower followed, preceding and proceeding, each to each.

Back Judge: Are you saying there’s no such thing as free will?

Line Judge: The concept of free will is bourgeois sanctimony. Only through the acquisition of capital—

Referee: What just happened did really happen. Cannibalism. 20 yard penalty.

* * * * * * *

Squire gazed dreamily at the ceiling. “Can you hear it, man?”

I scanned the upper reaches of my office. “Wha?”

“The Crowd, dude. The great ugly buzz, the scum of voices, heteroglossic exclamations of insufferable rage twining with the calls of the hot dog vendor, a surging mass of invective and depreciation like some vast Greek chorus announcing the imminent doom of the officials.”

“I’ll tune into that some other time, maybe. What about Karl?”

"Carried off the field and taken to the hospital. Got some sort of bacterial infection or something in his foot. Thing blew up huge. I saw photos. It was odd, unnerving. Like somebody’d stuck an air hose in his foot. I wrote a poem, ‘The Balloon of The Foot,’ a riff on ol’ dub bee:
Doctors, do what you do;
Bring the balloon of the foot
That swells and drags in the hospital ward
Into its narrow shoe.

“So anyways Karl’s football career was over. He turned to eastern philosophy. Went to India, lived in a monastery for seven years, established an Eastern Branch of the Institute for Disincarnated Sand Poetics. The whole sex thing got scaled way back, if you know what I’m sayin’. Became a completely different person. And I think he still is. Becoming one, I mean.”

Squire was interrupted by a knock at the door. I opened it to find Jankyn Slobotovich, whose office was directly across from mine, clad only in a bath towel and flip-flops.

“Kim, old sport, you’re right. That shower really is something. I wanted to thank you, and remind you about next Sunday.”

Jankyn was a proselytizing nudist, his motto “The only thing to fear is the naked fear of nakedness itself.”

“Slob, listen, I told you. I do not wish to bare my soul, or any other part of my body, to the sun, or the elements, or nature or any of that shit. There’s very good reason to fear the body: it’s full of spasmodic impulses, quixotic yearnings for pain, humiliation, extra mayonnaise. A-a-a-and another thing: I don’t think it’s such a good idea to go scamping around here in just a towel.”

Jankyn squeezed past me and sat down in a chair next to Squire.
"I've got a story to tell the two of you. I was on my way over to the college this afternoon when I came across a very disturbing sight: a group of obscenely heavily clothed people, gathered around a man in robes. Layers of robes it looked like."

Jankyn’s Tale

Shmuley “The Shmule” Sunshine, former rabbinical student, part-time employee of Sweet Loretta’s Style Parlor and Hash Emporium, is giving a speech advocating mass circumcision. What is needed to set the town and university straight is a grand scale civic ritual under the Friday night lights of Paulie’s Plush Pull Toy Stadium. “Gimme some skin,” Shmuley chants in deep, sonorous tones, accompanied by an arrangement for oud and tambour of the Stooge’s classic. The antediluvian cadence of his effusions transports his listeners—all three of us: myself and two dewy-eyed delinquents, apparently customers of Sweet Loretta’s—to some primordial zone, a shadowy platonic cave of enlightened misapprehension. “Pomp and circumcision!” exclaims one of my comrades. The third member of our trinity is not so sanguine: “Hey man, you know, listen, some chicks dig foreskin. Like check out some euro-porn sometime, man. Take a look. It’s all there.” Lightning flashes in Shmuley’s eyes; he levels a finger at his interlocutor: “May the wrath of the Mogen Clamp be visited upon you, Judas jackoff,” The Shmule inveighs, “this isn’t about your onanistic peccadillos. We’re after something greater, as well as something much, much lesser, than ourselves: a ceremony which will unify through division, multiply through subtraction, ramify by contusion . . . “
I’m not exactly sure what happened next; all that clothing draped over Shmuley was making me nervous. Edgy. Agitated. The last thing I remember before I start remembering what I remember is Shmuley waving a green, luminescent stone in front of me. “Dude, this is chrysolite, one of the precious stones in the foundation of the heavenly Jerusalem...”

Suddenly we were wrestling on the ground, The Shmule and I, engaged mano a mano. And just as suddenly it was over; I was pinned down, as a great crashing wave of profanity broke over my head:

FFFFFFFFFFUUUUUUUUCCCCCCCCKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKK!

There were people all around me—I recognized a few folks from the theatre department—snapping photos. Familiar, unfriendly faces.

Shmuley slapped me one in the kisser. “You ass!” he screamed. “You’ve ruined it, ruined it all! You’ve trespassed upon my imagination! Intervened in What You Know Not!

Behind him I could see a man holding a Bolex camera, slowly panning across our little group. A petite woman wearing strange sunglasses held a tape recorder toward me, one of those old portable ones that runs on six mongo batteries, internal microphone, playback is all weird warbly underwater kinda shit. She hits the play and record buttons simultaneously, it’s actually not that easy but she’s done her homework, she is on the case, Jackson.

And she says to me: “What are you?”
“Professor,” I answer.

“Undresser.”

“No, Professor,” I say, realizing just a second too late what I’m in for.

“Dispossessor.”

But now I’m onto her shit. “Yellow snowball,” I say.

“Corporate protocol,” she echoes.

Ouch. She hits me where I’m most vulnerable, already knows me better than I know myself. I recognize her methodology, free disassociative association, but am powerless to fight against it. Despairing, I reach back into the depths of childhood for a primal moment:

“Chocolate egg cream,” I say.

“Transnational death machine,” comes the reply.

I’m practically reduced to ashes. Finito.

“Orange,” I mutter, and it’s like somebody has snatched the needle off the record, dragging it just a little bit so you get that awful plastic-y electronic zzzwwiiinnkkk sound, everything has come to a momentary halt, a chorus of “Aw Shit” rising around me, I read the disappointment in my interlocutor’s face, even behind those glasses I can see it, feel it, taste it, the synesthetic panorama of having failed, she is aware of my unswerving perversity, my propensity for defeat at any cost. I want to apologize but she turns her back to me, the click of the tape recorder announcing show’s over folks.

“Orange is the new asshole,” someone says.
“Anti-euphonious prick,” another chimes in.

“Meet the new asshole, same as the old asshole.”

The Shmule grabbed me by the lapels. “You fucked up my cinematic dissertation, and then you fucked up the fuck up of my dissertation. You fucked me in triplicate. Satisfied?”

“I wouldn’t call it satisfied so much,” I said, searching the tops of my shoes for an answer. I tried to steer the conversation in another direction. “That was a pretty good half-nelson you threw on me there,” I said, rubbing my neck.

“You should be careful,” Shmuley said. “You have a very high susceptibility, apparently, to the powers possessed by gem stones, their properties of suprarational transposition, sublunar polarities, ritual cleansings at midnight in rural graveyards under the lovely nothingness of the new moon. Do you work with crystals at all?”

“When I can, sure,” I told him.

We looked at each other and I thought that perhaps an understanding—though of what I have no idea—was developing between The Shmule and I.

“Listen, we’re cool,” he said to me. “I know what you’re doin’ here, I know what this is all about”

“You do?”

“Tell Sprungstein his grass is ass. I’ll overcome this shit, no problemo.

“Who?”

“Listen man, don’t worry, I’m not gonna make you break cover. I know how things work.”
“Good, good.” I had no idea what he was talking about and I was okay with that.

He held out his paw. “Sunshine, Shmuley Sunshine. Friends call me The Shmule.”

* * * * * *

“We shook hands, and then I took off, came over here, jumped in the shower pronto. Didn’t even take my clothes off.”

“Clothes and all,” Squire confirmed.

“Yep. I was soiled, both by myself and others, besmirched, dirty. Had to get rid of it. Needed a good cleaning, physical, spiritual, sartorial. Hopped in, took off my clothes after a little bit, had a nice, long, regenerative ablution. Clothing, bah. I put the wet clothes in a garbage can down the hallway. By the way, I think we need bigger trash receptacles around here.”

“I concur, famously,” Squire said. “We’re handcuffed by the expectation of having small garbage, little dinky wrappers and shit, but what if you’ve got the real thing, man, a big honkin’ 112 ounce double cherry frozen fructifier? You’re up shits crick is what you are.”

“Right, damn right!” Jankyn said. “Where the hell you gonna throw that thing away, huh? You gotta stash it behind a bush or something, hide under the rear of someone’s car in the parking lot, I dunno. I do know, howsoever, that it’s a problem. Listen, I’ve gotta run. There’s a nudist potluck at six.”
Squire leaned back in his chair. “Well, I should mosey on too. Carla’s stopping by tonight, we’ll have dinner and then we’ll have dessert. She’s a good woman.”

I nodded and smiled

“You like her?”

“Sure, she’s great.”

“Great like how?”

“I mean, like, great. Cool. Funny.”

“You look at her sometimes, huh?”

“Well yeah, when I talk to her, I do actually look at her.”

“She told me you looked at her.”

“Looked at her wha?”

“It was at a party. You told a joke and she laughed, and then you looked at her.

“I suppose that’s possible.”

“She’s a good looking woman.”

“Very attractive, yes.”

“A real looker.”

“You know what I’ve got some work to do—“

“So when you looked at her at the party what were you looking at?”
I pulled at my columella with thumb and forefinger. “Her tits and her ass, what the hell do you think?”

Squire stood up. “Listen, just stay away from her tits and her ass, okay?”

“Squi, what the fuck?”

He closed the door behind him.

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A stack of essays stood needful on my desk. I looked it up and down, peered around its sides. I was afraid, both of what I would and wouldn’t find there: the half-dashed scrawls, the sustained and indiscriminate orthographical errors, the startling turn of phrase that gets underlined and awarded an exclamation point; words sentences syllables scratched across its manifold pages, ink struck to paper in hope and horror, misstatements bold and bald, the great and grim, the infinite middling.

The papers were for a required elective course in documentary fiction, focused on gender and sexuality in literature: English 268: Content TBD. My contribution to the enlightenment of my students was entitled, “The Bawdy Hand of The Dial is Now on the Prick of Noon: Romeo and Juliet, Romeo and Romeo, Juliet and Juliet: The Excellent and Tragic Explored and Exposed.” We’ll have a look at Will’s wordplay and his penchant for polysemantic obscenity. Required Text: Rubenstein, Frankie: A Dictionary of Shakespeare’s Sexual Puns and Their Significance. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995. 2nd Edition.
The trouble began early. A concerned parent sent me an email message about a week before the start of classes, asking why her daughter should study dirty words. I wrote back: “If you’re worried, perhaps it’s best if she doesn’t.” Her reply was short and sour: “Weasel,” it said.

I tried to remain above the fray but it was impossible. Darkbloom paid me a visit, asked me about the content of the course.

“You will not talk only about sex, yes? This is a dangerous thing.”

“How dangerous?”

“Kim, I like you. Not all the time, you can be a pain in the ass, but enough of the time so that I don’t notice. I don’t like to notice. Don’t make me notice.”

Dmitri shifted in his chair, rubbed his right index finger along the bridge of his nose. It was a fine nose, right out of Russian literature. I reflected for a moment on whether it had been borrowed, stolen, or was the real thing. What, exactly, was I dealing with here? A purloined proboscis? Or perhaps his schnozzola was the true article: biological destiny, the unavoidable outcome of centuries of genetic mixing and matching.

Dmitri went on: “I think it best if, given the nature and your course, you provide the students with information on safe sex practices.”

“This is a college literature class. We’ll study words, words words—their meaning, etymology, magical properties. I don’t think it’s the right place for a talk about condoms.”

“I’m beginning to notice, Kim.”
“I’ll hand out some brochures.”

So. It appeared I’d been put on notice not to be noticed. Just lay low, don’t cause a commotion, keep my nose—, as well as Dmitri’s— clean. Fair enough.

But what can I say? I’m drawn to the gutter, to the unseemly and salacious.

And so were my students, it appeared. The class was full, SRO. I figured it was best to scare some students away. I made extemporaneous adjustments to the syllabus.

“There will be two quizzes every class.”

“It says here a quiz every week.”

“Things have changed. And a twenty page paper. Maybe two if you do well.”

A student raised his hand. “Are you saying that we’ll have to write more if we have a good grade?”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Brawley Ferguson,” he answered.

“Well Brawley it’s like this old chap. The more and better work you do, the more you’ll be required to do more and better work. That’s how things are.”

A hush fell over the room. I sensed an uneasiness, a restive dissatisfaction. The students slumped in their seats, crossed and uncrossed their legs, gazed off into somethingness, examined their fingernails, avoided making eye contact with me. I was the member of the enemy encampment, had laid pernicious plans to occupy their weekends and off-hours, exerted a power over them they grudgingly respected and
actively resented: the ability to control, from a remote location, their actions and inactions.

At the very back of the room a tiny hand waved at me, attached to a creature of indeterminate sex: long black bangs covered the entire face, the clothing was gender non-specific. Something—my nose?—told me this was just the break I was looking for.

“Hi,” I said. “Yes?”

“I have a question—“

“Thank you.”

“Sure, no problem.”

Despite our exchange, I still couldn’t quite pin down the student’s gender. I entered a brief state of meta-annoyance: I was annoyed by the fact that my ignorance annoyed me.

“Your name?”

“Della Grammar. I can’t use a computer. Is that okay?”

“Perfect Della, that’ll be just fine.”

Dear Reader, learn, if you can, to trust your nose, regardless of the vagaries of its acquisition.

“Grammar,” I began, “late fourteenth century, rules of Latin, from Old French gramaire: grammar; learning; also magic, incantation, spells, mumbo-jumbo. In English, its common meaning of a set of rules of a language to which speakers and writers must conform dates from the 1580s. When—not if—you get a chance, look up
the word 'gramary:' I'll give you a head start: learning, erudition, and hence magic, enchantment. Let's backtrack for a moment: the Old French *gramaire* also connotes a book of conjuring or magic. This, in turn, leads to the Modern French *grimaire*: gibberish, incomprehensible nonsense. We have rules, we have what conforms to no rules. Now let's have a look at Mercurio's speech in Act 2, Scene 4 . . .
Works Cited