THE GOTHS
& OTHER STORIES





TIS KAORU ZAMLER-CARHART

p.

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Fig. 1. Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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Tis Kaoru Zamler-Carhart

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dear reader: we don't know each other yet, but I'm glad you're here. Tbh I didn't think you'd be reading this when I wrote it, so at first I wasn't actually writing for you. I was writing for a small, safe, trusted circle, who strengthened me with kind words and thoughtful critique. Slowly the circle grew: friends, colleagues, students — until these stories finally reached you. So before we get into the book proper I wanted to say a few words of thanks to those who allowed you and me to connect today.

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THE GOTHS

I

In the winter of 476 AD the Ostrogoths, hungry and exhausted from wandering for months through barren hills along the confines of the Byzantine Empire, wrote to Emperor Zeno in Constantinople requesting permission to enter the walled city of Epidaurum, and just kinda crash and charge their phones.

> "My most magnificent and Christian Lord,
> Blessed Emperor of the Romans,
> Light of the East and West,
> Protector of the Universe," wrote Theodoric, chieftain of the Ostrogoths,
> "My people are weary. We've been wandering around the Balkans for months. We're hungry, we're sleep-deprived, our kids are cranky, our feet are smelly, our crotches are itchy. We humbly request permission to settle in the city of Epidaurum and just kinda basically crash there and recharge, like, literally and figuratively."

Nobody said anything. It was windy. It was cold. The wind kept whistling cheerfully between the rocks like a misguided fanfare

adrift in an empty graveyard. The Goths sat awkwardly on the hard cold rocks. The cold rocks sat on the dead yellow grass. The yellow grass sat on the raw ground. The whole universe sat uncomfortably, as if balanced on the edge of a boulder. A hawk circled overhead, looking down like a jaded office worker reading a snack bar menu.

Finally Zeno texted back:
"np" (in Greek of course)

Theodoric gazed fixedly at his phone and at those two imperial letters etched in glimmering gold on a rich deep crimson field on his screen — a twinkle of splendor nonchalantly texted from the opulence of Constantinople. Those two little Greek letters acceded to his request, and yet their negligent imperial sparkle seemed so unfair, so inconsiderately lavish in the desolate muddy emptiness of the cold, bleak Balkans.

"Alright," said Theodoric aloud. "We're going to Epidaurum. His purple-born majesty is letting us crash there."

Exhausted cheers erupted around him like a weak froth fizzing up from a nearly-empty espresso machine.

"Sidimund," said Theodoric to his best knight, "you ride ahead to Epidaurum and get everyone there to leave. Just scare the shit out of them. I want that whole city empty for us."

"Very well, my lord."

"I want no Greeks left in that town. Everyone out."

"What am I to do with the ones that won't leave?"

"Make them leave."

II

Two days later Sidimund arrived at Epidaurum, a city he knew well for having been an exchange student at Epidaurum College for a semester.

He appeared at the city gates in the late morning
alone
mounted on a gray horse
his long blond hair flowing
out of a gilded bronze helmet
dotted with gray iron studs
in vertical rows
bronze panels engraved
with allegories of the seasons
over his ears and his nose
his pale gray eyes
peering between them
a gray fur cape
fastened on his right shoulder
by an eagle-shaped silver brooch
a gray fur tunic
tied around his waist
by a garnet-studded silver belt buckle
his hands poised on the bridle
motionless
in their gray woolen gloves.

Anyone in the Empire would have known him as a Gothic knight — still and superb in the winter morning.

The sky was low the air was gray
the horse seemed made of sky and hair
                the buckle hewn of rain
the silver glistened stark and cool
and winked a silent rimy gleam
                a bleaker winter glint
than crimson garnet's ruby sheen

aflare in coruscating hew
but metal hard and hoar
a leaden light instilled oblique
as if the knight had plundered it
from jewels in the clouds
and drifted down on frigid winds
to rutilate his loot
arrayed in gleaming winter gray
insinuating thunder
still
in the winter morning.

The city guards totally freaked out and ran inside to get the governor.

The governor was like — oh shit this Goth is like seriously bad news, bad news, bad news!!! — quick quick a miracle solution someone do something quick: Bishop Irenaeus? Could he come up with some fancy bishop trick to drive the Goth away — like maybe some gory relic with like blood and toenails and stuff??? Or like a spontaneous mass prayer event type thing lol?

Sidimund waited patiently for the bumbling Greeks to finish scurrying around, and did not dismount.

A tunic tied atop his loins
his loins astride atop his horse
his horse askance across the gate
its gait assured upon its foot
he stood
was there an inkling in his stance
a hint of helmets in the air?
of stride afoot? of screams afar?
a crowd, a toot as in a shroud?
a cloud?
he stood
alone for now his sword at rest
the sky was gray the air still plain
the horse was still the plain still bare

he stood
still
in the winter morning.

Finally Irenaeus appeared and addressed him:

What brings you, Goth? — said the old man —
Do you seek oats, do you seek socks,
And why?
Will you steal goats and plums and frocks?
Why?
Could you nab kids and kidnap cats
To goad your stock and stick your stalks?
To bear your pennant proud and shrill,
Bet you will.
You're bare of fodder, keen to kill?
You're after figs and digs and pigs?
Are you, Goth?
Do you seek swags and swigs and tricks?
And tracks and sticks and stacks
and food?
Do you seek food?
You Goth,
so still
in the winter morning?

"Dear Mr. Bishop," said Sidimund.

(omg I *so* do not go by "Mr. Bishop" — thought Irenaeus — but hey the situation did not lend itself to being picky about protocol did it now)

"My name is Sidimund, son of Sidimir the Amaling, and I bear a request from my lord Theodoric, chieftain of the Ostrogothic people."

"Do you come in peace?" asked Irenaeus.

"Well technically I haven't killed anyone yet," answered Sidimund.

He continued: "The request is as follows. My lord Theodoric will be arriving here in a few days, with forty thousand armed men and their families in tow. We are hungry and tired and would like to crash in your city. We don't want to have to kill everyone because that's typically time-consuming and stressful. Therefore we kindly request that you all get the fuck out and leave the city completely empty for us. Preferably leaving your refrigerators full for when we arrive, but I don't want to be indelicate about it if you feel strongly about taking your food with you."

"But… What… Leave? All of us? What about the children, the elderly, the sick? How? Where will we go?" pleaded Irenaeus.

"Mr. Bishop, I'm a Gothic knight, not a career counselor."

Irenaeus stood silent and stern, like a bishop on a chessboard put in check by an opposing knight. He continued:

"Can you give us time at least? When would you want us gone?"

"Tonight, by sundown."

Sidimund paused, then added: "Would you bring me a small child, like not too small but maybe six-seven years old?"

"Uhm, I suppose."

"I'll wait here."

The bishop waddled back into the city diagonally, staying on squares of his own color, and reappeared a few minutes later with a terrified young girl, cautiously followed by her anxious mother a dozen paces behind.

"Thank you," said Sidimund. "Would you bring her a little closer, to the right side of my horse please, about two arms' length in front of me and one to the right. There, perfect. Now leave the girl there and please step back for a second. A little further back (diagonally of course and staying on squares of your own color). Yes, to that tree over there, please. Thanks."

Sidimund unsheathed his sword and decapitated the little girl in one swift, silent motion, except for the swoosh of the blade skating through the air and the thud of her head falling into the grass. He added:

"Can you imagine how long it would take if we have to do this individually to every single person in the city? We can't give everyone that much personal attention I'm afraid."

Irenaeus quietly shat in his underwear and remained speechless. Sidimund moved his horse over to the grass where the girl's head had landed, leaned over slightly, and speared it with the tip of his sword as if he were picking up a cherry tomato with a toothpick. He handed the head to Irenaeus, who grabbed it mechanically.

"Here, you can have it back, we have tons of these already," said Sidimund while putting his sword away, leaving the girl's head in Irenaeus's hands.

"Sundown," he added. Then he turned around and rode away.

III

After a few days' walk the Ostrogoths arrived at Epidaurum. The city was nearly completely deserted, as requested.

Theodoric's wife Charlene, looking to move the family into some prime real estate, scored an

awesome five-bedroom two-bathroom duplex villa!!!
with indoor pool!!!
gourmet kitchen with marble counters!!!
hi-gloss Soft-Close® cabinetry!!!
SubZero® stainless steel appliances!!!
designer triclinium with wet bar!!!
private roof deck!!!
oversize peristyle with built-in tabulinum!!!
family room with floor-to-ceiling Ravenna-style mosaics!!!
thermostat-controlled hypocaust!!!
and two-chariot garage (which was sorta overkill because they were on foot).

Theodoric walked in first, but on the second floor he found an old man named Marcellinus (perhaps the former owner of the property?) who had failed to evacuate. With one hand he grabbed Marcellinus by the neck and held him up against a shiny pink veined marble wall. With the other hand he grabbed his spatha sword by its graceful stone-studded hilt and pushed the blade into Marcellinus's upper abdomen, approximately halfway between his sternum and his bellybutton, creating a

longitudinal laceration in
the parietal peritoneum of his anterior abdominal wall
his stomach's pyloric antrum
his hepatoduodenal ligament
the left lobe of his liver
and his superior mesenteric artery.

Marcellinus made a gurgly gagging sound, a bit of bright red blood pooled in his mouth and dribbled down his clothes. Some gas also came out of the opening in his belly.

Theodoric threw Marcellinus's body out through an open window and looked for the master bedroom's en-suite bathroom. Charlene walked in moments later.

"Theodoric, I know you're trying to be efficient but who's going to clean this up now? We got kids here, I'm trying to make this a wholesome and family-friendly environment."

"Yeah sorry. I threw him out the window though. You can look up when trash pickup day is in this town, or call for special pickup if they don't do bodies."

"Thanks. What's probably going to happen is I'm going to have to clean it up myself."

Their young daughter Theodegotha walked in, holding a coarse flax-filled rag doll in the effigy of Saint Eudocia, complete with a miniature wooden cross. She pointed to the bloody mess on the chessboard-patterned marble floor and asked:

"Mommy what's that?"

"It's the blood of some Greek guy your dad just eviscerated, and a tiny bit of his liver as well. Are you ready for your nap or do you want to help mommy clean up the corpse?"

"Clean up the corpse with mommy!"

"Good Gothic girl, always ready for action!"

IV

Theodoric welcomed me into his cluttered Midtown office, where he was kind enough to grant me an exclusive interview for this article. Amidst the jumbled decor of thousands of old books, gilded family portraits, antiques, and the purple velvet drapes framing the grand urban view out of his 28th-floor corner window, I asked the elder statesman to reminisce about the winter of 476 AD.

"Oh these were rough times. Savage times," he confessed to me, puffing on his pipe. "The Balkans were a backwater in the fifth century, there was no food, no infrastructure. We had thousands of people in tow, they were hungry, they were tired. The priority was to feed them."

I asked: "Were you expecting help from Byzantium?"

"Not really. I mean, it was complicated," he said. "We were all culturally fascinated with Byzantium of course. As Goths, we had all grown up watching Byzantine television. There were only three channels, it was primitive. Byzantine television wasn't even electrical, it was entirely mechanical. People today can't even imagine what these mechanical TVs were like. They basically ran on olive oil. This is probably long before you were born, we're talking 1500 years ago."

"Indeed, I'm 43," I nodded.

"So we grew up watching these Greek shows about people dressed in lavish outfits and having all these intrigues in marble palaces. And of course we were all secretly a bit jealous. Officially we were proud to be Goths, there was this whole public exaltation of Gothic culture, propping up warriors on shields, running sacred objects through fields for good harvest, etc. But I think in private a lot of us harbored a kind of Byzantine envy."

I asked: "Did that make you disappointed with the Empire once you got to know it better?"

"Yes and no. I think we were always aware of the dark side of it, this sort of Greek shiftiness. We envied the Empire's material

wealth but on some level I'd say even the average Goth on the street had a bit of disdain for Byzantine dishonesty. Honor was a big thing in Gothic society. And perhaps it wasn't always such a priority for the Greeks."

"And so to get back to the winter of 476?"

"The main thing is, we were hungry. We didn't trust the Byzantines but we needed them. We knew they considered us Barbarians, they made it clear at every opportunity. If I had just followed my pride, I would have just burned all their cities to the ground and killed everyone there."

"Well you sort of did exactly that, didn't you?"

"No, I think that's an exaggeration. We did that to a few cities, but the other ones we just ransacked for food and didn't really kill anyone — unless they got in the way. Fundamentally we're not murderous people, but we were just hungry. If you're in charge of feeding thousands of hungry armed warriors and you have to play games with some two-faced Greek envoy, it's a fine line. Of course you'd rather cut him in half or impale him. But you can't afford to get chased down by imperial legions. You also can't give in too much and lose your Gothic honor, or your own hungry men will kill you and go on a rampage."

"Would you say that you're anxious not to be remembered the same way as the Huns and the Vandals?" I asked.

"I think you've read my mind. Maybe all we wanted was a bit of dignity and material security."

"But wouldn't you say there was a cultural element of violence among the Ostrogoths?" I asked, hoping not to offend Theodoric with that question. To wit, I pointed at the collection of skulls arrayed in one corner of his office, and asked further: "I see you've kept the skulls of your enemies on display all these years. There's something almost Aztec about that fetishization of your adversaries' corpse, isn't there?"

"Well I don't know about Aztec, I wouldn't push the comparison too far. We never had human sacrifices obviously. But yes, we are a warrior people, I think I'm comfortable with you printing that."

"Is there one skull you're still particularly proud of?" I asked.

"Hah," Theodoric chuckled and his eyes lit up as if I'd brought up a comical memory. "Yes actually. That third one on the left is Odoacer. I'm still chuckling because I killed him with my bare hands at dinner — you know the story. I bent him backwards and sort of broke him in half. So you could say alright, nothing unusual about that part, but the thing is, he didn't go 'snap' or 'crunch' as you would expect. He was kinda squishy. His body kinda went like 'squish.' It's hard to explain…" said Theodoric, his hands gesturing as if wringing a sponge.

"What about Boethius? I asked.

His expression changed and became pained: "I was hoping you wouldn't bring him up — but I guess I expected you would. Yes. It's an unfortunate story. I still have his books." He got up from his desk and reached for a dusty volume. "I'll read you some if you don't mind," he said, then declaimed in a clear smooth voice:

O stelliferi conditor orbis,
qui perpetuo nixus solio
rapido caelum turbine versas
legemque pati sidera cogis,
ut nunc pleno lucida cornu
totis fratris obvia flammis
condat stellas luna minores…

"Beautiful. Now would you translate it for our readers who aren't as comfortable with Latin?" I asked, bearing in mind that many of you these days prefer to read classical texts in translation, little scoundrels!

"Sure" said Theodoric, "I guess the Greek would go something like this:

Ὦ ἀστροφόρου κτίστη τοῦ κύκλου,
ὃς ἀϊδίῳ ἐσκημμένος τῷ θρόνῳ
ταχεῖ τὸν οὐρανὸν στρόμβῳ περιστρέφεις
καὶ τὸν νόμον πάσχειν τὰ ἄστρα ἀναγκάζεις,
ὡς νῦν μὲν πλήρει λαμπρὰ τῷ εἴδει

πάσαις ταῖς τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ ἀπαντῶσα φλοξίν
κρύπτῃ τοὺς ἀστέρας ἡ σελήνη τοὺς ἐλάττονες…

"Right… I meant… into English? I thought our readers might…," I prodded gently.

"Hehe, right, of course. See, this is the kind of generational difference that makes me realize what a fuddy-duddy I've become. I'm a man of my time, what can I say. Back in my day, 'translating' meant between Greek and Latin — unless it was clear from the context someone meant Gothic. But we grew up knowing that nobody ever wanted to hear Gothic — well, unless they were a Goth. So I didn't even consider that. But anyway, yes, in English, it means roughly:

Oh stereophonic conditional orbit,
quick perpetual knickknack's solitude
rapid kale turbine workups
legume's keypad stares at cogs,
up nuns playing a look at a corny
tootsie frat rings up way a flan mass
condos stale as looney manors…"

"Thank you, it's beautiful. Theodoric, thanks again on behalf of our entire editorial staff for granting us this interview and sharing these precious memories with us."

"My pleasure."

V

Charlene walked out onto the porch of her new house along Theodosius Avenue, Epidaurum's main thoroughfare, and ran into Sidimund, who was coming to visit his boss.

"Hey Sidimund, how is it going?"

"Good morning Charlene, look at that swank house!"

"I know, we totally scored, everyone loves it."

"I bet. And awesome location, too."

"Actually, yeah, how does it feel to be back in Epidaurum? This probably all looks totally familiar to you. You went to college here, didn't you?"

"Only a semester. I was an exchange student. But yes, I'm on familiar ground."

"How was it studying here actually? Good experience?"

"In some respects, yes. It's all about finding your niche. I mostly hung out with the other exchange students, we were like the Epidaurum foreign student gang."

"Oh yeah?"

"The local Greeks were pretty arrogant and racist, to be honest. A lot of 'Barbarian this, Barbarian that.' So I mostly had these two really good friends, a Jewish student named Isaac and this guy Thabudius who was from Numidia."

"Oh wow, like, from Africa?"

"Yes. He was amazing, he had the most extravagant sense of fashion. He sometimes wore this sort of weird dark green silk pallium with an embroidered edge that was like, bright orange. Always with the most unusual motifs. And this awesome silver brooch. And he had this ridiculous collection of silver bracelets, some of them were just huge. And always with really strange stuff carved on them, like snakes, birds, whatever."

"Ooh that sounds really attractive! Bracelets! Let's totally go to Numidia right now and shop for bracelets!"

"Oh I know. He was incredibly handsome, too."

"Were you guys ever, like, together?"

"Well, kind of. We hooked up a few times. He had really dark skin and a tattoo of an eagle on his lower back, it was unbelievably hot. We used to joke that I was the palest person on campus and he was the darkest. Once we were naked and tangled in bed we probably looked like a chessboard. And I'm sure he thought hooking up with a pale Goth was pretty hot, too, come to think of it."

"Wow."

"But anyway, I have no idea where he is now. I hope for him he didn't go back to Africa. I don't want to speak negatively of the Vandals because they're our blood relatives, but… you know, the way they rule Africa. I mean, they're going to make a bad name for themselves."

"Well, yeah… what can I say… We read the same news…"

"Anyway. I think that was the reason his dad sent him abroad for college, he didn't think Africa was a good place for his son to stick around. And maybe Rome was too expensive. So maybe that's how he ended up at Epidaurum? I don't know. We didn't think about those things, we were college students."

"What about Isaac, was he from Judea?"

"No I think he was from Alexandria, or some place around there. We were roommates actually. Straight guy but really nice, smart, intellectually curious. We used to talk until late at night, he heard all the details of my stories with Thabudius… And I heard all his stories. The Jews are really interesting people actually. They have this whole literary tradition with a bunch of sagas, kinda like ours. But theirs are all set in the desert and are all about people being too hot and trying to find someplace colder, so everything works backwards."

"Hahaha omg that sounds amazing."

"Yeah it's cool stuff. Isaac was a really sophisticated guy. His dad wanted him to come back to Alexandria and go into banking, but he literally had zero interest in that. He was into Gnosticism, Montanism, and all that philosophy. He used to read Tertullian nonstop and tell me about Tertullian over breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It was kinda neat. I was never so much into theology but, you know, hearing it from such a smart and pas-

sionate person, you get into it. He said his family had no interest at all in Christian theology — or even Jewish theology. He actually audited a class on Gnosticism at Epidaurum and asked the professor not to have that appear on his transcript. He was like — dude if my dad finds out he's paying for me to studying this heretical Christian stuff he's literally going to kill me.

"Hahaha I love it."

"I once taught him how to use a sword. He said it was the most terrifyingly exciting thing he'd ever done. He used to joke — if my family knew that I'm hanging out with a Goth who's teaching me to wield a sword, they would just… And then he'd complete the sentence with something absurd and hilarious they would do: jump into the Nile, shred their shirts in mourning, hold a vigil for him, send a dozen slaves to bring him home…"

"That's amazing. Did you guys speak Greek together?"

"Yes. Actually his Greek was much better than mine when I got there. I mean, he was basically a native speaker, growing up in Alexandria and all."

"And with Thabudius as well?"

"Yes, also. Thabudius obviously preferred Latin, but spoke really good Greek. He had the most incredible Numidian accent in Greek. In Latin as well actually. I can't even describe it. Like something from the back of his throat, like a gentle roar. He taught us a lot of funny Latin words from his country. Apparently there are all these crazy Latin expressions that are only used in Numidia. Some of them are just hilarious."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

"So like, let me think… Like 'to charge your phone' you'd say 'mobile inferre' right? I mean that's like standard. That's what's printed on the bilingual label on the charger, etc., right?"

"Right. So what do they say in Numidia?"

"So according to Thabudius, people in Numidia say 'gestamen fovere' instead."

"Oh wow. So 'gestamen' like it's the thing you carry with you, and 'fovere' yes, like it needs to be warmed up and nursed and taken care of. That's really cute actually."

"I know, so adorable. Or like the stuff he cooked with. All manner of crazy ingredients with crazy names you'd never heard of. He'd be like 'I'm making galbaneum with galenga with zenzur with zizuinnim' and I'd be like 'you are *so* making this up, there's no way those are Latin words' and he'd be like 'dude it's in Apuleius, look it up. It's in the *Asclepius*.' And of course Apuleius came up, like, ten times a day, because he's pretty much their Numidian national hero. Thabudius would tease me and say: 'Oh well, I guess my job here is to educate the barbarian Goths about Roman classics. Let me see, are there are any wild Goths with long blond hair who need to be educated around here?' And at that point I'd be so irritated and aroused we'd end up having wild sex and making a hot black-and-white skin chessboard."

"It sounds like you guys were very close."

"Yeah, well. I don't know. Maybe. It's complicated. He did introduce me to a lot of cool Latin music. He knew all the Latin bands. Do you know this song *De reditu suo* by Rutilius Namatianus?

Velocem potius reditum mirabere, lector,
tam cito Romuleis posse carere bonis…

"Oh yeah! Rutilius! Omg I haven't thought about Rutilius in a long time! I actually do remember the lyrics of that song:

quid longum toto Romam venerantibus aevo
nil umquam longum est quod sine fine placet…

"Yes exactly!"

"Oh I was totally into Rutilius, too. This is long before Theodoric and I had kids. We used to go out and sing this stuff all night. Well OK, that's another story… But yes I totally remember it."

Sidimund and Charlene sang on together:

O quantum et quotiens possum numerare beatos
nasci felici qui meruere solo!

At this point Theodoric appeared on the porch. He grinned and briefly joined them in an improvised trio:

qui Romanorum procerum generosa propago
ingenitum cumulant urbis honore decus!

All three of them laughed. Sidimund bowed to Theodoric:

"Good morning my lord."

"Good morning Sidimund. Are we having a little Rutilius disco moment?"

"Looks like it," said Sidimund with a shy smile.

"I'm glad. I think we all really needed a little pause and something cheerful to think about. We've all earned it. Now we also do have some work to do."

"Yes my lord. What can I do?"

"Sidimund, since you know the city, I'd like you to be in charge of grain distribution. Recruit as many people as you need, do a tally of the granaries, divide up what we have, and make sure everybody has enough to eat tonight."

"Yes my lord, it will be done as you command." Sidimund bowed again, and left.

"Speaking of food," said Theodoric to Charlene, "did you take a look at the fridge and the pantry in this house? Did they leave any food?"

"I did. There's a lot of lard, there's a bunch of large clay tupperware with boiled lamb, boiled pork, and boiled goose…"

"Eeeww why do the Greeks have to boil everything?"

"I know… There's also a bunch of cans of murri sauce and garum sauce."

"Omg that stuff is so gross. The Greeks just eat the weirdest things. I can't believe they call *us* Barbarians…"

"Yeah seriously, that stuff is, like, weapons-grade. Like if you ever need to attack the Gepids and you want to get into chemical warfare, that garum stuff will do."

"Right, thank you Charlene, excellent idea, I'll remember that…"

"And then there's a few actually usable things like some koptoplakous cake, and a few cheeses like a whole anthotyros and about three quarters of a cephalotyrion."

"Meh."

"Yep. And a bunch of reflux medicine and stuff like that. The guy clearly had really bad reflux and abdominal gas problems."

"Oh yeah haha that's true, remember how all this gas kinda went 'puff' out of his stomach when I cut him open? I thought that was pretty funny."

"Well if you eat this rotten fish sauce every day with boiled mutton and all that random Greek stuff, I don't see how that's going to be a surprise when you're bloated like a bagpipe…"

"Well I guess that's what we'll eat for now. Still beats walking all day through the snow and getting blisters I guess."

"I don't know, barely."

"Yeah well. Alright, let me get to work then. Love you."

VI

Snow had fallen early on the Rhodope mountains that year and the passes were rough and icy.

Theodegotha asked: "Mommy, can I ride on the horse a little bit?"

"Why?" said Charlene.

"Because I'm tired of walking and I'm cold and my feet hurt."

"But a good Gothic girl walks at least twenty miles a day in the snow, sweetie."

"I know but my feet hurt."

"Alright, mommy will put you on top of the barley."

Charlene lifted the little girl, while still walking, and hoisted her up on top of a sack of barley jouncing up and down on the mare's sinewy rump.

"OK you hold on tight and get some rest up there," said Charlene.

"My feet also hurt and I'm also cold and tired," confessed Charlene to Theodoric.

"And so do mine," Theodoric answered.

"And everyone else's, I bet," said Charlene.

"I want to camp at lower altitude, maybe we'll walk down another three hours and find a good spot without snow. I don't want too many people freezing to death overnight."

"How do you feel about slavery?" said Charlene after a long pause.

"Slavery? Why slavery? How is this coming up now?"

"I'm just working on my paper, as much as I can while we move around. And I was just thinking — would we ever want slaves?"

Theodoric thought for a while, the snow crunching under his boots. A hawk flew by silently, far above them in the stark winter sky.

"I don't know," he said finally. "I'm not against it. The concept sounds great. But how do you feed them?"

They walked on. A twig crackled underfoot.

"You can't have slaves if you don't have enough grain to feed everyone. It's just more mouths to feed," he continued. "Maybe one day if we settle somewhere rich and bountiful? I don't know. It could also be really impractical."

Theodegotha took off her left shoe. Her little foot was sore. There was a bit of blood where her sock covered a raw blister on her heel. She held her Saint Eudocia doll tighter and frowned.

"Theodegotha, put your shoe back on," said Charlene.

"But it hurts."

"I know it hurts but it's cold and you can't be barefoot in this weather, so put your shoe back on until we're camping somewhere and we make a fire."

"ok mommy," said the little girl, reluctantly putting her bloody wool sock and then her dirty shoe back on.

They walked on, down from the pass into the valley. The trail gradually got wider and the snow slushier. The landscape lost its desolation and gained nothing in return.

The hard ice turned pulpy
the white turned sallow
the crisp crunch of each step devolved into a crunchy splosh
the stark became indecisive
the bleak became wan
the harsh became bleary
the grand became residual
the light gray became colorless
a goat bleated, far above them on an escarpment, and limped ungracefully out of sight after shitting on a patch of dead grass.

The path turned rockier and wetter. The mare hesitated and slipped a few times, sending jolts into the sack of barley and little Theodegotha's spine. Charlene's ankles twisted and turned

inside her woolen boots, pulling and tugging all the way up her legs.

Her knees hurt
a hundred horses hesitated
and slipped
one by one
as each tromped out of the white snow
into the sloshy slush
a thousand more ankles twisted
and hurt
each one in turn
in a caravan of sprains.

"So, I guess, who would our slaves be?" asked Theodoric.

"Well. I don't know. Our enemies? People we capture in battle?" said Charlene.

Theodoric kept walking. He forded a brook, trudging across its marshy embankment. Water got into his boots. The cold bit him like a snake. He said nothing. Water got into Charlene's boots. The cold soothed her blisters for an instant.

"If they've been brave in battle, wouldn't it be more honorable to kill them than to enslave them?" said Theodoric.

"I suppose," said Charlene.

"I don't think anyone would choose to be a slave. I imagine anyone faced with that choice would prefer death," Theodoric added.

"That's assuming you give them the choice. But as a king, why would you give your enemy the choice?"

"If they've been bold enough to be your enemy, why would you want them as your slave? They'd probably make a terrible slave. Also, I like killing my enemies in battle. The last thing I want is to see them every day and be responsible for feeding them forever."

They walked on. A spongy mat of soft dead grass provided false relief for a moment, then slowed them down like a wet rug.

"Theodoric, do you think we're like the Hebrews? Do you think this is our desert and there's a mystical dimension to our years of wandering?" asked Charlene after a while.

"No."

"I've been wondering about this, for my paper, but also personally. You don't think there's a great meaning to our wandering? That we're chasing God, or God is chasing us?"

"No. I don't see it. Maybe you're right, but I don't see it."

"So why are we wandering?"

"Because we're hungry, Charlene. We're going to run out of barley and die. We're going to lie down in the snow, right here in these mountains, and never wake up. And crows will eat our eyes. But we don't want to die. Even dogs don't want to die. Even mice don't want to die."

"Maybe we're like the Mormons. Maybe we're looking for our place, the home we were destined for, our manifest destiny as Goths."

"Maybe Charlene. Maybe. You're the scholar. I'm just a chieftain. I'm leading forty thousand men with blisters on their heels and water in their boots. All I know is that they don't want to die. If they die, they want to go sword in hand, like Goths. Not like mice in a trap. Not of hunger. Not of frostbite. Not shitting their guts out in a mountain stream."

"Mommy," said Theodegotha from atop the barley sack, "can we order Thai when we get to camp?"

"No, sweetie," said Charlene.

"Why not?" asked the little girl in disappointment.

"Because they don't deliver to this area, sweetie. The nearest Thai place is hundreds of miles and years away," Charlene explained. She paused, then continued: "Also my phone is dead and there's nowhere to charge it. And there's no reception. Everyone's phone is dead, sweetie, it's winter and we're in the middle of nowhere. And it's 476."

Theodegotha frowned and clutched her Saint Eudocia doll tighter, bouncing on the sack of barley as the mare trundled on.

VII

Charlene sat at the edge of Theodegotha's frilly pink bed in the warm, quiet mansion in Epidaurum, reading her a bedtime story.

"And then the Amalings killed the evil Emperor Decius and every last man in his army, and threw their bodies into the Danube. And the river turned red from the blood of our enemies…"

The little girl fell asleep peacefully. Her mom tucked her in and kissed her on the forehead. Then she got up and went to sit on the rocking chair across the room, and just looked at her sleeping child for a while.

Theodegotha's new room was a little girl's dream. Like all little girls her age she was in her Saint Eudocia phase. Soon she'd probably grow out of it and become fascinated with another saint. But for now she would not sleep without her Saint Eudocia flax-filled rag doll. Above her bed were fold-out mosaic posters of Saint Eudocia cooking, knitting, and writing *The Martyrdom of Saint Cyprian,* taped to the wall. She had the official Saint Eudocia® "Martyrdom of Saint Cyprian Playset" with which she played all day at beheading Cyprian and having his body taken to Rome on a little ship. Clearly the Saint Eudocia® franchise made a lot of money from this. And in a few months she would probably lose all interest in it, and Charlene and Theodoric would have to go to the mall outside Epidaurum looking for the playset for her next saint.

The experience at the toy store at the Epidaurum Mall was nothing to look forward to. Theodoric and Charlene often found themselves wondering if they didn't actually prefer walking across the Balkans in the snow. Somehow Theodoric felt more at ease fighting Roman legions in the freezing mud and splitting the skull of his enemies with an axe than dealing with his entitled, screaming, moody little Gothic daughter at a suburban mall.

Theodegotha's obsession with wanting to be a princess was particularly insufferable to him — not because that kind of fantasy was unbecoming for a little girl, but because Theodegotha was already a princess. Nothing Theodoric said or did seemed able to convince his daughter that the aristocratic rank she pretended to have when playing was the one she actually had. Deep inside, Theodoric knew that the kind of princess she dreamed of being was the kind who lives in a beautiful castle and wears flowy crinoline dresses — not the homeless kind who sits on a sack of barley bouncing on top of a scrawny mare and puts her bloodied socks back on so her feet won't freeze. He felt a sense of shame for not having managed to give his daughter a more comfortable childhood, or at least a sense of pride in her Gothic heritage.

"Theodoric," Charlene had once asked, "do you think it's important to expose young children to violence?"

"I think so, yes."

"That's also my intuition as a mother. I feel like they need to grow up knowing that violence and death is normal, and not feeling squeamish about it."

"Of course. Death is a part of life. We kill people all the time, that's just how things are."

"I feel like violence needs to be demystified for young children. It shouldn't be abstract, it shouldn't be glossed over. I think it makes sense for them to experience the details of wounds, of how blood gushes, of the various sounds people make when they die."

"I wholeheartedly agree. That's how we were raised."

"Especially slash wounds from swords, and also perforation wounds when people get pierced by an arrow. Those two are the most likely to come up in our environment. I think it's good to be able to explain to young children in simple terms how an arrow enters the body, tears up internal organs and causes hemorrhage. And also ideally for them to see it firsthand, so they can watch the pain on the face of someone who's dying that way. I feel like that has real pedagogical value for a young child."

"I'm glad you're thinking about this. You're articulating it better than I could."

"I think next time we have a battle, or some other opportunity to kill people, we should actually do a hands-on workshop for kids. You know like a petting farm, but for violence."

"That's an idea. I like that."

City life with a young child was another matter. It did not involve Ostrogothic battle workshops, or perforation-themed petting farms. In fact a quick stroll around the mall had made it clear to the embarrassed young parents that their Gothic tastes were painfully out of fashion, even in a provincial city like Epidaurum.

The latest craze in the Epidaurum toy world was the (supposedly educational) Faltonia Betitia Proba® make-your-own-Christian-poem Cento® set. The set consisted of 694 fridge magnets, each bearing a line from Virgil, which each player had to try to rearrange in such a way as to form an epic poem praising Christ, but without creating a pagan meaning. The game would beep if the magnets were rearranged in a pagan way — even by mistake — and would keep beeping until a Christian arrangement was found, making it one of the most annoying games parents could inflict upon themselves. The proper Christian rearrangement, called a Cento®, would cause the game to beep the tune of Saint Ambrose's *Te Deum.* Every child in Epidaurum had to have their own Cento® set. Parents not only often struggled with Virgil's Latin — often ashamed to tell the kids they didn't really understand it — but also felt increasing pressure to get bigger and bigger fridges to accommodate the game's 694 fridge magnets — an unrealistic number for the appliances owned by most middle-class families.

So I bet you guys are super curious to try, aren't you? OK we'll try it together. I got five Virgil fridge magnets to get you started. And I put an English translation next to it on the off chance that your Latin is rusty, little scoundrels!

Certa manent pueri et palmam movet ordine nemo
Mary had a little lamb
Promissisque patris
Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose
Nemo ex hoc numero mihi non donatus abibit
Three little pigs
Vestra" inquit "munera vobis
May the force be with you
"Audite, o proceres" ait "et spes discite vestras
God save the queen

Now let's give this our first try. We'll put the magnets in the right order to praise Christ, but if a pagan meaning comes out… Beep!!!

Nemo ex hoc numero mihi non donatus abibit
2 cups canned chickpeas
Certa manent pueri et palmam movet ordine nemo
½ cup tahini (sesame paste)
"Audite, o proceres" ait "et spes discite vestras
2 cloves garlic, peeled
Vestra" inquit "munera vobis Promissisque patris
Put it in a food processor

Ooops. Nope. You made the recipe for hummus instead. Pagan!

BEEEEEEEP!!!!!

Alright, let's try this again and hopefully we'll end up praising Christ this time.

"Audite, o proceres" ait "et spes discite vestras
The amount of the net capital loss
Certa manent pueri et palmam movet ordine nemo
for any taxable year shall be carried
Vestra" inquit "munera vobis Promissisque patris
to the earliest of the taxable years

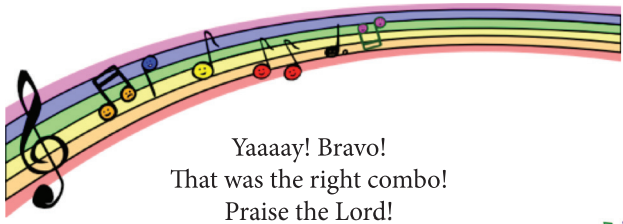
Nemo ex hoc numero mihi non donatus abibit
to which such loss may be carried.

Ooooops. Noooo. That was the tax code rule on the carryover of capital losses. Pagan!

BEEEEEEEEEEP!!!!!

OK last try and then we need to move on.

"Audite, o proceres" ait "et spes discite vestras
Those who hope in the Lord will be strong
Nemo ex hoc numero mihi non donatus abibit
They will soar on wings like eagles
Promissisque patris Vestra" inquit "munera vobis
They will run and not grow weary
Certa manent pueri et palmam movet ordine nemo.
They will walk and not be tired.



Yaaaay! Bravo!
That was the right combo!
Praise the Lord!



Te Deum laudamus! Te Dominum confitemur!
Te aeternum Patrem omnis terra veneratur!



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VIII

They camped in the valley at lower altitude, on a sloped plain above the river, where it wouldn't quite freeze overnight and there was enough dead wood around for everyone to make a fire.

It was cold. It was windy. It was dark. It was late. There were no stars, no clouds, no colors, and no shapes. The sky was gone and above them was just nothing.

Inside Theodoric's tent the fire was beginning to crackle. Sidimund sat silently looking down, as in defeat. His hair was sticky and dank like old hay. Charlene remained silent. Her ankle hurt. She sat at the edge of a coarse jute sack, as if to avoid getting too comfortable. Theodegotha was crouched before the fire. The blisters on her little feet stung, but she was too tired to take her boots off.

Theodoric stood.

Finally he said: "Let us sing. We will fill the night with poetry. We are still alive. Our songs are alive in our hearts. We are a race of poets. We will make new verse tonight. Sidimund, do you want to start?"

Sidimund threw a branch onto the fire, looked up, and started wearily:

My hardy fox foot has vaulted through the forest needles
Trundled tramped and bolted over the unfair boulders
That the fierce mountain meted humbled I fled forth
Now my dreams are stout and dry the old blazing fire
Burns only in my blisters my eyes have forgotten
The world beyond the wool of my wet boots.

"Nice," said Theodoric. "Charlene?"

Charlene sat up, threw a log on the fire. It crackled even more. She started:

soothing sunshine is somewhere else
soft safety is somewhere else
silky sleep is somewhere else
serene sweetness is somewhere else
but lurking in the murk — a gray area though?
down in the doldrums
gray is neither here nor there
gray is neither this nor that
gray is too much and not enough
in gray there's poetry
there's pitch and line and crinkle an accent ruffles the emptiness
a rhythm ripples and rings a soul sings.

"Nice," said Theodoric again. "Theodegotha, do you want to try?"

"Do you want to recite the Greuthungi Saga, sweetie?" asked Charlene.

"I don't remember it," said Theodegotha shyly.

"I'm sure you do," said Charlene.

"But I'm tired."

"But this is what we do when we're tired. This is always something we do at the end of the day when everyone is tired. Come on, tell us the Greuthungi Saga, sweetie."

The little girl reluctantly stood up and recited in an even voice:

"Long ago when dragons roamed the plains
And dwarves dwelled in the mountains
And witches in the forests
There lived a king in the land of Oium
With the name of Gadareiks
The fourth king of our people
Since our ancestors had crossed the sea
He had a son called Filimer
Who drove the witches away
And made peace in the waterlands
But the witches hid and waited

And then came Gauts the Brave
Then Halmals the Fighter
Then sharp-sworded Augis
Who begat our father Amala
But still the witches hid and waited
His son Isarna the Bold
Begat the shining Austrogotha
Who defeated the evil Greeks
And their wicked king Decius
And spilled his blood into the Danube
Then came Hunvils, Athals, and Achiulfs
But the witches came out of hiding
And they were called Halju-runno
Because they went down into hell
And married devils and spirits
And begat cruel savage monsters
Called the hideous Huns
And Achiulfs's son took up the sword
And his name was Airmanareiks the Great
And he led our people against the Huns
And defeated them in battle
Then came Winithar
Who fought Boz of the Antai
Then Wandalar and Walamer the Clever
Who took the Greeks' gold for his people
And then king Theodemir
And then daddy
And then meeeeeeee!!!!"

Theodegotha ended cheerfully, as all little girls do when the story suddenly revolves around them. Everyone clapped.

"Good job! Good Gothic girl!" said Charlene.

"Mommy?" asked Theodegotha.

"Yes my baby?"

"Why am I in the only girl in that story?"

Charlene turned to Theodoric with a wry grin: "Well, I don't know. I think that's a good question for your dad, actually. Your majesty, tell us, why is our daughter the only girl in that story?" Charlene asked with a mixture of feigned and genuine curiosity.

Sidimund said nothing, looked at the fire, covered his mouth with his hand and repressed a smile — but suddenly all the stars that were missing in the sky that night sparkled in his eyes.

Theodoric also smiled, but a different kind of smile: the kind that focuses in the distance and makes blisters and sprains feel inconsequential. He said to his daughter: "We are a brave people, and you are a brave little girl. When I hear you recite our saga, I imagine all our girls were as brave as you are, as far back as the beginning of the story. So maybe from now on we should recite their names. The story is not finished, it's up to us what the next lines will be and whose names will be remembered."

Nobody said anything. It started to drizzle. The rain made a faint tapping noise on the tent.

"Let's play Trope!" said Theodoric finally.

"How do you play, is it like chess?" asked Charlene.

"Almost. It's actually a Greek thing — they do it for their liturgy but we'll make it a Gothic thing and do it with our sagas. So someone recites a text we already know, for example the Greuthungi Saga we just heard, and then after each idea we add some verses to make it bigger and more beautiful, and that's called a trope. So go ahead, start reciting and I'll demonstrate."

Charlene started, and Theodoric completed each line with a trope:

Long ago	in olden lore we learn
when dragons	dreaded sullen rovers
roamed the plains	and plied the swamps
and dwarves dwelled	down in glum caverns
in the mountains	wicked rock bellies
and witches	wandered wide and festered
in the forests	this we faithful sing:
there lived a king.	

"Ooh this is fun!" said Charlene. "Alright now you recite and I trope! Or Sidimund, do you want to give it a try?"

"How about you recite, my lord, and you Charlene, how about you trope, and I'll comment on each line."

"This is so much fun!" said Charlene again.

Theodoric started in a different place, Charlene troped, and Sidimund commented:

Who defeated fought and vanquished
the evil Greeks their gruesome fate was bleak

This we sing. We fill the night with their cowardly deeds so the stars have reason to hide.

And their wicked weak and baffled
king Decius spring of sorrow deep and vicious

This we sing. We fill the frigid wind with their vile names so the cold will give all living things pause.

And spilled his blood the stream was red, the ground was mud
into the Danube and let the sea devour him.

This we carve into our verse, and our verse into our hearts, and our song into the night, for verse and valor carry us through the darkness.

They sang, recited, and troped until late. Theodogotha was already long asleep, curled up between two sacks of barley. It rained lightly on and off, delicately tapping the tent all night as if the world was mild.

IX

As part of our documentary series, our reporter Tis Kaoru Zamler-Carhart traveled to Thessaloniki to speak with Prof. Euphrosyne Didaskalidou, dean of the Distance Learning and Barbarian Graduate Education Program at the Byzantine State University at Thessaloniki. A transcript of the interview follows.

T: Prof. Didaskalidou, thanks for speaking to us today. What exactly is the Distance Learning and Barbarian Graduate Education Program?

E: The program was started about a decade ago to accommodate the needs of Barbarian students who want to complete post-graduate studies but come from nomadic or semi-nomadic backgrounds and are often unable to attend Byz State in person. We felt that those students have something to contribute and can still be a part of the Byz State academic community if we can accommodate their special circumstances.

T: Would you stay that the program has been successful so far?

E: It has been very successful, there was definitely a pent-up need among the Barbarian population and I'm proud to say that Byz State has been able to meet some of that. It has also been a success for the university. We have a mandate from the Imperial Ministry of Education to reach out to Barbarian populations and foster cultural goodwill towards the Empire, and educating Barbarian elites is definitely a way to achieve that.

T: On a more prosaic level, does the program end up costing the university money or is it self-sustaining?

E: The program actually generates revenue for the university, and I won't lie about the fact that this is one of the other mo-

tivations for having it in the first place. We're dealing with a student demographic that often comes from an aristocratic background, with families that have ample ability to pay for tuition, and who have calculated that a Byzantine degree from an imperially accredited institution is well worth the expense in terms of the prestige it will carry and the opportunities it will open up in their communities.

T: So have you typically not offered financial aid to those students?

E: We have in exceptional circumstances, but for the most part we haven't had to. What we have often done, on the other hand, is made special payment arrangements to accommodate the unique financial circumstances of Barbarian students. There's a reality about them coming from communities that are not well connected to the international banking system. They sometimes may also need to remit tuition payments in non-traditional ways because of their tribe's political or migratory situation.

T: Can you give us examples?

E: We had one Vandal student who sent forty slaves as tuition payment, explaining that his clan was plundering various cities in North Africa and that it was impractical to use the banking system, but that he was in a unique position to pay us in slaves because of his family's conquests.

T: Did you accept?

E: In principle we did, though twelve of the slaves turned out to be Roman citizens so we couldn't take them as payment. But we did accept the other twenty-eight and credited them towards the student's tuition bill.

T: Is that something you'd do again, or do you feel like there would be reasons to revisit that policy?

E: I think we should have just accepted the entire shipment as slaves, and not be so nitpicky about who's a Roman citizen or not. We've been discussing getting slave insurance, so if a student sends a shipment of slaves as tuition payment and this type of issue arises again, we could just file a claim with our insurer and let them handle it.

T: Would you say your primary mission is to make sure the University gets paid?

E: We're also trying to help the students. In-kind payments are of course much more work for our accounting office than just receiving a wire transfer. But that's exactly why we set up this program: my office serves as a single point of contact between these Barbarian students and the university. We're able to accommodate a variety of unique cases, whereas the student's request might have been rejected or delayed if they had to deal directly with the accounting office. We had a Frankish student who paid her entire education in cows. She wrote us a detailed letter explaining that there was very little currency in circulation in Northeastern Gaul but plenty of cattle, and asked if we would accept payment in cattle, which we did.

T: On the academic side, do you find that there is a difference in performance between Greek students who live on campus in Thessaloniki and non-Greek students who are completing their education remotely?

E: Not really. There are some very talented people in the Barbarian world and we've had some truly innovative and valuable scholarship coming from Barbarian graduate students. For example we have one Gepid student who is completing her PhD in ethno-botany with a survey of the graminaceous plants of Pannonia and their symbolic and medicinal use in

her tribe. It's a precious contribution to the field because it wouldn't be safe or practical for Byzantine botanists to do field work in Pannonia, whereas this student lives there.

T: Can you tell us about language requirements? Has that been an issue?

E: The language of instruction at Byz State is Greek. We require dissertations to be written in Greek, of which at least 50% must be in verse. We insist on the 50% verse requirement, but we give students a choice between a more modern type of verse based on sequences of accent patterns, in the style of Romanos if you will, like:

> Ὑπάγεις, ὦ τέκνον, πρὸς ἄδικον φόνον
> καὶ οὐδείς σοι συναλγεῖ· οὐ συνέρχεταί σοι Πέτρος
> ὁ εἰπών σοι…

then the same pattern repeats, you know, like:

> Ἀπόθου, ὦ μῆτερ, τὴν λύπην ἀπόθου·
> οὐ γὰρ πρέπει σοι θρηνεῖν, ὅτι κεχαριτωμένη
> ὠνομάσθης…

You get the idea… Or they can write in traditional metric verse, like regular classical poetry with long and short syllables, following the rules we all grew up with, like:

> Ἄριστον εἶναι πᾶν μέτρον, προεῖπέ τις.
> Κἀγὼ δὲ μετρεῖν πρᾶξιν εἰδὼς καὶ λόγον,
> μέτροις ὁρίζω καί λόγους τοὺς ἐμμέτρους.
> Μέτρον δ'ἄν εἴη πᾶν τὸ συμμέτρως ἔχον·
> μέτρον δ'ἄμετρον οὐδαμῶς μέτρον λέγω.
> Σκόπει τὸ ῥητόν, καὶ σύνες τί σοι λέγει
> (ἐκ Πινδάρου σοι τοῦτου τοῦ σοφωτάτου),
> καὶ μοὶ μέτρει μέν, ἀλλ'ἄριστε, σὺν μέτρῳ.

So they have a choice, depending on their personal preference. We try to stay open-minded about style, bearing in mind they're non-native speakers and their level of proficiency is variable.

T: How do you see that in their work?

E: The 50% verse requirement is something that we emphasize because we consider it an essential element of a Byzantine education, but our students respond variously to it. Our Gothic students often have a pretty solid intuition for verse and invariably choose to write in metric verse. I would say this is actually true of all our Germanic students, whether they're Goths or Gepids or Vandals or Franks. I obviously don't know any barbarian languages, but from the way our students write we see that their native languages must also have long and short syllables and some sort of poetic meter. So this must make intuitive sense to them.

T: So they're able to produce good Greek verse as a result?

E: Well, I mean… sometimes. They still come from a very different culture than ours, so inevitably expectations are sometimes, well… very different. Some of them end up writing this kind of bizarre alliterative verse because this is how poetry seems to work in their native language. We've deployed a lot of training resources on this subject and we try to help them discard Barbarian models, but some of them just can't imagine it any other way. For example I recently got this from an Ostrogothic student who's doing his PhD in theology:

> Γλωσσῶν τὸ γλῆνος εἰς γλυκεῖαν λαλιάν
> χέουσι χεῖρες καὶ χορεύουσι λίαν
> εὖ τὸ μέλος μέλλουσες μέλδεσθαι εἰς εὐρυθμίαν.
> Ὦ κρᾶμα καινόν· ἐκ κινημάτων μόνον
> θαυμάσιον τὸ θυμίαμα θείων λόγων
> εἰς ὕμνον ἡμῖν εὑρέθη ἁγίου λόγου.

So I read this and I'm like, OK, this student is basically writing Germanic alliterative verse, except in Greek, how am I going to explain that to him? Because of course, it's not technically wrong, but it's just… I mean, it's bizarre, right? It sounds really kooky, that's just not how we do poetry in Greek, it sounds totally incongruous. The entire esthetic of it is pretty much a big cultural misunderstanding. Which then begs the question: can the university legitimately endorse this person's academic work and recognize him as having received a Byzantine education when he's clearly thinking in Germanic alliterative verse, and his Greek poetry is basically Gothic verse in Greek?

T: And what did you decide in this case?

E: His father is a major chieftain and sent us several sacks of gold as a "thank you" for taking care of his son's education, so my office felt like that substantially addressed the issue.

T: Have you had cases where you've allowed a student to write their dissertation in a language other than Greek?

E: In Barbarian languages, no, we've never allowed it and never will. But in truly exceptional cases we've allowed students to write in Latin. For example we had this brilliant student from Ireland — which is a remote island somewhere in the middle of the ocean, if I recall — who wrote a really interesting sociology dissertation on monasticism in her country. She did a thorough demographic analysis of who tends to join Irish monasteries in her community, what economic backgrounds they're from, how educated the parents are, how often siblings are likely to join together, etc. Really interesting, groundbreaking stuff, with a lot of local field work, and uniquely valuable because we have so little information on Ireland. I mean, I wasn't even sure that island actually existed before she applied, I thought it might be more like a mythical place with sea monsters and stuff. But in any case, she said

that in her country it would be nearly impossible to find any resources in Greek because literally nobody speaks Greek, and that she wanted her research to be accessible to her own people, which I can understand. And apparently even educated people there don't know Greek, can you imagine? So we accepted.

T: How did you handle the 50% verse requirement in her case?

E: We basically had to waive it. We could never get her to even understand what poetry is. I don't know how their language works over there, she is certainly an excellent storyteller, her prose is very fluid, but after two lines of verse she basically always lapses back into prose. The Irish just don't seem to have a concept of verse as distinct from prose. But we were so impressed that someone is doing scholarship on such a remote island — and good scholarship no less — that we let her graduate anyway. And now we have a Byz State alumna running around somewhere in the middle of the ocean, which is a nice thought.

T: As a conclusion, do you feel like there's perhaps a growing trend in academia to try to phase out the use of the word "Barbarian" or that some students might be less comfortable with that term?

E: No I haven't heard of any such trend. I mean, they're Barbarians, aren't they? That's just a fact. Some of them might be wealthy and educated, but obviously that doesn't make them Greek, they're just Barbarians.

T: Prof. Didaskalidou, thank you very much indeed for speaking to us about the Distance Learning and Barbarian Graduate Education Program at the Byzantine State University at Thessaloniki, and for sharing these wonderful stories about your work and your students.

This concludes our series "The Goths."
Thanks for following us on this journalistic adventure.

I'm Tis Kaoru Zamler-Carhart and you're watching
Byzantine Television Channel 3 — live from Constantinople.

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CAST IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Theodoric son of Thiudmir
Flavius Zeno Augustus
Sidimund son of Sidimir
The Governor of Epidaurum
Irinaeus of Epidaurum
Epidaurean Girl
Epidaurean Girl's Mom
Charlene the Goth
Marcellinus of Epidaurum
Theodegotha daughter of Theodoric
Sasha Kaoru Zamler-Carhart
Euphrosyne Didaskalidou

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Βασιλικόν Πανεπιστήμιον Ρωμαικόν-Βεσσαλονίκη
Byzantine State University - Thessaloniki

Αυτόματη Διεύθυνση Κυβερνήσεως
Ostrogothic Ministry of Culture

Greater Epidaurum
Chamber of Commerce & Tourism Bureau
"your business partner"
Est. 228 B.C.

UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

X

Theodoric walked into his daughter's room as quietly as possible. He tried to dodge the toys strewn all over the floor but stepped on a chessboard and shattered it under his weight, sending the black and white square flying every which way. Theodegotha woke up.

"Daddy?" she asked Theodoric.

"Yes sweetie?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"It's something important."

"I'm listening, my baby."

"Can we go visit Constantinople?"

"No, I don't think so, my sweetie. I don't see that happening."

"Why not?"

"Well… because people there don't really want us to visit."

"Why not?"

"Because… because we're Goths my baby. It's not a good place for Goths."

"But Saint Eudocia went to Constantinople!"

"But Saint Eudocia was a Greek and we're Goths."

"But why does that make a difference?"

Theodoric was at a loss for an explanation. On the one hand the reasons why forty thousand armed Ostrogoths would not be welcome in Constantinople were really obvious. And on the other hand, if he couldn't explain those reasons clearly to a little girl, then maybe they weren't so obvious after all. Maybe there was actually no good reason.

"I think people there don't want us to visit, sweetie. We can go other places," said Theodoric finally.

"But why don't they want us there?"

"Well… because… we're displaced people, my sweetie. The Greeks are quietly sitting at home. They don't want other people to come disturb them. They want to be at home by themselves. They want to cook their own food for themselves and stay warm

and cozy. It's comfortable for them now. They don't want visitors and people like us who don't have a home yet."

"But why do they have a home and we don't? That's not fair!"

"Our home is different, sweetie. Wherever your family is, wherever we camp around the fire, wherever you hear people sing our sagas in our beautiful language, that's our home. One day we'll have a fixed home, too."

"And we'll go to Constantinople?"

"No, sweetie, we won't go to Constantinople."

"But that's not fair! Saint Eudocia went there!" said the girl in outrage.

Theodoric sat silently. Maybe it wasn't fair.

"What about Jerusalem?" continued Theodegotha, "can we visit Jerusalem?"

"No, my baby, I don't think we can visit Jerusalem either."

"But Saint Eudocia went to Jerusalem!"

"I know. Saint Eudocia did many interesting things and went to many interesting places. She was a great woman and a great poet. But she was a Greek and we're Goths. Our destiny is different, sweetie. We do different things."

"But I don't want to be a Goth! I want to go to Constantinople and Jerusalem!" the little girl protested.

Theodoric felt deeply wounded. He had dreaded this moment. His daughter didn't want to be a Goth. She didn't want to be a Barbarian. She didn't want to be a homeless girl marching around the Balkans with her tribe of refugees. She wanted to visit Constantinople and Jerusalem. She wanted to be a normal little girl in a normal little house, not a displaced Amaling princess trudging through the snow.

"Daddy?" asked Theodegotha again in a softer voice.

"Yes?"

"Can we go to Rome instead?"

Theodoric paused. "Rome… well… The thought has indeed crossed my mind."

"Is that a yes?"

"It's not a yes my baby, I just said the thought has crossed my mind. It's not so easy. We can't just walk into Rome."

"Why not?"

Theodoric grabbed a handful of the loose black and white chessboard squares littering the floor and fumbled with them nervously, stacking them and rearranging them as if he were dealing cards. He thought for himself: "Actually why not? Why can't we just walk into Rome? Maybe we actually can just walk into Rome."

"Daddy, I want to go to Rome!"

"Well my sweetie, who knows, maybe one day we'll go to Rome."

"Promise, daddy?"

Theodoric hesitated. He bit his lips. He twiddled his thumbs. He titled his head. He glanced up and down. He wasn't going to make an empty promise to his child. He stroked his chin, stared at the floor, stared at the ceiling, dropped the loose chessboard squares in a random disorganized pile.

"Daddy! Promise we'll go to Rome?" the little girl insisted.

Theodoric took a deep breath and looked up, as if he could see the sky through the walls of his daughter's cheerful pink new bedroom. He crossed his hands on his lap and remained still for a moment, pondering the tremendous weight of the promise he was about to make to his daughter — his little innocent child, snuggled warm and cozy in some Greek family's frilly pink bed in an expropriated mansion in Epidaurum — his little girl, who had no idea what it would mean for forty thousand armed Ostrogoths to march into Rome. He took Theodegotha's hand into his own.

"Yes, sweetie, I promise. I'll take you to Rome. Now go back to sleep, OK?"

Thunder rumbled in the distance. Theodegotha fell back asleep.

XI

Charlene
Anthropology 304 — Religion and Nomadism
Prof. Didaskalidou, Distance Learning Program
Byzantine State University at Thessaloniki

In this paper I explore the potential religious meaning of the wandering of the Ostrogothic people through the Balkans in light of other religiously meaningful wandering experiences, focusing especially on the Hebrews, and to a lesser extent the Mormons, and hopefully providing a tentative response to Virgil's query:

> *sub caelo tandem, quibus orbis in oris*
> *iactemur, doceas: ignari hominumque locorumque*
> *erramus, vento huc vastis et fluctibus acti.*[1]

Recent scholarship on displaced people has increasingly cast the ongoing refugee crisis in a scriptural light, trying to understand it not in its socio-economic context or in light of demographic or climate pressures, but in a more contemporary, allegorical way that seeks to derive theological wisdom from a symbolic interpretation. This methodology has been characteristic of the emerging field of avant-garde scholarship known as Patristics.

The emerging methodology has consisted in associating objectively observable events with unrelated — but theologically meaningful — events mentioned in canonical texts, and to draw conclusions by a process of poetic analogy justified by religious inspiration. That is the methodology this paper will also fol-

1 "We're basically wandering all over the place and have no fucking idea where we are, so if someone has any sort of clue what this whole trip is about, by all means let us know." Berno of Reichenau, trans., *Virgil for Millennials* (Reichenau: Reichenau Abbey Press, 1000).

low, in keeping with today's internationally accepted academic standards.

Patristrics, and by extension this paper, is indebted to the pioneering research of Philo of Alexandria — arguably the first researcher to demonstrate the methodological superiority of poetic allegorical interpretation over analytical rigor. Philo sums up his methodology in one sentence: "ὁ δὲ νοῦς ὁ διδασκόμενός ἐστιν, οὗ χάριν *αὐτὸν* ἀλλ᾽ οὐ τὴν αἴσθησιν προκέκληται."[2]

When it comes to the question of wandering and displacement, Philo's concern for the allegorical treatment of location is apparent in his interpretation of God's dialogue with Adam in the book of Genesis: "Τὸ δὲ 'ποῦ εἶ' πολλαχῶς ἔστιν ἀποδοῦναι· ἅπαξ μὲν οὐ τὸ πευστικόν, ἀλλὰ τὸ ἀποφαντικὸν τὸ ἴσον τῷ 'ἐν τόπῳ ὑπάρχεις' βαρυτονουμένου τοῦ 'ποὺ εἶ.'"[3] Which can be translated as follows: "The expression 'Where are you' can be rendered in several ways: firstly not as a question, but as a statement equivalent to 'You are located somewhere,' just by changing the [circumflex] accent [of the interrogative ποῦ] to a grave accent ποὺ, i.e., 'You are here.'"

Expanding on Philo's valuable insight that God addressed Adam in late Hellenistic Greek and that metaphysical answers can be found in spelling — and following the time-honored theological tradition of making up random shit based on unrelated words sounding kinda similar — it can be noted that ποῦ is also pronounced the same as "poux," meaning "lice" in French, whereby the miserable condition of our exile as wandering Ostrogoths — and indeed, the deplorable sanitary conditions of our forced march through the Balkans — is symbolized by the centrality of lice in our daily experience, which allegorically relates to the rhetorical centrality of the interrogative particle in Philo's interpretation of the scriptural text.

2 "The mind is capable of being taught: as a result of which [God] has called upon that [ability] and not upon the [physical] sense[s]." Philo Judaeus of Alexandria, "The Allegories of the Laws," Book III, Ch. 17, trans. and ed. Tis Kaoru Zamler-Carhart in *Making Shit Up in Late Antiquity* (Alexandria: Alexandria University Press, 22). Emphasis added.

3 Ibid., Book III, Ch. 52.

It can be further noted that ποῦ is pronounced the same as "poo," opening up several levels of interpretations of the statement "ποῦ εἶ" ranging from the political allegory "You are poo," which can refer to the Ostrogoths — and generally all displaced people — being treated like poo on the basis of an ontological conception of their lives having the value of excrement, to the eschatological "You are poo," taken to remind the Ostrogoths — and by metonymy, all humans — of the finiteness of their bodily incarnation.

On the political question of a possible ontological equivalency between displaced people and "poo," John of Damascus takes a dissenting view: "let us honor [those] who wandered around in sheepskins and goatskins, being poor, afflicted, tormented; they wandered in deserts and in mountains and in holes and caves of the earth. Let us carefully review the life of these men, and let us emulate their faith and love and hope and zeal and way of life, and endurance of sufferings and patience."[4]

On the other hand, Patristic scholarship does at times hint at an ontological conception of displaced people as "poo" by maintaining a sharp distinction between the tone used to discuss displacement as an object of theological inquiry, and the tone used to address displaced people directly. When indeed, at the turn of this century, our own Gothic theologians Sunnia and Fretela wrote to local religious commentator and translator Jerome of Stridon asking for his insights on a point of Hebrew translation, he responded, perhaps controversially: "Quis hoc crederet, ut barbara Getarum lingua Hebraicam quaereret veritatem, et ipsa Germania spiritus sancti eloquia scrutaretur?" or "Who would have believed it, that the barbarian tongue of the Getae would seek the truth of the Hebrew tongue, and that the Germanic world itself would research the eloquence of the Holy Spirit?"[5]

4 John of Damascus, "Exposition of the Orthodox Faith," Book IV, Ch. 15, ed. Tis Kaoru Zamler-Carhart in *Compendium of Future Theology* (Damascus: Syriac Future Press, 676).

5 Jerome of Stridon, "Epistola S. Hieronymi ad Sunniam et Fretelam," trans. Tis Kaoru Zamler-Carhart in *Sanctity and Mansplaining: Jerome, a Case Study* (Rome: Church Fathers Press LLC, 405).

Jerome does not specifically use the term "poo," but does appear surprised to see the Goths engaged in intellectual pursuits — while himself confusing the Goths with the non-Germanic Getae, who lived in the time of Herodotus a thousand years ago. He expands on his impression of contemporary Gothic intellectual life: "Dudum callosa tenendo capulum manus, et digiti tractandis sagittis aptiores, ad stylum calamumque mollescunt" or "It wasn't long since their thick-skinned hand was holding the hilt of a sword, and their fingers were more fit for handling arrows, and now they're softening to using a pen."[6]

Jerome's perspective on the experience of displaced people is possibly influenced by the recent fashion of "Desert Fathers," a new-age movement of middle-class urban tourists moving *en masse* to undeveloped areas for a limited time and on a voluntary basis, and growing their beards in search of personal fulfillment and spiritual experiences. Jerome himself spent some time in a touristy area of the Syrian Desert, benefitting from the region's dense support infrastructure for hermits and its long experience outfitting ascetic-themed safaris, and may have been under the impression that this constituted a first-person experience of displacement and exile.

The Patristic experience of displacement is, however, not always a result of tourism. Some authors have drawn significant theological insights from the discomfort caused by travel imposed upon them for professional reasons — even though there is still arguably a meaningful difference between mass homelessness and being assigned a job in an unexciting small town.

Just a few generations ago two social scientists of the so-called Cappadocian School, Gregory of Nazianza and Gregory of Nyssa, reflected on the theological implications of homelessness as a result of their own experience with housing instability, ushering in an era of contemporary scholarship where limited personal experience can be allegorically sublimated into theological findings. Gregory of Nazianza revealingly writes to his friend Gregory of Nyssa:

6 Ibid.

> Δυσχεραίνεις τῇ περιόδῳ, καὶ ἀστατεῖν σεαυτῷ φαίνῃ, καθάπερ τῶν ξύλων ἃ καθ᾽ ὑδάτων φέρεται. Μηδαμῶς, ὦ θαυμάσιε, μὴ οὕτως ἔχε. Τῶν μὲν γὰρ ἀκούσιος ἡ φορὰ, σοῦ δὲ κατὰ Θεὸν ἡ περίοδος, καὶ πάγιον τὸ τοὺς πολλοὺς εὖ ποιεῖν, κἂν εἰ μὴ τόπῳ πεπήγοις. Εἰ μὴ καὶ τὸν ἥλιον αἰτιῷτό τις, ὅτι περιτρέχει σπείρων τὴν ἀκτῖνα, καὶ πάντα ζωογονῶν ὅσα ἐπέρχεται· ἢ καὶ τῶν ἀστέρων τοὺς ἁπλανεῖς ἐπαινῶν, κακίζῃ τοῦς πλάνητας, ὧν καὶ τὸ πλάνον ἐναρμόνιον.[7]

Which we may translate as follows:

> so rn ur stressed out by all this traveling and u feel like ur all over the map like ok ur basically a piece of wood in a river or something #travelingsucks but dude chill out so like the wood is basically kinda whatever like its not like anyones in charge of it it just kinda does its thing right whereas imho ur totally getting pushed around by god ur going from place to place just being an awesome person to everyone no change there thats like ur thang even tho u cant seem to keep ur ass in one place its like if someone was like dude the sun sucks just because it keeps moving and shining on stuff and btw giving life to shit it hits no joke those rayz tho or like if someone was like ok stars r cool but planets r lame but yo their moves r lit af[8]

Recent Patristic scholarship has thus tended to applaud the virtue and fortitude of displaced wanderers, although indeed it has occasionally done so in a self-congratulatory manner, promoting that virtue as a badge of honor to be awarded to middle-class thrill-seekers who pursue that experience on a voluntary basis as part of a personal soul-searching quest, such as the "Desert Fathers."

7 Gregory of Nazianza, *My Letters to Various People* (Nazianza: Amalgamated Cappadocian Publishers, 379), letter 81.

8 Berno of Reichenau, *Patristics for Millennials* (Reichenau: Reichenau Abbey Press, 1000)

While the causes for displacement and exile are indeed manifold and range from tragedy to tourism, the moral position of those who are not wandering, and who may be in a position to accommodate the wanderers and extend hospitality to them — whether they choose to do so or not — also bears disserting upon.

The contemporary Milanese essayist Ambrose points out:

> Sine [benevolentia] usus hominum esse non potest ut peregrinanti monstrare viam, revocare errantem, deferre hospitium — non igitur mediocris virtus, de qua sibi plaudebat Job dicens: *foris autem non habitabat hospes, janua mea omni venienti patebat.*[9]

Which we may translate as:

> Mean people basically don't give a shit about showing you the way if you're lost, or letting you know if you're driving down the wrong street, or being hospitable. Hospitality is actually a big deal. iirc Job himself was like, if you show up at my door you can basically just walk in, I'm not gonna make a bro wait outside — and this is coming from a guy who's like a professional prophet I wanna point out.[10]

Which begs the question of whether the Greeks, who on the current geopolitical chessboard are in the position of the Biblical Job, have acted like him and extended their hospitality to the wandering Ostrogoths — and to displaced populations in general — or whether they have, to use Ambrose's own words, "made a bro wait outside" by promoting a policy of keeping these populations on the margins of the Empire, perhaps consciously or unconsciously motivated by an underlying excremental con-

9 Aurelius Ambrosius, *De Officiis Ministrorum* (Milan: Mondadori, 397), Book I, Ch. XXXII, 167.

10 Berno of Reichenau, *Patristics for Millennials.*

ception of displaced populations as ontologically equivalent to "poo."

We can offer a tentative response by returning to Virgil's *Aeneid* and engaging with the text in a manner consistent with contemporary standards of academic scholarship, i.e., not by undertaking an analysis of its contents or context, but by stuffing the canonical Virgilian text with an alliterative macaronic trope:

sometimes
sub caelo the sky is
not *tandem* even tented above them
camped *quibus* about
in the open *orbis*
borderless abyss
nor *in oris*
in a narrow sorry
iactemur yarn
of murmur hacked
as *doceas* dull talk
a gas
an air *ignari* gaunt and weary
humble *hominumque*
numb dumb
lack *locorumque* luck or room or way
so we *erramus*
slog aroam
vento huc wanting wandering
hookey hunting
vastis et was this
Job's hospitality or a
fluctibus acti sick fact of business
as usual?

XII

The End

step back or forward staying on your own	COLOR COLOR COLOR	*o stelliferi conditor orbis qui perpetuo*	NIXUS SOLIO NIXUS	*ὁ δὲ νοῦς ὁ διδασκόμ ενός ἐστιν*	IT WAS WINDY IT WAS COLD	*long ago when dragons roamed*	ERRA MUS
S U B CAELO TANDEM ERRAMUS	*a little girl a princess a princess a little girl*	AND FOOD ? DO YOU S E E K	*wholesome family friendly en vironement*	SOLIO NIXUS SOLIO	*the sky was low the air was gray*	STILL IN THE WINTER MORNING	*opening up several layers of in terpretation*
a hot black and white skin chessboard	SOME WHERE E L S E	*there is no greek nor goth slave or free or*	GRAY IS NEITHER HERE NOR THERE	*we were aware of the dark side of it*	A LITTLE DISCO MOMENT ?	*to even understand what poetry is*	GRAY IS NEITHER THIS NOR THAT
ON THE EDGE OF SOMETHING HARD	*a concept of verse as distinct from prose*	LIKE TOGETHE R ?	*male or female or male or female or*	WHAT ABOUT JERUSALEM	*θαυμάσιον τὸ θυμίαμα θεί ων λόγων*	INSINUA T I N G THUND ER	*facta viri mixtus dolor et stupor*
soothing sunshine soft safety silky sleep	SOMEWHERE ELSE	*quis hoc crederet ut barbara lingua*	TE DEUM LAUDAMUS	*those who hope in the lord will be strong*	UNREALISTIC NUMBER OF FRIDGE MAGNETS	*in vobis propheticus sermo est completus*	THE HILT OF A SWORD
THEY'RE BARBA RIANS	*a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose is*	PRIME REAL E S T A	*quaereret veritatem et eloquia scrutaretur*	ΠΟΥ EI	*they will soar in wings like eagles*	ΚΑΙ ΤΟ ΠΛΑΝΟ Ν ΕΝΑΡ ΜΟΝΙΟΝ	*ὀναχεραίνεις τῇ περιόδῳ καὶ ἀστατεῖν φαίνῃ*
a bit of dign ity and material security	SOME WHERE E L S E	*ἀπόθου ὦ μῆτερ τὴν λύπην ἀπόθου*	I THOUGHT O U R READERS MIGHT	*p u t everything in a food processor*	PEREGRI NANTI MONSTR ARE VIAM	*they will run and not grow weary*	F A L S E RELIEF FOR A MOMENT
Α Λ Λ ' ΑΡΙΣΤΕ Σ Υ Ν ΜΕΤΡΩ	*condos stale as looney manors*	LIKE A PETTING FARM	*like seriously bad news bad news bad news*	MAYBE THERE WAS NO GOOD REASON	*et propter divinitatem christi hac composui*	TANDEM ERRA MUS	*they will walk and not be tired*

HELL IS COMING TO TOWN

Chapter I

Miguel knew something unusual had entered his life when Roman mythology became a prominent item in his daily schedule.

On Wednesday morning at 7:30 am, the doorbell rang.

Miguel hurriedly rinsed the shaving cream off his face, put on a shirt while walking to the front door, and shouted: "Just a second, I'm coming, just a second."

He got to the door after stumbling into the kitchen trashcan and an unread newspaper. He looked through the peephole, and not recognizing the visitor, asked:

"Who is this?"

"Mercury," said the visitor.

"Oh, the Mercury News?"

"No, just Mercury."

"Are you trying to sell me a subscription? I already get the Chronicle, you know."

"No subscription. Just a message for you," said Mercury.

"But I told you… oh, never mind."

Miguel opened the door, half-shaven, barefoot, and wearing yesterday's undershirt, having no idea who was bothering him at 7:30 am, introducing himself as "Mercury."

On the threshold, standing on the floor mat, was a young man with black hair and a very square nose, wearing nothing but metallic shorts made of gold foil, a golden helmet, and winged sandals.

"Uhh, and you are…? Oh yes, Mercury, I suppose. And, well, right… I like your shoes, by the way," Miguel said, a bit surprised.

"I bring you a message, Miguel."

"OK, do I need to sign anywhere?"

"Hear my words, O Miguel, the advent of Pluto's time is drawing nigh."

"Right, but you can't just read it me like that, I need a copy."

Mercury then took a deep breath and recited in an even voice:

"Pluto rules
On spirits unrisen,
And the dead who languish in pain.
But in vain,
To the hellish prison
Would you confine these ghosts and ghouls.
— For hell is coming to town, Miguel."

He then walked away and disappeared.

"Well, OK, but I need a copy for my records," Miguel said, but too late since Mercury was already gone.

As an afterthought it occurred to him that this all sounded very inconvenient and poorly timed, because he had a lot of work to do, and this was his first day back to work after a pretty long break, and coming late into the office was just a terrible way to make a first impression. Miguel finished shaving, grabbed the

phone as he was looking for clean socks on his bedroom floor, and dialed the office's number.

"Ellison, Feingold, and Nehamas, can you hold please?" answered the nasal, high-pitched, droning voice of the front desk clerk.

"Yes, no, I mean, it's kind of urgent," protested Miguel at Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* blaring through the speaker.

"Ellison, Feingold, and Nehamas, how may I direct your call?" said the front desk clerk again, emphasizing each syllable as if the line had been written by Virgil and required a special kind of scansion.

"Yes, may I speak to Peter Courtney."

"One moment please," droned back the clerk.

"Tell him it's Miguel," he explained to Vivaldi's violins, but evidently to no avail.

"I'm sorry, sir, he's not answering his phone, would you like to leave him voice mail?"

"No, can you page him?"

"One moment please," said the droning voice sharply.

Miguel took a deep breath, sighed lengthily, and then refrained from saying anything more to Vivaldi.

"Ellison, Feingold, and Nehamas, how may I direct your call?" the droning voice came back as if the previous exchange had never taken place, but still rhythmically pounding the sentence into Latin poetry.

"I need to talk to Peter Courtney," said Miguel with the last bit of patience he could muster, having found one suitable sock and half-heartedly looking for another.

"May I ask who's calling?"

"This is Miguel."

"Aaaww, hi-i-i-i-i-i-i-i!" said the clerk, her voice shooting up to the top of its range then gliding back down a full octave before coming to rest on a fat, drawly "i" like a cow softly falling into a haystack.

"You're ba-a-a-ack!" she added with a similar vocal somersault.

"Yes, I'm back. Is this Jennie?"

"Yes. I'm so glad you're back! How are you? How was home? Did you see your relatives?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine. Everyone is fine. How are you? Listen, can I talk to Peter Courtney real quick?"

"Sure, let me connect you," Jennie said in an increasingly flat tone, her interest in Miguel's return having plateaued, then dissipated.

"Peter Courtney," said Peter Courtney.

"Hi Pete, this is Miguel."

"Hi. Welcome back. I mean, so, are you back yet?"

"Yes, I'm at home, I was just calling to let you know I'm running late. I had a visitor this morning and I got delayed. But I'm on my way now. I'll be in the office soon. Would you let Therese know I called so she doesn't kill me when I get there?"

"Alright. Don't worry about it. I'll see you in a bit. Oh, by the way, Comprodex got back to us on the Selvaco deal, and they want to structure it as a partnership, so Therese said that's going to be all yours, Miguel. I'll tell you about it when you get here."

"A partnership, huh? Well, we'll talk about that. See you soon," said Miguel before hanging up the phone.

Chapter II

Forty minutes of stop-and-go commute on a clogged and wet expressway failed to wake Miguel out of the stupor that sometimes lingers in those who have just returned from a journey. He let his mind be mesmerized by the perpetual motion of the windshield wipers, wishing he was still "back there," with his family, worlds away from the dreary morning traffic and the sullen trickeries of partnership tax.

He looked out the window at the rain pounding on the expressway, the words "back there" dribbling away into the gutter like an old guitar tune.

In the distance, gray clouds were rolling in over the city, soaking the pavement in muggy lukewarm milky rain. Bright orange taxis were rustling along the watery downtown streets like a colony of red ants frantically sniffing out a giant coconut. Further to the left, Miguel could make out the narrow beach in the distance, wrapped around the city like a soggy, popped-out hot air balloon decomposing in the stagnant sea.

Miguel parked behind the building near the doughnut shop, walked in through the back door to avoid making small talk with the front desk clerk Jennie, and climbed up the stairs to Peter Courtney's office. He poked his head in and waved at Peter, who responded with a restrained "hello" from behind a pile of papers.

Across Peter's desk, towering out of a sea of paper, stood Therese Feingold.

Her gray skirt was impeccably straight as usual. Her right hand was firmly clamping a chair down, as if to claim the ground under it. And while she was talking to Peter, her left hand pointed a pencil in the direction of his face, waving it back and forth with a prodding motion. She suddenly turned to Miguel.

"Good morning Miguel. Did you have a good break? We have work to do. Have a seat," she said in one shot without waiting for an answer.

Her sharp, steel-colored eyes suddenly reminded Miguel of this morning's razor, and for an instant he became terrified that he had forgotten to finish shaving. He ran his fingers over his face in a mechanical gesture, and detecting nothing but two smooth cheeks, snapped back into the conversation and blurted finally:

"Yes. Good morning. So, uhh, Comprodex got back to us, I hear. I've been in touch with Peter, you see. Well, a little bit, I mean. I figured I wanted to keep up with this whole deal, even while I was away, you know."

"Have a seat." She said again.

Miguel sat down and said nothing, half-expecting Therese to beat him.

"Mentoring is one of the great benefits of working with one of the firm's name partners," Miguel recited to himself silently, as if he had been instructed to repeat this mantra every time he felt his faith threatened.

"Look," said Therese in the tone of a second-grade teacher gently walking a student through a math exercise, "this deal is very similar to the PGS deal we did about three years ago. Do you remember that deal?" Miguel made a vague head motion that meant neither yes nor no. Peter subtly retreated behind the desk lamp to emphasize that the question was not directed at him but at Miguel.

"They want to structure the Selvaco deal as a partnership," she continued. "So we're going to take some aspects of the PGS deal and see how much of it we can adapt to this deal. You know partnerships better than almost anyone else in this office, Miguel, so I'd like you to look into that, OK?"

"OK," said Miguel blankly.

"I'll be in my office if you have any questions," said Therese as she stood up and left.

"She definitely knows her stuff," commented Miguel after Therese was gone.

"She sure does," echoed Peter.

Miguel walked back into the hallway with his damp raincoat and his briefcase. He stopped by the kitchen to make himself some coffee, then settled down at his desk and plunged himself into the Selvaco deal and the Tax Code.

He remained buried in the Tax Code until lunch break, at which point Peter suggested they get a bite to eat.

"Pete, let me ask you something," said Miguel between two mouthfuls of doughnut.

"What's up?"

"What do you know about Mercury?"

"Mercury? They're a division of the Ford Motor Company,"

"No, no, not that Mercury,"

"Then which one? The first planet from the sun? The liquid metallic element? The Roman messenger god?"

"Ah, that'sh it! It'sh the Roman messenger god. That makesh shenshe," exclaimed Miguel, this time with his mouth full of half-chewed doughnut.

"Would you care to finish your doughnut and then explain to me what we're talking about?"

"The reason I'm asking is because I got a visit from Mercury this morning."

"Is that so? I don't get visits from Roman gods. So what did Mercury have to say?"

"Something about hell. Actually I don't remember the exact words. He had a message for me but wouldn't let me keep a copy."

"Well now, I might just have another doughnut then."

After a full minute, Peter added: "But still, you should always keep a copy of this kind of stuff. Just for your records, you never know."

Chapter III

That night, as Miguel pulled up into his driveway, he noticed a faint red glow through the otherwise dark window of his living room and assumed hell had descended upon his house as announced.

He walked through the garage door, turned on the light in the hallway and looked into the living room. There he found a neatly burned circle between the sofa and the television. Small flames were still visible on the rim of the circle, while the inside had disappeared into the ground and all that remained of it was a seemingly bottomless, smoldering chasm.

Miguel put down his damp raincoat on a kitchen chair and his briefcase next to it, then reached for the fridge and poured himself a glass of chocolate milk. He then walked up to the edge of the chasm and shouted: "Hello, anyone there?"

Out of the hole emerged a tall, wrinkled old man with a large square nose and a bumpy, mostly bald scalp, except for a few irregular streaks of long white hair. One of his shoulders was covered in a draping toga-like cloth that wrapped around his waist and legs, while his other shoulder was bare and had ashen gray skin. The man's old, gray, sinewy hands projected a sort of harsh mineral vigor that reminded Miguel of medieval torture instruments he'd seen in a museum in Italy.

"Hey," said Miguel, without introducing himself or even extending his hand to the stranger.

"Should I ask you what you're doing in my living room?" he continued. The old man replied:

Quiver,
O Miguel,
I am Pluto,
The warden of hell,
The master and ruler
Of the underworld's monsters,
And I reign on the realm of pain.

"Do you always talk in italics? It's quite distracting I must say," noted Miguel, his head tilted sideways as if to better capture the conversation.

"Anyways. Will you be staying long?" Miguel added while sipping the last drops of chocolate milk out of his cup.

Rather than answer the question, Pluto disappeared in a puff of smoke. He left Miguel standing alone at the entrance of the living room, an empty cup in his hand.

"These Roman gods are a bit short on manners," Miguel muttered to himself. He put his cup into the dishwasher, added detergent and turned on the appliance. He then decided the day has been long enough without adding an hour of television. He brushed his teeth, went to bed, and promptly fell asleep.

When he woke up, dawn was barely cracking through his bedroom window. It took him a few minutes to remember the previous day's events. His first impulse out of bed was to walk into the living room, where he found that the burned circle had grown about a foot in diameter overnight. The circle was still very neat and regular, with a cleanly burned border. However by now it had engulfed the coffee table and was threatening to take in the television.

"Good morning!" Miguel shouted into the hole, though in reality he didn't wish anyone in that hole anything better than a hellish morning. "I hope you're having fun with my coffee table!"

He then walked into the kitchen to seek some solace in a morning dose of chocolate milk, but instead he found a young man rifling through his refrigerator.

"Well, excuse me, can I help you?" asked Miguel, trying to stay courteous with the intruder.

"Oh? Hi! Sorry," said the young man, suddenly turning around and shutting the refrigerator door behind himself.

The young man then stood up straighter, cracked his knuckles, picked up his lyre from the floor, flung around long hazel

brown hair behind his shoulders, readjusted his toga, and finally extended his hand towards Miguel.

"I'm Orpheus, by the way."

"And what are you doing looking in my fridge?" said Miguel without shaking Orpheus's hand.

"Oh? Your fridge? Why, I was looking for Eurydice, of course."

"In my fridge? There is no Eurydice in my fridge, I can tell you that much."

"Alas! Indeed, my beloved is nowhere to be found! Not in your fridge, you say… Not in anyone's fridge perhaps! Alas, her sweet eyes must be hidden in the darkest abodes of the underworld…"

Orpheus gradually replaced his Hollywood-perfect smile with an air of suave contrition. Then he let a drawn-out, slightly fake-sounding wail and plucked a few notes out of his lyre.

"Hey, I like that instrument," said Miguel.

"Oh yes… beautiful, isn't it?" Orpheus played on with more verve.

"Do you know salsa, merengue? Can you play any Latin tunes?"

"Latin tunes? Why, of course! Latin, Greek, Thracian, Phrygian tunes, you name it!" said Orpheus with a grin.

"Great. Let's touch base at some point. Hey, listen, I need to get to work right now, but we should definitely get together. Let me give you a card so you can get a hold of me," replied Miguel, having given up on the chocolate milk and now rummaging through his briefcase for a business card.

Miguel took leave of Orpheus after handing out a business card and scribbling his cell phone number on the back. He then shaved in half a minute, jumped into his car, and rushed into his morning commute on an empty stomach.

Chapter IV

Miguel eventually managed to extricate himself out of the expressway's dreadful traffic, having wasted precious face time away from the office chatting up mythological characters.

He parked illegally right in front of the main entrance, then ran in past the receptionist Jennie and rustled straight into the elevator, barely dodging her operatic "hi-i-i-i-i-i" as the Doppler effect distorted it into a wailing siren that started bouncing against the marble walls of the entrance hall. To his relief, the closing elevator doors cut the wailing out and gave him a few seconds of aseptic peace.

"Ding!" said the elevator's tinny bell as it opened onto the second floor.

Miguel took a deep breath, clinched his jaw into a professional morning smile, and marched out into the hallway.

At the end of that hallway stood Therese Feingold. This time she was wearing a fiery red skirt and looking into the darkness of a paralegal's office like a cat looks into a mouse hole. She was violently shaking her pointed index finger at the paralegal, projecting into the whole office the atmosphere of an impending magnetic storm. Her gold watch was rattling around her wrist in a rickety metallic tremble as if it were possessed.

Three feet behind her, cowering in the doorframe of another office, was Peter Courtney. He waved meekly as Miguel approached, and motioned him to keep a good distance.

"Where is it?" roared Therese furiously at the invisible paralegal.

"I don't know," said a weak voice in the small, dark office.

"What do you mean you don't know? I ask you one more time: WHERE IS IT?" she roared again.

"I don't know."

Therese opened her eyes wide, gleaming with anger. Then, just right there in front of Miguel and Peter, she raised her right

hand over her head and sent a blinding lightning bolt into the small, dark office. The paralegal disappeared in a cloud of black smoke amid a tremendous thunderclap, leaving behind only the scorched imprint of a person on the desk chair and two smoldering shoes on the ground.

Finally she turned around, made herself some coffee in the office kitchen, walked off into a meeting room without saying a word, and shut the door.

"Good morning Miguel," said Peter finally.

"Gee, looks like Therese is in a terrible mood today."

"Yup. Sure looks like it. You better make sure you don't start showing up late every day, or she'll send you to hell with a thunderbolt."

"Yeah… Well, I got hell at home already, so it wouldn't make so much difference, you know," said Miguel as he took off his damp raincoat and walked into his office.

He spent the morning immersed in the Tax Code, until lunchtime called for a trip to the doughnut store with Peter.

"So, Miguel, any more visits from Mercury?" asked Peter over the first doughnut.

"Nope. No Mercury this time. I had Pluto over last night, and then a young man named Orpheus this morning."

"Oh, you're getting some important visitors."

"I guess."

"And if I remember anything from high school, Orpheus was looking for Eurydice, wasn't he?"

"Yes, exactly. In my fridge."

"Right."

"Of course, she wasn't in my fridge."

"Of course not."

"But we hit it off anyways because he seems to be into Latin music."

"Oh good. But tell me, how are you dealing with supporting all those people in your house?" asked Peter.

"Well, I'm not supporting them. They're just kind of there."

"Come on, you said that guy was going through your fridge and eating your food."

"No, I didn't say he was eating my food. He was looking for his girlfriend."

"In your fridge?"

"That's right. In my fridge."

"Well still. It's got to be a burden. On the other hand, if they stay long enough, you can declare them as dependents and get a deduction."

"That's a good point. I'll ask them if they have any outside income."

"Yes, and don't forget to get their social security number, you need that on your tax return now."

"Oh, and they burned my coffee table."

"That sucks. How badly burned is it?"

"Oh, I mean, not like a burn mark or two. More like just totally vaporized into the bowels of inferno. Kind of like that paralegal, in fact."

"Wow. That's pretty brutal."

"No shit. But anyways, I guess I'll get a deduction for that, too. I wish they had burned something more expensive."

Chapter V

That night, Miguel trudged back home on the expressway only to find that most of the floor of his living room had been consumed by hellfire. The living room was now nothing more than a smoldering crater, except for the sofa, which still sat on firm ground. To his relief, Pluto had spared the television, though not the ground beneath it.

Miguel put down his damp raincoat on a chair in the kitchen, served himself a cup of chocolate milk, then came back to stand in the doorway of his living room, looking in.

Pluto was sitting on the sofa, watching football on television. The television set itself was somehow floating over a yawning chasm of fire and brimstone, but still faithfully broadcasting images of broad-shouldered men tossing a ball back and forth on a field, wearing togas.

"What team is this? I've never seen anything like it," asked Miguel.

"*Many are the questions that…*," started Pluto.

"Look," interrupted Miguel, "just cut it out with the italics or I'll turn the TV off and you can go back and watch football in hell."

"Fine." said Pluto.

"So? What's up with the togas?" asked Miguel.

"Well, togas are classier. They don't make you look like a walking refrigerator," explained Pluto, pointing at his own toga.

"I see. Clearly, you are a man of good taste. I suppose my living room also looks a lot classier with a burning hole in the middle of the floor," said Miguel as he walked back to the kitchen.

He opened the fridge, determined to find solace in a slice of cold pizza. But instead he found Orpheus in the fridge, just behind the bottle of chocolate milk, on the second shelf from the top. Orpheus was dragging behind him a really pale young lady. Her face had marble-still features and a diaphanous expression of sadness, as if she had just been woken up from the dead. He was

pulling her along like an inert sack of potatoes, making no effort to look at her, or even talk to her. Orpheus kept marching ahead across the refrigerator at a pace the young lady seemed hardly able to follow.

"Miguel! What a pleasure to see you again!" declared Orpheus in the cheerful tone of a débutant looking at himself in a mirror and rehearsing a phrase for a chic cocktail party.

"Yo, how's the fridge…," replied Miguel blankly, finding nothing better to ask and wishing Orpheus would just stay away from his kitchen.

"Look who I found!" exclaimed Orpheus triumphantly, but still without looking back at the young lady.

"Eurydice?"

"Eurydice, precisely. She was in your fridge after all!"

"Well, what do you know… I guess I haven't cleaned this fridge in a while."

Miguel closed the door of the refrigerator without waiting for Orpheus to make another comment. He walked away, having lost what little interest he ever had in Orpheus, Eurydice, and their bizarre refrigerated romance.

As he stepped into his bedroom, he turned on the light just in time to realize that he could walk no further. The ground of his bedroom had been replaced with a bottomless void, out of which crept flames, black fumaroles, and wafts of hot sulfurous vapor. The curtains had been burned so thoroughly that they were now reduced to a fine black lace that hung from the curtain rod like a collapsed cobweb. All that remained of the furniture was the alarm clock. A small, spiky, scaly demon was playfully dismantling it, tossing the electronics to the side and using the power cord to strangle another ugly monster who was defending itself amid yelps and groans.

"Well now, there's a pretty annoying pattern of things getting burned in this house," Miguel muttered to himself. He calmly closed the door back, realizing he would not sleep in his own bed that night.

The bathroom proved equally uninviting. The faucet had been taken over by two gargoyles. They were alternatively spitting hot and cold water with a hissing sound. Miguel pushed aside the shower curtain, but he found that his bathtub had apparently taken on a new functionality as the abode of the drowned.

The bottom had completely disappeared. Instead the tub was filled with a seemingly infinite amount of grayish-green murky water in which severed human heads were floating. Most of them had their mouths wide open and filled with water, and their eyes turned inwards. As far as Miguel could see into the bathtub, heads were gently bobbing around the green water, some draped in long hair like jellyfish with fine white tentacles, others hovering at random with noses and ears of various shapes and sizes steering them like rudders. All of them were exhaling a quiet aura of profound despair, with traces on each of their faces of agonizing pain that had finally been quelled by death.

Miguel gave up on the bathroom and made his way back to the living room, intent on having a chat with Pluto about the recent developments. But before he reached the living room the phone rang in the kitchen. He ran to catch the call and reached the phone in time to pick up just after the third ring.

"Hello? Who is this?" asked Miguel, a bit overwhelmed with the timing of the call.

"Mercury," said Mercury.

"Oh, you again," said Miguel without ceremony, feeling entitled to be rude after witnessing infernal monsters dismantling his alarm clock before his very eyes.

"I have a message for you, Miguel."

"Oh yeah? Well why don't you call back in a few minutes and leave it on my voice mail?" Miguel replied, satisfied that he had come up with a trick to keep a record of Mercury's message this time.

"Hear my words," continued Mercury as if Miguel had never mentioned calling back.

"Hell
Is coming to call,
Miguel,
Night
Will take over day,
Let fright
Spread
Till shadows to death
Have bled,"

Mercury announced, on the same tone as if he were saying "the number you have reached has been disconnected."

"That's not even the same rhyme pattern you used last time," noted Miguel. But it was too late. Mercury had already hung up.

Miguel repressed another disparaging thought on the manners of Roman gods. But then he realized he had forgotten to ask Mercury about his income and his social security number. Discouraged, he gave up on the chat with Pluto, and resigned himself to sleeping in the car.

He walked out onto the driveway with his briefcase, his damp raincoat, and a blanket. Finally he lay down on the back seat of the car, hoping that his neighbors wouldn't see him, or at least wouldn't infer some sort of sour end to a love affair from such unorthodox accommodation.

Chapter VI

Miguel woke up the following morning to the sound of a neighbor's lawnmower, followed by the combined smell of diesel and household trash that usually announced the arrival of the garbage collection truck. He peeked out of the blanket and stared blankly at the dashboard for a minute before realizing that he had slept in a car.

He decided to forsake breakfast and hygiene entirely so as to avoid any morning encounters with Pluto or his demons, and in fact made a point not to even go back into the house before driving off to work. In these strange modern times, he thought, even the fridge is not a safe place to store chocolate milk anymore, and who knows what other horrors he was going to find interspersed with his daily possessions.

He pulled out a piece of paper from his briefcase, and wrote a note to Pluto:

> Dear Mr. Pluto,
> I hope you have found accommodation in my house to suit your taste and that of your associates. Please kindly provide me with your social security number, as well as those of the various demons who will be habitually residing on these premises, so that I may declare you as dependents.
>
> Please advise immediately if you have other sources of US income, and whether you will be filing a separate US tax return. In addition, I will be checking if the US–Italy tax treaty applies to you. If any of your demons are engaged in activities in my house as a sole proprietorship or a partnership, please advise as soon as possible as to their country of incorporation. I would be grateful if you could provide the information requested herein by tonight.
> Sincerely,
> — Miguel

He then pinned the note on the front door, got back into the car, and drove off.

That morning turned out to be particularly rainy. The expressway felt like the road to hell. Water was pounding loudly onto the roof of the car like a madman frantically beating a metal drum, accompanied by a million arrows of rain shooting down diagonally all around him and impaling the pavement every second.

Miguel arrived at the office damp and groggy, but determined to bypass the receptionist's operatic greeting as well as any questions about his unkempt appearance.

He pushed open the front door and took a long, deep, breath as if to dive into a pool. Then he sprinted across the entrance hall as fast as he could. But before he could reach the elevator, Jennie saw him. She stood up from behind the front desk, unleashed a glowing smile across the hall, and shouted: "Oh, hi-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i!"

The "oh" started as a dark, almost mineral, tremble that made the marble walls vibrate as if to the rumble of a pipe organ. Then the pitch swelled up on the "hi," lingering a bit at conversation level, then abruptly shooting up the scale like a deafening vocal rocket launched into remote celestial octaves. The timbre of her voice gradually erupted out into a jarringly bright, rock-splitting siren. The vowel became fuller, louder, brasher, glowing red-hot as it escaped the solemn gravity of the marble hall and tore through the roof into the morning sky.

Upstairs on the third story the windows cracked into a million pieces and rained out onto the street below. The lights went off on the entire block. Thousands of miles away, a plane crashed into a field in Iowa, killing all passengers aboard and a cow on the ground.

The mirror in Peter Courtney's office shattered into hundreds of little shards and spread all over the floor just as Therese Feingold was walking through the door. For a brief moment, hundreds of small fiery images of Therese sent Peter a piercing glare from their jagged abode on the carpet.

Then the sound stopped. Jennie sat down, picked up the phone, and declared as if she were addressing the Roman Senate:

"Ellison, Feingold, and Nehamas, how may I direct your call?"

Midway through the phrase, another receptionist next to her picked up her phone and said the exact same thing in the exact same tone:

"Ellison, Feingold, and Nehamas, how may I direct your call?"

Then Jennie picked up another call and started again on the last beat:

"Ellison, Feingold, and Nehamas, how may I direct your call?"

And on it went with about six more calls:

Elllison, Feingold, and Nehamas, how may I direct your call?
Elllison, Feingold, and Nehamas, how may I…
Elllison, Feingold, and Nehamas…
Elllison, Feingold, and Nehamas, how may I direct your call?
Elllison, Feingold, and Nehamas, how may I…
Elllison, Feingold, and Nehamas…

Then Jennie switched back to the original caller and launched the second motif of her front desk fugue into the telephone, while the other receptionist continued with the opening theme:

One moment please,
Elllison, Feingold, and Nehamas, how may I direct your call?
One moment please,
Elllison, Feingold, and Nehamas…
One moment please,
Elllison, Feingold, and Nehamas, how may I…
One moment please,
Elllison, Feingold, and Nehamas…

Just as the receptionists' harmonic greetings were blossoming into a fugue of infernal proportions, Miguel entered the elevator. Its doors shut cleanly on hell's music, resolving its pitchless counterpoint in a dull thud.

Chapter VII

Miguel looked into Peter Courtney's office, but couldn't find him. Eventually he found both Peter and Therese holed up behind the glass doors of a meeting room. He walked in just in time to witness the end of a conference call with the Selvaco client. Only then did he notice the presence of Therese's secretary, taking notes by the phone.

"… So obviously we're a bit worried about that, but that's why we retained you guys," said the client's voice.

"Miguel is taking care of that. He's one of our best attorneys, so you can count on it getting done," said Therese confidently. Miguel looked at the wall and fumbled with a paperclip, pretending not to have heard anything.

"So we'll talk again tomorrow. Thanks," said the client before hanging up.

Therese then asked the secretary, without looking at her:

"So what was that registration number he gave us?"

"Let me see… I'm sorry, I don't think I have it."

"What? What do you mean you don't have it?" said Therese, raising her voice and now turning towards the secretary.

"I'm sorry, I'll look again, but I don't think I wrote it down."

"WHAT?" Therese growled.

Peter and Miguel glanced at each other, guessing that something bad was about to happen to the secretary. As a precaution they both lowered their head into a pile of papers and looked busy.

Therese then stood up. She waddled over towards the secretary with the slow, heavy gait of a large carnivorous reptile, her eyes flaring with anger and her mouth wide open. For a moment she looked down at the secretary from above, towering over her as if she were eight feet tall and the secretary were the size of a saltshaker. Then, in a snap, she pounced on the poor secretary and bit off her head with a furious roar, followed by the slightly muffled sound of a human skull being crushed. Therese gulped

down the secretary's head like candy, leaving just a slight sliver of red blood dribbling down her chin. Then she picked up her notes from the table and left the room.

The decapitated secretary writhed and twitched for a few moments, gushing large amounts of blood onto the conference table from her severed neck. Then she fell motionless with a thump like a juicy piece of steak dropped onto a kitchen floor tile.

"Therese eats too much protein," commented Peter Courtney after she was out of earshot.

"Speaking of which, I haven't had breakfast. Do you want to go out for a bite?" replied Miguel.

Lunch-hour doughnuts had a funny taste that day. Miguel found them too rich and salty and didn't eat much after all. Peter tried to engage the conversation on the treatment of cross-border interest income, but before Miguel said anything meaningful it was time to go back to the office.

Then, at 1:27 pm, night fell.

There was no sunset and no dusk. There were no stars either. Night fell in one instant, as it must fall inside a trashcan when someone drops a metal lid over it and walks away whistling.

Therese appeared in the doorframe of Miguel's office and announced that they were going to a client's office downtown with Peter, and that they should get ready to leave at once. Miguel pushed away the Tax Code and put on his raincoat. A few minutes later, all three were driving through the fresh darkness in Miguel's car, Therese in the front next to Miguel, and Peter in the back.

Birds were falling dead from the black sky all around them, frightened by the sudden nightfall. Traffic was unusually heavy for an early afternoon on a weekday, and further slowed down by darkness and falling dead birds. Therese was clutching her red leather purse, perhaps with unusual eagerness.

The streets were littered with thousands of dead birds, which made the pavement slippery. On larger open surfaces like highways and beaches, large flocks of migratory birds had fallen down in one block, leaving V-shaped patterns of small feathery cadavers on the ground.

Therese directed Miguel to enter a parking garage underneath a nondescript office tower. Miguel drove over two crows, collected his entrance ticket from a machine, and parked in an empty area filled by rows of concrete columns and lit by the faint orange glow of artificial lighting.

They went up the elevator into a wide marble corporate entrance hall, then up another elevator, until they were on a wide outdoor terrace overlooking the darkness of the city, looming beyond a low guardrail with a few dead potted geraniums. Opposite the guardrail was a broken floodlight, and next to it a small, weak orange emergency lamp, the only source of light on the terrace. On the sides were doors to various utility and janitorial rooms, whose labels were illegible in the low orange light.

"This is a weird office building," Miguel said finally.

"Yes, and their elevator smelled funny, didn't it?" added Peter.

"Who is this client, Therese, if you don't mind telling us?" asked Miguel.

"He will be here in a minute," said Therese without looking at Miguel, and still clutching her red leather purse.

"By the way, did you save that parking ticket?" Peter asked in a lower voice, turning to Miguel.

"Let me check," replied Miguel as he searched his pockets.

First Intermission

Before the conversation had come to any kind of natural juncture, Peter Courtney abruptly excused himself, walked into a small dark room on the left side of the terrace, and never came back.

Miguel waited a while, then undertook to look for him, but to no avail. He opened the door of the small dark room and looked everywhere: on every wall, under the mat, on the floor, on the ceiling. He looked with the lights on, with the lights off. But Peter Courtney had just disappeared and was nowhere to be found.

In fact to this day, even though I wrote this story myself, I have no idea what happened to him.

Therese then pulled out a maroon velvet armchair from her red leather purse, placed it comfortably in the middle of the terrace, and sat on it. She also pulled out an ample white robe fit for the stage of a Roman amphitheater, and put it on. Miguel was going to suggest she meet all the mythological characters that were occupying his house. But he never got around to offering his suggestion because Therese stood up and walked out of the story's plot. She climbed up on a little pedestal on the side of the main action, and declared that she was now part of the chorus.

Then Jennie the receptionist appeared from behind, dressed in a similar robe and joined Therese on the chorus pedestal. Then Orpheus and Eurydice joined, too, both also dressed in long white robes.

An Act

MIGUEL: Alas! The sun has gone and so have my companions.
Wretched gods, if you hear my words,
Descend from heavens high,
Explain this disturbance
And clean up the dead birds
That unjustly impede traffic!
CHORUS: The name of the gods is not called in vain.
Tremble with awe, O Miguel,
For Pluto, the warden of the dead,
Will appear before you.

(The wind picks up.)

MIGUEL: Lo, a breeze whisks the air around me!
Whirlwinds stir the sky!
The dead birds are flying in swirls and eddies,
Leaves and trashcan lids their companions in flight!
Yea, I smell the stale reek of Pluto's realm.
Come, appear, O hellish tenant,
And account before me for my coffee table!
CHORUS: Woe! Woe! Pluto is conjured up!

(Pluto appears amidst a whirlwind.)

PLUTO: I got your note, Miguel.
MIGUEL: And?
PLUTO: You have been chosen. Many more trials await you.
CHORUS: Woe! Woe! He is the chosen one! Hell is upon him!

(The wind dies down. Chorus steps back.)

PLUTO: I have come to you, consider it luck.
MIGUEL: It's not: so far as a tenant you suck.
PLUTO: To your humble house my demons now flock.

MIGUEL: And gleefully shatter my poor alarm clock.
PLUTO: But our aim is not to wreak destruction.
MIGUEL: Then is there hope for a tax deduction?
PLUTO: Bounty will come to hell's abode-to-be.
MIGUEL *(to himself)*: Could I claim it under 62(b)?
PLUTO: Riches will pay back your warmth and your vigor.
MIGUEL *(to Pluto)*: But of this burden must I bear the rigor?
PLUTO: What rigor borne, what has been disrupted?
MIGUEL: My home is torn, my bathtub corrupted!
PLUTO: Great things await you, a much better deal.
MIGUEL: Which I'm not keen, though, for you to reveal.
PLUTO: May I not int'rest you in things to come?
MIGUEL: I'm fine with my current level of income.
PLUTO: Isn't tax law the hearth of your abode?
MIGUEL: Nothing exists if it's not in the Code.
PLUTO: We'll bring you a client, a very good one.
MIGUEL: I quite dislike how this story gets spun.
PLUTO: Then why seek a moral to this fable?
MIGUEL: Hell, cause you burned off my coffee table.
PLUTO *(matter-of-factly)*: Hey do you by chance have a copy of the Tax Code with you?
MIGUEL: But of course.

(Miguel pulls a copy the Tax Code out of his shirt pocket. Thunder in the distance.)

CHORUS: Woe! Woe!
The Tax Code has appeared in the hands of a mortal!
The gods tremble on their throne,
The balance of heavens tilts askew
And the universe roils in disarray!
MIGUEL *(to the chorus)*: Will you be quiet already?
PLUTO: Let the chorus speak.
The chorus cares and keeps the score
Of characters scared or scarred or bored
Of discord to bear and concord in store
It holds this storyline steady,

It keeps the lines of death and life,
It ticks the tax and tolls the tithe,
It clocks the lines till plot is rife,
That shifts your fate for bleak and blithe.
So beware, Miguel,
Of the chorus from hell.

Second Intermission

About the time that night should have fallen — if it had not already been dark for six hours — Miguel abandoned Pluto to his infernal rantings and drove home.

Miguel reckoned he would finally find his house free of mythological occupants, especially since Pluto did not seem to have a car and was stranded downtown in a creepy office building.

In retrospect, Miguel's assumption turned out to be sensible, though I later pointed out to him that I could just as easily have put Pluto both downtown and at his house at the same time, since many elements in this story had not followed traditional logic, and Roman gods can do odd things anyways.

Chapter VIII

Miguel arrived at his house and parked in the driveway amid a few dead birds. They seemed shiny and black under the streetlight's faint orange glow. A clean, perfectly straight row of identical dead birds strewn across his front lawn alerted to him to the fact that a phone wire ran over the lawn, which he had never noticed before.

There was also a neat pile of dead sparrows beneath the cherry tree in the neighbor's lawn, laid out in the shape of the tree with branches coming out of a central spoke. The pattern repeated itself everywhere on the street: just a dead bird or two at the foot of mailboxes, bigger piles of dead birds under various trees, and narrow straight lines of bird cadavers beneath roof gutters and hung wires.

All around the city, midday's sudden nightfall had cast noon-crisp shadows made of dead birds rather than a dearth of light. The lifeless little creatures had tumbled straight down to the ground from trees, power lines, roofs, awnings, and fences, leaving on the ground the outline of familiar urban shapes.

Already, under every highway overpass, harrowed drivers had rolled countless times over the feathery shadows like a collective painter retouching an outline, flattening it, smoothing it out, squeezing blood out of the shadow and smearing it across the pavement like crayon. Hours later, some of that crayon had coagulated, lost its sheen, and caked on the pavement into the rich, dark, wine red of a Renaissance still life. Soon, the city's shadows would begin to smell.

Meanwhile Miguel found his house unlocked. He pushed the front door open, but found quite a different place from the home he remembered.

Peter Courtney and Pluto were comfortably seated on maroon velvet armchairs in the middle of some sort of large and poorly lit hall. Both of them were smoking thick cigars and occasionally tapping ash off the end into a veined marble ashtray.

Miguel recognized his good old coffee table beneath the ashtray. His heart warmed at the thought that things were finally getting back to normal. But then he also noticed that there was no floor under his coffee table or under the velvet armchairs, and that everything in the room appeared to be levitating over a bottomless chasm. There were also no walls anywhere. The hall in front of him extended indefinitely in every direction, except for the front door, which was the only firm boundary. He walked in.

Glancing back behind himself across the threshold, he could still see the streetlight's faint orange glow on the outside of the house, with his driveway and his mailbox out on the front lawn amid the dead birds. But from inside the house the hall seemed to surround the front door on all sides, and in fact to stretch on forever into the space behind it, which should have been outside the house.

Miguel became overwhelmed by a dreadful intuition: most likely, no income tax deductions were available for home improvements that result in geometrically impossible floor plans. He repressed a sigh of frustration, stepped forward, and shut the door behind him.

"Look Miguel, there's your coffee table again. Things are getting back to normal, you see!" Peter said cheerfully, leaning over his floating armchair to tap some ash off the end of his cigar. Miguel frowned.

"I don't mean to be the party-pooper here, but you know I don't like it when people smoke in my house," said Miguel with a tone of faint reprobation, as if to someone who is about to be forgiven for a minor faux pas.

Peter shrugged, tapped some ash off the end of his cigar into the marble ashtray and crossed his legs.

"We're expecting a visitor," said Pluto.

"We don't have enough chairs though," said Miguel.

"Will you have a cigar?" offered Pluto.

"I suppose I might as well…," groaned Miguel, reaching forward towards the empty coffee table and half-expecting a cigar box to magically pop out of the wood.

Before Miguel had time to reach for a cigar, or even to figure out what exactly he was standing on, the doorbell rang. He turned around, and for a moment just looked blankly at the front door, which was standing by itself, surrounded on all sides by a dimly lit boundless void permeated by a vague smell of cigar. Then he opened the door.

Out on the threshold, standing in the streetlight's faint orange glow, was a young man with glossy hair the color of a dead bird's plumage, and a particularly square nose. He was wearing nothing else than metallic shorts and a metallic helmet that seemed made of tin foil, but appeared golden in the orange light.

Mercury bent over to pluck out a bloody feather that had become stuck in his winged sandals, then caught a deep breath to deliver his message with the best possible diction.

"Mercury! What a pleasant surprise!" interrupted Miguel. "Let me guess: you have a message for me, it's totally cryptic, and I can't keep a copy anyhow? Is that right?"

"I bring a message to you, Miguel," said Mercury in a flat, even voice.

"Great! Now do I get a prize for guessing right? Like my own coffee table perhaps?" Miguel went on without letting Mercury talk.

Mercury pulled a silver platter out of thin air and handed it to Miguel with a telegram on it. Then he left without saying another word.

"A telegram? Alright, very stylish. But you could still improve on the customer service!" Miguel barked at Mercury while unfolding the paper and bringing it up to his eyes.

"What? And it's in italics? You can't send a telegram in italics! You damn Roman gods and your italics!" Miguel shouted at the driveway. Mercury of course had already disappeared.

Miguel glanced once more at the telegram, but then decided he had had enough of Mercury's poor social skills. He crumpled up the piece of paper and stuffed it in his pocket without reading it.

"So what's in the telegram?" asked Peter Courtney.

"Hell if I know," said Miguel.

"Well, why don't you read it?" asked Peter again.

"I don't really care what it says. I'll read it later if I'm bored."

A few seconds later, the doorbell rang again. "Am I ever going to get to sit down?" said Miguel, even though there was nowhere for him to sit anyway.

"I'll get it," offered Peter Courtney.

"Thank you."

Peter extricated himself from the comfort of his velvet armchair with a deliberate humph and walked up to the door, which he opened without asking who it was. On the threshold was a short, squat, middle-aged man wearing green leather pants and a feathered hat, carrying a lumpy suede bag, and peering at Peter through thick irregular glasses.

"Ha, love those glasses! I don't think they've been fashionable in the last six hundred years though, seriously," said Peter aloud as if the man could not hear his comments.

"And you are…?" asked the visitor in a thick German accent.

"Well maybe I should ask you who you are, since you're the one knocking at the door," Peter pointed out.

"Dr. Faust," he said, raising just his left eyebrow without extending his hand to greet Peter.

Peter paused for a second, then went on:

"Dr. Faust? Like Faust as in 'Faust,' you mean?"

"Himself," confirmed Dr. Faust.

"I'm sorry, but I don't think you're in this story."

"What? How do you know?" snapped Dr. Faust, his chin slightly prodding forward.

"Well, this is a story about…"

"Is this your house?" interrupted Dr. Faust curtly.

"No, I mean… why do you ask?"

"Whose house is this? I want to talk to the master of the house."

Peter walked back to his armchair and motioned Miguel to take over: "Gee, you think Mercury is rude. Try this guy." Peter then plopped back into the comfort of the maroon velvet armchair and picked up his cigar off the edge of the ashtray.

Miguel replaced Peter Courtney at the front door and greeted the visitor with the despondency of someone who has just been smoking cigars in a boundless hall with the Roman god of the underworld.

"So, can I help you?" he asked weakly.

"I have come… for the deal," uttered Dr. Faust in a breathy whisper, this time raising both of his eyebrows.

"Ah-ha. Right. So what's the deal?" replied Miguel without any interest in the answer. He was at least vaguely relieved that the visitor was not Orpheus.

"I have brought… the goods," he continued, shaking the suede bag to attract Miguel's attention.

"You know, look, just come in and talk to Pluto. He's weird, you're weird, you're both dressed funny, you'll get along," Miguel concluded, as he ushered Dr. Faust into his house.

Chapter IX

Pluto tightened his toga around his waist, rotated his armchair ninety degrees, and leaned over to hear what Dr. Faust had to say. The two conversed at half-voice for about ten minutes, leaving Miguel and Peter Courtney in the dark as to the topic of their discussion.

Once in a while Miguel looked around himself mechanically to see if he could find his briefcase. Occasionally he also glanced aside at his coffee table to make sure it was not getting burn marks from the cigars. Finally Pluto turned back around and motioned Miguel to approach.

"May I consult you?" asked Pluto.

"Well, why not," replied Miguel

"But would it be covered by attorney–client privilege?" Pluto asked again.

"I suppose it would, though I can't see why you would care. But anyway, what do you want to tell me?"

Pluto then leaned over and whispered in Miguel's ear for a minute or two.

Peter Courtney now was alone cut off from the conversation. He found a distraction inhaling cigar smoke and puffing out little clouds of it, not just in the shape of circles, but also of triangles, heptahedra, cones, rhombs, n-dimensional hypercubes, toric polyhedra, and various fractal patterns.

Dr. Faust was still out of earshot behind Pluto's armchair, clutching his suede bag, giving Peter angry looks and pointing his chin at him once in a while. Peter ignored him.

Eventually Miguel asked Pluto:

"Do you mind if I ask Peter for his opinion?"

"Go ahead," said Pluto.

Miguel finally turned back to Peter and explained the situation to him.

"So this gentleman, Dr. Faust, is German," explained Miguel.

"Yes, I know," said Peter.

"Oh he told you? Anyway, get this: he wants to sell his soul," added Miguel.

"I know," said Peter again.

"How do you know?"

"Because that's the story of Faust. Haven't you read Goethe? Anyways, that's why I told him he wasn't part of this story. This has nothing to do with our plot."

"That's what I think, too, but Pluto thinks we can do a deal," added Miguel.

"What deal? I don't think we should do deals. That guy is just not part of this story. We can't just change the plot because characters start showing up from other stories. Look, Miguel: he's some German dude with a soul for sale, whereas this is a story about…"

"I know, but we have to do what the client says," interrupted Miguel.

Peter winced, tilted his head to the right, then to the left, and just said:

"I suppose."

Peter tapped some ash off the end of his cigar, then asked in a lower voice:

"So is that his soul in that little suede bag he's holding?"

"Yes."

"Gee, my soul is bigger than that."

"Anyways, that's not what we were talking about."

"So what's the deal?" asked Peter more seriously.

"Pluto says he's never done this kind of transaction before. But he claims he's heard of others in his industry who have done things like this in the past," explained Miguel.

"Alright, so?"

"So he thinks this is a great opportunity to enter a new market."

"Well he's wrong," Peter declared decisively. "I'm sorry, but Roman gods don't enter new markets. Roman gods are not in the business of buying souls. In fact, I'm not aware that Roman

gods are in any business at all, be it this one or another," Peter pointed out.

"Look, Therese would worship us if we brought this kind of client to the firm," added Miguel with a glow in his eyes.

"Therese stepped out of the story a while ago."

"So we'll find her. You also stepped out of the plot a while back. And look, here I am talking to you."

"That's right, in a boundless hall with a geometrically impossible shape. Is that a good sign?"

"Well, I think this is a serious career opportunity. Shall we drive them to the office or not?" concluded Miguel, skirting the points raised by Peter.

Peter rolled his eyes, sighed and finally said:

"Alright, sure."

Miguel winked at Pluto, then announced: "Gentlemen, we will be leaving for the offices of Ellison, Feingold, and Nehamas in a few minutes. Please gather your belongings and get ready for departure."

A few minutes later Miguel, Peter, Pluto, and Dr. Faust walked out onto the driveway. Miguel briefly considered locking the door. Then he decided that anyone was welcome to come in and steal whatever they wanted, since now it all smelled of tobacco. Meanwhile, the rest of the passengers got into Miguel's car.

The car would not start. Flapping and barking noises could be heard coming from the engine compartment.

"If you will excuse me for a second," Miguel said with a little bit of embarrassment. He popped the hood open to check on the engine. Peter Courtney followed him. Under the hood was a pair of two-headed winged dogs strapped to the axle with various chains, belts, and other contraptions. The battery was still in place, as was the windshield washer fluid tank.

"I'm pretty sure this voids the warranty," commented Miguel.

"The battery seems in good shape, though, it should have no problem starting," said Peter.

Upon closer inspection, they found that the new engine had leaked dog urine on the driveway, and closed the hood after it

started growling and showing its teeth. In the end the car did run just fine and successfully carried its passengers to the offices of Ellison, Feingold, and Nehamas. Miguel even remarked that it had more low-end torque than before, although it smelled quite different.

By the time Miguel had reached the end of the street he realized that smell was not coming from the canine engine, but from the dead birds decomposing.

As long as he drove in the middle of the street it was just a waft, a distant suspicion of a faraway rot. But when he got closer to mailboxes and trees, the smell peaked into something more pungent. It seemed to grip houses and gardens like an evil overgrown vine choking a rosebush. The smell held on and did not let go until the car crossed an intersection and threw itself into the grip of another block. Then the stench picked up again.

On the highway large groups of birds had fallen down from overpasses. Regular lines of rotten bird cadavers jolted the passengers every time they drove over a clump. The rear wheels spun a little as they lost traction on the bloody feathers. Seconds later the odor of death caught up with the car, stuck for while, and then faded down until the next overpass.

As they approached the denser downtown area the smell gradually built up until it reached infernal proportions. Overpasses followed one another more rapidly until the final offramp launched the car into the foul atmosphere of downtown. A brutal onslaught of thick, gooey putrid air invaded the car and stuck to passengers' hair, clothes, and skin. Outside, the pavement shone bright under the maroon patina of feathers, caked blood, burst guts leaking half-digested worms, cracked beaks and bones, and bird shit, all smeared together on the roads and lit up by the orange glow of the streetlights.

Skyscrapers now towered over black expanses of dead birds like volcanic islands emerging from an ocean of death. The buildings' windows exuded an unending stream of rot across their cadaver-littered sills, as if every monster in inferno had

taken a deep breath of brimstone and now exhaled all the stench of the universe through a million nostrils.

Chapter X

Miguel parked diagonally over a pile of birds and announced that they had arrived at the law offices of Ellison, Feingold, and Nehamas. They walked into the hall. It seemed much bigger than Miguel remembered it. It was very brightly lit, suggesting the ambiance of a supermarket, except for the four imposing marble pillars at each corner. On the wall opposite the front desk was a huge fresco depicting nine mythological scenes, which Miguel had never really noticed before. All the scenes featured Therese Feingold.

At the far end of the hall, by the elevator, was the first scene, depicting Therese's childhood in ancient Italy and the Roman she-wolf that raised her to become the founder of Ellison, Feingold, and Nehamas. The second scene showed the mythological foundation of the law firm. Therese Feingold was represented holding a book in one hand and a large sword in the other hand, battling the Titans, crushing serpents underfoot, and crossing rivers of fire.

"Is that Therese?" asked Peter.

"Looks like her," replied Miguel.

"Wow, I didn't know she was so famous!"

"Really? She never told you about battling the Titans at the dawn of the world?" asked Miguel.

"No. Wow. She told you?"

"Dude, I was kidding. How likely is it that I would have a conversation with Therese about her personal life?"

"I guess you're right," Peter admitted.

"So how do we find her now?" Miguel asked.

"Who?"

"Therese, that's who we're looking for, isn't it?"

"Well she's right there on the fresco," said Peter pointing at the wall.

"Right. On the fresco. Of course," Miguel said, raising his eyebrows.

"I suppose we could find a ladder and help her down."

A few minutes later, Miguel and Peter had located a stepladder in a janitorial closet. They carried it past Dr. Faust, who gave them both an angry look and pointed his chin at them while clutching his suede purse.

"Yeah, cut the attitude, we know what's in that bag," said Peter to Dr. Faust while helping Miguel set up the stepladder underneath the second scene of the fresco. Miguel then climbed up to Therese's height, tapped her shoulder lightly and said:

"Therese, if you would please join us down here. I think we have a very good client for the firm."

Therese put down her book and her sword at the bottom of the frame and popped out of the fresco. She walked down the stepladder onto the marble floor until she stood in front of Pluto.

"Therese Feingold," she said firmly, extending her hand for Pluto to shake, and at the same time conjuring up a professional smile from her large repertoire of cocktail party facial expressions.

"Delighted," responded Pluto with no emotion.

"I see that you are a connoisseur of italics. I must say I'm quite a fan myself," said Therese with a different smile, tilting her head to the side to better follow the conversation in italics.

Miguel, Peter, and Dr. Faust also tilted their heads to the side, but straightened it back up as soon as Therese looked their way, so as not to appear like they were eavesdropping.

"Shall we adjourn to my office and discuss the subject of your visit?" suggested Therese, hoping to flatter the new client by demonstrating her own enthusiasm for italics.

"Please," replied Pluto tersely.

"Mr. Faust, if you would please wait for us? We will return promptly to hold further talks with you. In the meantime, may I suggest you contact counsel if you have not already done so?" Therese added, smiling at Dr. Faust this time, but with a much lower-quality smile.

Therese and Pluto then walked off towards the elevator, leaving Miguel, Peter, and Dr. Faust standing like marble columns in the middle of the huge entrance hall.

"Alright. It's over. So let's go eat," said Miguel.

"Shall we invite Faust along?" asked Peter aloud, as if Dr. Faust could not hear him.

"Nope," replied Miguel, as Dr. Faust glanced at him sideways, clutching his suede bag and angrily pointing his chin at them.

"Isn't it kind of rude to leave him here?" Peter asked, again as if Dr. Faust couldn't hear him.

"He's not even a part of this story. You said so yourself," Miguel argued.

"I guess, but we can't just leave him here,"

"Look Peter, you were the one who pointed that out in the first place. So enough is enough. I'm not going to dinner with a guy who's not a part of this story. He should feel lucky that we're even talking to him at all. Like you said yourself, he's this German dude with a soul for sale, and this is a story about…"

"Alright, alright, I get it. Let's go already. Pizza OK?" interrupted Peter.

"You got it," concluded Miguel as he and Peter walked off towards the front door.

"Our firm has considerable expertise with this type of transaction," Miguel overheard Therese say to Pluto as the two were walking away towards the elevator.

"We have years of experience dealing with non-traditional corporate structures like yours,"

"Naturally we are equipped to handle transactions involving international parties and multiple legal systems,"

"And of course you can count on the utmost confidentiality and professionalism from our attorneys,"

Miguel heard Therese one last time as he was walking out the door, just before her voice vanished in the distant elevator. Dr. Faust was left standing alone in the middle of the silent hall.

Epilogue

A few months later I asked Miguel: "Anyways, what was in that telegram I made Mercury deliver to you?"

"Actually I don't remember, I threw it away," replied Miguel.

"I guess we'll never know."

"I guess not."

OXNARD PLYMOUTH

I

CHORUS: A man is sitting on the sidewalk.
He is wearing a T-shirt with sunflowers on it.
Who is he? What is he thinking?

Jeremy sat on the sidewalk and started thinking of distant lands, sweltering swamps, crocodiles, yellow, and purple birds. The tropics… Africa perhaps… Somewhere really far and really hot, with fist-sized insects.

Boy, was it hot in Oxnard. The sunflowers on his shirt were starting to wilt in the heat. "Maybe I should go back inside and get something to drink," Jeremy thought.

He stood up briskly, and for a few seconds an overwhelming head rush transported him to the swamps of Africa. Guessing his way through a melee of colorful birds and exotic insects, he walked into the dealership, grabbed a coke, and stood for a moment in the cool of the air-conditioned showroom.

CHORUS: Cool is the showroom, and cool is the coke.
May they refresh him, and the birds disperse,
So that the sunflowers may not wilt!

The birds and the insects cleared up and gradually turned into glossy new cars with gas mileage stickers. He walked back out to the gate and leaned against a pole. He opened the can with an august gesture, expecting a majestic and instantly refreshing *psshhht!* A *psshhht!* just like in TV commercials, unleashing floods of ice-cold soda bursting around him in slow motion, with attractive young people smiling their heads apart out of the sheer bliss of advertising a carbonated beverage.

But the *psshhht!* didn't happen at all. Instead, the can unwillingly creaked open and delivered to his lips a vaguely cool sparkly liquid.

CHORUS: Psshhht! Be soothed, Jeremy,
Soothed and cooled,
Cooled and refreshed,
For as the can creaks,
Carbonated bliss flows all around you!

He leaned back and started imagining that he felt better. Above him, a big red and white welcome sign read:

"Oxnard Plymouth — Our Strength Is Our Commitment To Your Satisfaction."

CHORUS: Our satisfaction is your commitment,
Our commitment is capital,
Our capital is strong! Yes, our capital is strong,
And strong is our satisfaction.
Welcome, noble customer,
Welcome to Oxnard Plymouth!

One of the sunflowers died of heat exhaustion and fell off Jeremy's shirt onto the sidewalk.

CHORUS: Thus ends the life of a flower.
May it rest in the scorching peace of the sidewalk.

A few feet behind Jeremy was a row of quality pre-owned cars, each of which was exactly the one every customer had been looking for. Those were not just average used cars: they all had passed the dealership's thorough 37-point inspection, an experience that few vehicles could relate to.

CHORUS: Poor, lonely, pre-owned cars!
Their life has been pain, their life has been suffering.
Now their fate is to sit in the sun, patiently,
And hope that a customer will soon engage
With them, weathered wretches,
In a life-long partnership.
For them, love at first sight is a long-forgotten ideal,
At best they now hope for respect and shelter,
Like disillusioned whores lined up
In a low-budget brothel.

Across the driveway a customer was looking at a new Plymouth Malaga Custom Sedan. A sticker in the back left window explained that the Malaga was a full-size expression of Plymouth value. The car itself was glued to the back of the sticker to support that claim. The gas mileage sticker promised frequent acquaintance with pumps.

CHORUS: The customer is a mature buyer,
Trailed by a wife and a belly.
Which is respectable? And which is decorative?

He had already opened the driver's door and was now in the midst of a sensual experience, caressing the inside upholstery carved out of solid plastic wood. His wife, respectful of her husband's sure-footed taste in matters of fake wood upholstery, seemed resigned to be supplanted by a Plymouth as the main object of desire in his aging harem. She turned away and looked up at the plastic banner above the car that claimed: "The New Plymouth Malaga: The Affordable American Legend." It was unclear whether the term "legend" meant that the model had been

around forever, or whether it acknowledged something fictional about the whole claim.

CHORUS: In either case, A man who has successfully
Carried such a belly through the years
Is entitled to feel patriotic,
Especially if that is the affordable thing to do.

Jeremy looked at the Malaga again. "That car looks like a cereal box tilted on its side," he thought. He sipped up the last drops of coke, tossed the can in a graceful swing, and began to mosey on down to the Malaga stand.

As he came closer to the customer, he licked his lips, then turned all his facial muscles on "twitch" mode to reset their expression. The twitch was properly executed. It cleared the default "gonna-catch-that-fat-fish" appearance and replaced it with a more amenable one. Just in time for contact, he retrieved the "hi-I'm-Jerry-how-may-I-help-you?" look from his batch of stored expressions, installed it on his face, and successfully docked onto the customer.

CHORUS: Twitch, Jeremy, twitch,
And dock onto the customer,
And sell him a car!
But beware, for he's a mature buyer!

"Hi, I'm Jerry, how may I help you?" Jeremy asked the man cheerfully.

Touched by such a spontaneous display of friendliness, the customer searched for an appropriate response but did not find one exactly adapted to that situation. In the absence of a specific protocol, his facial expression defaulted to the forty-year college reunion "I-have-no-idea-who-you-are-but-it's-nice-to-see-you-again" smile.

"Hi Jerry, I'm Randall," he chanced.

"Nice meeting you, Randall. So you're looking at a Malaga, huh?"

CHORUS: It's working! The college reunion smile
Has proved highly reusable.
And now Jeremy and his customer
Are obviously going to become good friends,
And all that would never have been possible
Without the Plymouth Malaga,
The affordable American legend!

In the meantime, Randall's wife was exploring the realm of her new freedom, the Malaga's generously sized passenger seat. A joyful yellow label on the glove compartment informed her that "airbags can severely injure or kill young children sitting in the front seat." Her curiosity then took her to the visor, and there she discovered a previously hidden mirror.

"Oh, cool!" she thought, secretly using the word "cool" like younger people do on TV. "Now I can see the inside of the car backwards."

She sat in the passenger seat and looked in the visor mirror for a while. Not only could she see the inside of the car backwards, but also the back window, the lid of the trunk, and the world beyond it — all of it backwards. In that exotic world, she saw that cars were driving on the wrong side of the road and license plates were printed in a different alphabet. At that moment an ambulance, also driving on the wrong side of the road, dashed by with its lights and sirens on, and then disappeared into the corner of the mirror.

"Probably some child who got severely injured or killed by an airbag," she thought.

CHORUS: Airbags can severely injure
Or kill
Young children sitting in the front seat.

"And what do you drive now, Randall?" Jeremy asked.

"Actually, I have a Plymouth Malaga right now, but you know, the older model. I've had eight different Malagas. Loved them all. Got my first one when Charlotte and I moved here in 1966.

Is that right, honey?" Randall turned around and waited for his wife's sanction.

"It was 1965 actually. November 1965, honey," she responded.

Randall turned back to Jeremy, gave him a fake blink of complicity and added in a softer and more musical voice: "She's the boss, she knows everything. If she says 1965, she's gotta be right!"

Jeremy generated a competent fake look of sympathy, and steered the conversation back to the car:

"I bet the Malaga looked pretty different back in 1965."

"Doesn't matter what it looks like: if it has the same name, it's the same car," Randall asserted, with the authority of someone who has successively owned eight unrelated but homonymous cars.

"Well, tell me Randall, would you like to take it for a test drive?" Jeremy asked.

Randall turned to his wife: "What do you say, Charlotte?"

"I say go for it, Randy."

CHORUS: Go for it, Randy,
Go and test-drive the car,
For a Malaga once is always a Malaga.

Jeremy walked back into the dealership and came back out a few minutes later with a pile of papers. "How can this man stand to carry so much fat when it's so hot? He should be melting or something," he thought.

In the meantime, Randall was sitting at the wheel and playing with the Malaga's various gadgets. He adjusted the power seat a hundred times, then rubbed his hands on the steering wheel, pursing his lips and emitting a slight moan as he imagined himself driving a new Malaga.

"Nice, isn't it?" Jeremy said as he opened the back door. "Let's get this baby on the road."

Randall began commenting on the car as they drove off.

"It drives very nicely. Yes, very nicely indeed. You know, actually, when I bought my first Malaga, that was back in

1966 — wow, you probably weren't even born — well, anyways, back then…"

Like most contemporary car salesmen, Jeremy was luckily equipped with Elderly Customer Protection. He activated it promptly and turned on the "Oh, really? Hmm…" function with a two-minute default interval.

Randall went on:

"And I never thought I'd buy one at first, because you know, I mean, it's like you always think that you're going to do something, but in the end, life is so unpredictable, so you know, I thought that…"

"Oh, really? Hmm…," Jeremy replied after exactly two minutes.

"But what you're not going to believe is that, immediately after I got out of college, which was quite some time ago as you can imagine, well, Charlotte and I — and I know you're going to say 'Wow, you already knew her,' but anyway, what we did was…"

"Oh, really? Hmm…"

"And things were pretty different back then, but…"

"Oh, really? Hmm…"

"Although, of course, as you can imagine…"

"Now, we're going to make a right at the third stoplight onto Vineyard Avenue and we're going to get on the 101, so you can appreciate how this car drives on the freeway." Jeremy said, shifting into manual mode for the time of an utterance.

A few blocks before the freeway entrance, though, traffic on Oxnard Boulevard had been abruptly interrupted by a large and spectacular accident.

CHORUS: Accidents are so gothic,
So large and spectacular!
Now Randy, Charlotte, and Jeremy
Are stuck in a line of cars,
Like ball bearings in rollerblade wheels.

What can they do, but wait for the normal flow
to resume?
And entertain themselves with the spectacle
Of cars piled up vertically,
Instead of lined up horizontally.

"Don't you think there's something very gothic about accidents?" Randall asked.

"Sure. Yes, gothic. There's something quite gothic. Very gothic." Jeremy had no idea what Randall meant, but it didn't matter as long as he was going to buy the car.

"Not just gothic in fact, but there's something electric, almost epileptic about accidents… You know, it's not supposed to happen, but it's going to happen anyways. I think it's very gothic, and epileptic at the same time."

"Yes, epileptic." Jeremy repeated. The conversation made no sense to him.

"Epileptic. Yes, it's epileptic, that's what it is. It's like something suddenly goes wrong in the flow of traffic, and bang!"

"Bang, yes. Bang indeed."

"Bang! Bang! That's what so gothic about it."

"Yes. You're right. Bang. Gothic."

CHORUS: Bang! Bang!

A small body was being carried into an ambulance on a stretcher. Paramedics and police were swarming around the scene like fruit flies hovering above a trashcan. Randall rolled down his window and stretched his neck out of the car to get a better view. In the lane next to his, an elegant lady with a dark blue silk scarf in the passenger seat of a red convertible Ford Mustang was doing the same.

"Can you see anything?" Randall asked her.

"I think it's a kid they're carrying on that stretcher." The lady replied.

"A kid? Oh my, I think you're right."

"Poor thing. People should be more careful when they're driving with kids, don't you think?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Too many people drive with small kids in the front seat. That's really dangerous," she asserted.

"Yes, they could go through the windshield in a crash… although with airbags, I don't know," Randall replied.

"Actually, airbags can severely injure or kill young children seated in the front seat."

"Is that so? Well, good thing I don't have young children anymore… I do have a daughter, but she's definitely old enough to ride in the front seat," Randall smiled.

"Oh, you have a daughter? I have a daughter, too. She's 31. She just got married last week, to a really nice gentleman from San Diego. He's a doctor, a phroncologist I think. His folks are from Mexico, but they're very nice people. How is old is your daughter?"

"My daughter is also 31, isn't that a coincidence?"

"By the way, I'm Janet," said the elegant lady, stretching her hand out of the Ford Mustang.

"Nice to meet you Janet, I'm Randall. Strange place to meet people, isn't it?"

"I know! It's very gothic…"

Randall wasn't quite sure what she meant.

CHORUS: What a coincidence!
She has a daughter, he has a daughter!

By a clear but tacit agreement, the conversation had now officially died, but it would have been rude for Randall to roll up his window immediately. He waited a few seconds, pretending to be looking in the distance and purposely not establishing eye-contact with Janet, while she was doing the same on her side. Finally, he rolled up the window and turned back to his wife and Jeremy.

"Guess what? That lady in that car next to us — her name is Janet by the way — well, she has a daughter who's 31 — the same age as our daughter — isn't that incredible?"

"Oh really? Hmm…," Jeremy replied.

"Our daughter just got married last week to a doctor from San Diego," Charlotte intervened proudly.

"Oh really? Hmm…."

"He's a phroncologist."

"Oh really? Hmm…."

"Note that I had never heard of that specialty before our daughter married that gentleman, but I hear they make a very good living."

"Oh really? Hmm…."

"His family is from Mexico," Charlotte then conceded.

"Although in all honesty, they're very nice people," Randall added.

"Oh really? Hmm…."

"And you know what?" Randall charged anew, "That lady — Janet — her daughter also got married last week to a doctor from San Diego, and his family is also from Mexico! Isn't that quite something?"

"Oh really? Hmm…."

"You know, Randy, maybe we just have the same daughter as that lady," Charlotte suggested.

"You're right. That would explain it. Yes, of course, it must be the same daughter, otherwise it's too random of a coincidence."

"Oh really? Hmm…," Jeremy commented with the enthusiasm of a wristwatch telling the time.

"Of course. We must have the same daughter." Charlotte concurred.

"What time is it, by the way?" Randall asked.

CHORUS: Of course, it must be the same daughter!
His folks are from Mexico.
How gothic!
Somewhere really far and really hot!

Jeremy had no idea what they were talking about. In fact he didn't really care. He was staring at the window of a travel agency, mesmerized by a colorful cardboard placard advertising a cruise to some distant land. His eyes drowned in hazy reverie, he could see sweltering swamps, crocodiles, yellow and purple birds. The tropics… Africa perhaps… Somewhere really far and really hot, with fist-sized insects.

II

"So, Jeremy, how far are you going?" Charlotte asked.

Jeremy snapped out of the tropics and responded politely:

"Malaga."

"Oh, Malaga? We'll be there in less than an hour, I think. What do you think, Janet?"

"Well, my dear Charlotte, considering how fast you're driving we might even get there earlier — if we don't drive off the cliff and crash, that is."

"I'm so grateful you guys were willing to give me a ride," Jeremy said for the third time. "If you hadn't stopped to pick me up, I'd probably still be waiting for one of those Spanish buses. I get a sense they're not very reliable. I don't know…"

"They're not," Charlotte confirmed.

"That's why we always rent a car when we come here!" Janet added.

"Do you come to Spain a lot?" he asked.

"We try to come here every year. It's so nice out here. We first visited Spain in 1966. Is that right, Charlotte?"

"Actually, 1965. November 1965. Of course, Spain has changed quite a bit since then, but we still like it. We meet lots of people from England and Germany, but we rarely run into other Americans."

"I must be the first one you've met this time, am I not?"

"You might very well be."

Jeremy looked out of the red convertible Ford Mustang onto the Mediterranean, trying to breathe in the salty air. The wind was blowing his long hair into a wavy brown pennant as the car breezed along the twists of the road. "This is so cool, this is so incredibly cool," he thought. He turned back to Charlotte.

"So, are you guys sisters, or…?"

Charlotte and Janet gave each other a smiling glance. Janet replied:

"We're lifelong living partners."

"Ah? Okay…" Jeremy was a little taken aback, but tried to act normal to show that he was "cool" with it. He continued on a different topic, making an effort for the abrupt transition to appear seamless:

"So, Charlotte, what do you do, I mean, what kind of job do you have?"

"I'm a writer. Not, like, a famous writer or anything, of course. I used to think I would become a great writer when I was your age, but I've kind of given up since."

"Really? Why?"

"Well, I don't know. I haven't written that many books, to begin with. And most of them suck anyway. I'm not into it anymore. I guess you'd call the stuff I wrote 'airport literature.' You know, the kind of book you'd pick up while you're waiting for a connecting flight in a place like Cincinnati, when it's some random hour in the morning, you've already bought a coke and the local newspaper, but you don't really care to read its eighth-grade-style editorial about urban violence, you've walked the alleys up and down a few times and ascertained that you don't need a third overpriced hot dog or any name-brand golf equipment. Finally you mosey into a newsstand, pick any paperback with a shiny cover and a generic-sounding title printed in silver letters, hand a few dollars to a woman with a name tag that says 'Rosalinda,' and then you walk away and look for the departure gate. That's my book you have in hand. You'll read it on the plane, then you'll forget it on your seat, and you won't remember the title or the name of the author. That's me. That's my little contribution to the world."

"I guess you don't sound too enthusiastic about your job… Are you working on anything right now?"

"Sort of. It's about this guy who's a terrorist from an anarchist group and he's out to blow up a car dealership. Anyways he ends up rigging an airbag pouch with explosives. It's supposed to be a thriller, but I guess the plot kind of drags on after a while. I think I might turn it into a cookbook instead."

"Well, that sounds… uh… wonderful. Yeah, it's got exciting ideas and all. I hope to read your book when it's finished. Where do you think I'll be able to find it?"

"Cincinnati airport. Try the newsstand on a dull winter morning."

CHORUS: That's her little contribution to the world,
Somewhere really far and really hot,
With sunflowers fields.

Jeremy raised his eyebrows and remained silent. He didn't know what to make of Charlotte's response, so the conversation stalled. He looked over towards the sea as the car rushed along the narrow clifftop highway. The Mediterranean was glowing with bright afternoon light, and each wave sprayed little white suns onto a carpet of undulating blue water. On the other side of the road, sunflower fields stretched out to the horizon, each flower avidly drinking color from the sunlight.

The words "dull winter morning" stuck in Jeremy's head, bleached of their content by the Spanish sun like dry bones in the desert. He tried to paint the landscape gray and to imagine winter in his mind, but blue and yellow kept growing back in the corners. Finally he arrived at an image of a gray sea of cheap novels, a dead and wilted Mediterranean pounding cold paper waves against the gray cliffs of Cincinnati airport.

"This is so, like, gothic. It's just totally gothic," Jeremy thought for himself, then addressed the two ladies:

"Don't you think this whole country is so gothic?" he asked, punctuating the question as if it were in iambic pentameter.

"Yes, Spain is very gothic. Undoubtedly gothic," Janet responded in an ambiguous, even voice. He expected more but she said nothing else. He wasn't sure if she was making fun of him.

"You know, it's like, it's just… gothic, I guess. Do you know what I mean?"

He felt that his question wasn't making sense to her, so he gave up.

A long silence followed. He couldn't decide if it was a comfortable silence or not. It was a very opaque silence in any case: it didn't seem to mean anything. It was not a pause, not a rest, not a punctuation mark. Just a blank space on the soundtrack, like the kind of silence found in a closed refrigerator.

Suddenly Charlotte interrupted:

"Jeremy, you didn't tell us what you were going to do in Malaga."

"Huh, I'm going to meet some friends, then we'll go somewhere. I don't know, I guess we'll hang out, or something."

"I see. Well, I hope you have fun there, or something."

"Yeah, I hope."

"Well, fellows, I think the first thing I'd like when I get out of this car is a nice, cold beer," Janet added cheerily. "Unless, thanks to Charlotte's sporty driving, we all get pulled out of the car on a stretcher at the bottom of this cliff, in which case I think I'll have some IV perfusion instead."

"Janet, you're such a cynic… But maybe that's why I love you…," she went on, putting her right hand on Janet's left hand and pressing it tenderly.

Jeremy watched the interaction between the two women from the back seat, with an uncomfortable feeling of confusion, surprise, and curiosity. He said nothing and repressed a hint of a wince by drowning it in the bright blue sea.

"I love you, too," Janet said, "but keep both your hands on the wheel, because I'd really prefer the beer over the IV perfusion…"

Eventually, a row of dark sticks began slowly sprouting behind the hills, then grew bigger and more definite in shape: some were topped by crosses, some by smoke. Finally, Malaga's skyline of smokestacks and gothic churches appeared distinctly, and before long the road was engulfed in urban sprawl while the sea had receded behind factory outlets and car dealerships.

"Could you drop me off at the airport junction?" Jeremy asked.

"Sure," Charlotte replied, "I didn't know you were going to the airport. Are you flying out?"

"Well, it depends."

"Alright, as you wish."

A few minutes later, Charlotte and Janet dropped off Jeremy at the intersection where the airport road meets the main highway. They exchanged generic greetings and polite wishes, then shelved each other's memory away in a dungeon full of images of people met once and never again.

CHORUS: Drive with a cynic, Jeremy,
Once and never again,
But, well, it depends.

Jeremy walked for a short while and reached Malaga's airport. "Not much of an international airport. Looks more like a lame mall," he thought. He reached the newsstand inside the main lobby, and as planned, met his friend Randall. A girl was standing next to him. Randall started:

"Hey, here you are. I didn't think you'd make it so quickly."

"Who's that?" Jeremy pointed to the girl.

"That's Rosalinda, she's our contact."

"OK, good. Alright, let's get to work."

They went behind the newsstand, where they were somewhat shielded from the crowd.

"Did you bring the things?" Rosalinda asked Jeremy firmly and with a strong Spanish accent.

"Yes, I did. It's in the backpack."

"Show me."

Jeremy carefully put the small backpack on the floor, kneeled next to it, and zipped it open. Randall and Rosalinda also kneeled around the backpack and peered into it. They could see a squarish plastic object with protruding wires and what seemed like a clock. The rest of the object was in the dark.

"Are you sure it works?" Randall asked.

"Duh — how am I supposed to know?" Jeremy replied with a little impatience at the naiveté of the question. "If I knew for sure, I wouldn't be here to tell you."

CHORUS: For sure, he wouldn't be here if he knew.
He wouldn't know for sure if he were here.
If he knew, he wouldn't be here for sure.
Drive with a cynic, Jeremy, once and never again.
But just listen, she's not done explaining.

"OK, let's just finish the job and go," Rosalinda interrupted.

"Alright, where do you want to place it?" Jeremy asked.

"Over there, do you see the ticket counter of the national airline?"

"What? You want to put it on the counter? They'll find it right away and we'll get busted!" Randall shouted, then realized how loud he had been and contained his voice.

"Just listen to her, you moron, she's not done explaining."

Rosalinda continued, impervious to the animosity between Randall and Jeremy: "Right next to the counter, under the 'no smoking' sign, there is a large green trashcan. Do you see it? That's where we want to put it."

"OK, fine, go ahead. You go over there and you put the backpack in the trashcan," Randall said to Rosalinda.

"No. One of you should go. You are the men. Death is a man's job. I will wait here and pray."

"Yeah, right, don't even start with your gender-role bullshit," Jeremy snapped. Rosalinda gave him an angry and puzzled look. He hammered on in a quiet but decisive voice:

"Look girl, it's your country, your cause, your people, and I'll tell you what: Randall and I could just be sitting in America watching a movie and eating popcorn right now instead of helping you out with this. So you just go and place the goddamn backpack in the goddamn trashcan or we just call it a day and move on to something else. Entiendes?"

"Fine, just give it to me." She almost ripped the backpack from Randall's hands and walked off muttering a curse.

"Dude, you really pissed her off," Randall said after Rosalinda was out of hearing range.

"I know, she's fuming. I was waiting to see smoke come out of her nostrils. Stupid bitch."

CHORUS: Tick tack tick tack tick tack,
Just wait to see smoke come out of her nostrils
Once and never again,
But, well, it depends.

Rosalinda stopped for a minute against a wall and opened the backpack. She flipped a switch on the machine, closed the backpack, then strapped it on her right shoulder and walked towards the ticket counter as casually as possible. Once there, she mingled with the crowd and started subtly inching towards the trashcan. She finally leaned against it and slowly slid the backpack into it, making sure nobody was watching. Then she pretended to stand in line for a minute and followed the crowd of passengers checking in for flight 635, after which she acted like she had forgotten something and left.

"We have seven minutes to get out of here," she told Randall and Jeremy as they met again.

"Let's jet then," Randall said.

As they were walking away, Jeremy stopped suddenly and exclaimed:

"Shit, I forgot my allergy medication in the front pouch!"

"And you're calling me a moron?" Randall replied sharply. "So what do you suggest we do now, Mr. Smart-ass? Maybe you want to go dig into the trashcan and get your allergy medication back, so you don't have to blow your little nose tonight? Come on, let's just get the hell out of here."

"Let's go, we don't have time to quarrel now," Rosalinda interrupted again. Then turning to Jeremy, she added: "I thought you were professionals."

"Yeah, Mr. Professional, why don't you go back and look for your allergy pills? You have seven minutes before you get your sinuses cleared big time," Randall added.

"Well, I guess there's no point dwelling on that now," Jeremy mumbled back.

"Whatever, you arrogant shithead."

III

CHORUS: It's a dull winter morning
On the gray cliffs of Cincinnati airport,
You arrogant shithead.
But cold paper waves keep swelling in the corners,
Some topped by crosses and some by smoke.

Randall strolled by the golf equipment store, thinking: "Gosh, I wonder who would ever buy that stuff, especially in an airport."

He wandered up and down the alleys of Cincinnati's dreary airport, not knowing if he should buy a third hot dog or find something else to keep himself busy before his next plane left. He thought: "Maybe I'll call Charlotte. Let's see: what time is it in Oxnard? Oh yes, she'll be awake."

"Charlotte? It's me! Did I wake you up, honey?"

"No, I was up. Where are you, sweetheart?"

"Cincinnati airport."

"Where? Cincinnati? What are you doing there? Isn't it very cold there?"

"I have a connecting flight in an hour, but there isn't much to do between now and then."

"Buy the paper. I don't know. Get yourself one of those cheap novels and read it on the plane. It'll keep you busy."

"Yeah, I guess."

"How did your meeting go?"

"You know, same old. I'll be happy to be back home. Alright, I'll see you in a few hours. Love you."

"Love you Randy."

Randall hung up and strolled down to the newsstand. He took a look at the local paper, then suddenly turned to the first person he could find, a woman with a name tag that read "Rosalinda":

"Wow, did you see that? A bunch of kids from around here blew up an airport in Spain! 6 dead and 35 injured… Gee, that's no small job they did, your locals! Let's see… It says they're in an

anarchist terrorist group… Well, I tell you, in my time, American kids didn't screw around in foreign countries with explosives…"

The woman muttered something back about how gothic it was. Randall gave up trying to establish a conversation, handed her a dollar for the paper and walked away.

He finally sat down in the waiting area immediately next to the departure gate, watching planes land and take off in the gray winter morning. "Where are all those people flying to?" he wondered. Foreign countries probably. Sunny, warm places. He started thinking of distant lands, sweltering swamps, crocodiles, yellow and purple birds. The tropics… Africa perhaps… Somewhere really far and really hot, with fist-sized insects.

IV

"Isn't it really hot today?" Jeremy commented.

"Oh, tell me about it!" Charlotte replied.

"So, would you like to take this car for a test drive?"

"Sure."

"So, Charlotte, what do you drive right now?"

"Well, I don't drive anything right now."

"Oh really? So is this going to be your first car?"

Charlotte's expression turned bleak: "Well, when my dear husband was with us, I never had to drive. He would just take me everywhere. Randall, my husband, died a year ago. Do you remember that terrorist attack on that airport in Spain? It was in the news everywhere."

"Yes, yes, I remember that."

"Well, he was one of seven Americans who died there. He was on a business trip and he was just heading home."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. That's so… gothic, I mean, I'm so sorry to hear that. It's such a gothic way to die…"

"In any case, our daughter Janet has been trying to convince me for a year to get a car and to take charge of my life. So I guess I made it in the end." Charlotte eventually looked up and forced a painful smile onto her face.

"Well, that's wonderful. It's very courageous of you. I hope we can find just the car you need. Your daughter will be proud of you."

"There's just one thing I need to ask you: my daughter insists that I should buy a car with an airbag: does this car have an airbag?"

"But of course! It even has two airbags. Look right here — I mean, no, don't look, look at the road while you're driving, of course — but when we stop somewhere, you'll see there's a label right here that says 'airbag,' and another one right on your steering wheel. You'll see."

"Alright."

"Now, we're going to make a right at the third stoplight onto Vineyard Avenue and we're going to get on the 101, so you can appreciate how this car drives on the freeway."

CHORUS: Painful is your smile, Charlotte,
Yes, it was such a gothic way to die.
May you appreciate how this car drives on the freeway,
Once and never again.

A few blocks before the freeway entrance, though, traffic on Oxnard Boulevard had been abruptly interrupted by a large and spectacular accident. Two ambulances, a fire truck, and several police cars were blocking the way. Paramedics were swarming around like honeybees while the police was trying to keep passers-by away.

The police chief walked with an ambulance technician to the edge of the cliff and pointed down:

"See, they're down there."

"Oh God, they must have driven themselves off the cliff!"

"Yup. I don't know how the hell we're going to get down there."

"Well, they're probably all dead anyways. That's one hell of a fall. I can't see how anyone could possibly survive that." The technician shook his head.

"Let's at least try to send someone down," the police chief concluded, then walked back to the fire truck to seek logistical assistance. Two officers were sitting inside the truck. One of them was reading a book. The other one was whistling the jingle of a TV show.

"Hey there, what are you reading?" The police chief asked the first one.

"I don't know. Some random book. I picked it up on a bench, I guess someone must have forgotten it."

"Is it any good?"

"No. Actually, it just flat out sucks. I guess you'd call it 'airport literature,' if you know what I mean, except that it's kind of gothic."

"I see. Well, anyways, do you guys think we can send someone down there?"

"Yeah, sure." He turned to the other officer in the fire truck: "Why don't you go? I want to finish this chapter."

"Fine, I'll go, give me a minute."

V

At the bottom of the cliff, the crash had dipped the red convertible Ford Mustang into the sweet Mediterranean like a cookie into milk. The front was crumbled and crushed, and soaked in about a foot of water, but the back was recognizable. Finally one of the firefighters climbed his way down the cliff. It wasn't too steep, it turned out.

CHORUS: Not too steep. That's what they always say.
Just too steep for a fire truck,
Or a convertible Ford Mustang, for that matter.
But cookies must crumble and sunflowers must wilt,
May both rest in the peace of the blue Mediterranean.

Charlotte was quietly sitting behind the wheel, her eyes wide open turned up towards the sky, with just a little bit of blood drooling from the side of her mouth. The airbag had deployed, dutifully breaking her nose, while the rest of the crash had broken her neck. The firefighter examined her for an instant, felt her lack of pulse, and pronounced her dead.

Next to her, Janet was still sitting in the passenger seat, except for her head, which had detached from her body under the impact, and was now lying on the narrow strip of beach at the bottom of the cliff. Warm, peaceful waves were gently massaging the tip of her hair. The bright red blood oozing out of her severed head was slowly mixing with the Mediterranean's salt water, giving her a last rich and lathery shampoo.

"Blood is very good for your hair anyway," the firefighter remarked to himself, "it acts as a conditioner." He looked at Janet's head on the beach and thought how blood had healthy protein that makes your hair shiny and manageable, like in TV commercials.

CHORUS: Janet had always wanted to be a model
For a shampoo commercial.
It was so beautiful to die on the beach in Spain,
While realizing her dream.

FISH

I

"Your pills, Mr. President."

"What? Fuck pills. I hate pills. I'm sick of pills."

He swallowed the pills. Didn't even look at who was talking to him.

You could see most of Abidjan from the terrace. You could smell it, too: rotten fish, chicken excrement, and wet dirt. The rotten fish came and went with the tides, on an invariable background of chicken excrement. When it rained, Abidjan turned into a foul soup. The warm red dirt sweated out excrement and fish. The air got thicker and more pungent. Fishermen spread sea snails on aluminum sheets. Flies swarmed the gooey carcasses. Into the soup.

President Cissoko didn't care about fish. He didn't care about sea snails. He didn't care about dirt. He didn't care about anything. He was bitter, and he was going to make it clear.

"News from the homeland, Mr. President."

"Thank you Max. Let's see."

The President's face lit up for a few seconds, like a child from the countryside getting a ballpoint pen for the first time. Then the excitement died. He didn't really care after all. He pretty much knew what he was going read in the *Burkina Sentinel.*

Max wiped his hands on a handkerchief. The ink was cheap. You would have the whole *Burkina Sentinel* printed all over you if you held it long enough. The President glanced at the date at the top of the front page: it was yesterday's issue. Max calmly waited for him to explode.

He exploded.

"It's yesterday's issue! What's wrong with you people, can't I ever get fresh news?"

"It's always yesterday's issue, Mr. President."

"Just how difficult is it to ship a newspaper from Burkina Faso to Abidjan? It's the 1990s, we have telephones, we have fax machines, we have telexes, we have televisions, we have airplanes, how complicated can it be to ship a newspaper?"

"I don't think you would find today's issue even if you were in Burkina Faso right now, Mr. President."

President Cissoko hunched his back, started angrily chewing on his denture, then added: "You… you, you keep your sarcasm to yourself."

Max remained still, standing a few feet behind the President. President Cissoko would spark up a conversation shortly at that point.

"Max?"

"Mr. President?"

"Have you had a chance to read this paper?"

"I skimmed the front page, Mr. President."

"Criminals. Look what they're doing to our country. Down the tubes, it's going down the tubes!"

"It is, Mr. President."

"Diallo and his revolutionaries from hell… Bunch of criminals… Bunch of idiots, him and his soldiers, and his whole government. Illiterate imbeciles… And he calls himself General Diallo…"

"Very unfortunate, Mr. President."

"We were the pearl of Africa."

"Undoubtedly, Mr. President."

"And now Diallo is sleeping in my room, in my own bed, sitting at my desk, eating with my silver forks and knives, using my porcelain toilet, driving my Mercedes, using my golf clubs… Remember the golf clubs we got in Geneva? Ah Geneva… Geneva was nice. Bunch of criminals. I bet he doesn't even use the silverware and eats with his hands…"

Max stood silent. He had heard the same curses every morning of their exile. The President would get excited about reading the *Burkina Sentinel,* as if he expected to read that Diallo had been lynched by the crowd and that his people were begging him to return. Then he would realize Diallo was still in power. Then he would erupt.

And true, shopping in Geneva was nice. But now they were in exile in Abidjan. Max had learned to weather the President's morning eruptions like a daily tropical rain. Every day he stood through the President's shower of curses at General Diallo. No aspect was spared. He had heard of Diallo's bad table manners, his lack of education, the insignificance of his ancestry, the bad reputation of his native village, the smell of his feet, the zits on his face, the lice in his hair, as well as all sorts of obscenities about his mother, and various far-fetched allegations about his anatomy. Then President Cissoko would calm down and realize he was far from his golf clubs and his palace, and settle into jaded bitterness for the rest of the day.

Truth is, Max didn't mind being in exile. Abidjan was all right. He liked the smell of rotten fish. He liked the gooey giant sea snails. Nothing like that in Burkina Faso, or in Geneva in fact. You could probably overthrow General Diallo's government with the smell of gooey giant sea snails. He would bring back some if he ever went home. The cook would figure out how to prepare them. Fishermen here fed their whole family on just one of those snails, so it couldn't be that bad. Or maybe it was

awful. Then the cook would eat it himself and keep the rest for his children.

DID YOU KNOW?

Downtown Abidjan has 12,756 streets, boulevards, and avenues, but unlike in other cities, none of them intersect. There is no way to go from one street to another. All one can do after starting to drive down one street is to continue until the street ends. There are no cross-streets anywhere. Very inconvenient for giving addresses and directions!

Sea snails stink even worse than rotten fish. Down by the ocean at Grand-Bassam, they lie drying on shelves all over the shore. The beach looks like it should smell of salt and iodine, but the ocean breeze is pungent and sticky instead. The wind reaches inland and brings tidings of something dead and slimy rotting around in the open air. The sea snails sit in still rows, bleeding gunk on old aluminum sheets. They always look like they are about to melt, but they never do. They contain themselves and ooze in silence.

Further into town, the snails are spread on wooden planks. Those are the drier ones. They have lost their gooey sheen, and are starting to shrivel up like stinky dead things. A buzzing mob swarms around them, poking at them, slicing them, buying them, selling them. Stinky stew in the offing. Further still, on the way back to Abidjan, hardened cubes of sea snail flesh are displayed for sale every few yards on little roadside stands covered in flies.

Max would miss Grand-Bassam and the ocean if he ever went back to Burkina Faso. Just looking at one of the roadside stands felt like someone was breathing yellow snail scum into his throat. The air in the town market was so foul that it made him giddy to walk through it, getting high off the smell of rot-

ting snail flesh. No doubt you could overthrow any government in Burkina Faso with something that smelled so bad.

"So what do you think of that, Max?"

"Well. It's entirely possible." Max had no idea what the President had been talking about. His mind was on rotten fish.

"And I've been making that point for years, but at the time, foreign powers had no interest in the welfare of Burkina Faso. I doubt they even do now."

"That may very well be the case, Mr. President."

Rotten fish. Sea snails. Stew. Salt, iodine, slime.

"You're a man of good judgment, Max. I should let you go now. I'm going to read more of this paper. There's a column about sea snails. Do you know anything about sea snails? Well, in any case. I will see you around some time today, or perhaps tomorrow. Make sure my grandson gets a good lunch. He's growing, he needs good food."

"Titi will get a good lunch, Mr. President."

"And make sure he doesn't spend the whole day in front of his computer."

DID YOU KNOW?

About half of Abidjan's streets have no left side at all. Thus, while the right side of the pavement usually has one or two lanes, the left side can have an infinity of lanes, since the pavement is not bound by anything. In a few streets—some of them major thoroughfares—there is no distance between the buildings on either side. In those zero-width streets, the entrance door of one building is also the entrance door of the building across the street. Those streets have no lanes and no pavement at all, which makes street-cleaning fast and easy, but impairs traffic flow.

"As you wish, Mr. President. Good day."

President Cissoko opened the *Burkina Sentinel* wide and slipped into the world of printed sea snails. Max left the terrace quietly. He opened the glass door, stepped into the mansion, and shut the door behind him.

II

When you were right by the ocean at Grand-Bassam, the most difficult part of the game was to go through the marketplace. You needed to stay just long enough so you could buy the fish at the best price. But not too long, or you'd die from the smell. Inexperienced players often underestimated the difficulty.

Once you had survived the marketplace, shipping the fish to Burkina Faso and overthrowing the government was not so hard. Sometimes there was even a spontaneous revolution, which was unpredictable.

Titi only had two lives left. The situation was not looking good. The street vendors were starting to put sea snails on their stands. Those were super hard to handle. Regular fish was worth 10 points, sea snails 50 points. Obviously there was a reason. More points, but you also die a lot faster if you go for the snails because they stink so much worse than the fish.

He wasn't quite sure what to do. Run out of the market with all his fish and head straight for Burkina Faso? But if it wasn't enough to overthrow the government, he'd be in big trouble. Or buy one of those sea snails? But he probably wouldn't make it out in time. At least, the hard drive was so slow that he had time to think about it.

He decided to go for a sea snail. He walked up to the stand and started bargaining. But then another vendor pulled out a huge snail right behind him. Plus of all the rotten fish that was already there. He was stuck. The smell rapidly grew out of control. Before he had time to do anything, he was dead.

One more life. Alright, different strategy. He ran away from the snails as fast as he could and went straight for Burkina Faso. He got there without any major trouble, and he lost just one little fish on the whole trip. Massive attack launched. Target: presidential palace. All the fish at the same time.

The guards came out, and it was a nasty bloodbath. They had 300 points. He only had 271 points worth of fish. He knew what

was going to happen. Too late. 29 points short, there just was no way. He was gunned down by a group of loyal guards, and died right in front of the presidential palace. Game over.

Titi looked at his computer with a feeling of frustration and boredom. The game was over, there was nothing he could do about it anymore. He pushed the joystick back with resignation. He felt blank. He stared at the screen emptily for a while, sprawled on his bed, lying on his stomach, his chin resting on a pillow, teasing the joystick with his right hand. Then he let go of the joystick and slowly slid his hand down his body and into his shorts. He left his hand there for a little bit, playing with himself. Then he turned over on his back, and started rubbing his penis up and down, first slowly, then a little faster, then really fast. Finally a warm liquid flowed on his hand. He lay on his back for a few minutes, gazing at the ceiling, feeling really bored. Then he grabbed an old dirty sock that was lying around the floor, wiped his hand clean, and threw the sock under his bed.

It was time for lunch.

III

Titi walked to the kitchen. His sister Nina was already there. So was the cook, Rose. Rose never seemed to have left the kitchen. She was like one of those familiar pieces of furniture that could conceivably be moved to another room, but stays in the same corner for decades because it doesn't occur to anybody to move it. Rumor had it she had been born in the kitchen, and that she was named after an older appliance that had been thrown away about the time she came into service. She was silent and reliable, but not fast. Titi and Nina frequently outran her to the microwave, and she was left disoriented when she couldn't complete a task she had started. Whenever that happened, she would pause for a few seconds, then turn around to register her new surroundings, and finally get started on a new task. She had no known companions, except for the refrigerator and the oven.

"Titi, guess what I got!"

"I don't know. What is it?"

Titi was not in the mood for guesses. He walked up to the fridge and grabbed a bottle of soda. Rose also hobbled over to the fridge, but too late. Titi purposely ignored her and slammed the fridge door in her face.

"Just guess."

"A donkey? A potato? A jackhammer? A screensaver?"

"I'll tell you: I got Fish 2.0."

"No way! That's so cool! How? Where did you get it?"

"Mom and I went shopping this morning."

"Awesome. Have you tried it yet?"

"Once."

"Let's go try it right now! I wonder how different it is from Fish 1.0."

Titi and Nina got up and ran out of the kitchen without finishing their lunches. Rose was about to say something or go after them, but they were already gone.

"Come on, load up," Titi said impatiently to his computer, tapping the monitor.

"Just hurry, come on," Nina added.

The computer did not hurry. Much to the contrary, it replied lazily:

"Press any key to terminate memory test."

"I'm going to terminate your ass if you don't hurry up," Titi jeered.

"Press esc for setup," the computer answered.

Nina pushed her brother aside, grabbed the computer, and addressed it in a less confrontational, but more authoritative, nurse-like way:

"Why don't you chew on this for a while." She popped a diskette into the floppy drive and typed a:\setup.

"Slurp," said the computer, then it hissed for a brief moment. Then, as through the magic of a psychotropic drug, its personality got taken over by Fish 2.0. Now it was docile, even friendly.

"Welcome to Fish 2.0," the computer added, oblivious to how recalcitrant it had been a few seconds earlier.

"Alright, let me do it," Nina said. Titi watched in excitement. She selected "Configure Game" then "Configure Character."

"Let's make Max a woman."

"Why? That's ridiculous."

"Why is it ridiculous? Fuck you! Let's just make Max a woman!"

"Sure, fine, whatever."

Titi didn't really care if Max was a man or a woman, as long as he or she could buy fish and overthrow the Burkina Faso government. Nina clicked on "Select Gender" and then again on "Female." Now Max was a woman.

The screen went blank. Then an ocean shore scene appeared slowly. First a blue background, then patches of other colors in the lower half. Slowly, objects took shape: wooden planks, then people around them, then finally fish on the planks. Across the background was the Fish 2.0 logo.

Welcome to Fish 2.0

Max didn't mind being in exile. Abidjan was all right. You could find fish here. She liked the smell of rotten fish. She liked the giant sea snails. Nothing like that in Burkina Faso. You can overthrow the government there with the smell. The sea snails smell much worse than the fish.

"OK skip skip skip, whatever, where's the fish, I want fish for my revolution!"

"Alright, skip… Space bar, let's see…"

The screen went blank again. The image reappeared a few seconds later, with a large Fish 2.0 logo in the background, and the words "WORLD 1.1" across it. Then "WORLD 1.1" faded away, and Max appeared in the middle of a fish market.

"Where's the joystick?" Nina asked.

"Uh, I don't know. Let's just use the keyboard."

"Right."

Fish 2.0 Tutorial

The beach looks like it should smell of salt and iodine, but the ocean breeze is pungent and sticky instead. The wind reaches inland and brings tidings of something dead and slimy rotting around in the open air.

"What is this poetry shit? I want my fish!"

"Fish fish fish!" echoed Nina.

Titi started playing. He maneuvered Max inside the market, and decided to walk her up to a stand to bargain down a huge

snail. The vendor was way too savvy. She was barely able to get anything off the original price. Meanwhile, Max's responses were getting slower and less precise.

"What's going on? It's like we're losing her or something. She's not responding."

"I think she's dying. The smell is too bad in that part of the market."

Less than a second later, Max collapsed and died.

"Shit, she died," Titi said.

"Yeah that's pretty embarrassing."

"Whatever, I'm trying."

"I mean, how difficult is it to ship fish from Abidjan to Burkina Faso? Seriously, how complicated could it be?"

"OK stop that already."

"Let's try again."

Fish 2.0 Tutorial

HINT: Further into town, the snails are spread on wooden planks. Those are the drier ones. They have lost their gooey sheen, and are starting to shrivel up like stinky dead things. A buzzing mob swarms around them, poking at them, slicing them, buying them, selling them.

"Stinky stew in the offing!" said Nina.

"Stinky stew for my revolution!"

"Replay? Quit?" said the computer.

Replay. This time, Max was not going to die so easily.

Max was back at the beginning of the game. She made her way through the market and found a spot that didn't smell too bad. She started bargaining down a heap of fish. People were swarming and buzzing around, slicing them and poking at them. So far, so good. Max moved on to the road between

Grand-Bassam and Abidjan. Hardened cubes of snail flesh were offered for sale every few yards. Literally covered in flies. She got about 50 points worth, then moved on.

Fish 2.0 Tutorial

CONGRATULATIONS!

♦♦♦ You have made it to WORLD 1.2!!! ♦♦♦

Now you can overthrow the Burkina Faso government with the smell of rotten fish and giant sea snails!!!

Ha, easier said than done though. Max only had one more life. All this rotten fish could mean a quick death. Titi decided that Max was going to try another strategy. She ran away as fast as she could and headed straight to Burkina Faso. She got there without any major hassle, just one little fish lost on the journey. And then: big attack on the presidential palace! All that fish in one stinky pile, revolution!

But the guards came out and it got bloody. They had 300 points. She only had 271 points worth of fish. Too late. 29 points short, there just was no way. She died right in front of the presidential palace. One life left.

"Yeah if you can't even make it into the presidential palace, it's a pretty bad sign," Nina remarked.

"OK well those guards, come on."

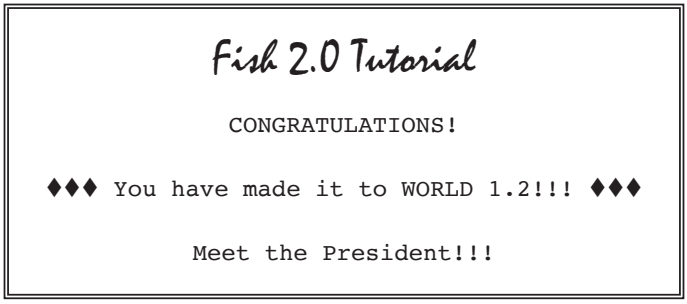
"Those guards what?"

"Bunch of criminals. Get out of my palace. I want my palace!"

"Yeah well it's not your palace and your stuff until you get enough fish to take it over. Just get yourself a big load of stinky snails to overthrow them and it'll be your palace."

"Oh do you also get the Mercedes in version 2.0? I love the Mercedes."

One more life. This time, Max was going to make it. She again got to Burkina Faso without much trouble, losing only one little fish in the process. But this time, she was going to approach the presidential palace from the back and get in through the terrace window.



Max stood under the terrace for a while, listening for indications of where the President was, and what he was up to. From the mansion's terrace, you could see the dusty plains of Burkina Faso. You could smell them, too: spoiled meat, dog excrement, and wet dirt. The spoiled meat came and went with the wind, on an invariable background of dog excrement. When it rained, Burkina Faso turned into a yucky porridge. The warm red dirt sweated out excrement. The air got thicker and more pungent. Street vendors spread spoiled meat on aluminum sheets. Flies swarmed the slimy offal. Now onto the terrace.

Max had better be careful. She was out of the marketplace but not out of danger. What if it started raining? Well she was pretty sure that it didn't rain in World 2.1 unless you played in Advanced Mode.

She heard people talking up on the terrace as she prepared to unleash her massive fish attack. She recognized one of the voices as the President's:

"Your pills, Mr. President."

"Fuck pills. I'm sick of pills," he grunted.

The president didn't even turn around to see who was talking to him. He just stared out into the distance and sighed jadedly.

He kept staring out blankly.

He kept staring out blankly for a really, really long time. Nobody moved. Max stood completely still, not making any movements, without speaking or even breathing. Nothing at all moved, not even the wind. A minute elapsed. The president was still staring fixedly at the horizon, in the same position. Max was still standing in the same place, still not moving. Nobody had breathed yet.

"Damn it! It just froze! Fuck! Aaaaargh!" Titi burst into a rage and started hitting all the keys on the keyboard and yelling profanities at the computer. The computer remained deaf to Titi's anger, opting to maintain the President in his vapid stare and Max in apnea.

"I can't believe this piece of shit just froze on me! I was just about to win!" Titi yelled. He proceeded to kick the computer, which responded by going completely blank and emitting a dull beep. Nina felt vaguely satisfied that the computer had frozen. Now her brother was furious and it wasn't even her fault.

IV

Max breathed a sigh of relief. He walked into the living room and shut the terrace door, leaving President Cissoko behind him. At first he wandered aimlessly between the furniture for a few minutes, then plopped into a leather sofa and stared blankly at the coffee table. After a while, it seemed that the coffee table was staring back at him, and he began to feel uncomfortable. He realized the room was very silent and he was a little hungry. Maybe he could drive into town and grab lunch with his sister-in-law. Oh yeah, also, he had to make sure the kids ate something.

Well technically the President had only mentioned feeding his grandson. Whatever, he could just bring them both along and find something downtown. He grabbed the edge of the coffee table and hoisted himself out of the sofa. The coffee table slid about an inch forward. Now the cosmic order of the living room was disturbed. The table lay ridiculously close to the sofa and the rug was wrinkled. Oh well, some maid would be fired for the mess.

Max walked towards the kitchen. He found Rose in front of the oven, carefully removing a hot dish.

"Hey Rose! Seen the kids?"

Rose was so startled she dropped the dish on her feet. It broke and let the hot food spill over her feet and ankles. Her face contracted in an expression of burning pain, then she threw her arms up and opened her mouth wide. Max walked away. She must have screamed after that.

He knocked at Titi's door.

"What?"

"Can I come in?" said Max, pushing the door ajar.

"What?" asked Titi again.

"Do you guys want to come to the city with me?"

"When are you leaving?"

"Now."

"No. I don't know. I guess."

"Come on, grab your stuff, let's go." Nina said to her brother.

"Are we taking the Jeep?" Titi asked.

"Sure." Max replied.

Max climbed into the driver's seat, Titi and Nina into the back. They drove off into the warm wet Abidjan air. They turned left, left and left and left. Then left, left, and left. Then left and left. Then they were downtown.

DID YOU KNOW?

Some Abidjan streets disappear when it rains, while others simply grow overnight out of nowhere. The city is known to have gained and lost hundreds of residents as heavily populated streets either disappeared or emerged in the rainy season.

It started to rain. Not a nice refreshing drizzle, but a thick, warm, sticky rain that smelled like earth, as if someone was pouring red vegetable soup over the city. Nina opened her window and stuck her head out to smell the rain. It felt dense and heavy, like breathing soup. They drove past the cathedral and left it standing in the rain with its arms raised towards the sky, water dribbling down its white concrete sleeves.

"Where are we going?" Nina asked.

"To the Bank of Burkina Faso tower," Max replied.

"Why are we going there?"

"We're going to pick up my sister-in-law Beatrice."

Nobody said anything for a few seconds, then Titi added:

"I'm hungry."

Dear reader, please bear with us as we pause for a short commercial break. Stay tuned, we will come back to Titi, Nina and Max's adventures after this ad:

VISIT BURKINA FASO

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Under the progressive leadership of President Diallo, Burkina Faso is quickly emerging as a premier destination for tourists and investors alike. The "Pearl of Africa" is entering the 1990s as a leader in key industries:

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– Logic & Semantics
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Thanks for staying with us. And now back to our programming, with Titi, Nina, and Max's adventures.

V

"So… I was saying… I'm hungry," said Titi.

"OK," Max replied.

"But I'm hungry," Titi insisted.

They entered a broad tree-lined avenue with two lanes on one side and an unbound infinite plane with an infinity of lanes on the other side. Finally they reached a large ugly concrete building that looked like a shoebox tilted on its side.

"Is this it?" Nina asked.

"Yes. You guys stay here," Max replied as he hopped out of the car and walked into the building.

"Sir, may I help you?" the receptionist asked Max.

"Hmm, yes. I'm looking for Beatrice Ouedraogo. I'm her brother-in-law."

"Do you know what section she works in?"

"Department of Fish, 7th floor," Max recited.

"One moment please."

"I'm sorry, sir, but she must be in a different office. This building now only has six floors. The 7th floor was moved to the 3rd floor," said the receptionist after a while.

"Oh? Why is that?"

"I don't know. I just work here."

"So what happened the people who worked on the 3rd floor?"

"Deleted, I mean like, overwritten," the receptionist responded, chewing on a pencil, then added: "I guess if you move one floor to another and one of them is not write-protected, then it just gets overwritten by the other floor."

"Right. Well, can you look up my sister-in-law somewhere? Her name is Beatrice Ouedraogo. Department of Fish, 7th floor… or wherever she might be."

The receptionist pulled up a stack of wrinkled yellow paper from a drawer, and started reading down a roster:

"Oua…, Ouadi…, Ouattara…, Ould…, Ouya…, …no sir. No Ouedraogo here."

"So what happened to her?"

"Looks like she was deleted," said the receptionist, as if the answer was obvious.

"So…?"

"So I guess she never existed. Basically, you don't have a sister-in-law, and you've probably never had one at this point."

"I see. Too bad."

"Yeah, many people have had this problem lately. It's the new logic and semantics reform. So you're not alone."

"Ah… huh, yes, well, what was it again?" Max asked.

"As I'm sure you've read, President Diallo plans to make our proud nation a truly independent country. So he reformed logic and semantics to abolish all converse relationships. You know, like colonizer–colonized, brother–sister, stuff like that. This is for our independence. We can't keep operating on semantic theory inherited from colonization. So now Burkina Faso won't be bound to anyone unless it's strictly on equal footing. We have to follow their policy within the bank. We're just a local branch here, you know."

"That's very puzzling." Max said diplomatically, having not gauged the clerk's political allegiances.

"True. A lot of people lost relatives that way. It's a kind of sad in a sense, but that's life. But a lot of people also got rid of their debt. So I guess it averages out."

"Well, thank you, have a nice day," Max said suddenly, and left without waiting for a response. He walked back to the car without his non-existent sister-in-law.

Understanding the 1991 Diallo Logic & Semantics Reform

Many of our readers have asked about the Diallo Logic & Semantics Reform. An explanation from our experts: Since the ouster of former President Cissoko, the new Burkina Faso regime led by General Diallo has taken a number of practical steps to affirm the country's independence. One of these reforms concerns the field of semantics and logic. As of February 15, 1991 converse semantic relationships will be treated differently from symmetric ones. Converse relationships will be disallowed, making such relationships as brother–sister, colonizer–colonized, parent–child, boss–employee invalid within Burkina Faso. Items formerly bound by converse relationships will be purged. Symmetric relationships, such as siblings, spouses, colleagues, relatives, will remain unaffected. So it will be possible to have siblings and a spouse because those relationships are symmetric, but no brothers or sisters, and no husband and wife either. Brothers and sisters will be deleted, unless they are also siblings, in which case they will be requalified.

"So?" Nina asked as Max sat down in the driver's seat.

"So what?"

"Your sister-in-law wasn't there?"

"No, but I never had one. She should have worked for a Swiss bank instead."

"How so?" Nina asked.

"She was overwritten as part of the abolition of converse relationships, OK? Now let's talk about something else."

"Also, I'm hungry," said Titi.

VI

Sea snails smell much worse than rotten fish. See our travel section, p. 4

said a little box at the bottom of the front page of the *Burkina Sentinel.* President Cissoko flipped a few pages and started reading the article:

TRAVEL (continued from front page)
One thing we don't have in Burkina Faso is sea snails. Visiting Abidjan? Try going down to the ocean at Grand-Bassam to experience the stench of snails lying on large shelves all over town. The ocean breeze in Grand-Bassam is not just crisp and salty. It's pungent and sticky! You'll know from miles away that something dead and slimy is rotting around in the open air. It's an experienced not to be missed! The snails sit in still rows right on the shore, bleeding gunk on old aluminum sheets. They always look like they are about to melt (but they never do). Walk further into the town, you'll see snails spread on wooden planks. Those are the drier ones, they're probably beginning to shrivel up like dead things. But you'll be amazed how much they still stink! A buzzing mob typically swarms around them. Further still as you drive back, you'll notice hardened cubes of snail flesh displayed for sale every few yards. Try one of those. Don't know how to prepare it? Ask your cook!

President Cissoko stopped reading. He grabbed a crystal glass emblazoned with the logo of a Swiss hotel and poured himself whatever was left of the bottle of whiskey.

"This is not very interesting," he thought.
"Also, something smells."
Then he just stared out into the distance and sighed jadedly.

EPILOGUE

"Hey Beatrice, where were you?" asked Max.

"I was with Rose," said Beatrice.

"Oh I didn't know she was also in the game," said Max.

"Yeah, well that spoiled little girl — whatever her name is…"

"Nina?"

"Yeah Nina. She insisted on having more female characters."

"Hmm, yeah, true, like me I guess. So you didn't get overwritten?" asked Max.

"Come on, would I get overwritten anyway?" said Beatrice.

"Haha, of course not," said Max with a fake chuckle.

"Also, Fish 2.0 is a lot more robust in terms of memory management," Beatrice pointed out.

"Oh it certainly is," Max nodded.

"Also, something smells," said Beatrice wrinkling her nose.

"Well the story is called Fish, so…"

"Also, I'm hungry," continued Beatrice without listening to Max's explanation.

CHIRP

Chirp chirp.

The morning's first birds were up, chirping through the fading darkness, announcing dawn. In a moment the sun would rise.

Game over.

Chirping birds at dawn: the sound of failure.

As long as it was dark, well, Gregor effectively just kinda went to bed late, right?

Very late maybe?

It was exciting to go to bed so late. Almost romantic.

ok but look this was not late.

This was literally birds waking at dawn.

This was the grim bird gong sounding game over.

The death chirp of dawn:

"Gregor, you have failed

you have wasted the night

you can't recover

you will fall asleep in guilt

the dismal light of dawn creeping into your bed like a stain of discouragement, spreading to your pillow, your pajamas, your blanket."

More birds joined in: "Again! Again!"
You have failed again.
You have wasted the night again.
Game over. Again.

"I know, I know," said Gregor to himself.

Seven hours later — ding dong — it was time for breakfast!
Or for a quick trip to the store? Tough call.
Or maybe read the news first?
What if there is other news? Like on another website?
What about a third website?
Maybe there's more news in another language?
What about car news and computer news?
What about agriculture and marine archeology?
and Asia–Pacific bond markets?
Shrimp?

Oh but it's morning!
(not outside, but in Gregor's underwear).
Well, that will take priority, won't it?

Wasn't there some boy with red hair in the news? Somewhere in the left-hand corner of a photo of something or other?

Gregor looked out the window.

It would be nice to have that red-haired boy right here in his room.

No no scratch that. What would be really amazing would be…

to *be* that red-haired boy? Like, to just *be* him, right?

(would he have to live in that photo though?)

"Now, if I was that boy with red hair, and I was looking out this window right now, the view would look the same, wouldn't it?

Exactly the same.

As long as I keep my eyes focused on the outside,
Then I can be that boy and have red hair.
Shit that's really exciting, having red hair,
instead of plain black!"

What would it be like to have red hair instead of black hair?

Gregor found himself consumed by the question. He projected himself into a red-haired boy's body, looking out the window, bursting with desire, all the while mentally looking at himself from the back, being a red-haired boy looking out the window.

So arousing.

Now it's morning in the red-haired boy's underwear.

And Gregor can be right inside!

And experience it first person!

Actually wait.

Wouldn't it be boring to have red hair if you had red hair?

Would the red-haired boy think it's normal to have red hair?

Like just normal. Just plain.

After all, has he ever experienced the morning in any other way than with red hair?

This is really discouraging. To be gifted with such a special feature and to experience it as something unremarkable.

Such a grim reality:
The red-haired boy has never eaten a sandwich,
showered,
walked,
or slept,
or done anything without having red hair.

Even brushing his teeth. Even having a headache.

"Quick quick quick!
Let's enjoy myself while it's unusual for me to have red hair,
while it's still a novelty!" thought Gregor,
looking anxiously out the window

(as if the birds were going to cry game over once more)

No
too late
game over.
If he really was that boy with red hair,
then he had always been that boy with red hair.
And he had always had red hair.
And it had never been special.
And then it was not exciting.
It was utterly discouraging
The dream of his life, finally fulfilled!
and then it's nothing special because red-haired boys come with a history of always having had red hair.

The phone rang.

"Yes, yes, no. I'd say about 140 by 150 actually, or a bit wider. Tomorrow would be great, it's up to you. Of course I'm here, call anytime. No, no, it's not too early, of course. If there's another one let me know. Thanks."

Few phone calls could have been more erotically arousing. Somewhere, on the other end of the line, was a person who had talked to Gregor,
and for all that person knew,
Gregor might just have been a boy with red hair.
Yes, Gregor had just had been a boy with red hair,
not just to himself,
but to another person,
for the span of that conversation.
omg
And if he had been a boy with red hair to another person,
he was a boy with red hair to the whole world.
And not just for the span of a conversation,
but forever,
irrefutably,
like a fact.

I mean, that's basically what a fact is.

Now that he had red hair, Gregor decided to write himself a letter, which he started by signing "Walter Benjamin Franklin Roosevelt," with a little heart next to his name (so cute).

Then he grabbed a towel, covered his black hair with it, and looked at himself in the mirror,

seeing a boy with red hair,
his hair entirely covered by a towel
(yes)
but its redness an undeniable reality nonetheless.

A truly exciting way to start the day. To get to be that attractive red-haired boy in the left-hand corner of the photo in the news. So what would he do in that boy's body?

He could do anything he wanted. Hehehe even dirty things.

Although
would it really be exciting to do dirty things
to himself
if he was that red-haired boy?

Mr. red-haired boy didn't think it was anything special to have red hair, did he?

Slowly that realization bloomed from a concern to a discouraging certainty that

took over the whole room
(like an overcooked metaphysical soufflé)
and cast a pall of depressing familiarity over Gregor's body.

"Bah, if this is the body I grew up with, then what do I care?"

What would the red-haired boy actually fantasize about?
Being someone else?
Who?

Now that Gregor was the red-haired boy,
he stared out the window,

consumed with the desire to be another.

What if it was boring to have red hair and freckles?
Or worse,
what if it was annoying,
something to hate about yourself,
something to get rid of,
something to fantasize away?

Red hair and freckles on Monday
Red hair and freckles on Tuesday
Red hair and freckles for breakfast, lunch and dinner
Even with the flu
or while traveling abroad!

Encountering other red-haired boys and finding them
… plain?
boringly similar to himself?
The thought devoured him.

"I would probably hate having red hair if I was him.
I would find my body so plain.
I would hate freckles.
I would find red-haired boys so unattractive."

Gregor found himself obsessed with this new question.
He tried to project himself out of the red-haired boy's body
looking out the window
bursting with desire
all the while mentally looking at himself from the back
(being a red-haired boy looking out the window and desiring to be someone else).

"I bet I want to have black hair.
Hard to imagine.
Black hair.
But I would love to have black hair.

All the other red-haired boys would find me special!
I'd be the only red-haired boy with black hair!
They would desire me,
like I desire black-haired boys!
and want to be one of them."

Gregor went back to the mirror, still with the towel on his head, trying hard to imagine that his red hair beneath the towel was actually black — which in fact it was. He projected himself with all the force of his sexual desire into the body of a black-haired boy. He furiously tried to ignore his non-existent freckles and imagine them gone until they weren't there anymore — which they had never been.

Then he took off his towel
and he actually had black hair.

He was so aroused by the sudden transformation that he started to vigorously masturbate the body of that black-haired boy of his dreams in front of the mirror. He watched the reflection of that body he had obsessively desired as it heaved, sighed, and came, his mind flooded with anger, despair, discouragement, hatred, bliss, and orgasm.

Then he fell asleep on the couch and slept for two hours.

Then he ate two cans of asparagus and a peanut from the floor (it was still clean).

Then he put some underwear back on.

Then apparently some ferry sank in Bangladesh with millions of people on it.

He fell asleep again and dreamed that he had freckles
with red-haired birds
and light coming from underneath his pillow

and he was angry and discouraged
and wanted to be someone else, somewhere else.
But he was stuck on a boat in Bangladesh, staring out the window, with black hair.

II

He woke up a few hours later — it was dark

(thank God)

and as it was dark, not to press Gertrude Stein's point though,
but it was necessary
to speak louder
or very softly

So ding dong — breakfast time yep. Maybe a bowl of cereal with milk? Is there even a clean bowl in the house?
No, there was a dirty bowl
a sponge
hot water from the tap
and dish soap.
So basically no way to make a clean bowl.

(He would have to turn on the water
and literally start scraping the bowl
like with the sponge)

OK so — in theory — that was possible,
but where would he stop?

Would he just pause the entire activity when the bowl was clean?
No!
He would rather keep the water on forever and wash every bowl in the world.

But he only had one dirty bowl.
(so get more bowls and wash them?)

Would he have to turn the water back off
and dry the bowl?

This was getting too complicated.
Impossible.
Better just use a dirty bowl
Also, like, complex engineering problems so early in the morning, seriously, no.
Even at night. Whatever time it was.

He poured some milk into the bowl.
Whoa wait, was that milk still good?
Did it smell funny?
Gregor smelled the milk.
It didn't smell funny. But it didn't smell clean either.
It didn't smell like anything.
wtf this noncommittal milk is freaking me out!!
(i.e., as in, " ")

He dipped one finger in the milk
and cautiously tasted his finger.
It didn't taste bad.
Or good.
It didn't taste like anything.
Maybe it was……. rotten?
Shouldn't milk smell and taste clean and fresh?
It was probably rotten.
Maybe it wasn't rotten,
but it could have been rotten.

The thought that it conceivably could be rotten filled Gregor with such revulsion that he couldn't bring himself to drink that milk. He went to the sink and poured the milk down the drain, to the last drop. Then he turned the water on, cleaned the bowl with dish soap until there was no trace left of the milk, turned the water back off, and dried the bowl.

Oof. In extreme situations people can do amazing things, and this was certainly one of those situations, with the milk possibly rotten, and every drop of it portending contamination, bad smell, revulsion, and yuck.

He certainly wouldn't use that bowl again — perhaps ever (at least not today).

He considered an apricot.

There were four apricots
in a little wicker tray on the table,
soft and green,
with thick fuzzy mold growing on them.

They were already rotten yesterday,
and two days ago.

Gregor had hoped that they wouldn't be rotten today. Ideally, the rot would resolve spontaneously and they would be clean and fresh today.

But no. Give them another day (safest thing to do).

What about a peach?
There was a peach in the fridge,
nice and clean,
fresh and ripe.

He pulled out the peach, but the situation was intractable. He could bite directly into it, but then it would be juicy and messy and filthy sweet liquid would drip down his chin and onto his chest, and that was just unthinkable. And also, he wouldn't know what was inside the peach if he didn't cut it open first.

What if it was filled with: – worms, or
– cucumbers, or
– goat cheese?

Obviously, he had to cut it first, look inside, and if it looked clean and peach-colored, then he would eat it.

But!

How could he cut it, just with a knife,
with brutal violence?

Also impossible.
The peach was round and closed
the knife would make it irregular and open.
An act of cosmological destruction.
There would be a discontinuity between the wet part and the dry part.
It would be different colors inside and outside.
It wouldn't be round anymore.
It would probably require superhuman strength to push the knife into the peach.
He couldn't bring himself to do it,
not at this hour, not to that peach, not in his own home.

He put the peach back in the fridge. He would eat it tomorrow, if it was already cut. Hopefully someone would come to his fridge while he was asleep and cut his peach for him. Otherwise he would wait patiently.
He grabbed a glass and filled it with tap water.
It tasted funny.
Maybe it didn't.
But it tasted as though it was about to taste funny.
Maybe it was…… rotten?
Maybe there was something rotten in the pipes?

He could just have another sip and check. But that sounded disgusting.
The first sip was already rotten,
why try another one, right?

He poured the glass out into the sink in revulsion and didn't rinse it out.
The whole sink was rotten,
and the water was rotten.
He looked away from the sink with disgust.
He wouldn't go near that sink again — perhaps ever (at least not today).

He looked in his cupboard to see what other supplies he had for breakfast.

Seven cans of cod liver
(bought a few days earlier at the supermarket).
Those were certainly rotten.
They were probably shipped rotten from the factory.
He checked the date on the can: good for another two years.
That was a sign: they were rotten.

Another carton of milk,
fresh,
unopened,
bought from the store this week?
Too risky.
First of all, the carton was closed.
To drink from it, he would have to open it.
But then it would be open!
And he wouldn't feel comfortable drinking from an open carton of milk.
What if it was rotten?
Better leave it closed
and not take the risk!
Actually there was nothing good to eat in the cupboard,
everything was rotten.

Everything in the fridge was also rotten.
Not only the food that was actually rotten (for weeks),
but also the fresh food from this week's grocery run.
The yoghurt was probably rotten.
Everything was rotten, the whole fridge.
Everything already open was definitely rotten.
And everything that was still closed and fresh was off-limits because it was still closed.
And despite being fresh, maybe it was also rotten.
There was no way to know
(unless he opened it — and that thought was so disgusting omg)

better not to try it.

Maybe he could have pizza delivered?
But that would require calling someone on the phone.
And that person may or may not think he was a red-haired boy with freckles,
or a black-haired boy without freckles,

And that was just too complicated because he just wanted pizza. He didn't want to have hair right now, black or red, he just wanted to order pizza as an anonymous caller. Isn't there a way to order pizza without having a specific hair color? You'd think there would be a demand for that kind of service.

What about the embarrassment of everything being rotten in his kitchen?
Even the sink and the tap water?

He didn't mind the delivery person showing up in his mess. After all, it's their job. They show up in everyone's mess, they probably don't care. They just think about their next delivery.
But the person on the phone.
That was another matter.
Don't people on the phone sometimes also show up at your window
and look at you?
There was probably some way that they could see him through the phone.
Maybe his phone had a secret camera
that lets people see how his kitchen is filled with rot
when he calls to order pizza.
Maybe they could smell it.
Maybe they had a big switchboard
with lots of lights!
and when they got a phone call from a house where the tap water was rotten,
a big red light would start to blink.

Gregor sat at the table for a while, ashamed at the big blinking red light on the switchboard of the pizza delivery place.
Dozens of employees huddled around it!
nauseated by his stack of cans of rotten cod liver,
laughing snidely at him for ordering pizza,
thinking he was a red-haired boy,
(or a black-haired boy? perhaps? hard to say)
What if his phone didn't hang up properly afterwards?
Wasn't there a chance that they could keep listening to him
in the privacy of his room,
even after he thought he was all alone?

I don't know, you read a lot of strange stories today, literally.

A better solution was not to call,
but to hope that they would know to send pizza anyway.
He would be really grateful.
And perhaps he would strike up a great friendship
with the pizza delivery boy.
(they're sending a boy, right?)
And perhaps more.
Perhaps the pizza delivery boy looked just like him,
with black hair.
Or perhaps, he looked just like him,
with red hair and freckles,
and he loved black-haired boys
and would be immediately charmed
and they'd make love after eating the pizza,
or even before.

Gregor felt at peace with this practical compromise solution. He didn't eat, lay down on the couch, and fell asleep again.

He woke up a few hours later — ding dong — breakfast time! It was kind of dark. Or maybe not too dark, but like a bit dark, who knows.

He made himself a bowl of cereal with milk, into which he cut some fresh peach slices. He looked at himself in the mirror briefly, and thought he quite liked his attractive black hair. The air was still and peaceful. He put on a Mahalia Jackson song and smiled. He fell back asleep to the sound of gospel music.

III

A few hours later he woke up rested and content — ding dong — it was time for breakfast. He got dressed, hopped in the car, and drove down to the supermarket in search of breakfast inspiration.

The supermarket is an exciting but difficult place. It's a space designed by cruel playful forces to torment people and tease their appetite for shapes and colors. Research shows that the idea of using that kind of space to sell food was hatched out of primal sadism, i.e., to give people an impossible choice between starvation and overstimulation. The exciting game-like aspect of the interaction only developed later from a supermarket evolutionary point of view, when humans learned to make the best out of a hostile sensory environment that was out to make sure they wouldn't get any breakfast.

For one thing, the supermarket is organized in an utterly illogical manner: all the meat is grouped together in one area, all the cereal in another area, all the cans in yet another area, vegetables in yet another area. To buy a simple meal, you literally have to visit several aisles, be exposed to a wide variety of unrelated shapes and colors with different hues and saturation levels, and even occasionally to other people.

The logical arrangement would be to make hundreds of little private aisles right next to the entrance, each of them with the ingredients for just one breakfast: one cereal box, one piece of meat, one bottle of juice, a few vegetables. This would keep trips as short as possible, minimize interaction with other customers, and provide less choice, making the whole experience infinitely more pleasant.

Ideally it would also be dark, perhaps candle-lit. And all the same color.

The rest of the store, away from the entrance, could be devoted to:

– mysterious things,
– imaginary things,
– dangerous things,
– rotten things,
– undefined things,
– inexplicable things that other people buy, and
– things that nobody buys (with the bright lights concentrated there please).

That would be the most sensible use of space.

But no: products are deliberately spread out over the entire surface of the supermarket, so that even basic supplies can sometimes be found only in dangerous remote corners of the store,

or in prime number aisles,

or in area with unpleasant floor tiling,

or in other places that customers should not reasonably be exposed to.

Gregor found himself in the red meat aisle, looking for some red meat. It was clearly not going to work: there was lots of meat, and it was all red. He gave up on meat but came up with a better methodology: he would turn left at the next three yellow items he would see, and buy whatever he found there.

He ended up in the ice cream section.

The ice cream section was uniquely problematic on a metaphysical level because the boxes of ice cream were on shelves inside coolers with glass doors.

There were four shelves in each cooler
and eight boxes of ice cream on each shelf,
in two rows of four,
which meant 32 boxes of ice cream in each cooler.
If he took one,
there would be 31 left,

but that was a prime number
— not an impossibility per se, but obviously a loaded statement.

If he took two,
there would be two black holes
in the constellation of remaining ice cream boxes,
which was simply inelegant.

If he took four,
one off each shelf,
then at least there would be seven left on each shelf,
and there would be a harsh prime number situation at the shelf level
but a sort of compensatory wholesomeness at the cooler level.
This was, plainly speaking, a question of his impact on the world as a person.

He took four identical ones,
one from each shelf,
plus one vanilla almond from another cooler
(because he actually liked that flavor).

Next he needed cans,
because so far he only had cans of cod liver at home
and that just looked crazy.

If someone came and inspected his cupboard
and failed to see a random distribution of household items
beyond the cans of cod liver,
they would think he's insane
and as a result he could be blacklisted from pizza delivery
or deliberately served rotten water by the utility company,
and generally speaking
there was just too much at stake cosmologically
to only have cans of cod liver in the cupboard,
and he had already carefully thought this through anyway.

What he needed was lentils because they're brown, oval, and unthreatening.

Gregor found the lentil section.

He counted. The store had:

– 37 cans of the store-brand lentils,
  • of which one batch of 31 cans expired in 421 days and
  • another batch of 6 cans expired in 303 days, and
– 26 cans of the name-brand lentils,
  • of which one batch of 16 cans expired in 456 days,
  • one batch of 9 cans expired in 298 days, and
  • one can with a slightly lighter color that expired in 133 days.

The store brand was cheaper but the label had an unpleasant sans-serif font that made the lentils look less deliberate and — in Gregor's opinion — defeated the whole point of buying lentils in the first place.

He bought one of each, plus the one slightly lighter-colored name-brand can that expired earlier, because it looked jarring next to the other name-brand can with its darker label. He liked the raucousness of the cans not quite matching, probably hating each other, and still having to live together forever in his cupboard. Hehehe.

On his way to the checkout register he ran into an unnamed girl that he may have known. She was with her roommate, who also had no name.

"Hey," he said cheerfully.

"Oh hey Gregor, what's up?" said the first girl.

"Are you shopping?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"So, yeah."

"Right, so."

"Right, yeah."

"Yeah."

"Well."

"Yep."

He had no idea what her name was. He had no idea what any girl's name was. The universe seemed to be so much more complex as a result of girls having names, it was hard to understand the logic behind it.

For a brief moment he felt genuine admiration for his straight male friends who were able to keep track of girls' names individually. By sheer power of cognition and memory basically. Though he realized he didn't have any straight male friends. Which he tentatively chalked up to the hypothesis that perhaps girls don't actually have individual names and therefore he doesn't need straight male friends to remember them?

IV

Checkout was difficult. First there was this sitting lady, who not only bore the name Cyndi (said her name tag), but requested money.

And not only requested money, but a specific amount
and clearly would take no less and no more,
her calculation being tied in some cosmic way
to the kind of ice cream and lentils Gregor intended to take home,
but also to how much of each.

But aha Gregor used his credit card: a little plastic device capable of deflecting the machinations of Cyndies by giving her ilk what they want without having to count money!

Secretly he suspected the credit card machine also really wanted to eat his card and had an oral fixation on hard plastic. You could tell it derived pleasure from Gregor pushing his hard plastic card deep into its mouth. The erogenous part must have been at the very end of the slit because the machine only expressed satisfaction when the card was deep inside it. Actually Gregor enjoyed giving the credit card machine pleasure. He felt a special power as the munificent giver of oral satisfaction, as he pushed his hard plastic card slowly and deliberately into the machine.

"Debit or credit?" asked Cyndi.

Gregor didn't understand the point of the question, and why Cyndi was trying to insert herself into this sensual moment. Was this an invitation to a threesome or something?

Then there was the boy next to him, at the neighboring register.

He had light red hair and freckles
(but probably thought himself plain and boring),
perhaps he even found his own hair black!

Perhaps he even considered coming to the supermarket with a towel around his head so people would imagine his hair was red, which it was.

He was probably named Athanagild and was probably a Visigothic prince, otherwise perhaps Ben.

He clearly relished watching Gregor stick his hard plastic credit card deep into the terminal's mouth, and was doing the same with gusto at his own register.

Gregor was debating: would he rather follow the boy to his apartment, make love with him, and marry him, especially if he was a Visigothic prince? Or was it was more prudent to first invite him to his home? Ideally they would move in together and make love all the time.

But without the red-haired boy's actual presence
(so Gregor could be left alone).
Otherwise the boy might complain about Gregor's lentils
and keep him awake at odd hours.
Also what about that awkward moment after making love,
when the boy would realize that Gregor's tap water
    and apricots
were rotten?
What if he was disgusted?
What if he hated tap water?
What if he worked for the pizza union
and blacklisted Gregor forever?
What if he wanted to have other meals than breakfast
and didn't like cod liver?

Did the Visigothic religion ban cod liver? Gregor couldn't remember. He had probably learned that in high school and foolishly thought he would never need that information. He was stressed out at the idea of having to visit his new lover in the Visigothic neighborhood.

What if he didn't live there?
What if he lived somewhere strange,
in a strange apartment with unpleasant lighting,

with a high creaky bed
with a thin mattress pushed right against the window
so all the neighbors could watch them make love
and call the police if they kept their socks on?
What if he had mice in his apartment,
or feral artichoke-eating lobsters that carried diseases?

Gregor realized the boy would probably insist on making love on a ferry in Bangladesh

(some people just have that fantasy and you can't get it out of them)

and they would die drowning together.

This was a very bad idea.

Also, what was the point of this random red-hair freckled boy?

Gregor himself had red hair and freckles (despite having black hair).

He was not the kind of person who would date someone
because they look like him,
oh no.
How narcissistic.
And even if that boy secretly had black hair,
well, so did Gregor.
They basically looked like twins actually,
what would be the point of even dating him?
He drove home.

V

By the time Gregor got home it was breakfast time.
(yes, ding dong)

I guess it was maybe a little dark, like somewhere in the sky? Hard to say.

He made himself a bowl of vanilla almond ice cream with lentils and cod liver, then microwaved it for a minute. It wasn't very good. Not like rotten, but something about the bowl maybe was the wrong shape?

He turned on the TV but it was that time of day when broadcast TV revolves around creepy artichoke-eating lobster issues and Bangladesh and that kind of thing,
and he didn't have the Visigothic channel
— if there was such a thing —
and anyway there were enough sinking ferries in this country without having to occupy his mind with everyone else's.

Also seriously why does TV always seem to have so many moving images
with people talking
and making noise
and so many different channels,
each with moving colors
and shapes
and noises,
that is just so much input,
so much stimulation,
so exhausting,
who could possibly watch such a thing?

He turned off the TV, turned the screen around so it faced the wall, and covered it with a shirt. He was slightly concerned that people would look at him through the screen (though he realized they were probably too busy making noise and getting

agitated to pay attention to him). Still it was better to have the screen face the wall.

Although…
the wall was slightly glossy,
and maybe they could see out the angles of the screen?
in a sort of curved way?
thanks to the wall's slightly reflective coating?

Probably not, but the shirt was still a sensible precaution. Though that shirt was actually a bit thin. In theory you could see through it. You'd have to really put your eyes right up to it and look into the light. But who knows how close they'd get to his shirt? After all it was right on the screen, touching it. He put a thicker sweater on top of the shirt and now the screen was securely blind.

The phone rang.

"Hi Gregor."

"Hi mom."

"How are things going, how are you feeling?"

"Fine, normal, everything fine. I went to the store — like, earlier."

Gregor wasn't an expert at technical questions of morning or evening or yesterday or today and all that stuff, but "earlier" was pretty safe.

"Good, what did you get?"

"Stuff for breakfast, vegetables."

"Nice. Are you eating well? Balanced meals?"

"Of course, you know I like cooking. I eat very well."

"Sounds like you're doing great. Are you being social, seeing some people?"

"Sure. I saw this girl with her roommate, we talked for a little while. I don't think you know her name," said Gregor — truthfully, in the sense that he didn't know her name either.

"Well that sounds wonderful. Glad you're seeing people and eating well. Keep up the good work, love you."

"Love you mom."

Mom was nice. It was funny that she didn't have a name either — except for "mom," but that was more a function or a title than a name, like "majesty" or "your honor." There was a logic and an order in the universe after all.

I mean, he never doubted that.

Gregor sat on the floor. The triangle formed by the fridge handle, the overhead lamp and the sink tap pointed up, and

logically
if the world was symmetrical
then it implied a similar triangle
right underneath it,
but pointing down.

And that was essentially an invitation by the universe to sit there, on that auspicious well-signed spot designated by the apex of the triangle.

The floor was cold and uncomfortable. Maybe he didn't care so much about this triangle and he could just sit in the couch?

He felt calm.

He felt this strangely relaxing sense that he was alone in his room,

and nobody was looking at him
and nothing mattered very much at all.
Objects around him were blissfully still,
even the ones out of his field of vision
all polite, staying still.

He showered, then looked at himself in the mirror.
There was no one else in the mirror, just him, naked.
He felt fresh.
He put on his pajamas.
The air was still and peaceful
The light was pleasantly irrelevant.
The objects had no angles: geometry was suspended.

He put on a Mahalia Jackson song. He stripped the linens off his bed and put the dirty sheets in the laundry basket, then put on new sheets and made the bed. Mahalia Jackson was singing "I'm glad salvation is free."

He crawled into bed — his sheets were crisp and clean. He fell asleep to the sound of gospel music. Salvation was free, hallelujah.

THE BOX

Preface

I am an old man now, and my memory fails me. I have entered the autumn of my life. Old friends fall around me like fellow leaves from the same oak. Soon winter will come, I will fall too, and return to the dust of the earth.

It is ironic — and perverse maybe — that the death of my dear friend Benoît should have caused me any joy. But in the midst of my grief, a plain box brought me a ray of light.

In the bottom drawer of a cabinet in his house was a box, a simple wooden box. A maid found it when the time came to sift through his belongings: just a rectangular box, with no decoration and no engravings, no handles and no feet. On the lid was a note instructing whomever would find it to deliver it to me without opening it. The maid gave it to Benoît's daughter, and his daughter to me.

It was the last thing they found when they looked through his affairs. The main bedroom had been cleaned out and so had the dining room, the waiting rooms, the servants' quarters, and even the library. Had it not been for a nosy maid looking for some forgotten jewelry to stuff into her apron, the cabinet might have ended up in a fire, with the box in it. Or some poor soul

might have chopped it up into a stool and a fishing rod, and thrown the box into a river.

But providence be praised: the box was saved. And through the loving diligence of Benoît's daughter I received it, unopened, in good shape, and with all its contents intact.

In the box were two piles of folded papers: forty years of correspondence Benoît had dutifully preserved through wars, disease, old age, and now even through death. All the letters I had ever sent him were there, neatly folded and piled in chronological order on the left side of the box. Some of them were quite recent. Others were yellow with age and felt like parchment to the touch. On the right side of the box were all his letters to me, painstakingly copied one by one and arranged in the same order as the other pile, a meticulous record of our lifelong conversation, intended to live eternally inside a wooden box, even after both of us would be dead and our names forgotten.

It has now been a month since I received the box and I have spent most of my days reading and re-reading our correspondence. The letters have brought me a mix of grief and happiness. Some of them rekindled for an instant the zest of our youth, others plunged me back into the pain of long-healed wounds, reviving old calamities and distant crises.

The earlier letters are the most faithful to the image I kept of Benoît through these forty years: the image not of a face, but of a handwriting. A dry, angular, spare handwriting, with regular letters that were neither too small nor too big, neither rushed nor cautious. A steady, peaceful script that was never unnecessary curled or hyperbolic, even when all of Paris was consumed for a whole season with a passion for flamboyant calligraphy after the young King remarked on the elegance of Madame de Lauray's signature.

Towards the bottom of the pile, Benoît's writing becomes more irregular. At first his usual angular style is still evident, even as the lines start to wander and the letters run into each other. But as weakness and disease settled in, so the letters become compact, tortured graffiti penned by the trembling hand

of an old man. Even towards the very end something of Benoît's even-paced handwriting occasionally shows through — the bar through a *t,* the arches of an *m* — as if to tell me that it is the hand that deserted him and not the soul.

Of the hundreds of letters in Benoît's box, several dozen deal with nothing but births, betrothals, marriages, deaths, and other family joys and tragedies, interspersed with the occasional comment on the latest fashionable frenzy in the capital. Dozens more contain requests for advice and pieces of personal wisdom, from dishonest servants to failed crops in the countryside, dowries, and repairing broken door locks and mechanical music boxes.

A great number of letters, of course, contain long discussions — sometimes over months or years — of the matters that occupied our lives and our minds as men of science: optics, astronomy, questions about the souls of plants and animals. Quite a few also debate the merits of various classical and modern poets, particularly of Clément Marot, whom Benoît greatly admired, and whose works he fervently maintained were superior to Ronsard's. To my sadness, the majority of my own letters bring up episodes I have now completely forgotten, and sometimes develop arguments I would be incapable of rephrasing today.

Of those hundreds of letters, a few must have stood out enough in Benoît's mind for him to place them together in an envelope, which I found in the middle of the pile of other letters.

The letters preserved in the envelope were written over twenty-five years ago, and they relate events that took place still many more years earlier. Many of the sheets are now discolored and cracked, and the ink looks gray and faded. Even in my mind the ink of time must have faded, for I have little recollection of the events described in those letters.

That small piece of our correspondence contains little mention of family events, and not much about life in the capital. No calligraphy, no servants, no children, no receptions, no plugged chimneys or runaway horses. In fact, it is so self-contained and bears so little on anything extrinsic to its own story that, it seems

to me, it could as well have been written two hundred years ago in a country two thousand leagues away, had it been our lot to live in such time and place.

I do not know if Benoît intended for me to publish those letters, or if he just thought them special at the time, put them in an envelope twenty-five years ago and then forgot about them. Perhaps, on the contrary, he wanted them to remain secret and for their contents to accompany him into death and oblivion. Perhaps he had a different purpose still. I do not know if he wanted me to ponder them or burn them, read them or bury them, serve as a beacon of truth or a warning post on the path to error.

But I do know that I am an old man, and that my memory fails me. Soon, I will be returned to the dust of the earth. And some day eventually so will this wooden box and with it forty years of records of two men's thoughts, even if the paper should outlive me by hundreds of years.

So as winter presses nearer, before the last leaf falls from the old oak, before I join my dear friend Benoît in his eternal silence, I offer these letters to the public for the edification of the curious and the satisfaction of the faithful. Perhaps as the ages pass upon these letters the purpose of their preservation will become manifest.

First Letter: Benoît to Pierre

Dear Pierre,

I hope you are well and the children are healthy. Before you even remind me, I know that I have announced my return to Paris many times and never made good on it. For having cried wolf so often, I now think you might hardly believe my presence even if I appeared in person on the porch of your house.

But believe it or not, I expect to be back in Paris in a few weeks. If I manage to settle my affairs here as quickly as I hope to, I could be back before Christmas. By then, hopefully, Hélène's leg will have improved enough to allow us to travel comfortably, and there will be nothing keeping us here. For now she can hardly leave her chair and although she does not complain, I sense she must be suffering.

In the meantime, I am spending my days in relative boredom. I have had my fill of being invigorated by the country air, and if it were not for my dear Hélène, I would soon be no more competent at conversing intelligently than the cows and goats that surround us.

In any case, I am at least free to daydream, reminisce about the past, and prophesy at will about the future. Usually the empty hours of the afternoon yield nothing more than idle nonsense. But today, the season's first snowflakes reminded me of an episode many years ago that troubled me at the time, and that I do not recall having recounted to you. If you would therefore forgive me for bringing you news that is almost as old as your eldest daughter, I claim permission to abuse your time and your patience as a reader to take an old story off my mind.

The winter of 16— was a snowy one, you may recall. I had been exchanging a lively correspondence with Mr. Foulquières, the abbot of Luzirac, who was interested in my views on the souls of plants and animals. I assumed the abbot was chiefly interested in the particulars of plants and animals, for he was an accom-

plished naturalist himself, and only peripherally in the question of the soul. But a letter I received in October proved me wrong. Not only had the abbot been interested all along in my views about the soul, but it now seemed as though he had feigned to be concerned with the material aspects of plants and animals, perhaps to trick me or test me. To test what? A commitment to the question, an awareness of something? Who knows. I did not think about it very much at the time. Whatever the case might have been, he invited me to visit him at the Abbey of Luzirac, which surprised and delighted me.

It so happened that I had business to conduct in that part of the kingdom that autumn, so I replied to the abbot that I would gladly visit him and that he could expect me in late November or early December as I would stop there on my way back to Paris.

Luzirac is a very small village. In fact, it is hardly more than the abbey itself. Had I consulted a map, I would have realized that it lies fairly high in the mountains and that snow in late autumn was not only possible, but likely. But good maps are hard to find in the provinces. In any case, it so happened that I arrived in Luzirac in early December, early enough to see a few tardy farmers harvest the season's last crops in the valley, but late enough that it began snowing as I climbed up the hills to the abbey.

By the time I had reached the abbey and met Abbot Foulquières, it was late afternoon, and it was snowing so heavily that one could hardly see the tip of one's own gloves. After my first meal as the abbot's guest, the abbey's crude stone cloister seemed warm and welcoming compared to the tempest outside. That night, I spent a long time in front of the fire. I remember thinking the abbey was an island, or a ship adrift in a sea of white, for it truly felt like the rest of the world had vanished as I had entered.

As it turns out, the snow ended up detaining me at the abbey for several days, during which Abbot Foulquières and I had some intriguing conversations. So intriguing in fact that I wonder if I they are properly to be called conversations. But in any case, those conversations are what I meant to write about. Of

course, I do not want to burden you with strange stories when you have many other things to turn your attention to. But if what I have said so far is sufficient to pique your interest and you would like me to write more, I will be honored to oblige.

I wish you the best until I hear back from you. It looks likely that I will miss seeing the performance of that latest tragedy everyone seems to be talking about in Paris. I can hardly tell you how far away Paris and its theaters seem from here. Sometimes I think no one in this entire province has ever been to a theater or any place of that sort. In any case I will be counting on you to keep me informed and to give me your educated judgment on the play.

Your friend and servant,

BENOÎT

Second Letter: Pierre to Benoît

Dear Benoît,

I hope this letter finds you in good health, and that Hélène's health is improving. I was going to write about my impressions of the latest plays I saw. But on second thought, burdening you with a report on this season's latest display of frivolity is doing it too great an honor.

The little world of Parisian theater seems to be made of air and ale. If there is any substance to it, it is invisible and untouchable. For each mouth that sings and acts, there are five mouths frothing with enough empty praise to cloak the heart of the matter in a fog of nonsense, like these ales from Flanders that seem to turn into a cloud of foam as soon as they are poured into a glass, leaving of the liquor only the sound and the smell.

In any case, I can hardly recall any of the plays without drawing a yawn, any of the actors without feeling the buzz of a thousand flies in my ears, and any of the playwrights without smelling what attracts all these flies. So I hope you will forgive me if I leave to themselves those self-anointed kings of a season without feeling like I should hold their cup. As the saying goes: "it pains me to praise someone who has no merit, and I do not anoint the head of sinners with oil."

Your adventures in Luzirac, on the other hand, titillate what taste is left in me for the bizarre and the incongruous after a season spent dulling my senses in the theaters of the capital.

I must say that the names of Luzirac and Abbot Foulquières had not entered my mind in a long time, and even then they had hardly ever claimed any prominence. Luzirac has never evoked in me much more than what you have already described: a stone abbey perched atop a hill in a remote mountain village. As for Abbot Foulquières, I knew of him, of course, but our paths never crossed — beyond names in a conversation, that is.

So please, do tell your story. You will find in me a fresh and open mind even for very old news, and having so little stake in this distant matter, whatever truths you wish to impress upon me I will gladly entertain and treat as my own.

Your ever-curious friend and servant,

PIERRE

Third Letter: Benoît to Pierre

Dear Pierre,

I hope you are well and the children are healthy. Hélène feels better already, but I think it will be a while before she can walk more than a few steps. As for me, I think I know every cow, every tree, and every stone in the province by now, and I should add every cloud in the sky and every star in the night, for I have looked up and watched them so much in my boredom that I feel as though I have shed earth and time for a life of celestial contemplation. Hardly any words now pass my lips but morning greetings and psalms. By now I have said them so often that they may well continue to spring forth from my mouth even if I were dead, like the water of a well springs without end through the stone of a fountain, though the stone is dead.

Had it been my lot to be gifted with the knowledge of tongues, I would have plenty enough time to translate the whole psalter into measured verse in the language of the Tartars, the Turks, or perhaps the naturals of Peru. I hear even the English and the Scots have now set it with mingled voices in their vulgar tongue for the benefit of their assemblies.

But having neither the knowledge nor the talent to undertake such endeavors, I am left to let my tongue run and watch the clouds drift. Perhaps I should some day write a treatise on clouds. In any case, I promised you a story, so I will make good on my word. Let us, therefore, go back to the abbey at Luzirac.

As I told you, I arrived late and it was snowing heavily. So heavily, in fact, that I could not tell when night fell, for the excess of white brought about its own sort of darkness. So thick and opaque was the whiteness of the afternoon that it stole dusk's entry and obfuscated any boundary between day and night.

The abbot had arranged a private room for me. It smelled like must, autumn leaves, and cold ashes. Perhaps someone had earlier hung laundry there to dry. I briefly walked around the

square cloister, which was empty and wet. Nearest the door of the chapel I smelled damp rust, nails, cold iron keys, and door hinges. Near the dormitory, fresh pine and hay. By the presbytery, horses. And finally, in front of the dining hall, I smelled a duck roasting in the night like a beacon.

After dinner I remained alone in the dining hall with the abbot. I resolved to spare him the frivolity of my chatter and to let him guide our conversation, out of respect for my host and regard for the holiness of the venue — but also, I must confess, out of sheer curiosity for the abbot's motives for inviting me.

To my surprise, the abbot began speaking not about the souls of plants and animals, not about the abbey's spiritual work, not even about meteors or geometry, but about theater. I had not come to Luzirac expecting to discuss theater in an abbey, especially one engulfed in snow, several days' walk removed from the nearest provincial entertainment hall, even in good weather.

But I believe the abbot had not chosen the topic by coincidence. He asked what I thought of the latest plays I had seen in Paris. I told him, as you most likely would have, that Parisian theaters were full of smoke and hot air, and that all I could see there was so mannered and so false that if there was something else to see, I had failed to perceive it.

He remained silent for a while, but then added that Saint Bonaventure describes theater as a recipient of a certain kind of heavenly light: of all the different kinds of heavenly light, theater is apparently filled with the kind of light that shines on skills that complete the deficiencies of man's body.

I am not sure I understand why Bonaventure considered theater a skill that completes a deficiency of man, nor why the abbot brought him up, but at least I believe the reference is accurate. The abbot also pointed out that Hugh of Saint Victor, before Bonaventure, lists theater in his *Didascalicon* among the mechanical arts, together with weaving, armory, agriculture, hunting, navigation, and medicine.

To tell you the truth, having traveled all day I was quite tired, and I did not have the wherewithal to debate the question further with the abbot, nor the audacity to dispute his interpre-

tation of Bonaventure's theory, nor anything intelligent to add about Hugh of Saint Victor's views on theater and armory and whatnot. So I went to bed, and resolved to continue the conversation the next day.

But I realize I have perhaps abused your curiosity and corrupted my promise of a good story into a droning account of what must sound to you like a seminary lecture. So I will cease robbing your time, and leave you to your affairs for now, in the hope of having secured, if not your entertainment, then at least your indulgence.

Your friend and servant,

BENOÎT

Fourth Letter: Pierre to Benoît

Dear Benoît,

I hope this letter finds you in good health, as well as Hélène. Indeed your account of your visit to Luzirac is not taking the turn I had expected. I thought that, in our day and age, monasteries mostly occupied themselves with making goat cheese and plum liquor. But I see that they still have libraries and that there are people who have spent time in them.

And by no means should you imagine that I find your story boring. On the contrary: I could hardly have imagined that Abbot Foulquières had invited you to Luzirac to speak about theater. Nor, to be honest, have I heard anyone mention theater and Saint Bonaventure in the same sentence in as long as I can remember. I would not presume to guess whether Abbot Foulquières himself has ever set foot in a theater, but I after the latest season I must conclude that, had I wanted my senses excited and my mind set in motion, I would have been better served traveling to Luzirac in the snow to speak about theater with the abbot than seeing the real thing on stage in Paris.

That being said, I am curious to know where the abbot's comments led you. While it is perhaps not my place to argue with his interpretation, I note that Bonaventure describes theater — as well as the other mechanical arts for that matter — as a *recipient* of heavenly light. This is in fact what the abbot himself pointed out, if I read your letter carefully. And indeed, without dragging the conversation too heavy-handedly back to the subject of optics, it strikes me that an object that is a recipient of light does not itself emit light, and therefore that it is dark. Or is my reasoning flawed?

Unfortunately Bonaventure does not tell us whether he finds that, by receiving heavenly light, the mechanical arts absorb it or reflect it. And indeed we can hardly fault the generations that have preceded us in faith — especially with such awesome in-

sight as Bonaventure — for having done so with the tools of their day, knowing nothing about optics, and without the benefit of the light that modern science sheds on Creation, so to speak. But the question remains, of course, since in one case theater is a dark art, in which we can hope to see nothing, namely if it does absorb heavenly light. Whereas in the other case theater sends us a faint reflection of the light of God, and while that makes it far from a heavenly mirror, at least there is a bit more to see in it than in the dark bottom of a deep well.

But I am letting myself be carried away, as if you could relay my comments to the abbot, forgetting that you are telling me a story that took place many years ago and that, for all I know, the abbot might now be long dead. I hope you will at least take my transports as a sign that I am not bored of your story, and that I look forward to the excitement of reading your next letter.

Your friend and servant,

PIERRE

Fifth Letter: Benoît to Pierre

Dear Pierre,

I hope you are well and the children are healthy. Hélène is improving slowly but still spends most of her days chairbound, doing handiwork in her room. As for me, I am too idle to be either well or unwell, and sometimes I am so bored that I forget if I am awake or asleep. I catch myself envying the enthusiasm Virgil found in agriculture, and the poetic inspiration Pliny drew from his country estate. For, alas, my coarse and unimaginative eyes do not see it: I stir this way and that, I fret, I sigh, no verses come to my mind from the buzzing of the bees, and no songs from the whispering of the brook — nothing, in fact, but impatience, for all I see is insects and water. Perhaps I am too much of a scientist and not enough of a poet.

In any case, I wish the trivial matters of this estate could settle themselves without my intervention, or that I had the good fortune of deriving my income from land a bit closer to Paris. Surely some people have estates a day's ride away, and they do not have to spend months at a time in this sort of place?

I wonder how people manage who have acquired estates in the New World. I imagine things there go wrong as often as they do here, or even more often perhaps. The owners obviously never visit the land, and I suppose they leave its administration to the care of adventurers. To me this seems no more reliable than pouring money into the sea and hoping it will be returned tenfold.

In any case, you see to what idle musings I am reduced. Had I known I would be detained here so long, I would have brought my lute with me, so that at least there I could compete with Virgil's bees and brooks, and perhaps accompany a bleating goat or two.

But I had promised a good story, or at least secured your indulgence for a mediocre one, and here I am, keeping you wait-

ing while I speak nonsense. Let me therefore return to the abbey at Luzirac and deliver the story I had promised.

After my first night at the abbey, I woke up to the sound of dawn coming into my room. I knew it as soon as I heard it: a characteristic faint rustle, an indistinct morning murmur which, by a slight change of tone, signals that day has broken, night has receded, and the outside world has turned busy rather than ominous. I rose, went up to my window and opened the curtains. Behind the curtain the window felt cold, empty, and perhaps even jealous: as if it wanted to suck in the whole room, bed, blankets, pillows and all, and throw it outside. The thick woolen curtains felt rough and heavy, but not unfriendly — like a gruff bear posted as a sentinel to guard my room against the cold.

I touched the window: it was damp with frigid dew. The glass felt weak and inept at its job of separating the inside from the outside. I praised the wool of the curtains, but felt disappointed in glass as a substance, amusing myself all the while at the frivolity of such indignation. I felt my mind waver about glass. As a man of science I had nothing but scorn for the incompetence hiding behind its hardness. It had one task, that of providing separation, but every night it abandoned its duty and betrayed its makers. I could not repress the thought that somehow glass was a substance from purgatory: spiteful, duplicitous, unreliable, and jealous, waiting all night to take revenge on the warm and throw it to the cold. After all, how else could glass be hiding something?

I left my room and walked down to the refectory. My steps seemed awkwardly noisy on the creaky wooden floor. I imagined the dead trees under my feet taking revenge on the living faithful by exposing their silence as a fraud, every morning. Perhaps I was surrounded by vindictive and jealous substances, and this abbey was full of metaphysical hazards?

Further down I sounded blunt and clumsy in the reverberant stone staircase, as if I was plodding with yarn clogs on the surface of a giant drum. The further down I walked, the more the stairs turned drafty, chilly, and resonant. Finally I reached

the refectory's door. I lifted the cold, smooth, round handle, and at once it was warm and still. The room smelled of oatmeal. The occasional ring of spoons against cups — in fact just a muffled and truncated tinkle — revealed the room's thick rugs and wall drapes.

The abbot met me after breakfast. I foolishly presumed to open the conversation with shallow prattle about my gratitude to the rough wool of the curtain and my frivolous disappointment with glass for its metaphysical failings — forgetting perhaps that I was not at a Parisian salon amusing friends with witty chatter, but in a mountaintop abbey with a man of religion.

I was quite taken aback when the abbot indicated, without irony, that this was in fact what he intended to discuss that morning: the metaphysics of wool and glass. Hugh of Saint Victor, the abbot declared without any introduction, names two activities in which man can approach resemblance to God: the contemplation of truth and the exercise of virtue.

I confess it took me a while to accept that the abbot had just said something specific with words that were intended to have a meaning. I was still in oatmeal, body and soul. Perhaps I expected everything in the morning to have the consistency of oatmeal, even philosophical arguments. Perhaps I had just contemplated the truth of my breakfast and exercised the virtue of finishing every last spoonful of it, and that was how far I could think before the gears of my mind could spin further. I listened on in curious and largely respectful silence.

Saint Bonaventure, the abbot continued, follows the division of human activities laid out by Hugh of Saint Victor, and assigns to each one a degree to which they reflect the light of God. In that division, believe it or not, the preparation of wool appears on the same theological level as the art of theater, both of which being called "mechanical arts."

Allow me, at this point, to anticipate your sarcasm: you quipped in an earlier letter that abbeys nowadays were mostly known

for making goat cheese and liquor. And indeed I can hear you joke now that if their intellectual pursuits also involve discussing optics under the angle of theology, and using texts hundreds of years old without concern for the light that modern science has recently shed on the field — so to speak — then perhaps goat cheese and liquor would be more worthwhile pursuits.

Before you entertain this thought and, God forbid, revoke your kind indulgence for my recounting of this curious story, I should say that the abbot had more in mind. Having explained why he cared about the optics of wool — if I may luxuriate for an instant in the pulp of such an eye-crossing shortcut — you will soon seen why he cared about glass and theater as well.

But now I think I have said either far too much or not enough. I fear I have unduly taken advantage of your time and your curiosity by troubling you with such stale and fantastical blather, so I will leave the story here and let you return to your affairs.

Your friend and servant,

BENOÎT

Sixth Letter: Pierre to Benoît

Dear Benoît,

I hope you are well and that Hélène's recovery is proceeding apace. The story you tell is indeed extravagant — and more so by the page if I may say so — but you tell it so well that I am beginning to relish the journey more than the prospect of arriving. Half of me ardently wishes to know where your story is going, but I think the other half might secretly hope it goes nowhere.

You now have me musing that we men of science profess to seek truth, and that — pardon me for stating the obvious — we might in fact largely do so in the genuine hope of finding it. But your story makes me search my heart: I wonder if we quietly harbor a certain scorn for wayfarers and storytellers, those for whom truth is a direction more than a destination.

For indeed I am now doubting whether your story will lead me to any kind of truth, or whether I should experience it as a promenade. Part of me wants to be led to truth. But if I find truth, what will I do with it? Perhaps nothing special in fact. Maybe truth only beacons brightly because it is so hard to reach, but it remains a direction rather than a destination. I suppose the same could be said of the search for wealth, since wealth is also quite hard to reach. And for that matter, it seems that anything that is hard to reach could make for a fine quest.

Now I wonder if it is the quest for truth we cherish, rather than truth itself. If so, then our quest for truth is nothing more than a promenade, a wandering for leisure, strewn with beautiful and interesting thoughts like flowers in a planted alley. Truth perhaps serves merely as a sort of sunset, pointing the curious wanderer west and telling him which country to visit next. But the sunset itself is a direction, not a destination. The curious traveler leaves sketches of his visits to beautiful and interesting countries, but he does not actually visit the sunset. I wonder if this is in fact what we do as scientists.

In the end it may matter little for the value of these sketches whether the traveler has gone east or west. We read them and find them inspiring, even if they speak of countries that do not exist, and follow imaginary sunsets in worlds with no sun.

And so perhaps similarly we men of science might leave sketches of the beautiful and interesting thoughts we have visited on our way to truth, even if we wander in worlds with no truth. Maybe the accounts of our wandering thoughts are just fit to be called poetry?

But see how I digress when you throw me into the thick of this strange new tragedy where an abbot, Hugh of Saint Victor, and Saint Bonaventure meet on a mountaintop to find something of philosophical value over oatmeal. The plot is frankly not much more absurd and ludicrous than some of the more fashionable tragedies I've seen this season — and perhaps you should really write that play and see if it takes the Parisian stage by storm.

But you still have not explained what the abbot was looking for, and also what you have to do with any of this. There is nothing so strange about abbots busying themselves with fatuous speculations around the thoughts of old authors — that is, in a sense, their profession. But I have yet to understand what value the abbot was hoping to find in the contribution of a modern man of science like yourself to these matters.

In the hope that you will now satisfy the curiosity you have so skillfully kindled, I remain

Your faithful friend and servant,

PIERRE

Seventh Letter: Benoît to Pierre

Dear Pierre,

I hope you are well and the children are healthy. I had not known you to have such a fondness for the art of promenading, but come to think of it, that is perhaps what theater does for us as well.

Somehow when we have had a fine roast and ale aplenty, and we step into the theater at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in pleasant company, modern science wafts away for the evening. The grease of a good duck glows from our bowels up into the rosy sheen of our contented cheeks and the glimmer of our eyes. For an instant we are a beaming microcosm of our nocturnal theatrical macrocosm, its own incandescent grease also shining contentedly from sconces and chandeliers onto the luster of satins and farthingales. The distinction between mental and physical substance dissolves rapidly in ale and duck fat. For a few hours we would have none of it, and would toast Nicholas de Cusa for bringing the whole universe into our bodies if he was still alive and walked by our table.

And speaking of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, you may recall that brilliant but somewhat eccentric actor Valleran Le Conte — he sadly seems to have fallen out of favor with the public — on stage in one of those curiously compelling plays that Alexandre Hardy once gave there: the story was from Plutarch, and in a sense was just as much fatuous speculation around the thoughts of old authors, to use your own words, as the abbot's musings on Saint Bonaventure's theory of theater as a "mechanical art."

But somehow we do not find Hardy to be fatuous speculation because we expect theater to be false, whereas we expect science to be true. So we delight in idle speculation if it is called theater, but resent it if it calls itself science. Yet in both cases it is perhaps indeed the promenade we enjoy: the effort of going somewhere, wherever it may be, and perhaps also the skill expended on the process.

In theater this is obvious because we enjoy watching plays whose end we already know, and even with the knowledge that the characters are fictitious and there is nothing real at stake in their frenzy. If that were true for science we would enjoy reading old arguments whose conclusion we already know, even with the knowledge that the reasoning is spurious, the conclusion is false, and there is nothing real at stake in the intellectual commotion. And I was going to conclude that we do not — but I wonder: perhaps we do. And perhaps that is true even with new arguments, and perhaps even with our own? We might also occasionally find something true in science, but maybe that is just an added cause for satisfaction in something that is already pleasant regardless.

Now I wonder if theater is just the same but in different proportions. We expect theater to be false, but if we occasionally find it to be saying something true, then it is like finding the clove of garlic in the roast: there is a certain satisfaction in finding it, but we will not swallow it, nor do we wish for more. Yet when we find science to be untrue, then it turns into last week's roast: we may agree that it was good at the time, but we will have none of it today. And yet last week's roast and today's roast are the same thing, and we still praise the cook's talent for something we would not eat today.

In any case, here I am maundering again and writing you an impromptu neoplatonic treatise on the philosophy of garlic instead of answering your questions and telling the story I had promised you.

To be fair, it was not wholly without purpose that I brought up Nicholas de Cusa, for the abbot has a fascination for his writings. I know that is unlikely to endear him to you — or to me in fact — or indeed to any of the serious scholars of our generation who have devoted their lives to prying science out of the former wretchedness of mystical darkness, and to expounding instead

the clarity of the distinction between mind and matter as the foundation of all possible knowledge.

But recall that we are now in a story set in a mountaintop abbey in the snow, with a blind abbot — did I mention he was blind? — debating questions of theater as a mechanical art with Hugh of Saint Victor and Bonaventure. So if you have enjoyed the journey so far, not for any truth it has purported to uncover, but for the entertainment of the journey itself — just as you enjoy a good play about an ancient crisis — then you might as well embrace Nicholas de Cusa as a character in this strange play and invite him to the table to share in the duck grease and see where it drips this time. It is in that spirit that I will now tell you why the abbot cared so much about him, if you would still like to know.

Nicholas de Cusa, the abbot points out, devoted an entire treatise to the beryl stone: until recently beryl was used to make eyeglasses — until, that is, the craft of making fine enough glass was perfected. In order to make eyeglasses, the beryl had to be properly cut into a lens that is equally convex and concave, allowing one to see things that were previously invisible.

To you and me — and anyone else in this age who can distinguish science from the artisanship of goat cheese and liquor — this is an obvious matter of optics. And more generally this is a question about the behavior of a physical substance, in which we see nothing else than exactly what I just said: the behavior of a physical substance.

But not to Nicholas de Cusa, and also not to the abbot, because the former lives in a different century from ours, and the latter lives on a snow-covered mountaintop shrouded in blindness where metaphysics has the consistency of oatmeal. And so if I understand correctly what the abbot said about Nicholas de Cusa, this optical property of beryl is not just a matter of optics, but also a metaphor — or more accurately an allegory. Nicholas de Cusa imagines a sort of "beryl of the mind," which, if properly crafted, makes discernible what was previous unintelligible to the intellect. And what was previously unknowable, but finally

becomes intelligible through this mystical beryl, is no less than the nature of God.

The question for the abbot, of course, is what such a "beryl of the mind" is, where it can be found, and how it would have such optical properties not for the eye, but for the mind.

I believe you now understand why questions of the substance of wool and glass are not a matter of breakfast chatter for the abbot, but issues of metaphysical and, ultimately, theological importance. But I imagine you are still wondering why these issues should concern me: what light I could possibly have to shed on these arcane questions of the substance of wool and glass, especially as uniquely phrased as they are by Abbot Foulquières?

I was hoping the answer would have been in warm breakfast oatmeal, but it was in beryl: the abbot was looking for a synthesis, a sort of philosopher's stone in effect — a miraculous marriage of Nicholas de Cusa's allegorical ideas about optics and Hugh of Saint Victor's classification of human activities.

This is the marriage proposal: on the one hand, Nicholas of Cusa describes a "beryl of the mind" that will reveal the nature of God. On the other hand, Hugh of Saint Victor describes a "contemplation of truth and the exercise of virtue" that will let us resemble God. The abbot wanted to find these two things together, in one place, or rather I should say in one practice, one activity: an activity that contemplates truth and exercises virtue, and turns out to be the "beryl of the mind."

And where do you imagine the abbot looked for that mystical synthesis? In an unexpected corner of Bonaventure's theory of light: theater. Yes, my dear friend: I had traveled through snow to a mountaintop abbey to debate with a blind man over oatmeal whether theater can reveal the nature of God and bring us closer to our Creator.

At least now you understand why the abbot was keen on my expertise — if I can use such a word for the countless evenings I have spent overdressed, daydreaming, or cackling in the theaters of the capital. Hugh of Saint Victor and Bonaventure and Nicholas de Cusa would not tell him anything about those idle ale-filled evenings watching hot grease drip from sconces onto

some far-fetched tragedy at the Hôtel de Bourgogne: he needed me, of all people, to contribute that keystone to his mystical edifice.

But surely I have now exhausted your goodwill — I have also reached a reasonable closing point in my tale. So I will leave it at that and not bother you further with the nonsensical drivel I have been imposing upon you under the pretense of a good story.

Your friend and servant,

BENOÎT

Eighth Letter: Pierre to Benoît

Dear Benoît,

I hope you are well and that Hélène's recovery is proceeding apace. Truth be told, I am troubled by your last letter: I am a man of science, and usually my doubts are of such nature that I am secure in them. But doubt requires method, and method requires certainty that some things can be doubted because they are being investigated, while others cannot be doubted because they are the tool of the investigation or even the reason for it. But all of that is beginning to dissolve in snow, duck fat, ale, goat cheese, and liquor.

The abbot, you see, makes a fine point after all. He is undoubtedly a learned and keen man of religion, and there is insight and discernment in what he says about these illustrious authors.

He is, in a sense, trained to consider these matters along lines of thought that we modern men of science would perhaps no longer deem part of our intellectual arsenal. His work as the abbot of Luzirac gives him a different perspective than ours on Hugh of Saint Victor, Bonaventure, and even Nicholas de Cusa. For, assuredly, you and I still read and respect these authors as intellectual monuments of the generations who have preceded us in faith and science. But it has become harder for us to find spiritual light in them — especially for those among us who, thanks to the recovery of true religion in the past century, have learned to find that inspiration solely in Scripture under the immediate guidance of the Holy Spirit, and to distinguish religion from philosophy.

Nicholas de Cusa is perhaps the hardest one of all for us to consider because he is closer to us: so much of our generation's work has focused on overcoming the neoplatonic nonsense of microcosm and macrocosm, and replacing that folksy allegorical thinking of yore with a scientific distinction between mind and matter.

But I will grant that with some effort we could still appreciate that obsolete philosophy as poetry, and perhaps in fact I will grant more than that: I am willing to concede that in matters of light we may not always be just discussing optics, but that perhaps there is a spiritual matter at hand that can only be properly approached metaphorically and through poetic discourse because we lack the ability to investigate it with other methods.

The difference remains that our generation is able to appreciate a metaphor for something distinct from reality — even if in spiritual matters we may come no closer to that reality than the metaphor in question — whereas Nicholas de Cusa's generation continues to frustrate us for its inability to distinguish metaphor from reality, as if it possessed the ability to walk the straight path of logical argument but somehow always took an unexpected side step and confused inquiry with choreography.

Yet if the generations that have preceded us in scholarship thought it fruitful to dance their way to spiritual cognizance, perhaps we modern men of science would do well to read their contribution as poetry, and to see what light illuminates it as an art — to use Bonaventure's words. Perhaps we ought to consider whether divine light shines more on the act of making something — on the poetry in the Greek sense — than on the product of that labor, be it a dance or a roast or a piece of scientific reasoning.

And so perhaps Bonaventure makes a valid point about divine light shining on the mechanical arts if we consider that the illumination occurs by virtue of the designer's work, and not because of a physical property of the finished object made by him. We might read Bonaventure again and start wondering if he sees process, rather than completion, as luminous.

Or to use Nicholas de Cusa's words, maybe the "beryl of the mind" brings clarity because it is so hard to carve, and not because we can look through it. Perhaps it is our promenade in the direction of truth that is the "beryl of the mind" because truth remains far away and the path is strewn with obstacles, and it is our toil and not our skill or our result that has any value in the world of spiritual optics — if you can call it that.

But if that is so, then what is our role as men of science? Does it matter that what we seek is truth, or are we like poets, who give something of value to the world by virtue of putting toil and skill into their design, and not because that design points to the truth or to anything else in particular? Or is it toil alone, and not even skill, that reflects light?

In any case, I was going to give you my judgment on the play I saw last night, but I now have no memory of it anymore and instead my head is filled with light, snow, goat cheese, and liquor. I might just stop attending plays altogether and look forward instead to an extravagant theatrical setting of your own story. Really — I jest, but not entirely: you ought to make it into a play.

Your friend and servant,

PIERRE

Ninth Letter: Benoît to Pierre

Dedication to the esteemed Pierre, scientist

My lord,

The lowly play I humbly present to you has perhaps no other merit than that of having occupied me a while in the desert of the countryside, and if it has the additional merit of entertaining you, surely that quality comes from the lack of skill with which it was made, inspired as it is by a shadow of the memory of a shadow, not of the best plays of our age, but of whatever froth the worst ones have left strewn on the sand of my mind after evaporating.

Our God is a generous one and His gifts upon us are many. To you, my lord, he has given, I believe, the gift of discernment, and if any light shines forth from the clumsy work of my graceless hands, it is surely because you have faithfully accepted the gift that lets you see His light reflected in the toil of others. My virtue is feeble and unworthy of such a gift, but if toil in darkness is my lot, I rejoice at least that it is my labor and not my skill that is worthy of gracing others with a reflection of His light.

My lord,
Your very humble and very obedient servant,
Benoît

A PLAY

THE CHARACTERS

BENOÎT, a man of science and frequent theatergoer, visiting from Paris.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES, an old blind man, head of the abbey of Luzirac.

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR, a twelfth-century monk, philosopher, and theologian.
SAINT BONAVENTURE, a thirteenth-century monk, philosopher, and theologian.
NICHOLAS DE CUSA, a fifteenth-century philosopher and theologian.

The scene is in Luzirac, a stone abbey on a remote mountaintop.

ACT I

SCENE I

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR, NICHOLAS DE CUSA

NICHOLAS DE CUSA, *holding a shiny rock.*

Upon this trinity philosophers have pondered
Anaxagoras and before him Hermotimus
And all who read Plato have wondered what

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR, *kicking him.*

What?

NICHOLAS DE CUSA

What?

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR

Trinity?

NICHOLAS DE CUSA

What trinity?

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR

A rock?

NICHOLAS DE CUSA

The beryl: a shiny stone, white and transparent,
To which both concave and convex form can be given,
And through which what was previously invisible can be seen.

SCENE II

BENOÎT, ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES, *seated in a refectory over warm oatmeal.*

BENOÎT

This oatmeal is a small miracle, my dear abbot.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Everything is a small miracle.

BENOÎT

Surely, but this warm bowl in my hands
The tinkle of the spoon against it
And my bowel swaddled in sweetness.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Like the newborn Christ in the hands of Mary.

BENOÎT

Your gift for images is also a miracle, my dear abbot.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

All the events around us are but a series of miracles,
Whether they move the sun or a spoon.

BENOÎT

I suppose the miracle of Creation
Has set the machine of the world in motion
And in these noble halls you men of religion
Study the original miracle
While we men of science study the machine
And understand its gears
Whether they move the sun or a spoon.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

I do not see it this way. I see only miracles and no machine.
And I do not know how to measure the size of a miracle
And whether it is a greater miracle
That God moves the celestial bodies across the sky
Or that while doing so he also remembers
To make every spoon in the universe tinkle.

BENOÎT

What is then this machine that we men of science study?
Does it not have principles and causes and effects?
Surely there is something for us to explain and discover

Lest men of my ilk be called poets,
Seeing fanciful links where there are none,
And doing no other good than wording them into pleasantries.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Perhaps they are pleasantries?

SCENE III

BENOÎT, ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES, BONAVENTURE

BENOÎT

If events are just a series of miracles,
What need do we have of causality?
Is causality dead, my dear abbot?
Is the appearance of causation a mere fiction?

BONAVENTURE

If I may interject,
I believe I have written at length on the matter.

BENOÎT

You tell us.

BONAVENTURE

Avicenna believes in such a theory of causation,
You could call it occasionalism:
It views all events as unrelated miracles
Effected by God at all instants
With no causation between them.

BENOÎT

And did you support such a view?

BONAVENTURE

I did not, because Augustine points to a better one.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

But as a literary theory?

BONAVENTURE

As a literary theory? Is that what we are talking about?

BENOÎT

Is that, my dear abbot, what we are indeed talking about?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Were you not, just now, concerned about being a poet?

BENOÎT

I was concerned about the existence
Of cause and effect in the universe.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Were you actually concerned about the existence
Of cause and effect in the universe?

BENOÎT

I was.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Concerned in what sense? About safeguarding it?

BENOÎT

About discovering it. About describing it.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Then is your concern about the universe?
Or about the work you do
When you write about it for others to read?

BONAVENTURE, *interjecting gently.*

I am, of course, an ordained minister
And available to take confession if one of you requires it.

BENOÎT

Then I suppose I can openly confess that my concern
Is about discovering and describing causality in the universe
And writing about it for others to read
And thus my concern is whether that work is science,
As I believe,
Or poetry, as the abbot believes.

BONAVENTURE

Then, if I may, this is not Avicenna's concern
And I have not written about it
For his concern was the metaphysics of the universe
And not the place of scientific writing in literary theory.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Then if you will, I would like to speak about the *Decameron*.

BONAVENTURE

In that case, on metaphysical grounds,
I must excuse myself from the discussion
Because the matter is after my time.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Unless you can confess to being a character in a play
And secure a special dispensation from the author.

BONAVENTURE

I had not considered the matter under that angle.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

The author is right here.

BENOÎT

With all due reverence,
I will not grant such dispensation for the moment,
And while I admire your courage, Bonaventure,
For confessing to being a character,
I kindly request that you withdraw
As we discuss the *Decameron*.

Bonaventure withdraws.

SCENE IV

BENOÎT, ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES, *seated in a quiet secluded room.*

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

If I were to convince you that the *Decameron* is a fiction,
Would that remove all causality from it?

BENOÎT

No, but I am already convinced the *Decameron* is a fiction
Because it is, indeed, a fiction. We know the author.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

It is indeed a fiction. And does that eliminate the appearance
That the various events in the story
Are linked by sequence and causality?

BENOÎT

No, that appearance is plain for all to see, my dear abbot.
It is created by Boccaccio's genius and skill, and nothing else.
Not by anything intrinsic to the events recounted.
For indeed they are not events:
They are figments of the author's mind.
Through his skill they are made to look like events,
Capable of causing and being caused,
And of appearing in sequence with other events.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

But in reality?

BENOÎT

In reality they are not events
And there is no causality in the *Decameron,*
Or in any other work of fiction.
I suppose that is the conclusion you were driving at?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

No. And I disagree.
If there were no causality in the *Decameron*
It would be quite tedious to read.
But instead it is very pleasant.

BENOÎT

Then I am at a loss.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

There is causality in the *Decameron,*
But it is not a feature of the events.
Causality is not an object in the universe of the *Decameron*:
It is only a device at the author's disposal.
With that device he puts a certain order
In the universe he has made
So that, for example, there appears to be events
And causation between them.
But that device is not an object in that universe.
We could call it a category of that universe:
It allows us to order the objects in it.

BENOÎT

Could it not have appeared as an object in that universe?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

It could have, but it does not.
Michelangelo does not paint paintbrushes, does he?
He could have, but he does not.
Devices remain hidden outside the finished work.

BENOÎT

And so with miracles?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

And so Boccaccio has a little machine
To manufacture small miracles at will
Within the universe of the *Decameron*.
It is called causality
And only the author is allowed to use it.

BENOÎT

Indeed, my dear abbot,
Now I see that every event in the *Decameron*
Is a miracle sprung out of Boccaccio's genius and skill,
And whose causal relationship to other events in the work
Is pure fiction.
But now, do you say so of the real world as well?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Yes.

BENOÎT

That the events in it are pure fiction?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Yes.

BENOÎT

That
The appearance of causation between those events
Is also pure fiction?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Yes.
Causality is a device we employ to put order in our universe.
But it is just that: a device. It is a fiction.
As you said: we know the author.

They stand up and walk away.

SCENE V

BENOÎT, ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES,
pacing around the cloister quadrangle at night,
NICHOLAS DE CUSA,
walking silently in front of them, lighting the way with a torch.

BENOÎT

My dear abbot, what about the events we live?
What about this conversation?
And this walk around the cloister of your abbey?
Are they also fictions?
What about Nicholas de Cusa holding a torch before us
And lighting our way?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

We are but small creatures, are we not?
We cannot create events out of the power of our minds.
Only our author can.
But we can create devices out of the power of our minds
In order to organize God's creation.
Time, causality: these are our human fictions,
Our most refined creations.
With those devices, we can make sense
Out of a senseless shower of miracles.

BENOÎT

I see, my dear abbot, that this is the privilege
Of the human race.
To frogs and insects there is nothing more
Than a shower of miracles.
There is no order, no sense,
And no beauty perhaps.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Indeed, this is also why our correspondence started
With the question of the soul of plants and animals.
This is what we were driving at.

BENOÎT

I see it now.
But is our world not infinitely more complex
Than the universe of the *Decameron*?
How can we call it a fiction,
When there is such a perfect order
In the pattern of the planets and the stars?
In plants and animals, in motion and matter?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

God is an author of infinitely more genius and skill
Than Boccaccio.

Nicholas de Cusa pauses for a moment. The others pause behind him. He starts walking again. The others resume walking, a few steps behind him.

BENOÎT

And otherwise our world is nothing
But a very big *Decameron,* is it not?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

There is a danger in how seductive that statement sounds
Because it is false.

BENOÎT

Then tell me, my dear abbot, what is the difference?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

The difference is where the devices reside.
In the *Decameron,*
The devices that put some order in the universe
Are not a part of the work itself.
They reside with the author, outside the work.
The participants in the *Decameron* have no power
To organize their own world.
They cannot order it according to cause and sequence:
We do that for them, and it is imposed upon them.
They only have the power
To perform the acts that have been assigned to them
And to act out their part.

BENOÎT

But in our world?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

In our world, things are different.

He pauses. Then continues.

We could call the real world a universe whose participants
Have the power to create devices to organize it.
Only God has the power to make events.
But we have the power to see causality and sequence in them.
We also have the power to refrain from using those devices.
Events are fictions made by our author.
But categories are fictions made by us, for ourselves
To organize our universe

(Looking at the audience and smirking)

— Though only if it suits our fancy.

Nicholas de Cusa walks off the stage with the torch, leaving the other two in the dark. They sit on a bench.

BENOÎT

Forgive me, my dear abbot, if this is an academic question,
But how it this a matter
Of literary theory and not of metaphysics?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Consider the *Decameron*
And the smaller stories told inside it by its participants:
You can imagine endless lower levels of fiction

Of stories within stories.
Boccaccio creates a world
And creates its participants as well,
And then in turn those participants
Create their own embedded worlds of fiction,
And so on.
But the power of authorship remains with the author
No matter how many embedded fictional worlds
His characters imagine.

BENOÎT

And with our own universe?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Perhaps it is more difficult
To envision worlds of inverse proportions:
Bigger worlds, in which ours is contained as a fiction,
Worlds we can explain and order
Because the power to organize and invent metaphysical devices
Resides with us,
But of which we are still participants,
Created by authors who live in higher levels of fiction.
And so on, as far up as your mind can stretch.

BENOÎT

That is harder to imagine, but not impossible.
It would be hard to find evidence for it.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Just a few pages ago
You banned Bonaventure from this discussion,
Is that not evidence enough?
The fact that you and I are characters in a fiction

Is not a metaphor,
But an objective fact: you wrote this play.

BENOÎT

I suppose I would be contesting my own authorship
If I disagreed.

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

So this is the inverse of the *Decameron*.
It is inverse fiction — fiction in the passive voice.
We are being imagined.
There is no limit to how many higher universes
We can imagine, containing ours.
And we can spend a lifetime imagining them,
And ourselves being imagined
As characters in a fiction, even outside this play.
Ultimately this is indeed a matter of literary theory.

BENOÎT

As a man of science
Am I then only a poet?

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES

Being a poet is no small thing.
Perhaps science is the branch of poetry
That organizes the fiction that contains us.
Perhaps it tries to put some order
In a work of fiction in which we are the characters.
But it does so with devices that we created ourselves
And that firmly reside with us, not above or below us.

The abbot stands up, puts his hand on his hip and looks up.

And perhaps even theology is nothing more
Than a weak attempt
To reach for those upper fictional universes
Of which we can barely conceive:
Those worlds where our world is a fiction of a fiction,
A story within a story within a story and so on,
Yet one where on a remote level — ours — the characters
Are endowed
With the power to order universes, to create devices.

They leave, the wind is heard howling.

End of ACT I

Well my dear Pierre, here is at least one act of the play you egged me on to write. I doubt it would gain the favors of the Parisian public or be much esteemed by playwrights and poets. I imagine Malherbe and Montchréstien would find it wretched — as they generally do anything written by others than themselves.

Perhaps Alexandre Hardy would find some merit in it: he is, after all, no stranger to irregularity, and perhaps I ought to be as unconcerned as he is about whether the play is a tragedy or a comedy, since I do not know the answer either.

But see to what nonsense I am once more reduced: here I am, discussing the merits of my skill as a poet after staging myself in fear of being called one. I think I have gone far enough with this trifle and abused your time and indulgence. If you wish to cure me of my doubts, why not endeavor to write the second act yourself, and see if you can either do better, or at least join me in the indignity of this claptrap.

Your loyal friend and servant,

BENOÎT

Tenth Letter: Pierre to Benoît

Dear Benoît,

It is no small feat of alchemy you have accomplished, proving, as you did, that metaphysics dissolves in ale and duck fat. And though you may shudder at leaving such posterity, history might just remember you for this groundbreaking result. As a fellow man of science, I have done what is my duty and responsibility to the cause of knowledge: I have replicated your experiment, using the very same substances, and you will be delighted to know that I have obtained the same result. To prove it, I submit to you Act II of what is undoubtedly soon to be the most tedious and unpopular play on the Parisian stage in a generation, famous as it will soon become for its sideways neoplatonic choreography and its frivolous lighting.

ACT II

SCENE I

NICHOLAS DE CUSA, *pacing alone, agitated.*

Could God not have created those devices for us?
Are they ours? Are they just our own works of poetry?

(sits on the edge of a chair)

God does not need categories for himself.
Why would he make them? For us?

(stands up and begins pacing again)

No, metaphysics is just
Carpentry for the weak and the unfaithful.
We only need it because we are lowly.
We would otherwise be overwhelmed
By God's endless shower of miracles.
We need metaphysical devices
Like small children need the Bible to be told to them
In a dozen simple sentences.
They could not comprehend the raw bulk of it,
But they can grasp a few highlights
If it is properly organized for them.

(moves to the front of the stage, looks up, addresses the audience)

We need those devices
Like we need the beryl to make eyeglasses:
To power and augment our weak vision
So that we can explore our universe methodically.
But what good is such a device to God?
He does not need to make sense out of the universe
Around him.
God does not need the beryl. He does not need eyeglasses.
The universe is not given to him. He made it.
He does not need to explore it
And inventory its contents. So God does not need metaphysics.
But we do! We do!

SCENE II

NICHOLAS DE CUSA, HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR, *entering the room and interrupting.*

Yes we do. And for this we have poets and scientists.
And they make the same thing:

Poetry, which is a mechanical art.

(the two remain silent for a while,
then Hugh of Saint Victor continues)

I will tell you something:
There are three ways for man to know something.
The first one is observation,
The second one is logical reasoning.
These two we share with animals.
For animals, too, in their own ways, are capable of reasoning.

NICHOLAS DE CUSA

How do you find animals capable of reasoning?

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR

When a dog, having been stoned many times,
Avoids the raised hand holding a rock,
Is he not using induction to predict a general law
From a few instances?

NICHOLAS DE CUSA

I suppose he is.

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR

And when mice, surveying the kitchen
And pondering two ways to get to the bread
Choose the difficult way around the glue trap
Rather than the easy way into it,
Have they not compared the value of two propositions,
And taking note that one was absurd,
Concluded that the other one to be correct?

NICHOLAS DE CUSA

Surely they have.

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR

I tell you then, our own skill in reasoning
Differs only in magnitude and power, but not in kind,
From that of animals.
Similarly animals often surpass us in their skill of observation,
And through their superior senses
Come to know things that we cannot know.
But that is again only a difference in magnitude, not in kind.

NICHOLAS DE CUSA

Then what is the third way for us to know something?

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR

I say, it is the third way that sets us apart:
What distinguishes man from animal
Is the ability to receive revelation.
In this respect God has favored man beyond all other creatures
For he has given us a way to know something
Beyond what we can observe
And beyond what we can reason:
A little window onto his infinite glory.

NICHOLAS DE CUSA

A little window, you say?
And can we make this window bigger?

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR

We can make it a little bigger by sharpening our faith.

As for those who do not know this third path to knowledge
Either because they have never heard of it
Or because they are leaving the little window unattended
And looking the other way,
They may indeed have fine observation skills,
Like the far-seeing eagle
And keen reasoning power, like the mice defeating the trap.
And through those two skills alone
They may know many things indeed
For which we can respect and love them as creatures of God.
But like the eagle and the mice, they are animals.

NICHOLAS DE CUSA

Leaving aside the animals, I am interested in the optics of this.

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR

They are animals.

NICHOLAS DE CUSA

You are entitled to that opinion.

SCENE III

BONAVENTURE, *alone in the refectory, eating oatmeal.*

Everything good that is given
Every good gift

(pauses, puts his spoon down — the spoon tinkles faintly)

It comes from above: from the God of light.
And that includes theater, does it not?

Hugh of Saint Victor calls it a type of dramatic art,
Together with music and poetry and dance.
And I, with him, call it a mechanical art,
Because it fulfills a need of the body.

(takes another spoonful of oatmeal)

People must have assumed I meant that it was the product
Of that mechanical art
That fulfills a need of the body
And reflects the light of God
As if the labor was just a means to that end.
But now that I am a character in a play,
As I have previously confessed,
I wonder if I could not take the liberty
To read myself otherwise.

(stands and begins to pace, still with the spoon in his hand)

Maybe the bodily need is to make that art
Maybe the need is in the making, and not in the result,
In the process, not in the product.
Maybe what our bodies need is not what the art produces
But the labor of making.
We only exist in Creation through our bodies,
The needs of our bodies are our needs
And if God made us in his image, with bodies in his Creation,
Perhaps it is because he is a maker
And he made us makers, too
And perhaps that is how we are in God's image:
As makers in the world he made.
As makers we reflect God's light on Creation
Not through what we make, but through the act of making:
That is what our bodies need,
Because they are made in God's image
And that is how the mechanical arts fulfill that need.

(fidgets with the spoon and accidentally drops it on the stone floor — it tinkles)

God made this world as he imagined it
And made the rules for it
And similarly we make poetic worlds as we imagine them
And make the rules for them.
Is that not in fact the essence of that conversation
About the *Decameron*
From which I had to excuse myself?
And is that not what theater is? A poetic world we imagine?
In spiritual matters we do not come close to knowing reality —
We do not come close to knowing God,
For our eyes are dimmed by sin.
It is only through contemplation that we elevate ourselves
Into God's light, and reflect a little bit of it.
And that contemplation is the act of making,
The labor of poetry,
The mechanical art of theater.
Theater reflects the light of God
Not because of what it shows the audience
But because making theater is an act
That reflects the light of God
For in that act we use our bodies as makers, in God's image.

SCENE IV

ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES, *to himself, hiding behind a curtain.*

I heard everything!

(facing the audience and comically enjoining them to be silent, leaning forward with his index finger on his mouth)

Sshhhh!

I heard everything!
The beryl!
Saint Bonaventure is right:
It is making theater that reflects the light of God
And not watching it.
I was right all along: as a blind man I am not deprived
Of the ability to reflect divine light,
And I was right to inquire about theater!
I praise the author for the chance to be in this play
And to make theater as best I can —
At least as a character for now!

SCENE V

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR, BONAVENTURE, NICHOLAS DE CUSA, ABBOT FOULQUIÈRES, BENOÎT, *holding hands, dancing, and singing in a circle in the style of the Commedia dell'Arte.*

The beryl! The beryl! The beryl of the mind!
We found it at last! It's theater! It's theater!
It's all about making and not about watching
The light's in the labor
We're makers and made
Let's rejoice and dance
And step forward and sideways
As the mind and the body
Partake of the same roast
And their old rivalry
Dissolves in duck fat and ale!
Let's rejoice and dance
The light's in the direction
And not in the destination
Tonight scientists are poets
And all sit at the same table
And join hands in the great theater

Of the mechanical arts!

Curtain

End of ACT II

Well my dear Benoît, if there was any indignity in Act I, then I surely have now joined you in it. But lest you think I have also joined the ranks of the damned, let me anticipate your skepticism: I can almost hear you wondering aloud how it is that we can sing and dance in joy at the reflection of divine light in labor, while at the same time profess, together with those who have accepted the true religion as it has been restored to us in the past century, that no salvation comes from our work, but only from our faith.

The answer is that the matter at hand is not how to obtain salvation, but how labor behaves optically — so to speak — within the optics of divine light. For indeed you will have noticed this peculiar feature of the knowledge passed down to us by those who have preceded us in faith and science, and particularly of the great authors with whom we have just danced and sung: they are not concerned with what we should do, but with what we actually do.

Our world is pragmatic, theirs is static. The question of what we should do is a unique concern of our generation and entails the notion that we have a choice about it, and in a sense that choice is the mark of those who, like us, have embraced the freedom given to them by God's gift of grace. And that is, I believe, what makes their view of work compatible with ours: they are not concerned with the ethics of labor, but with its optics.

Nothing in the poetic idea of discovering the "beryl of the mind" in theater entails what we should, or should not, do. The only thing we should, or should not, do is place our faith in our Savior and accept his grace: that is the choice we are given. But because this choice involves no labor — and indeed no labor can supplement or diminish it — the question of what happens to our work in the optics of divine light is wholly separate from whether we receive or reject divine grace. In fact you could call this a shortcoming of our theology: we have so much to say about what labor does not do, that we say little about what it does. And perhaps the answer is simple: it reflects divine light because we are made as making bodies.

In any case the chances are slim that either of us will have much success on the Parisian stage with this play. I cannot quite imagine us writing the remaining acts, and I think the fate that awaits us as playwrights is to be forgotten — perhaps for the better, as theological conversations with Parisian audiences do not always go well.

So without further ado I will let you return to your affairs, as we perhaps both ponder what strange comedy has just unfolded under our pens.

Your faithful friend and servant,

PIERRE

Eleventh Letter: Hélène to Pierre

Dear Pierre,

I hope you are well and the children are healthy. My dear husband Benoît is packing our belongings and settling the last few details of our affairs as we prepare to finally leave this estate and return to Paris, so please forgive my temerity if I take up the pen to write on his behalf.

Our time here has been quite tedious, as I believe Benoît has relayed to you. My husband has little affinity for the countryside: the idea of having unlimited space and nobody to conform to, or disagree with, ironically made him fret like a lion in a cage. I perhaps enjoyed the emptiness more than he did, but as you know, my leg was injured so the space was of no use to me: I was chair-bound and carrying in my very body the physical shackles of being tied to a small place in the universe.

But God be praised: I am healed and I can finally walk on my own again. While the two of you were exercising your great minds and leaping through theories and centuries, as men of science do, I tried my best to contemplate the truth of the Resurrection of our Lord by feeling the pain of his Crucifixion dimly reflected in the suffering of my own body. I trained my mind on exercising the virtue of faith in the rightfulness of my suffering. At last I reached a point where I stopped longing for the vanity of an unfettered body, and instead I began to feel grateful for the consciousness of my physical extension in the world, and for my ability to receive grace and reflect a tiny bit of divine light — not despite the limitations of my feeble body, but on the contrary through the awareness of my modest place in the universe.

As for grace, it was easy: I could do nothing to earn it even if I wanted to, and still I basked in the joy that I was worthy of it. I rejoiced in the incapacity of my body in the eyes of men, as it clarified to me the incapacity it had always had in God's eyes: not that my body was flawed, but rather, that God did not

need anything I could make for him, and that did not affect how much or how little I deserve his grace.

I also found myself accepting the suffering of my flesh as a privilege. Christ had suffered in his flesh to redeem the sins of others, and as I contemplated my own suffering I grasped that the power to redeem others through physical suffering lies solely within the purview of the divine: I had no such power, my suffering could not be part of any transaction with God or with anyone. No matter how much I suffered, I could not redeem myself or anyone else. Pain was merely a privileged insight into the human experience of Christ, designed perhaps to excite our gratitude to God for having created us as bodies.

As for reflecting divine light, it was also easy: I found myself making even more things than before from the immobility of my chair. The more I knitted, embroidered, and sewed in the dim light of my room, the more I felt like my hands were the candle and my work was the light. And if the room was still dim, it was because my labor was only dimly reflective of divine light, but still reflective enough to dispel the darkness and glorify God by making things, reminding myself that he had made me.

I probably do not quite have the aptitude to understand the many subjects that you and my husband, as men of science, debate and weave into the fabric of your writings, and yet sometimes it seems to me that I do almost the same work with my poor hands in the dimness of my room. For by luck I had brought with me a good thread of Persian yarn, a length of even-sided English foulard twill from fine silk, and a length of satin of Bruges. As I embroidered the yarn onto the satin, I was reminded of the lancing suffering of my flesh each time I pierced the fabric with my needle, as if God was embroidering my body with pain and passing a needle through me, and I was merely imitating his gesture. Yet as the embroidered satin became more beautiful in my eyes, I felt myself becoming more beautiful in the eyes of God as he also embroidered my body with a yarn of pain.

Indeed it is ironic that the practice of embroidery should reflect divine light: Persian yarn is made of wool, which is dull

and matte, while satin of Bruges is made of silk, which is shiny. It is strange that beauty should arise from marring, as it were, a shiny substance with a dull one, and that from this taint a more beautiful object should emerge. But in fact it seems to me that it is not the silk itself that shines, but the satin weave, wherein the weft floats over the warp, that causes it to shine. And in fact English foulard, being also made of silk, should shine as much as satin of Bruges if it were the silk itself as a substance that, through a sort of intrinsic nobility, attracted light, or perhaps I should say reflected it. Yet foulard twill is less shiny than satin, and it seems to me that it is the sturdiness of the twill weaving technique that makes it so.

And so it is not the substance itself, be it wool or silk, that has the quality of reflecting light, but the labor that is applied to it, namely whether it is woven as twill or satin. And perhaps as I sit embroidering wool onto silk in a chair in a dark room, in pain and unable to stand, it is not the quality of my person that reflects the light of God, however dimly, but the labor of my hands, because he has made me a making body in his image, and I am the fabric in his hands.

I have sometimes mused whether the fabric in my hands was sentient in some way, and gradually developed a sort of gratitude for its physical extension in the material world each time I pierced it with my needle, and reminded it through the pain of embroidery that it was being made more beautiful in the eyes of its maker. Perhaps there is a gratitude of objects in the small worlds we make, mirroring our gratitude in the world in which we are made?

In any case, while I embroidered, and while you and my husband debated great things, I was healed, and now I can walk on my own. I praise the Lord for that, though sometimes I doubt if there is any causality in matters of healing. I praise and I am healed, I am healed and I praise: it is hard to know if one comes first and the other follows. Perhaps it is fitting that I do not understand much about metaphysics because it seems of no succor

to us in these spiritual matters. Perhaps causality and sequence are like twill and satin: just two ways to weave the same yarn, so we can do something with it?

But you must think I am abusing your time and patience, foisting upon you these wives' tales about the trifles with which we concern ourselves in the dimness of our rooms, and usurping my husband's pen to cogitate indiscreetly on such inconsequential matters. Let me therefore bring my chatter to a halt.

As the coffers are being loaded onto our coach, and before I put this pen down and take my place among trunks and traveling vittles, let me at least promise you that you will see my husband again as soon as we return to the capital.

With my humble and most respectful salutations,

HÉLÈNE

Epilogue

I am an old man now, and my memory fails me.

I have now published the thoughts that dwelled for years in commentaries upon remarks upon memories of a snowy sojourn in a mountaintop abbey recounted in a pile of faded letters preserved in an old envelope kept inside a box.

I still do not know if Benoît wanted me to ponder them or burn them, read them or bury them, serve as a beacon of truth or a warning post on the path to error. But I do know that I am an old man, and that my memory fails me. Soon, I will be returned to the dust of the earth — as will you, dear reader.

And so as winter presses nearer, and the last leaf prepares to fall from the tree, I have offered these letters to the public for the edification of the curious and the satisfaction of the faithful. Perhaps as the ages pass upon these letters the purpose of their preservation will become manifest.