

Notes from a Burning Underground

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I.

Let me explain.

“Let” being of course superfluous here, where I am God, but infinitely appropriate in the presence of Truck, to whom I intended to deliver my treatise *in toto*, only one needed *permission* to address Professor Truck, Professor Truck’s rhetorical posture was that of a hilltop castle, an immense castle, absolutely impregnable, a fortress defended by ramparts and bulwarks, dimwitted men in chain mail willing to die en masse at a word from their lord, so that one entertained the mere prospect of approach with foreboding, a shift of the lip was all Truck would need to evince his professional distaste *for my methods*, so that rather than risk being embarrassed again, I often eschewed expression altogether, though I had many things to say, in silence allowed Truck to carry on with his nonsense while I improved upon a number of clever schemes to dispense with the gloating man’s life. But that day, on the hardwood, adrenaline made me unusually brave.

Let me explain, I repeated, I grunted, as he posted me up. *But he wouldn’t.*

Executing an ungainly reverse pivot—an inarguable travel I didn’t dare call—Truck loped into the lane, lofted a hideous hook-shot high over my head that improbably—but inevitably—swooped through the net without touching rim. Twenty-one he said, smiling. I had eight.

Truck and I had commenced our supposed friendship by chance, at a karaoke bar just off-campus, where a small contingent of Humanities faculty had convened *for a mixer* conjured by our provost to facilitate bonhomie. In that sultry singing hall a grinning Professor T (he was often grinning) approached me as I towed perspiration from my neck to express his admiration for

my vigorous rendition of a certain unjustly neglected gem I'd reclaimed from the coffers of late-century hip-hop. "Nasty," he laughed, suspending a closed fist for me to bump with one of my own. I was once an excellent rapper. In point of fact, I know quite a bit about rap, much more than most *professional* rappers know: genealogies, sources, aesthetic trends; it was even once my habit to extemporize bursts of bravura freestyle verse but who would believe me if I were to assert as much now?

Soon we were taking our meals together, in the student-faculty dining hall—a dismal establishment staffed by cheerless Hispanics with limited lexicons, poor compensation, absurdly long hours and in general scant inducement not to defile an ala carte item demanded sans "please." Over charred burgers and fried mozzarella Truck loved to regale me with yarns of ivory hijinks and professorial jest: the preposterous students; our peers' reams of feeble investigations, published in quarterlies perused, mainly, by the contributing parties themselves: department heads, alumnae, chairpersons, deans, other figures of administrative sway dealt department-lounge pleasantries and cocktail-greased praise, the odd besotted co-ed whisked decorously to bed, later gently nudged along with a few months of future memoir-material and an inflated grade at an enjoyable semester's end. I chewed, and appraised long passing legs, waiting for gaps in his discourse for the chance to preface remarks *I* would have liked to contribute to our between-class repasts. But there were no such gaps.

I usually tried to look pensive as Truck urged me to perceive the cutthroat sterility beneath every guffaw, every crass in-class aside snuck by our dumb students, or lobbed over their heads, every earthy backslap exchanged between ostensible brethren in letters who secretly found their colleagues insipid beyond contempt. Isn't this—here he might gesture theatrically at

whichever thick volume lay bristling with neon micro-Post-Its beside his plastic lunchtray—what we’ve decided to *do* with ourselves? Aren’t we supposed to be the good guys?

We flipped in a few post-contest lay-ups. I moved out to the arc. Truck tried, not for the first time, to explain that I might significantly increase my shooting percentage by snapping my wrist forward and *following through*. Meanwhile, on defense I was frequently flat in the foot, thus surrendering what he claimed was my best counter to his considerable height advantage, my speed, though in fact I have never been fast.

“What are you writing these days, Truck?” I wondered.

As a young man not yet out of grad school he’d published his polemic, a raging denunciation of more or less everyone, but specifically taking to task two groups of citizens: the post-internet generation just then coming of age, a roaring disappointment to Truck, these youth—who, yes, of course had been battered since birth by the robust exertions of multinational commerce, forces too perniciously large for most folks to detect, let alone resist, legitimately hoodwinked into massive passivity, yes, but who also *didn’t really seem to mind*. “Relax, Bro,” he titled his book’s first half.

But it was for the next group that Professor Truck reserved the special wrath of his book’s *second* half, a blistering sparsely-punctuated screed excoriating *academics*. Who, Truck argued, having done the interminable headwork, annotated pages deep into countless CNS-enhanced nights, sat through seminars, read untold books and journals, ground out dissertations—who were in other words perhaps cognitively equipped for the battle being waged behind most of the oblivious population’s back and *might* constitute the last viable counterforce to Capital’s inexorable tread. The pencil heads might be heroes! he claimed—but instead they’d lost

themselves in their labyrinths of personal expertise, in their arcane argot, their inaccessible bullshit, insider back-and-forth (“credence-jostling,” as he called it). Truck, on the other hand was for a scholarship that *meant* something to somebody *not wearing tweed* (not that many of us wore tweed—this was Truck's choice of phrase). Truck was for a scholarship that saves lives.

Naturally, *The Malaise that Thickens Unto Death* housed no original claims. (As the near-two-million-*and-counting* copies sold [factoring in not insignificant sales overseas] ought to prove.) However, it was a sensation. He parlayed his triumph into a lucrative stint at S——— College, where we both found ourselves among the younger members of the faculty team. On accepting his post, Truck was already well known, a celebrity, not only around campus, but wherever he went, more or less. My own work was not known outside of scholarly circles.

“Almost done with *Dis: Illusion*,” he said, “after that, well, who can tell?”

Truck opposed all illusions. He was out to demolish hypocrisy, once and for all. Nothing got him off like giving it to the odd department head, or using his platform to remind the rogue campus poet that despite all her spleen she was still securely ensconced in her hated high-middle class.

“Truck,” I told him, “Truck: you’re kind of an asshole. You’re a complete asshole. Anyone ever tell you that? How old are you?”

“You’re just saying that. Thirty-one.”

“Death coming soon.”

“Think so?”

“You’ve wobbled over the peak. Never even felt it happen. Soon you’ll be picking up downward speed. Think about that reverse I snuck past you.”

“Well.”

“Getting old.”

“You pushed off with your left hand. Blatant foul. I didn’t call it because what was the point?”

“Death scoping out property in your code.”

“Death not necessarily knocking, but maybe hanging out at the end of the drive, you’re saying.”

“You see Death sprinting under a scythe-shaped kite in the field at the end of your block.”

“Deathgrams encrypted in the dentist’s bills. You’re older than I am, ass.”

“Death not as distant these days. Death closing in.”

Death, yes: but murder? If I were to kill Henry L. Winston Truck how many Trucks might rise up in his place? A Truck at the corner of every street. I could devote a life to extermination and never rid a single town of its Trucks. Then too, I didn’t necessarily even want to kill every Truck. *This* Truck, sometimes, yes, but not every iteration of Truck. I wanted to move these men, shape them, somehow eradicate the Truckness without destroying the Truck. My *assassination drive*, as I took to tagging it in journals logged during this time, was accordingly a form of capitulation: I wanted to kill what I lacked the power to touch. And what was it I wanted to touch? Killing Truck would solve nothing. (Or little.) For every Truck slaughtered I’d still be surrounded by uncountable Trucks.

On the other hand, Truck kept becoming less possible to stand.

Blithe Truck casing the warrens of Humanities halls, pausing to pummel some student with volleys of casually discharged argot, because he could. His *epistemes* and *écriture*, allusive

esotera, the names, the scholarship, nomenclature braided into easy conversation about MTV and Empire, Internet commerce and Death—synchrony, illocution, misprision, Lebenswelt! he shouted, from the coffee lounge, *Einführung*, the irony so densely layered on that one struggled to sort out the targets from targeteers. That very evening he'd be back in a packed auditorium, up to his usual saving of lives. But whose life was he out to save?

Our weekly one-on-one hoops sessions were an unrelenting shame. Tall Truck routinely swatted my lay-up attempts off the glass, calling fouls on himself when he'd cleanly caught my shot (meanwhile refusing to acknowledge his persistent and blatant reliance on the illegal *hand check*). Only an analogous pounding on the college's clay tennis courts would have been more personally painful, as we may or may not subsequently see, depending on how soon I decide to burn these notes.

I lived in a small second-floor apartment off campus. I had very few other friends. The only furnishings of note were a bookshelf, a bed, a framed photograph of my mother on a table of varnished black wood, and (in replica) the bones of a man who'd stood nearly seven feet tall. One night, as I sat weeping, awash in cheap gin, at the foot of the gnomonic illustration I seemed to have Sharpied onto my wall—an admittedly crude rendition of the primal scene—I gave in to a vision of redemption and glory. Somehow, one day my *idea* would rise from these dissipate ashes like a great golden bird, or maybe a monolith, a towering effigy of the man I'd always wanted to be, the man it hurt not to be, this man, alive now, arisen, *striding forth* at dawn, shadow casing the territory before him as he nears the mist-wreathed city thrust up over cracked earth, a black Stetson's brim pulled low over his brow, this drifter, this calm boss of the plains, shrouded in black, as well as in mystery, loping toward his destiny, at last *prepared* to stare into the eyes of

men—only I didn't *have* a vision of any me other than what I was not.

Picture the harried humanities professor from your undergraduate days. You remember? A man who, it's palpable, from his youth must have *loved learning*. One imagines him snug on some ottoman through the long afternoons, indifferent to sunlight and kid-whoops streaking in from outside as he soaks in the stories of famines and plagues, intrigue, calamity, war, peace, survival, progress, relapse, culture, barbarity, life, death, struggle and hope, a book-loving boy, not necessarily intelligent or even wise, an indifferent sportsman, not what his father might call "handy," destined, in short, to haunt lecture halls and libraries in the hopes of attaining an associate-professorship, and tenure, should he make it that far.

In his lectures, ever-frantic to unburden himself, the poor man pontificates, more allegro appassionato as the hour wanes . . . the hour's end nears, his young charges squirm, writing implements perform increasingly acrobatic feats over platforms of knuckle and thumb, mutters, embellished coughs, yawns, somebody's phone goes off, the clock's hands resist a collective extra-sensory admonishment to *move* . . . see how our hero streaks toward the terrible moment when the first student with guts will decide Enough, *later, asshole*, baseball cap (worn inside in direct violation of undergraduate handbook) shading face, and now it's only backs, an exodus ascends the aisles between stadium seats, files for various exits, perhaps to reconvene for a greasy snack, or some hackey-sack out in the quad, or maybe to trot under those famed florescent spinning discs—*Frisbees*. These mutineers clatter from amphitheatrical seats, begin to disperse, even as a fearsome *apodosis* heaves into view, prepares to shake the inner chambers of what in quainter times was called the soul, a thundering finale to which the lecturer's whole preceding hour-and-a-half has been but a prelude, the breath of life that these early leave-takers won't hear

and *wouldn't understand if they did*, since their attention has been flagging for some time, perhaps even for the *entire* time, on a morning when many are still not quite recovered from last night's Dionysian fun—What's this joker's point, *Bro*? Which part do we need to know for the test?

On the other hand I have secretly sat in on any number of *Truck's* lectures—in inventive disguise: false mutton chops, capacious jeans, and, at first, a baseball cap of my own until the near-calamitous morning Truck demanded mid-lecture in front of my several-hundred fellow lecturees that I remove my headwear indoors as demanded by handbook law, so that I was forced to flee the cavernous hall, barely dodging a burly enthusiast near the back who attempted to intervene on his professor's behalf (the only session I missed that semester of the entire insipid series)—seen all pens ascribe till the moment he steps back from the rostrum and *bows*, to emotion-rich applause.

Have I pointed out I'd compiled any number of infinitely superior theses, dissertations, treatises, bits of metaphysical speculation, thought experiments, logical proofs, cultural dissections, arguments toward a new socio-economic world order in lieu of the ruling neoliberal capitalist regime, sonnets in all the traditional forms (with an especial emphasis on the rhyme scheme of the Bard), prose poems, light verse, film scripts, film critiques, villanelles, volumes of critical discourse, meditations, labyrinths, philosophical dialogues, disquisitions, an uncompleted epic poem in cantos waltzing from Gaelic to Hindi to Latin to Greek (my Italian not yet up to the task), a rock opera, several symphonies the college orchestra declined to perform, as well as various other trifles *in my notes*? I had. However: Truck had a finger on the popular heartbeat, Truck had the vast vapidty of the culture *by the throat*, and in this sense (and in this sense alone)

was neither charlatan, nor phoney, nor hack, but pure product of his times, that clown, a reality only I had the lucidity to see, let alone find distressingly bleak.

Truck put his arm around my shoulder, suggested we head for the showers. He enjoyed showering in the unstalled locker room for obvious reasons. Something split in me. His hand was on my shoulder, his breath was in my ear, I looked up and embarked on a thorough description of what I would do to him one day, the *methodical* approach I would take to dismantling his corporeal vessel, time permitting, since my whole life has been one long race against self-inflicted death, and I couldn't *guarantee* the fate I articulated in meticulous detail as he slowly eased his hold on my shoulder and backed away, mouth agape, but I assured him I would do all I could do to ensure it was his.

"Everything in my power!"

I bellowed a choice bit of untranslatable Japanese, leapt up onto a wall-mounted bench and banged my fist against the nearest locker's thin steel.

Truck called for help.

"I'll assemble an arsenal," I enthused, "of implements designed to inflict *maximum pain!*"

"Stop this." He was shaking his head as if he believed in so doing he might negate *me*.

"Change of plan," I decided: "I'll eat you alive!"

He whinnied and dashed round a locker-bank for the door as I bounded down from my perch, grunting with hatred and joy.

Of *course* a star cornerback with sea gaskets for triceps and a yeoman's love for his famous old *prof* was waiting in a half-crouch to intervene, pinning me to the foot-fragrant Berber wall-to-wall while I squirmed and heaved.

“Everything in my power,” I breathed.

Of course “everything in my power,” is a signifying phrase that lacks a clear referent when applied to a powerless man. The provost declined the reasonable alternative I proposed to his offer of granting indefinite psychiatric leave: that we subject Truck’s so-called treatise to review by a panel of reputable or even competent scholars I offered to personally handpick. I was left with little choice but to cite my disenchantment with the utter lack of intellectual integrity displayed by an ostensibly well-regarded academic institution—“You’re only in it for the money,” I barely had the energy to note—and, barring reconsideration of my proposed compromise, resign my post, a post I reminded the provost he was hardly likely to fill with a candidate my equal in acuity, rigor, generosity, expertise, to say nothing of raw skill, so that it was not a personal affront or slap in *my* face when this resignation was accepted so much as it was a debasing of an entire department, an irreparable marring of an until then widely admired school of arts and letters, a fact I reiterated more than once and in not unheated tones as I strode through the door, kicking over a stack of books on my way out.

Exterminate

the

Excuse me.

Of course, I had it all wrong—later on, during those first awful months after I relinquished my position on the faculty of the distinguished liberal arts college which good taste forbids me to cite here by name, I took a job waiting tables at a small *bar and grill*, a national chain, recently the beneficiary of a successful rebranding campaign, a series of television spots by a fat Food Network figurehead. Only one employee had even *heard* of Truck—and she copped to having never read his work! One night I accepted my employee-perk half-price on a plate of insipid potatoes, then left. At the screen door, on apprehending the import of my suitcases and bags, my bleary-eyed mother looked sad, but not necessarily surprised.

In the beginning, as I lay groaning on the uncomfortable cot in the basement beneath groaning floorboards (my mother's subtle footfalls the predawn antipode to the restless pacing of my insomniac brain), I'd often catch myself peering further into my piteous past, trying to extract something like sense, a reason, a thread; or compiling lists of all the things I'd ever loved: Reasons to Live. There were few. Mostly what I thought of were things I didn't even like. And if you can't conjure a modest list of lovable features of life, how are you supposed to summon what needs summoning to ride out everything else? Why should you?

“Got it, Buddha,” a female buddy’d once quipped, when I tried to explain my inability to get up the will to do what was expected of me when I knew in the end I’d be dust, and until then, profoundly unhappy. This was when we were students ourselves. I’d decided to take a degree in *kinesiology*, as a sort of penance for my failed tennis career—which is to say I was studying to become a P.E. teacher.

We were at a bar, or outside a bar, out back, in a cool September breeze, me smoking a cigarette, her holding her lager or ale, half-pint sloshing from side to side in her unsteady hand, casually suggesting that I come on back inside. I declined, not yet having fully articulated my position. Perhaps I should have simply gone. She’d asked me here, she seemed to want to spend some time with me, it was possible that we would fuck. But there, on the veranda of a bar that happened also to be *called* “The Veranda,” as she sat beside me on a little ledge built right into the half-wall of heavy wooden planks, my desire to fuck her was subordinated by my desire to *make her see*.

With a shrug this well-lubricated half-friend turned to re-enter the bar. Were this the future (that is, *now*) I might have invited this young woman (who was not unattractive, in her sloe-eyed, docile, way, possessed of a goodnatureedly ignorant charm) to consider several passages I might then quote verbatim—Nietzsche, Freud, Goethe, and especially Shakespeare as channeled through Macbeth, that tormented thane—however, having done so, I’d have hastened to add: no quotes were necessary: you needn’t crack these dusty tomes, no call for consulting relics if you’re willing to think just a bit for yourself. However, this was then; I lacked the will- and firepower I would in mid-adulthood gain. I imagined punching her in the breast. Instead, after chiding her for reluctance to exercise her brain, I heaved into a fresh exposition of my thesis

as she peered into her stein.

A second-string halfback paced unsteadily past.

“Ditch the zero, get with a hero,” he said.

Stupefyingly, she *did* join this athletic oaf and his merry band—only later did I learn they’d once co-taken a class—and she left, offering only an apologetic shrug and a whispered suggestion that I find her inside, “Rescue me in a minute or two,” as she made her own way back in.

Under a puny moon, I stood with my hands on the veranda’s cracked wooden railing and looked out at the makeshift lot crowded with a chaos of all sorts of trucks and cars (I noted in passing what struck me as an atypical proliferation of jeeps) and started to weigh my options. “But isn’t that the problem?” I asked myself—literally asked myself, aloud, and not under my breath in a near-whisper or even a subdued mutter but at vocal full-throttle, my inquiry’s echo caroming off car hoods and jeep-windshields and up into the night. “Fool!” I shouted, in a moment of thunder “it’s ALWAYS the *options*: never the choice!” I spun and reentered the bar called Veranda. I spotted my friend, whose name, incidentally, was Puff, near the back, and while mouthing the word “Choice” to myself nudged my way to the bar, at some point en route altering my mantra to “Act,” which I’d decided was closer to what I meant, and then—as I waited for the bartender to serve other patrons, then some more patrons who’d clearly arrived after me, and then a gang of chattering girls with gilded faces and sculpted coifs, whose baroque requests burdened my overworked mixologist for a solid seven minutes, and then an enormous bearded man beside me who wanted a stout and whose proximity left the bartender nearly no choice but to ask me what I needed—“Do,” I muttered aloud, “Do” was a definite improvement on “Act”—

it could constitute a whole personal philosophy, I felt—“Sorry?” asked the barman, furrowing his lone brow, hand theatrically cupped to ear, face distorted with scowl.

I started to stammer, my mind abruptly an arctic drift unspoiled by the name of a single brew, I couldn't even see the tap over the neon potion-sipping clique's considerable perms, and I hadn't decided what to drink yet, *had not weighed my options*, and the horror of inadequacy in the eyes of my fellow men, my quintessent lack, reminder of why I preferred even then to drink alone, the internal gulf came roaring open again like a field of empty tennis courts, and I saw the full folly of “Do”: of course I can't merely “Do,” as other men Do, I'm missing *something* that enables their Do, I contemplated a tail-tucked flight from the Veranda until a lyric to a song I'd not heard in years bounced into that mental vacuity like a tennis ball dropped from heaven, and though I could have wept with gratitude, I nodded, cool, with narrowed eyes: “One bourbon, one Scotch, one beer.”

After an only half-awkward exchange (the bar's selection of Scotch was sizable: I selected an attractive red label at random) I downed my distillates and hefted my pint of headless ale toward the table where Puff and her new drinking partners were swapping banal bits culled from their respective personal histories.

I interposed with a roared “WHAT'S UP?” and greeted Puff with an affectionate pat on the head. My hand, perhaps a bit heavy with liquor, came down harder than intended.

Puff flinched away.

“Ah, what the fuck B———? That hurt!”

From one of several indistinguishable specimens of brawn: “Yeah, what the fuck B———?”

“WHAT’S HAPPENING?” I asked.

After a long pause during which it did not occur to me to feel fear, Puff muttered, “I think you should go home.”

THE NIGHT IS YOUNG!”

A second friend said, “Dude, you look like shit.”

Here I tried some ineffective riposte to the effect that *he* was the one who looked like shit, *aaaand—*

(Standing up): “What’s that?”

I revised, managed nothing more potent.

Naturally, things began to swell, I dimly recall pounding my fist on the table, staring hard at a spot just north of one of one football fellows’ brow in an imitation of grim eyelock, more insults were bartered, I scoffed at their stupidity, they ridiculed my modest paunch, my slurred words, my lack of what they conceived of as fashion sense (I had on an Atlantic-blue blazer in excellent taste), my choice of major, and soon Puff had started to cry, I suppose seeing what was in the offing, all women are Cassandras, no, that’s an exaggeration, but some seem to have a prescience for this sort of thing, as I grimly trailed the young men into the lot out back. We snaked in an almost stately procession through columns of jeeps and cars, arriving at a secluded patch of asphalt, dust, broken glass, where, under a cloud- and mostly moon-less sky, I swung without warning for my enemy’s face, missed, took a powerful knee to the groin, stumbled, half-saw the impending faux-leather boot, then a fist clenched around some unsportsmanlike protrusive gleamings, and then

“Here, the big cut is bleeding again,” Puff said, with one hand proffering a fresh napkin

extracted from her purse while with the other she navigated a leftward turn through an empty intersection.

“Again?” I asked.

“Those fucking assholes.”

Leering out at me from the small rectangle of mirror ensconced in the felt flap folded down over the windshield’s upper rim was a grotesque caricature of an injured young man who vaguely resembled myself: vampirically sallow, one eyelid fixed at half-mast, several disgusting gashes criss-crossing his temples and cheeks, a rivulet of purple-red blood dripping from his left nostril.

Good Puff took good care of me that night, whisking me away from what, unbeknownst to me, had become the scene of a crime. In desperation I’d flailed for my mauling attacker’s face while he knelt and methodically mashed up my own, that unsporting clutched or worn metal improving on his already-effective bare fists. He’d shrieked and reeled back, blood dripping from a hand cupped over one eye, smashed his gloved fist through a neighboring car’s window, car alarms sounding as witnesses came pouring out of The Veranda, sparing me who knows what further consequence, as the footballers took off in a battered Ford truck.

I was in bad shape indeed, until Puff reappeared in her sleek sedan and assisted me into the passenger seat (I remember none of this, though I was apparently able to hobble) and we made our escape.

But I was ungrateful. I howled with fury and shame, demanded that she let me out so that I could “hunt the fucks down,” but she would not. I insulted her. I told her my reconfigured face was her fault. She begged me to calm down; I refused, spewing insults, calling her terrible

things. I told her she was unattractive and getting a bit fat. I told her I wouldn't have bothered to help her in reversed circumstances (which was true). In the end, she deposited me at my on-campus apartment, where a roommate of mine she'd called to awaken perturbedly waited to assist me to bed, and, as her little sedan eased off into the night, I perceived that I'd spent my last evening in the company of Puff.

I vowed to return to the Veranda every night for the next several weeks, *or as long as it took*, until I could find my enemies and, removing the sunglasses and surgeon's mask I wore to conceal the spectacular inscriptions they'd left on my face, challenge them to a duel. I didn't know precisely what sort of duel (my father had fenced, a common decadence among a certain strain of military men, but he'd never taught me) but after they failed to appear on either of the next two evenings I took to pacing the streets of our shabby little college town's "downtown," a long lane of interchangeable bars, in the vain half-hopes of our paths intersecting and my exacting bloody recompense for that very bad evening, but I was never to see them again—a relief, naturally, though one I was too ashamed to admit that I felt.

But eventually I *did* admit it. Toe to toe with these behemoths I couldn't conceivably win. I had to find a way to slip past the stupidity—or, to lift lingo from the barbarians' own horde, execute an end-around, or again, to put it in terms taken from the annals of American folk wisdom: one day I wanted them to be *pumping my gas*. I dreamed of a life that wouldn't come down to who could muscle whom out of position. I thought: There must be some other way to live. Naturally Nietzsche would disagree, but how could I have known that *then*? I began reading books. Soon I'd embarked on my course of humanitarian self-education, which, as I have adequately demonstrated above, was of course just another mistake.

Reasons to live, reasons to live . . . well. What about tennis? I had been in early adolescence an avid if mediocre tennis player, and while more often I preferred to sequester myself on the practice courts where I might hone my arsenal of shots by firing them off against the green paint-chipped monster of a wall (or “N.V.”, as I privately called it), I would occasionally linger along the fringes of the outdoor courts at our local community center until someone’s partner pulled up lame—groin, ankle, knee: I would find myself half hoping for such an injury and the competitive opportunity it would provide while simultaneously dreading the subsequent contest I would thereby be compelled to complete to the point that I’d entertain the idea of pretending to roll my own ankle while jogging over to the other court— and I was invited to compete for a couple of sets. Darting across the practice court, I would envision myself in just such an impromptu contest, gigantic N.V. assuming the role of an immense stalwart opponent possessed of an impeccable if somewhat predictable return game. In a racquetwhirling dream I’d pirouette through the precise tracings of intricate patterns air-etched by my own bodily motion, necessarily never *winning* a point, but often sustaining the imagined volley for so long that time seemed not merely to stretch but to fray, into a fluffy thing, like the deplasticized tips of the laces tufted through the topmost eyelets of my “lucky” tennis shoes . . . immaterial . . . these volleys lasting much longer than any undertaken with sentient partners, my sense of self nearly atomized, all the restrictions of corporeal being seeming to effervesce as the “I” that I believed I must be was diffused across a bodiless state of freefloating grace, or a current flowing in loops like an invisible “8” round the syncopated beating of the tennis ball’s “pock”’s, and I became something more than myself—or perhaps *less*: an extract, a distillate of my own ordinarily

diluted perfect particles, too crudely and hastily stirred in with the offal and gunk of imperfect experience for anyone else ever to appreciate (or *see*). . . . Invariably I would walk from the practice court after one of these sessions hot with triumph, sure that when I next descended upon the community center's courts, the blood-fueled opponent chosen to stand in for impassive N.V. (whose perfection I'd been able to meet, stroke for stroke, almost), would be staggered with awe. Possibly a small-to-medium-sized crowd would gather to witness the match, and they, too, would be awestruck by the skill, the precision, the glory, the power, the beauty, the *art* of the transient architecture my slicing racquet nimbly carved.

Onlookers did, in fact, frequently gather beside those courts, not strictly to spectate so much as to keep tabs on matches in progress and secure their own position on the court—but watching, nevertheless: so that the losses' humiliation was magnified—when my failure to return even my opponent's most lazily-placed shots began visibly to annoy him (or her) and I perceived his (or her) frustration over my inability to provoke the expenditure of even token effort, I would furiously redouble my own, will myself to focus a bit harder, lighten my feet, concentrate *keep your eye on the fucking ball, B*——, only to find the more fiercely I focused, the more difficult it became to make even the most glancing, ineffectual contact with the ball, so that I'd often close a match by failing to connect with five consecutive serves. . . . I'd afterwards grimly shake hands and accept my opponent's dishonest gratitude for the match, inwardly steeling myself against the ludicrous tears on the inevitable brink of gushing forth, pledging to return that night, after dark, for a flagellant extra session on the practice court, with N.V.

We now roar forward through half-remembered time. The subsequent scene finds your

narrator still residing at home, meek, though not penitent, having renounced the university for good, the young ex-doctor of the humanities sketching feeble prose poems on the transient stationery of sleep-desperate thought to pass nights in his widowed mother's basement, where his boxed possessions form a sort of fort or parapet around the cot his limbs stick to and probe for some semblance of repose, in vain. What was keeping me up? Well, I still wanted to kill my ex-colleague, of course, but back then it was all I could do to pour milk into my cereal without the weeping and sobs, let alone leave the house, let *alone* stalk the corridors of S—— College at night, lie in wait for the unsuspecting public intellectual, sneak up from behind with the rag and duct tape, machete, so forth.

 Tempting as it may be for the time-traveling autohistorian to seek out specific causes, to guess at the Ur cause that left him no choice but to set out *then* on the path that one day led to *now*, it's of course important to consider that there may be none. Might I have been merely mad? True, my father had passed on, leaving me nil—but I'd long expected as much, and the truth was, I hated the prick, and even if his death hadn't been coming for a good half-decade or more, *I* wouldn't have wept at his wake (which was lugubriously overwrought: folded flags, bugles, canonfire, the like). In the interests of isolating motive, I suppose it'd have been better to see him die violently at the hands of some hateful sub-human, gunned down for a wallet or watchband to be plucked from the lifeless corpse. No such luck. However, I didn't *need* a singular catastrophe to perceive the sprawling catastrophic tableau. What, do you?

 Eventually I found more menial work. Mother begged. But what a miserable employee I was during those miserable months! I could regale you, Reader, with countless tales of humdrum failure, but I'm beginning to wonder who I expect to care about these things. Not that I care

whether anyone will care. How could you care or not? I intend to deprive you of the choice, once I've hurled this obscene constipation into the fireplace (I don't have a fireplace; I will find one) or some comparable conflagration, the blaze that will sizzle and crackle, consuming these sentences' sickening, bloat. But not until I've explained it *all*.

I worked in an office. One morning a supervisor (not *my* supervisor, just someone I'd often seen strutting the dismal halls of my workplace's small office complex with a supervisory air. I couldn't positively claim he was a supervisor) was passing my desk. I had been shuffling papers from one stack to another for some time so as to sustain an industrious air, but perhaps I'd momentarily let my hands go idle; I looked up to see this particular supervisor. He had just one arm, his name, I believe, was "Wrangler," the purest of pricks, and this particular morning he met my eyes as I happened to look up from my pensive daze, that *smile* on his ruddy overfed face as he chortled, not slowing his gait, "*Must be nice.*"

I stared after him, not especially worried about my job security, he wasn't my supervisor, and anyway I was near enough to the company's bottom rung—actually the position I held most likely constituted the company's bottom rung, regardless of the several-cent raise I'd recently been awarded, presumably for shuffling the papers from one stack to another without getting in anyone's way (I avoided the phones)—as to not merit more than this sort of snide commentary upon my general lack of worth.

"NICE"? I was half-inclined to roar: "NICE? You think you know who I am?"

But of course, he didn't know who I was. Or maybe he knew just enough to know it didn't matter who I was. I didn't matter to anyone. I imagine this will sound trite, sentimental, who knows (or cares—I reiterate my intention to burn these notes), but it was this sudden insight

—that is, that in order for this one-armed mid-level office manager and the whole mass of living men for whom I suddenly perceived he must stand in as a sort of three-limbed proxy to *know* me, I would have either to do something awful—something brutal, chilling, horror-inducing, something too thunderously balance-upsetting to be laughed away in passing by any supervisor with more important things on his mind, I would have to shake the earth—or else I would need to *become* him.

It seemed too late to *become* anything worthy in the eyes of other men; but how would someone like me shake the earth? Supposing I were to procure an assault rifle, for instance, carry it in the duffel bag in which I ordinarily bore my *gym clothes* (though upon reaching the gym I more often than not sat in the locker room for a half-hour before deciding to catch the next train after the one that by sitting in the locker room I had missed, calculating I could use the extra time to work through a few pints at the stationside bar). But, no, the thought was too awful—less because I couldn't bear to have the blood of innocent others on my hands than because I was truly terrified of the prospect of being sent to jail. Rape! Torture! I'd rather be this miserable than worse! Or so I said to myself that morning, as I recommenced shuffling my papers between stacks, at nearly double my usual speed, even going so far as to create a series of new stacks which I then seamlessly incorporated into the procedure in a kind of intricate weave, my face a blank mask of grim focus motivated by this newly-arisen need to be witnessed by the next passing supervisor *hard at work* until I grew confused and pushed back from my workspace and left the office without informing anyone that I'd decided I was hungry and needed a snack.

However I did desire a firearm. One summer morning, mere days after my humiliating encounter with Wrangler, having arrived by train at the suburb I commuted to each morning, I

had just settled down on a curb beside a steel safety rail rimming a small parking lot, where it was my habit to light a cigarette, drink the rest of my coffee, and read. Memory declines divulgence of that a.m.'s particular text but most likely it was Dostoevsky, as in those days Dostoevsky was all I ever read.

More than half of the cigarette remained when the first policeman preceded his partner by an instant, the bulky pair barging into my periphery, and asked to see some form of identification. I checked the page-number of my book—I remember the terror with which I endeavored to draw this action out, evincing all the languid insouciance I could muster, even willing myself to conduct a leisurely search of my pockets for a page marker before responding, aiming to communicate my utter indifference to this sudden incursion of The Law, meanwhile clenching my fists to conceal the trembling fingers—and how nonetheless I fumblingly dropped the book (it *was* Fyodor, I see it now: a minor late work, lacking the lunatic rage of the unpolished younger scribe) so that several corners were bent and some mud marred the previously pristine pages (infuriatingly: I always labored to keep my books clean; the more wear incurred, the less likely I was to finish, though my sloth and poor attention to detail invariably led to spills, creased covers, crumbs in gutters, something—one reason I began so many books but rarely finished any, the other reason being that I lacked discipline, a personal deficiency I found a perpetual torment until I discarded altogether my indebtedness to your “discipline,” your striving, your will to power, Reader, Brother, Servant, Fool) and I was ultimately too nervous to protract my show of pretending to search for a bookmark.

"What you doing," the first officer asked.

The actual answer to the man's question was banal: I was delaying my arrival at work by

the fifteen-to-twenty minutes I knew I could accomplish without risk of being fired—in truth, without even being reprimanded, which I probably feared far more than actually losing my job at the office (it was still unclear what I was being paid to do there; on recent days I'd been conscripted by a different supervisor to carry boxes from one end of the office complex to the other. What was in these boxes? Nothing! I myself had assembled them a few days back at a different supervisor's behest; then left them, as directed, in a corner which must have fallen into the sector of this second supervisor [I couldn't keep straight who was senior to whom], who didn't want the boxes there, so that perhaps my services were being deployed in a passive-aggressive intra-office feud, I had no idea, and didn't much mind, as I enjoyed building the boxes, enjoyed the leisurely cross-office stroll bearing empty boxes after a quick pull from the soda bottle I kept filled with soda and wine, my empty head filling with visions of vapid satisfactions—the next bottle of wine awaiting me at home, a sangria or two to go with my sandwich and chips; the flanks of the ample Dominican secretary I'd imagine mounting while I masturbated in the men's room most days during the afternoon's pre-coffee lull; of course I still sorted stacks of papers whose purport I couldn't begin to parse, now with considerable skill: into alphabetical, numerical, or any other order and handed the files back to whichever supervisor or superior [every other employee in the office was technically my "superior," as far as I could tell] had handed them to me).

“Reading?” I asked.

Neither officer was on edge, as he would have been had I posed an actual criminal threat; probably they'd been annoyed by the shrill housewife's housecall, perhaps this wasn't the first time she'd abused her citizen's right to be protected and served. Neither officer looked alert to or

even prepared for the remote possibility for example, that in the time-abraded duffel beside me, instead of gym clothes and several of the books I'd begun that week, along with the journal in which I kept both my "notes" and my forays from the period into philosophy and theory, (the entire pathetic oeuvre of which, cold and wise with gin one evening not so long ago, I thankfully burned), but just imagine instead of these harmless materials, in this bag of ragged canvas, just below the topmost tanktop there lay: a handgun? Probably I could kill both of them, or at least one, firing at zero range for the face or chest, before either could reach his own *piece*.

The first of the two men repeated his request to see some sort of ID, which I unhesitatingly withdrew my wallet to flip through a deck's worth of unnecessary cards and receipts and search for, despite my sense that there was no clear reason why I should have to ID myself, as the only thing I was doing was sitting on a curb reading one of Dostoevsky's lesser late novels, smoking a cigarette.

But what if I had a gun! I reiterate: what attracted me to the notion was not the premise that I might actually withdraw the handgun and with it claim these public-servants' lives, but that, were there a gun in my bag just now, I *could*, that is I would have it in my power to do so. Unbeknownst to them I could harbor this secret potency just out of sight, and these avatars of the Law would never know that whether they lived or died today was entirely *in my hands*, so that the fate of an entire accretion of experience, memory, hope, fear, "thought," perhaps a wife, a child, children, a whole family tree's destiny might hang in the balance, might hinge on whether or not I liked the man's tone, which I certainly didn't—and he, all the while never aware of anything more than a vague desire to get this shit over with already because he'd only had time for a bagel and coffee this morning, and that'd been a while back.

Of course, if there were a gun in my bag, I would even now run the risk of either officer asking offhand, "What's in the bag, Chief," and, sensing something off in my unwillingness to divulge, suggest I let him have a look, upon which investigation I would be either arrested or shot, depending on whether I made any subsequent threatening moves. But even this prospect thrilled me, so that when one of the cops now actually did ask what I had in the bag, Chief, I attempted to slide into what I imagined would be a guilty look, hoping to arouse his suspicion, but was only able to appear abject or cringing or servile, since this is the only mood my face ever honestly reflects, and thus unable to arouse any suspicion: *precisely because*, I instantly saw, there *really was no gun in the bag*. So that even as the policeman, whose radio had suddenly crackled, whined, and produced a coded bark, dismissed me with a wave, actually flipped my driver's license to the pavement as he spun and hustled off with his partner, presumably summoned now to a genuine threat to civic peace, I vowed that the next time I would have a gun in the bag.

That evening I visited a local megastore with the vague idea that I'd price automatic weapons. But I still couldn't get past certain crass, lower-order concerns: Assuming I could muster the money, not to mention the requisite licensing paperwork, to purchase a suitable firearm or arsenal, whom, exactly, would I want to shoot? The vision of absolute, unexercised power I'd almost seen flickered, and all I could think of was the mechanism of the gun. Could I really hold it to the temples of the Wranglers of the world, the fraternity-men, cops, Henry L. Winston-Trucks? Could I hold them responsible for failing to know me? Was any one of them worthy of blame? I might as well fire off round upon round at the sky.

Instead of a gun, I purchased a guitar—cheaply made, a pathetic little instrument—and went out to the parking lot where most of the spaces were empty or occupied by shopping carts only. I began to sing a song I composed on the spot, though the tune was not original, the chord-progression generic, derivative of the worst campfire pop (but of course I'd never actually been by a campfire, never submitted to that suffocating mood of commune and peace, the violent goodwill that will perhaps be embarrassing in the daylight, certainly nothing you can evaluate with logic, but that, nevertheless, under the night's diamond-studded dark cloth, at the outskirts of a central flickering warmth, surely all makes its own kind of sense? A shared understanding that all is well? I imagined this was the mechanism of camp), these are the words as well as I can remember them (even now, even here, I continue to spew lies: of course I remember the words! They are etched in my heart):

I want to see my name

inscribed in galaxies

I want to have

and unreturnable serve,

But most of all

I want to be

more loved than I deserve:

Is — thaaaat — too — much — to — ask?

I sang this song as loudly as I could until from the window of a passing pickup with

lumber stacked in the bed came a flying bottle of Rolling Rock—half full of still-cold beer, the weight of which was sufficient to punch a second hole in the body of my just-bought “guitar.”

“No!” I screamed, leaping to my feet as if to chase down the truck and my unseen assailants, though secretly relieved to see them accelerating in a spume of shrieking gravel out from that overlit megalot outside the megastore, since I have always been terrified of confrontations *between men*.

After I'd subsequently gone howling into the megastore parking lot's waste of sodium-perforated night; after that episode of shrill (albeit relieved) outrage and despair; after with head back I'd howled lupine peals that faintly traced the arc of the tune I could no longer accompany with the cheap “guitar,” under an absent moon too indifferent to make a mocking cameo; after I'd stomped repeatedly on the “guitar” and hurled splintered chunks as far as they would go, which was scarcely more than a meter since the ostensible “wood” was an absurdly aerate dreck, and I was anyway *weak*; after I'd salvaged a copper-wound “E” string, noosed it round my neck and wildly searched for a suitable gallows substitute (nothing); after I'd lost myself in Keatsian contemplation of the iridescent sprinklings of emerald gold and diamond dust, the powdered glass all aglitter under cones of man-concocted light down that sparkling asphalt plain; after I pretended not to hear the jeering of a teenaged chieftain and his pack of teenaged droogs, flipped them a brazen finger once they'd passed from view beyond a parallel aisle of cars; after I stomped on the “guitar” some more, I began wandering indirectly toward the stop of the bus that would take me home, not wanting to go home, not wanting to be here either, or anywhere, when I was overcome by a sensation of vacancy, as the emotional display had somehow gutted me, as

if I'd spilled something essential into the night, only to no purpose—or for precisely the purpose of creating a diversion for the passing cretins in their pickup truck (surely they'd been seeking someone to hurl a bottle or two of beer at, perhaps without even knowing what they sought; I had consummated their evening, even now they were probably packed onto a natty sofa in some infested hole draining additional bottles of Rolling Rock, competing to have their own version of the brief-but-still-funny episode heard above the familiar harmonic phrasings of, say, *Modest Mouse*). I remembered the description given me, some several years back, of what might have happened had my rotting appendix not been removed, as the doctors informed me, no more than an hour or so before it would have burst: *Had it burst*, they'd explained, its putrefaction would have spilled out into the surrounding abdominal region, polluted it, the resulting contamination requiring months of convalescence: the salience being that this rotted little bodily fruit needed to be harvested whole and intact, lest the poison it contained spill out and taint its whole surrounding milieu. The image dominated my reflection on the embarrassing display I'd provided all those megastore patrons. I was pleased with the analogy's aptness; I wondered how I would ever get all of that soul-rotting filth out intact.

I wandered in a state of high rumination—literally, as it is my habit to chew at the cudlike insides of my cheeks, which are (or were, until gluttony was shucked along with a panoply of other appetites in the riot of liberation that attended my personal ascent) hideously plump, as if stuffed with the pulped but unswallowed mastication of a long-completed meal—brooding, attempting to drift in an unscripted melancholy trance, guided only by the mute meditation on my failures as a man, but failing even in this—since despite my conscious desire to lapse into a fugue of pure feeling (which desire I wished would *itself* be unconscious) in which I'd wander

the deserted streets like a Jeremiah of our age, seeing in his own frailty a signal or code, a message from on high, in the singular piteousness of my state, a universal sign: *I will show you fear*, I recited, knowing full well I was reciting (and in fact, remembering, despite my yearning to obliterate every last granule of humiliating memory, the way I had once—or actually much more than once, to be honest, quite often, almost nightly, I just did this an evening or so back—as a young man solemnly recited these lines, in their entirety, while peering through the weak-second of my half-reflected self, superimposed over the branches of a weeping willow, out my darkened bedroom window, my best approximation of what I conceived of as melancholy or *tristesse* [at the time I would of course have lacked access to the term] transfiguring my mien, meanwhile imagining a cinematic eye gazing down on this grief-stricken tableau, a somber swelling score, plaintive strings sweetly singing in a minor key, or perhaps the *peal of bells*, the young man's soul infused with lyrical light, at the heart of the silence, as the camera pulled up into the sky, drifting higher, gradually to reveal . . . well there was nothing more to be revealed: enough that the stricken audience perceive the affliction in the young man's gaze, *What outsized feeling, what an immensity of soul*, they would whisper to themselves—or not whisper, merely feel, in a wordless ecstasy of tidal pathos, my sacrificed lifeblood infusing the thirsty hearts of a million other desolate souls with something like hope, as the screen faded to credits [which would consist of a single name] the rising violins graced with the hiccups and sobs of grief-cracked women and men, all of them swimming in *me*, allowed, in an epiphanic moment, my gift to them, to truly *see*), wishing that for just one moment I might be guided by forces greater than my own confusion and woe, that for just this once I might feel closing around me the fists of divine wind suffusing the cosmos with mystery and miracle, feel myself tugged and carried along by the

magnets and currents of fate, or the gods. . . .

But despite this yen to lose myself, I'd been unable to forget where I lived (and likewise unable to forget my mother's habit of chewing an apple too close to my ear, of the dusty sunlight in the silent afternoons, of my basement's damp *smell*), or in what direction I needed to walk in order to get there, so that at each intersection instead of being carried by the winds of fate I was lucidly, horribly conscious of whether I was getting nearer to or farther from "home."

At last I found a sparsely populated bar and started ordering shots of *Jack*.

All of which I present by way of explanation. How it could have been that I was weaving between derelict vehicles parked or abandoned on an unfamiliar alleylike street—I'd succeeded in failing to know where I was—humming the same tune I'd been bellowing in the megastore lot some several hours back—which episode now, in my stupor, struck me as something stupendous, magnificently right, the only time in a very long time that I'd finally gotten to the heart of things, and I'd let a Ford F150-ful of fools ruin it with one hurled bottle. As I tottered between carhusks along pavement glittering with moonstruck glass I resolved (aloud) to return to the megastore the following day, where I would purchase a real guitar, assuming the megastore offered real guitars, bring it out with me into the parking lot, climb into the bed of a different pickup truck, commence booming out the same song I'd improvised that evening, even though I had no money for a second guitar and couldn't borrow any more from my old poor mom. And the point of the song (which I now realized I hadn't made up: I'd actually grafted the single verse onto a tune I'd stolen verbatim from a popular rock ballad I'd been particularly moved by as an adolescent and had earlier heard on one of the stereos on sale in the megastore's electronics department), if the song'd had a point, was its visceral power, which was of course gone.

I heard the *sound* but failed to grasp its significance until several moments had passed. Down the sidestreet from which it had seemed to issue—I imagined I could almost hear or feel a still-lingering reverberation—there was no one to be seen; the wind rustled the hairs on my arms, lifted a few pages of an abandoned morning paper; I saw streaks of moonlight kiss a rusted Mustang’s metal husk, I saw paths of still more broken glass, a smokestack performing its appointed task (its smoke an almost lucent violet-gray), and the alley gave off of an avenue, down which I could see the skyline in the distance under a thick bank of clouds so low the half-towers looked like rigid charcoal fingers pressed through a fingerless glove, reaching down to rummage idly through the rubble of city life, and fleet footsteps echoed, fading with urgency toward the traintracks, which rose at this alley or sidestreet’s far end, the report beginning to signify, I began to see its shape, like an afterglow of sound, as I shuffled into the alley, scanning the pavement intently, already starting to sober up.