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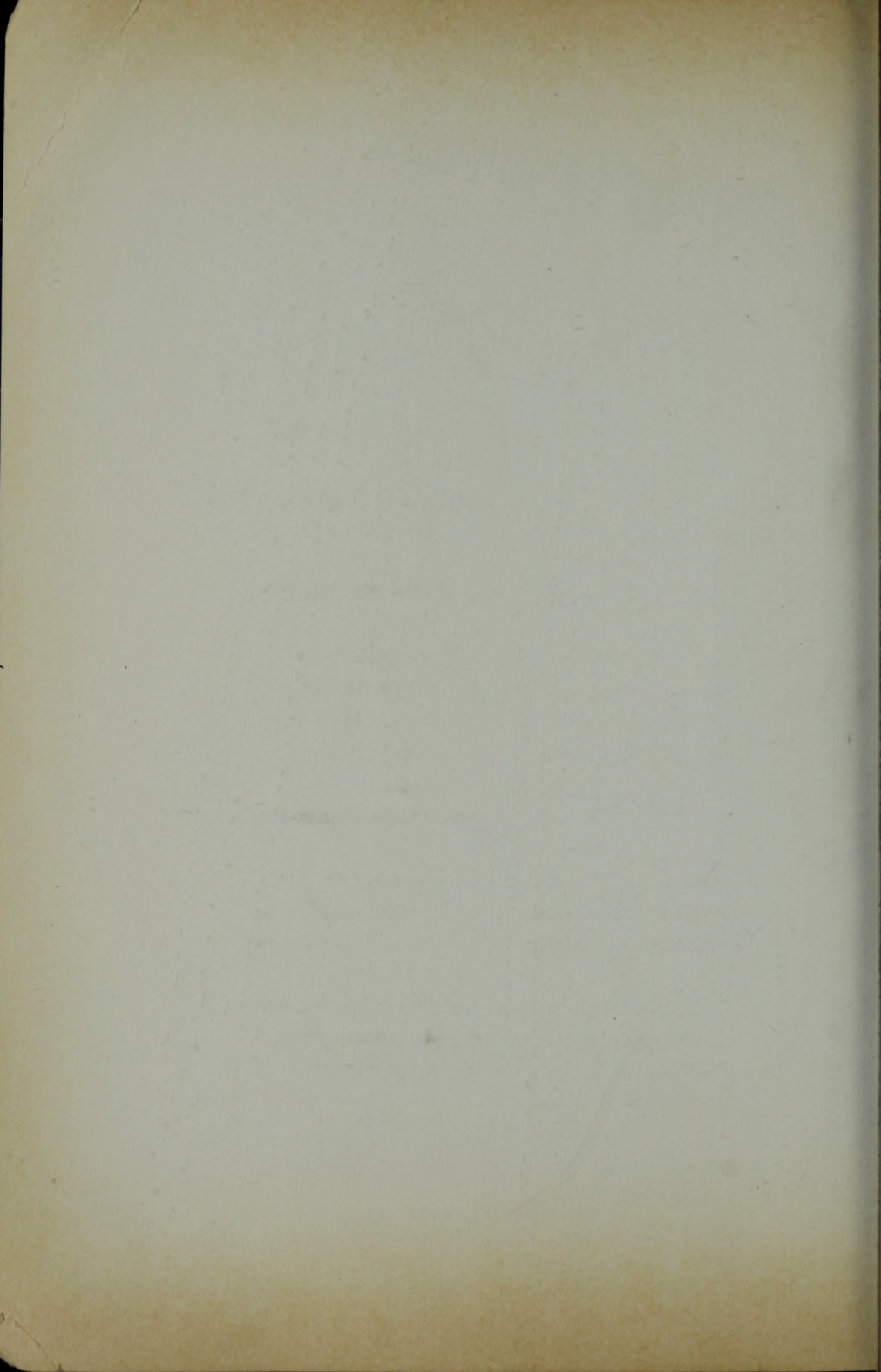
"AN UTTERLY ORIGINAL,  
UTTERLY DELIGHTFUL NOVEL" —*Newsweek*

THE  
*GOLDEN  
GATE*

A  
NO  
VEL  
BY



*VIKRAM SETH*



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# THE GOLDEN GATE

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*A Novel in Verse by*  
VIKRAM SETH



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Where, with progressively precarious  
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Has waxed, and waxes, lax and sickly.  
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Or bumbled, "What a masterpiece!"  
Or smoothed my steps with sage suggestion.  
Third, to John and Susan Hughes  
For refuge, friendship, ears, and views.  
And, fourth, to you, who did not question  
The crude credentials of this verse  
But backed your brashness with your purse.



# Dedication

So here they are, the chapters ready,  
And, half against my will, I'm free  
Of this warm enterprise, this heady  
Labor that has exhausted me  
Through thirteen months, swift and delightful,  
Incited by my friends' insightful  
Paring and prodding and appeal.  
I pray the gentle hands of Steele  
Will once again sift through its pages.  
If anything in this should grate,  
Ascribe it to its natal state;  
If anything in this engages  
By verse, veracity, or vim,  
You know whom I must credit, Tim.



# Dedication

So here they are, the chapters ready,  
And half against my will, I'm free  
Of this world's entanglements, this body  
Labor that has harassed me  
Through these months with its delight  
Lured by my friends' interest  
Faring and passing and apoc  
I give the gentle hands of sleep  
Will once again, through its pages  
If anything is to be said  
Ascribe it to no mortal state  
If anything is to be said  
By word, or deed, or sign  
You know whom I now credit.

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# THE GOLDEN GATE

THE GOLDEN GATE



# ONE

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## 1.1

To make a start more swift than weighty,  
Hail Muse. Dear Reader, once upon  
A time, say, circa 1980,  
There lived a man. His name was John.  
Successful in his field though only  
Twenty-six, respected, lonely,  
One evening as he walked across  
Golden Gate Park, the ill-judged toss  
Of a red frisbee almost brained him.  
He thought, "If I died, who'd be sad?  
Who'd weep? Who'd gloat? Who would be glad?  
Would anybody?" As it pained him,  
He turned from this dispiriting theme  
To ruminations less extreme.

## 1.2

He tuned his thoughts to electronic  
Circuitry. This soothed his mind.  
He left irregular (moronic)  
Sentimentality behind.  
He thought of or-gates and of and-gates,  
Of ROMs, of nor-gates, and of nand-gates,  
Of nanoseconds, megabytes,  
And bits and nibbles . . . but as flights  
Of silhouetted birds move cawing  
Across the pine-serrated sky,  
Dragged from his cove, not knowing why,  
He feels an urgent riptide drawing  
Him far out, where, caught in the kelp  
Of loneliness, he cries for help.

## 1.3

John's looks are good. His dress is formal.  
His voice is low. His mind is sound.  
His appetite for work's abnormal.  
A plastic name tag hangs around  
His collar like a votive necklace.  
Though well-paid, he is far from reckless,  
Pays his rent promptly, jogs, does not  
Smoke cigarettes, and rarely pot,  
Eschews both church and heavy drinking,  
Enjoys his garden, likes to read  
Eclectically from Mann to Bede.  
(A surrogate, some say, for thinking.)  
Friends claim he's grown aloof and prim.  
(His boss, though, is well-pleased with him.)

#### 1.4

Gray-eyed, blond-haired, aristocratic  
In height, impatience, views, and face,  
Discriminating though dogmatic,  
Tender beneath a carapace  
Of well-groomed tastes and tasteful grooming,  
John, though his corporate stock is booming,  
For all his mohair, serge, and tweed,  
Senses his life has run to seed.  
A passionate man, with equal parts of  
Irritability and charm,  
Without as such intending harm,  
His flaring temper singed the hearts of  
Several women in the days  
Before his chaste, ambitious phase.

#### 1.5

John notes the late September showers  
Have tinged the blond hills round the bay  
With a new green. He notes the flowers  
In their pre-winter bloom. The way  
That, when he was a child, the mystery  
Of San Francisco's restless history  
Kindled in him an answering spark,  
It strikes him now as, through the park,  
Wrested from old dunes by the westward  
Thrust of the green belt to the slow  
Pacific swell, his footsteps go.  
But it is late. The birds fly nestward  
Toward the sunset, and the arc  
Of darkness drifts across the park.

1.6

It's Friday night. The unfettered city  
 Resounds with hedonistic glee.  
 John feels a cold cast of self-pity  
 Envelop him. No family  
 Cushions his solitude, or rather,  
 His mother's dead, his English father,  
 Retired in his native Kent,  
 Rarely responds to letters sent  
 (If rarely) by his transatlantic  
 Offspring. In letters to *The Times*  
 He rails against the nameless crimes  
 Of the post office. Waxing frantic  
 About delays from coast to coast,  
 He hones his wit and damns the post.

1.7

A linkless node, no spouse or sibling,  
 No children—John wanders alone  
 Into an ice cream parlor. Nibbling  
 The edges of a sugar cone  
 By turns, a pair of high school lovers  
 Stand giggling. John, uncharmed, discovers  
 His favorite flavors, Pumpkin Pie  
 And Bubble Gum, decides to buy  
 A double scoop; sits down; but whether  
 His eyes fall on a knot of three  
 Schoolgirls, a clamorous family,  
 Or, munching cheerfully together,  
 A hippie and a Castro clone,  
 It hurts that only he's alone.

## 1.8

He goes home, seeking consolation  
 Among old Beatles and Pink Floyd—  
 But “Girl” elicits mere frustration,  
 While “Money” leaves him more annoyed.  
 Alas, he hungers less for money  
 Than for a fleeting Taste of Honey.  
 Murmuring, “Money—it’s a gas! . . .  
 The lunatic is on the grass,”  
 He pours himself a beer. Desires  
 And reminiscences intrude  
 Upon his unpropitious mood  
 Until he feels that he requires  
 A one-way Ticket to Ride—and soon—  
 Across the Dark Side of the Moon.

## 1.9

He thinks back to his days at college,  
 To Phil, to Berkeley friends, to nights  
 When the pursuit of grades and knowledge  
 Foundered in beery jokes and fights.  
*Eheu fugaces* . . . Silicon Valley  
 Lures to ambition’s ulcer alley  
 Young graduates with siren screams  
 Of power and wealth beyond their dreams,  
 Ejects the lax, and drives the driven,  
 Burning their candles at both ends.  
 Thus files take precedence over friends,  
 Labor is lauded, leisure riven.  
 John kneels bareheaded and unshod  
 Before the Chip, a jealous God.



1.10

As did Phil too, until his recent  
 Flight from the rich realms of Defense  
 (With what John holds to be indecent  
 Precipitation and bad sense).  
 John, still engaged in such endeavors,  
 Feels Phil's new zest for peace work severs  
 A thread of mutual interest.  
 He almost fears to call him lest  
 Political debate should color  
 A friendship based on easy cheer,  
 Light camaraderie, dark beer,  
 And double-dating. Life's grown duller  
 Since when—ah, time!—they used to share  
 The aegis of the Golden Bear.

1.11

He phones Phil, the first time in ages,  
 But there's no answer. (Friday night.)  
 He idly thumbs the scribbled pages  
 Of his address book. Well, he might  
 Phone Janet Hayakawa. Many  
 Seasons have sunk since there was any  
 Hazard a meeting could educe  
 Their former love. A standing truce  
 Shelters their friendship from all passion.  
 They'd felt their union would constrict  
 Their separate lives. An interdict  
 Agreed by both, after a fashion  
 They went about their singular ways,  
 Slaves to the Chip or artist's daze.

## 1.12

She is a sculptor. Stress and pleasure  
 For her thus perfectly combined,  
 The boundaries of toil and leisure  
 By definition ill-defined,  
 Her worktime doubles as her playtime,  
 But hand and eye deployed in daytime  
 Yield, when night comes, to ear and hand.  
 She is the drummer in a band  
 Well known and feared throughout the city:  
 The striking sounds of Liquid Sheep  
 Rouse distant suburbs from their sleep.  
 Unlinked alike to tune or ditty,  
 Their music is a throttled yelp—  
 Morse crossed with a pig's squeal for help.

## 1.13

Although such accents supersonic  
 Engage her in the fevered night,  
 Janet considers it ironic  
 That her true forte, try as she might,  
 Her quiet forms of bronze and iron—  
*Three Eggs, An Adolescent Lion,*  
*Clothed Nude, Study of Young Man Caught*  
*In Eagle's Claws*—have not yet brought  
 The sober critical attention  
 She craves. The critics' common nose  
 Sniffs magisterially at her shows.  
 And as for divine intervention—  
 In Schiller's phrase, the very gods  
 Strive fruitlessly against such clods.

## 1.14

Blind mouths! They spew their condescension:

*Miss Hayakawa, it appears,*

*Lacks serious sculptural intention.*

*Where has she been these thirty years?*

*Are Moore's and Calder's use of medium*

*Unknown to her? The languid tedium*

*Of lines too fluid to show pains*

*Reflect this artist's dated chains:*

*Derivative, diluted passion,*

*A facile versatility. . . .*

With smooth and blinkered savagery,

Servile and suave, obsessed by fashion,

These chickenhearted chickenshits

Jerk off their weak and venomous wits.

## 1.15

Though savaged by this vain unkindness

Which she tries not to take to heart,

She too displays unwitting blindness,

Plunging her spirit into art.

Only her cats provide distraction,

Twin paradigms of lazy action.

A short walk from Café Trieste

The three live in an eagle's nest,

A great loft studio, light and airy.

Each day for breakfast Cuff and Link

Have fish to eat and cream to drink.

Their mistress drinks a Bloody Mary

(For inspiration) and devours

Her Weetabix, and works for hours.

## 1.16

Sweet Siamese of rare refulgence  
 With chocolate ears and limbs of tow,  
 Jan gives them love, food, and indulgence.  
 The cats take this for granted, show  
 Scant deference to their human betters;  
 Their baskets woven with gold letters,  
 In splendor Jan can ill afford,  
 In silken bed, on sumptuous board  
 They fatten. Though, when out of favor,  
 The L and C on their beds are  
 Interpreted "Louse" and "Catarrh,"  
 Jan relishes the warmth and savor  
 The deeds of Cuff and Link confer,  
 The love they deign to yield to her.

## 1.17

Through Cuff's exploratory predations  
 Knobs in electric blankets know  
 Untimely death. Link's sharp striations  
 Score the old desk that years ago  
 Was left by Jan's grandparents, issei,  
 To her own parents (self-made nisei),  
 And now (for lack of storage space  
 In their small flat) stands in this place  
 Beneath a scroll by her grandfather:  
 A twilight poem by Wang Wei  
 He calligraphed that shameful day  
 In '42: Internment. Rather  
 Yellowed and frayed in recent years,  
 This scroll still brings Jan close to tears.

1.18

John stands beside his phone, recalling  
 Janet's warm beauty, smiling calm,  
 Her dark eyes, high-boned features, falling  
 Black ponytail, her vagrant charm.  
 He thinks, "I guess I'll be the wiser  
 For talking to a sound adviser."  
 He dials. To his peeved surprise  
 An answering machine replies,  
 Requests his message, name, and number.  
 ("Wait for the beep.") John says, "It's me,  
 John. 234-4963.  
 No message." Rather than encumber  
 The brusque machine with his heart's woes,  
 He wraps himself in pensive prose:

1.19

*Life's Little Ironies* by Hardy,  
 The gloomier sermons of John Donne,  
 The *Zibaldone* of Leopardi,  
*The Queen of Spades*. At ten to one,  
 From the crevasse of melancholy  
 In which he now is buried wholly,  
 He hears the phone ring. "Hello, John?  
 Are you OK? What's going on?  
 I just got back. I thought I'd phone you  
 Although it's late. You sounded bad  
 On the machine, more tired and sad  
 Than in the whole time that I've known you."  
 "It's nothing." "Tell you what, let's meet  
 For lunch tomorrow. 16th Street.



## 1.20

The Shu Jing. One. It's well-frequented.  
 Food's great." Next day, not quite at ease,  
 John shows up early, cologne-scented,  
 Hyper-immaculate, sits and sees  
 Families, lovers, inter alia  
 A circus clown in full regalia,  
 But as the hope-hour strokes its sum  
 He fidgets: Janet hasn't come.  
 Deaf to the pap of Muzak sounding  
 "O Little Town of Bethlehem"  
 Anachronistically at them,  
 The patrons dine with zest. Rebounding  
 Off plastic chairs and grubby floor  
 The notes merge with the squeaking door.

## 1.21

John thinks, "It's not that I'm fastidious. . . .  
 I wish they'd turn that music down. . . .  
 It's gross. That calendar is hideous . . .  
 (He stares at the distasteful clown.)  
 . . . I've waited half an hour, blast her!"  
 Her hands encased in clay and plaster,  
 Janet arrives at twelve to two:  
 "So sorry, John, I had to do  
 This torso. Yes, I tried to hurry.  
 I'm glad you've got yourself a beer.  
 What's that? Tsingtao? Don't look severe.  
 I didn't mean for you to worry.  
 You've ordered? No? This place is fun!  
 What'll you have? It's family-run."

1.22

The food arrives as soon as ordered.  
 Impressed and ravenous, John relents.  
 His chopsticks fasten on beef bordered  
 With broccoli. Enticing scents  
 Swim over the noise, the greasy table.  
 Two bottles each of beer enable  
 Small talk and large, in cyclic waves,  
 To wash their shores, and John behaves  
 At last less stiffly if not sadly.  
 "How are the cats?" "Just fine." "And you?"  
 "Great." "And the sculpture?" "Yes, that too."  
 "Your singing group?" "Oh, not too badly.  
 But I came here to hear your song.  
 Now sing!" "Jan, I don't know what's wrong.

1.23

I'm young, employed, healthy, ambitious,  
 Sound, solvent, self-made, self-possessed.  
 But all my symptoms are pernicious.  
 The Dow-Jones of my heart's depressed.  
 The sunflower of my youth is wilting.  
 The tower of my dreams is tilting.  
 The zoom lens of my zest is blurred.  
 The drama of my life's absurd.  
 What is the root of my neurosis?  
 I jog, eat brewer's yeast each day,  
 And yet I feel life slip away.  
 I wait your sapient diagnosis.  
 I die! I faint! I fail! I sink!"  
 "You need a lover, John, I think.

1.24

Someone, I'd say, who's fun to be with—  
 And, of course, vitamin C to eat—  
 And choose a richer lens to see with.  
 Reach for a vision more complete.  
 Trade in that zoom for a wide angle.  
 Don't let your drooping sunflower dangle  
 Its head upon the garden wall.  
 It needs some watering, that's all. . . ."  
 The fervor of her declamation  
 Induces her to drum a roll  
 With her chopsticks upon her bowl.  
 A waiter turns in consternation.  
 ". . . Don't put things off till it's too late.  
 You are the DJ of your fate.

1.25

Think of yourself a few years later,  
 Possessing, as the years go on,  
 Less prepossessing vital data:  
 Love handles . . . ("Thanks a lot," says John.)  
 . . . Receding . . . (John is getting nervous:  
 "More rice? I wonder when they'll serve us.")  
 . . . Hairline . . . ("Funny taste, this tea."  
 He sips at it distractedly.)  
 . . . Lonely and lost, sans love, sans lover,  
 Too much to drink last night . . . (And here  
 Jan pauses for a sip of beer)  
 . . . Nursing the dregs of your hangover,  
 Blubbering into your raisin bran.  
 Why not do something while you can?"

"But what?" growls John as this depressing  
 Directory drums on. "OK,  
 You've got a point; enough B.S.ing—  
 Suppose you're right—well, what's the way  
 To hook chicks?" Angrily and sadly  
 Jan looks at him. "You'll blow it badly  
 Till you clean up your Pigspeak act."  
 "Oh, come now, don't overreact,  
 Janet, you know I didn't mean it."  
 "Nor, I suppose, did the crude crass  
 Hall manager who pinched my ass  
 Last night. 'Cute chick.' You should have seen it.  
 I punched his snout. 'To hook a chick'—  
 Such porcine lingo makes me sick."

"A venial linguistic tumor."  
 "It's not benign." "But it was just  
 A joke, Jan. Where's your sense of humor?"  
 "It's dormant since last night." "Why must  
 You blame me for his roving trotter?"  
 "Because, sweet ostrich, it was not a  
 Harmless joke. Enough said, John.  
 You've got my drift. I won't go on."  
 "I donned machismo just to rile you."  
 "Well, you succeeded." "Sorry, Jan—  
 Friends?" "Friends—of course, you fool, how can  
 You doubt it? Though I think I'll file you  
 Under 'Male Repentant Pig.'"  
 John takes her hand, and she a swig.

"We need first off," says Janet dryly,  
 "A venue to begin from." "What?"  
 "Your office, John?" she ventures slyly—  
 "Any nice women?" "Not too hot."  
 "Any nice guys?" "Oh, come on, Janet,  
 I just don't go for that, so *can* it."  
 "Well, don't knock what you haven't tried."  
 John stirs his overstirred stir-fried  
 Vegetables for answer, thinking,  
 "She's had too much. Should I suggest  
 We stop at this one? No, it's best  
 To keep the peace. But when she's drinking  
 She talks about the weirdest things—  
 Guys with guys, or pigs with wings."

Now Janet's fancy (wingéd? flighty?)  
 From pigs to pictures is enticed.  
 "Ever tried seeking Aphrodite  
 In a museum?" John cries, "Christ!  
 Haven't I just? With base volition  
 I've gaped at Goya, ogled Titian,  
 Loitered by Rubens with intent,  
 But have (to date) not made a dent  
 In the cool academic armor  
 The women wandering through those halls  
 Assume; we stare at paint and walls  
 But not a word's exchanged." Then, calmer:  
 "I gave it up eventually.  
 My weekends mean too much to me."

"Your weekends—well, how do you spend them?"

John thinks—where do my weekends go?

"Oh, things go wrong. I have to mend them:

A plug, the plumbing, the Peugeot,

A stone stuck in the electric mower—

And I'm a regular moviegoer:

Whenever there's a decent show

I try to make the time and go.

Last week I saw a Buster Keaton.

(I think he's great. He never smiles.)

Then home, to catch up on my files.

A can of chili. When I've eaten,

The late night news, and so to bed."

John looks forlorn as this is said.

"I guess my weekends aren't too sprightly

After all." Jan with a kiss

("Poor little rich boy") murmurs lightly,

"We've got to put a stop to this.

There has to be a swift solution

To this impasse." "Electrocution?

I could jump off the Golden Gate.

I read in the *Bay Guardian* . . . " "Wait!

I've got it, John! The perfect answer!

I should have thought of it. My friend—

Your sufferings are at an end."

"That sounds as terminal as cancer.

Let's hear it." With a tame surmise

He listens. Jan says: "Advertise."

"What? Advertise? You must be joking!"  
 "I'm serious." "Jan, you're nuts." "I'm not."  
 "You know, Jan, you've had such a soaking  
 In Tsingtao you don't know what's what.  
 Me advertise? You must be kidding!"  
 "Kidido, I'm not. Just do my bidding.  
 Take out an ad. Right now. Today.  
*Young handsome yuppie seeks . . .*" "No way!  
 I've always thought your schemes, though wacky  
 (Conceived in midair, born in haste),  
 Remained within the bounds of taste,  
 But as for this one—talk of tacky!  
 Let's talk of something else instead.  
*Young yuppie . . . ! Better dead than read.*"

The family at the next table  
 Are listening in with interest.  
 "But, John, at least—when you feel able—  
 Why don't you put it to the test?"  
 "But it's so desperate, so demeaning."  
 "Johnny Boy, your mind needs cleaning  
 Of the debris of prejudice."  
 "Jan, what has that to do with this?"  
 "Its definition is," states Janet,  
 "Judging a thing before it's tried."  
 "But it's the same for suicide,"  
 Says John—"or blowing up the planet.  
 Why should I try it first to see  
 If it agrees or not with me?"



"But that's . . . but that's . . ." Janet considers.

"That's what? It's a meat market, Jan.

Goats and monkeys, bears, bulls, bidders,

Buyers: grab me while you can—

*DWJSM, 50,*

*Solvent, sexy, thrilling, thrifty,*

*Seeks a bosomy brunette*

*Who likes to play the flageolet.*

*Let me make music with you, baby.*

*Bax 69. I will not share*

A column with such types out there.

How could you think I'd do it? Maybe

You see me as *Male*, 26,

*Who gets his thrills from hooking chicks."*

Janet picks up her fortune cookie,

Then puts it down, turns to her friend:

"Don't bank too much on youth. Your rookie

Season is drawing to an end.

John, things we would—when young—not think of,

Start to make sense when, on the brink of

Thirtydom, we pause to scan

What salves and salads cannot ban,

The earliest furrows on our faces,

The loneliness within our souls,

Our febrile clawing for mean goals,

Our programmed cockfights and rat races,

Our dreary dignity, false pride,

And hearts stored in formaldehyde.

Time sidles by: on television  
 The soaps dissolve, the jingles change.  
 Defeat or pity or derision  
 Constricts our hearts. Our looks grow strange  
 Even to us. The grail, perfection,  
 Dims, and we come to view rejection  
 As an endurable result  
 Of hope and trial, and exult  
 When search or risk or effort chances  
 To grant us someone who will do  
 For love, and who may love us too—  
 While those who wait, as age advances,  
 Aloof for Ms. or Mr. Right  
 Weep to themselves in the still night.

It's sad to see you look so lonely,  
 That's all, John." John does not confute  
 Jan's passionate words. He thinks, "If only  
 Things were that simple." Moved and mute,  
 He sits and stares as little bubbles  
 Fizz in his beer, and his grand troubles  
 Dissolve: "Well, I'm a lucky man  
 To have a true friend like you, Jan.  
 You may be right. But if I do it . . .  
 Who knows what sort of person I'll  
 Wind up with." He attempts to smile  
 But fails. He sighs, "I can't pursue it.  
 I'm sorry that I'm such a pain.  
 It simply goes against my grain."

## 1.38

The family, the clown, the lovers  
 Have left. Muttering in Cantonese,  
 Impatiently the waiter hovers  
 Around the table. "Check, sir?" "Please! . . .  
 But, Janet, what have you been doing?  
 Last time we met you were pursuing  
 A work of deathless interest:  
 Sculpting three golf balls in a nest."  
 "I'm hunting for an album cover  
 For the first disk of Liquid Sheep.  
 I know just what I want. I keep  
 Remembering this scene: above a  
 Meadow of lambs a green and white  
 Hot-air balloon is poised in flight.

## 1.39

Who painted that? Can you remember?"  
 "I do, though I can't quite recall. . . .  
 Was it the air show last September?  
 I think I saw it there, though all  
 I know is, it was on a poster  
 Sometime last year, well, at the most, a  
 Couple of years back. . . . No, I'm stuck.  
 Jan, looks as though you're out of luck.  
 Afraid my mind's deteriorating. . . ."  
 "Oh no, John, no, John, no, John, no!  
 You're right! A poster at a show.  
 That's where I saw it. I've been waiting  
 A long time for a proper clue.  
 I'll check some stores now, thanks to you.

I'm sure I'll trace it." John smiles shyly,  
 Picks up his cookie from his plate.  
 Janet reads out her fortune, wryly:  
*"For better luck you have to wait  
 Till winter. What's it now, September?  
 Come speedily, O numb November.  
 Congeal my fingers. Cigarette?"*  
 "You know I don't. Here's mine: *Forget  
 The entanglement of love; forget not  
 To practice charity.* You see—  
 The cookie says love's not for me."  
 "John, I've a better dictum: *Set not  
 Any great store by cookies; set  
 Your boat on course and spread your net.*"

John kisses Janet swiftly, lightly.  
 The waiter sets the check by John.  
 Jan frowns. They pay, and Jan politely  
 Thanks him and leaves a tip upon  
 The cookie plate. She thinks, "Why bother?  
 There's always something or the other,  
 And even good men of goodwill. . . .  
 Poor guy. We kept him waiting. Still,  
 I wish . . . but what's the use? It's trivial,  
 I guess." When John attempts to hold  
 The door for her, she thinks, "Why scold  
 Him for such slips? It's been convivial.  
 Part with a smile!" They smile and part  
 In friendship, with a lightened heart.

# TWO

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## 2.1

That midnight, after strenuous drumming  
And an hour's drive for Liquid Sheep,  
After the catcalls of homecoming,  
Janet's arm hurts. She cannot sleep.  
For hours she stands and views Orion,  
The Bear, the Dog, the Goat, the Lion,  
The cats asleep now, slackly curled  
Upon the surface of the World  
Of Counterpane. Then, suddenly smiling,  
A light within her almond eyes,  
To her grandmother's desk she flies,  
Seized by a notion so beguiling  
That she must—must?—she thinks a bit—  
She must act instantly on it.

## 2.2

The fitful pen moves on the paper.  
It pauses to delete a phrase,  
Doodles a face, attempts to caper  
Across a dubious word, but stays  
Poised in midair. "If injudicious,  
At least this won't be meretricious;  
But individuality—  
How do I strike that note? Let's see,  
If I used. . . ." Outside, day is dawning.  
Opus complete, and at the sill  
She stands in thought. Eight. Nine. But still  
The city sleeps. (Ah, Sunday morning,  
Most blessed of all times.) She sets  
Her breakfast out, and feeds the pets.

## 2.3

Sated with requisite nutrition  
They eye her milk and Weetabix  
As she reads out her composition:  
*"Young handsome yuppie, 26,  
Straight, forward, sociable, but lonely,  
Cannot believe that he's the only  
Well-rounded and well-meaning square  
Lusting for love. If you, out there,  
Are friendly, female, under 30,  
Impulsive, fit, and fun, let's meet.  
Be rash. Box \_\_\_\_\_. Cuff, off that sheet!  
It's just been typed, and now it's dirty.  
I guess your paw prints . . . (The cats purr.)  
. . . Can serve in place of signature."*

## 2.4

Brown paper packets, marked discreetly,  
 From the *Bay Guardian* arrive  
 Each week: within lie, nested neatly,  
 A clutch of envelopes. When five  
 Such packets lie on Janet's table  
 (Thinner each week) and she is able  
 To sense a dwindling of the tranche  
 That seemed at first an avalanche,  
 She slits the packets to examine  
 The postmark on each envelope,  
 Thinking, "I wonder if he'll cope  
 As sanguinely with glut as famine."  
 She counts the letters—eighty-two—  
 And wonders, fiercely, what to do.

## 2.5

"So many! Jesus! Should I vet them,  
 Select a few and pass them on,  
 Or curb myself, abstain, and let them  
 Wing their uncensored way to John—  
 Expectant, uncurtailed, each letter  
 Pleading its own defense? It's better,  
 Surely, to yield to laissez-faire  
 And burden him with bulk than dare  
 Presume to cull his choice by proxy,  
 Picking my path through torrid lines,  
 Pert promises and suave designs  
 From dulcet Deborah to foxy  
 Farah—a world of tendered joys,  
 A passion play of pleas and ploys."



Two mornings after Janet fires  
 Her postal charge, she's roused from sleep.  
 A chilled voice on the phone inquires:  
 "You sent it? Janet, you're a creep.  
 You didn't fool me for a minute—  
 But would you care to know what's in it?  
 It's wasted, I would say, on me—  
 My interest in pornography  
 Is somewhat jaded. Still, I'm curious:  
 Why did you choose to loose this host  
 Of bacchantes on me through the post?  
 Ought I to thank you?" "You sound furious."  
 "Your crazy ad—" she hears him shout,  
 "Was garbage in and garbage out!"

"Come, John, where is your sense of humor?"  
 "It's dormant since last night." "But since  
 A good man wrote it, I'd assume a  
 Few pleasant women might evince  
 A favorable—who knows?—inviting  
 Response; I'd find it quite exciting.  
 How could they all be maenads mad  
 With morbid lust? Is it that bad?"  
 "Well, while we're on the subject, Janet,  
 Since you're charmed by your scheme, and I  
 Am a mere blameless passerby,  
 I think it's better if you ran it.  
 No doubt your modest maidens will  
 Quiver to your responsive quill."

"John, don't get mad. Just think it over."  
 "You're too much. Look, I'm late for work.  
 I've got to go." "O demon-lover,  
 Drive carefully." "I will, O jerk."  
 But loosed upon the frenzied freeway,  
 He gives no quarter, grace, or leeway  
 To lesser cars within the law.  
 Tight-lipped, he hears the Peugeot roar  
 Past little Bugs and harmless Hondas  
 At 90 m.p.h., his mind  
 Pulsing with anger, while behind,  
 Unnoticed, the deft anacondas  
 Of the road-jungle glide in fast:  
 The cops catch up with him at last.

Lights flash. "Oh God! This means a ticket."  
 The siren wails. John brakes. "Well, I'm  
 Just going to tell them they can stick it. . . ."  
 A cop comes. "License, please. . . . This time  
 It's just a fine. The speed you're going  
 Is hazardous. How about slowing  
 Your pace a little, Mr. Brown?"  
 John hears him with a restive frown,  
 With more impatience than repentance.  
 "Officer, work begins at eight."  
 The cop says, "Better late than 'late,'"   
 Signing his ticket on that sentence.  
 "Have a good day, now!" But John, cross,  
 Can't work, and quarrels with his boss.

## 2.10

A fellow engineer's been fired.  
 John pleads his cause. ("What's done is done,"  
 His boss replies.) At evening, tired,  
 He drives back on Route 101.  
 Above the rush-hour droves, commuting  
 Bumper to bumper, horns are hooting.  
 Through the concussive gas fumes John  
 Sees *Goodnight, Lemmings!* scrawled upon  
 An overpass. A stern contralto  
 Bays Wagner out on "Listener's Choice."  
 An overripe announcer's voice  
 States, "KDFC, Pah-lo Ahl-to."  
 John turns his knob from rival bands  
 Till KOME's on his hands.

## 2.11

The freeway sweeps past humming pylons,  
 Past Canterbury Carpet Mart,  
 Warehouses, ads displaying nylons  
 On shapely legs that make John start.  
 A cigarette ad, sweet and suborning,  
 Subverts the Surgeon General's warning:  
 A craggy golfer, tanned, blue-eyed,  
 Insouciantly stands beside  
 A Porsche-caged blonde; coolly patrician,  
 He puffs a menthol-tipped King-size.  
 John tries to curb his vagrant eyes  
 And heed the poet's admonition:  
 "Beneath this slab John Brown is stowed.  
 He watched the ads and not the road."

## 2.12

But in five minutes other features  
 Divert him: "Honk for Jesus." "I  
 Swerve to run over little creatures."  
 "The President is a lesbian spy."  
 "Nuke the nukes," "Fan of David Bowie"  
 Or "Here today—and gone to Maui,"  
 "I ♣ winos," "I ♥ L.A."  
 Or "Have you hugged your whale today?"  
 "Bartenders do it with more spirit."  
 "Old beach boys do it with good vibes."  
 John sighs, looks up. An ad describes  
 The Roach Motel's compelling merit:  
 "Roaches check in—but they don't check out!"  
 John thinks, "That's what my life's about."

## 2.13

Need John's life be so bug-infested?  
 He wasn't always so alone.  
 Entrepreneurial, double-breasted,  
 He's changed from what his friends have known.  
 Work, and the syndrome of possessions  
 Leave little time for life's digressions.  
 At college, walking down the hall,  
 You'd meet your friends. But now it's all  
 Too complicated. . . . Scattered, sifted,  
 From New York City to L.A.,  
 They write, "We must meet up some day . . .";  
 Yet even those who haven't drifted  
 —Like Phil, or Jan—too far from John,  
 He's chary to encroach upon.

## 2.14

His work's use does not disconcert him;  
 At least, not much. John feels that what  
 He chooses to ignore can't hurt him;  
 Some things are his concern, some not.  
 His politics have strongly, slowly,  
 Rigidified; nor does this wholly  
 Stem from his tenure in Defense.  
 It's a reflection, in a sense,  
 Of a rigidity deeper-seated.  
 A bit of an emotional waif  
 Since, a small boy, he used to chafe  
 Against the fate that he'd been meted,  
 The mother's love he'd never had,  
 He'd clung to "standards," good or bad.

## 2.15

Mumbling, as he turns off the freeway,  
 "Christ, what a day!" he drives his car  
 Beyond the Bay Bridge piers, the seaway,  
 The Ferry Building, to a bar,  
 In search of . . . what? Oh, any dumb thing—  
 Love, company, oblivion—something  
 To breach this fearsome solitude.  
 Two bourbons down, in cheerier mood,  
 He thinks less of the ungiving fetters  
 Of his bleak life, the Universe,  
 And how things must get worse and worse,  
 Than of the intriguing cache of letters,  
 Almost untouched, back in his flat.  
 "I'll read a few. No harm in that!"

## 2.16

Back home, he spreads them in his study,  
 Boosts his intention with, "Godspeed!  
 You've got to get your fingers muddy  
 When panning gold," and starts to read.  
 The first one, waxing weird and wayward,  
 Comes from a doomed housewife in Hayward;  
 The next, from Kate in mad Marin,  
 Is redolent of Chanel and gin;  
 The third . . . but why describe the riot  
 Of paper, color, scent, device,  
 Construction, style? Let it suffice  
 That, dazed by this immoderate diet  
 ("Too much confectionery, too rich"),  
 John can't remember which is which.

## 2.17

Yes, why describe the louche lubricious  
 Dreams of a Daly City Dame,  
 The half-enticing, subtly vicious  
 Burlblings of Belle from Burlingame,  
 And then from Eve of San Francisco,  
 "Six novel ways of using Crisco,"  
 Or the Tigress of Tiburon  
 Who waits to pounce on hapless John.  
 Still, trapped in this traumatic traffic,  
 Silly and frilly, cool and hot,  
 John finds about a quarter not  
 Too evidently pornographic.  
 Of these he gingerly picks three.  
 "The others just aren't right for me."



## 2.18

Selection made, John now dispatches  
 Three crisp and courtly notes, and waits  
 Unhurriedly. The act detaches  
 His heart from gloom, leaves to the Fates  
 What lies within their proper region.  
 To each of the residual legion  
 He sends in a plain envelope  
 The photocopied lines: *I hope*  
*You will excuse this xeroxed letter.*  
*I do not think that you and I*  
*Are matched, but thanks for your reply*  
*To my ad, and I wish you better*  
*Luck for the future. John.* He signs,  
 But adds no surname to the lines.

## 2.19

In his notes, though, he begs the pleasure  
 On three successive Saturdays  
 (If they should chance to have the leisure)  
 Of the three women at three plays  
 Followed by dinner. Wasp Bluestocking  
 Accepts, and turns up with a shocking  
 Pink parasol. They see *Macbeth*,  
 Where John's bored to an inch of death  
 By her insistent exegesis:  
 Appearance and reality themes  
 And the significance of dreams  
 And darkness, and the singular thesis  
 That the Third Murderer is in fact  
 The central figure of each act.

## 2.20

Throughout the play she oozes jargon.  
 Throughout the meal she oozes French  
 Till John is numbed inert as argon.  
 He grows quite pale. "Aroint thee, wench!"  
 He thinks, but keeps a fragile patter  
 Feebly afloat. "Why, what's the matter?  
 You look as white as Banquo's ghost  
 Force-fed three slices of milk toast."  
 She laughs genteelly at her sally.  
 "Just indigestion," John replies.  
 When the time comes to leave, he sighs,  
 "Lately, my work in Silicon Valley  
 Leaves no time for *affaires de coeur*,"  
 And bids a glad adieu to her.

## 2.21

Belinda Beale's acceptance letter  
 Arrives (with photograph). John smiles.  
 "Surely Belinda will be better:  
 What eyes!" Unconscious of her wiles  
 John waits; exactly one week later  
 He goes with her to the theater  
 To see that interesting play  
*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Halfway  
 Through the third act, her dexterous digits,  
 With small attempt at camouflage,  
 Engage in passionate pétrissage\*  
 Along his thigh. John squirms and fidgets.  
 He darts her a swift glance. She stops,  
 But not for long. The curtain drops.

\*pétrissage: "massage by longitudinal rubbing and lateral squeezing"  
 (*Chambers's Twentieth-Century Dictionary*)

## 2.22

At dinner amorous Belinda  
 Stares deep, deep, with her peerless eyes  
 And tries to spark John's dampened tinder  
 With coos and flutings. "Ah," she sighs,  
 "You're such a fox!" John frowns and flushes.  
 Immune to his beleaguered blushes,  
 With "Oh, your accent is so cute!"  
 She strikes her helpless victim mute,  
 While underneath the elegant table  
 Of coq au vin, to John's disgust,  
 Discomfiture, and rising lust,  
 She . . . John gets up, concocts a fable,  
 "Ten-thirty!—got to go—my wife—"  
 Leaves fifty bucks, and flees for life.

## 2.23

"Too bad," he thinks. "Well, third time lucky."  
 He waits for A.T.F.'s response.  
 "I liked her letter; she sounds plucky  
 And amicable. For the nonce  
 I think that's what I need. Belinda  
 Would have combusted me to cinder  
 And Wasp stung me to learned death."  
 Her letter comes. With indrawn breath  
 John reads the note, the friendly greeting,  
 The lines (as usual, typed). They say:  
*Since my job's taking me away  
 From San Francisco soon, our meeting  
 Would serve no aim. Forgive me, please;  
 I've just been told this. Anne T. Friese.*

"The King's third daughter," John thinks sadly.

"If this were just a fairy tale. . . .

Why am I taking this so badly?

She's just a name brought by the mail,

Gone with the wind." To her box number

He writes: *Anne, I don't mean to lumber*

*Once more into your consciousness,*

*But if you left me your address*

*We could maintain communication.*

This is returned: *Box Number Changed.*

Thus Janet (alias Anne)'s arranged

Her creature's discontinuation.

She feels the note she wrote for fun

Would have been better unbegun.

## 2.25

At breakfast, sipping a Bacardi

And Coke, Jan meditates upon

Her guilt. She forwards seven tardy

Responses to the ad to John.

John reads these with faint aspiration.

Each seems a standard variation

On themes he's heard too loud and long.

"The Rhine maidens have sung their song;

This straggling coda is bathetic . . .

(He reads the fifth one) . . . It's a farce . . .

(The sixth one) . . . And it came to pass

That John stayed celibate and ascetic.

Good! Curtain down, and weak applause."

The seventh letter gives him pause.

## 2.26

He reads it through twice, somewhat chary  
 Of yet one more time being had.  
 It goes: *Dear Yuppie, I am wary*  
*Of answering a personal ad.*  
*This is the first time, I should mention,*  
*That I have broken my convention*  
*Of reticence. But, well, here goes:*  
*I rather liked your literate prose.*  
*As an attorney, the clear crafting*  
*Of words (our stock-in-trade) excites*  
*My admiration. Nothing blights*  
*A document like sloppy drafting.*  
*Your ad, if I may be allowed*  
*To matronize you, does you proud.*

## 2.27

*I'm friendly, female, 27,*  
*Well-rounded too, and somewhat square.*  
*I've not yet known romantic heaven,*  
*But harbor hopes of getting there.*  
*I'm fit—at least, I'm not convulsive;*  
*And fun, I hope, though not impulsive.*  
*To match the handsomeness you flaunt*  
*(I do not mean this as a taunt;*  
*I find immodesty disarming),*  
*I have heard several people say*  
*I am good-looking, in my way.*  
*So if you'd like to meet, Prince Charming,*  
*That shows discernment. If you flout*  
*My charms, you are a tasteless lout.*

*With all good wishes. Yours sincerely,  
Elisabeth Dorati (Liz).*

John reads, but sees no image clearly.  
At times it seems as if she is  
Nervous and stern, at others hearty.  
Who is Elisabeth Dorati:  
A cool manipulating minx  
Or a wise imperturbable sphinx?  
The hand's italic, warm and vigorous,  
Crossed out, at times, with a clean line.  
The paper's cream, of plain design  
(No scent or frill), the ink's a rigorous  
Black, and the pen, though narrow-tipped,  
Maintains the strength of the clear script.

How could John know that Liz Dorati  
(Ex-Stanford Law School, last year's batch)  
Is neither cool nor stern nor hearty,  
And much sought after as a match  
By more than one well-heeled attorney  
At the staid law firm Cobb & Kearny?  
Daily their sheepish, prurient eyes  
Swerve from their statutes to her thighs.  
Unmoved by this redundant bounty,  
Liz spends her weekends at her folks':  
A vineyard where she reads and soaks  
The sunlight of Sonoma County,  
Talks to her dad of must and vines,  
Plays chess with him, and sips his wines.



Though Liz was brought up marinading  
 Near the jacuzzis of Marin,  
 She never reveled in parading  
 Her heart, her knowledge, or her skin.  
 She bloomed unhardened by her beauty,  
 Immune to "Lizzie, you're a cutie!"  
 Though doting aunt and bleating beau  
 Reiterated it was so.  
 Her mother, anxious, loving, rigid,  
 Said, "Liz, a pretty girl like you  
 Ought to be thinking of . . ." "Et tu?"  
 Sighed Liz, "Mom, do you think I'm frigid?  
 Just let me get my law degree  
 Out of the way—and then, I'll see."

Though while at law school Liz had wandered  
 Into the odd affair or two,  
 So far at least she had not squandered  
 Her time or heart on someone who  
 Appeared a candidate for marriage.  
 Mrs. Dorati might disparage  
 Her children (Liz and Ed and Sue)  
 For proving such a fruitless crew;  
 Yet all her gentle instigation  
 ("When I was your age, Ed . . . don't frown . . .  
 You really ought to settle down. . . .")  
 Had foundered in the generation  
 Of the desired posse of  
 Grandchildren she could spoil and love.

## 2.32

Liz seemed immersed in her career  
 (For which Miss Simms of fifth-grade math  
 Must bear the blame—who made Liz veer  
 Toward a more professional path  
 Than had been planned by Liz's mother).  
 Ed too had no "significant other"  
 (Or none, at least, who could be seen).  
 And Sue in recent years had been  
 So captivated by the cello  
 That bows and rosin and Mozart,  
 Not beaus and roses, filled her heart.  
 Although life's autumn, sere and yellow,  
 Now pattered round their mother's days,  
 The kids preserved their childless ways.

## 2.33

Yet Liz, sweet Liz, a little lonely,  
 Sequestered in her city flat  
 (Unlike her student days), with only  
 The trusty Charlemagne, her cat,  
 A fearsome tabby, as companion—  
 Felt, as she swam the rapid canyon  
 Of her career, while crocodiles  
 Nibbled her toes with savory smiles,  
 That there must be some happy medium  
 Between a legal partner's life  
 And being a legal partner's wife.  
 O loneliness—or else, O tedium!  
 And so one day she hit upon  
 The personal ads and, through them, John.

In fact her letter cost Liz dearly.  
 Skimming the paper, flipping through  
 Its pungent *cris de coeur*, she nearly  
 Passed John's ad by. The word that drew  
 Her gaze was "square." She'd often pondered  
 Her own geometry, and wondered  
 About a possible congruence.  
 Could this be it? A second sense  
 Nudged second thoughts aside. Though cringing  
 At her unprecedented act,  
 With a brash pen and muzzled tact,  
 A quickening heartbeat and a singeing  
 Blush, she composed and swiftly wrote,  
 Signed, sealed, addressed, and sent her note.

On Sunday morning, groomed and waiting,  
 John sits in the Café Trieste.  
 A canny veteran of blind dating  
 (Twice bitten, once shy), it is best  
 To meet, he reckons, far from drama,  
 In daylight: less romantic, calmer,  
 And, if things should not turn out right,  
 Convenient for ready flight.  
 At noon, the meeting hour appointed,  
 A tall, fresh-faced blonde enters, sees  
 The suited John. "Excuse me, please . . .  
 (A little hesitant and disjointed)  
 . . . Would you be—John?" John smiles. "Correct.  
 And you're Elisabeth, I suspect."

"She's lovely," John thinks, almost staring.  
 They shake hands. John's heart gives a lurch.  
 "Handsome, all right, and what he's wearing  
 Suggests he's just returned from church. . . .  
 Sound, solid, practical, and active,"  
 Thinks Liz, "I find him quite attractive.  
 Perhaps. . . ." All this has been inferred  
 Before the first substantive word  
 Has passed between the two. John orders  
 A croissant and espresso; she  
 A sponge cake and a cup of tea.  
 They sit, but do not breach the borders  
 Of discourse till, at the same time,  
 They each break silence with, "Well, I'm—"

Both stop, confused. Both start together:  
 "I'm sorry—" Each again stops dead.  
 They laugh. "It hardly matters whether  
 You speak or I," says John: "I said,  
 Or meant to say—I'm glad we're meeting."  
 Liz quietly smiles, without completing  
 What she began. "Not fair," says John.  
 "Come clean. What was it now? Come on:  
 One confidence deserves another."  
 "No need," says Liz. "You've said what I  
 Would have admitted in reply."  
 They look, half smiling, at each other,  
 Half puzzled too, as if to say,  
 "I don't know why I feel this way."

Around them arias from Rossini  
 Resound from wall to wall. A bum  
 Unsoberly demands Puccini.  
 Cups clink. Aficionados hum  
 And sing along with Pavarotti,  
 Expatriate upon the knotty  
 Dilemmas of the world, peruse  
 The *Examiner* for sports or news  
 Or, best of all, the funny pages,  
 Where Garfield, that egregious cat,  
 Grows daily lazier and more fat,  
 And voluble polemic rages,  
 While praise by one and all's expressed  
 For the black brew of the Trieste.

The pair are now rapt in discussion.  
 Jan comes in, sees them, cannot hear  
 What they are saying—could be Russian  
 For all she knows; she does not steer  
 Too close, takes in the situation,  
 Sees John's face boyish with elation,  
 While Liz (Who's she?) with vibrant verve  
 In an exhilarating curve  
 Of explication or description  
 Looks radiant. Jan reflects, "Somehow  
 I feel . . . Oh Christ! . . . I feel, right now,  
 I don't want coffee. My Egyptian  
 Deities wait at home for food.  
 I'll come back when I'm in the mood."

Unnoticed, Janet leaves, abstracted  
 By her abortive coffee break.  
 Back in the café, Liz, attracted  
 By John's absorption, nibbles cake,  
 Sips tea, doffs her defensive armor  
 And, laughing, thinks, "This man's a charmer.  
 I like him, and he likes me, though  
 I can't imagine why it's so."  
 (O nightingales! O moon! O roses!)  
 In talk as heady as champagne  
 She mentions her cat, Charlemagne:  
 "A wondrous cat!" John laughs, proposes  
 A toast: "The King and Queen of France  
 And England. Far may they advance.

Well may they reign. Long may they flourish."  
 Happy (with just a dash of pain),  
 He drains his cup. "But now to nourish  
 My hopes of meeting you again—  
 What do you say—next Thursday—seven—  
 For dinner at the Tree of Heaven—  
 Say that you'll come—it's in the Haight—  
 A movie afterwards at eight?"  
 Liz thinks, "There's my gestalt group meeting.  
 I didn't go last week. I should  
 (The leader said) come if I could  
 This Thursday. . . ." But the thought is fleeting.  
 She says, "Thanks, John," and the pair parts  
 By shaking hands (with shaking hearts).



## 2.42

The days pass in a picosecond—  
 The days pass slowly, each a year—  
 Depending on how time is reckoned.  
 Liz, floating in the stratosphere  
 Of daydreams, sees the hours go flying.  
 For John they linger, amplifying  
 The interval until they meet.  
 The sun seems almost to retreat.  
 At last it's Thursday. John, ecstatic,  
 Arrives first, stares at the decor  
 (Arboreal), then at the door . . .  
 And Liz's entrance is dramatic:  
 A deep blue dress to emphasize  
 The sapphire spirit of her eyes.

## 2.43

Her gold hair's fashioned, not severely,  
 Into a bun. From a gold chain  
 A single pearl, suspended clearly,  
 Allures his eye. John, once again,  
 Can't speak for wonder and confusion:  
 A woman, or divine illusion?  
 He overcomes his vertigo  
 And stands. He mutters, "Liz, hello.  
 I hope . . . was it a hassle finding  
 This place?" His voice fails. He sits down.  
 Liz says, "You're nervous, Mr. Brown.  
 Don't worry; I too need reminding  
 That this is real." In an unplanned  
 Gesture of warmth, she takes his hand.

John looks downwards, as if admonished,  
 Then slowly lifts his head, and sighs.  
 Half fearfully and half astonished  
 They look into each other's eyes.  
 The waiter, bearded, burly, macho,  
 Says, "Madam, though it's cold, gazpacho  
 Is what I'd recommend. Noisettes  
 Of lamb, perhaps, or mignonettes  
 Of veal to follow. . . ." Unavailing  
 Are his suggestions. Nothing sinks  
 Into their ears. "Ah, well," he thinks,  
 "They're moonstruck. It'll be plain sailing.  
 Lovers, despite delays and slips  
 And rotten service, leave large tips."

Liz, floundering in a confusion  
 Of spirit, starts to speak: "Today  
 We fought a case about collusion. . . ."  
 John says, "I don't know what to say.  
 Liz, since we met, I think I'm losing  
 My mind—O God, it's so confusing—  
 I thought it was a joke, but when  
 We met, I realized—and then  
 Today, once more—it seems I'm flailing  
 Around for something—and I feel  
 An ache too desperate for repeal  
 Or cure—as if my heart were failing.  
 I was transported Sunday. Then  
 You left; the pain began again."

His voice is lowered, lost, appealing,  
 Rinsed of all wit, of all pretense.  
 Liz, helpless in a surge of feeling,  
 An undertow to common sense,  
 Finds that she has assumed the tender  
 Reincarnation of dream vendor.  
 Her eyes mist over with a glaze  
 Of sympathy. She gently says,  
 "Why do you find it so surprising  
 That you are happy? Are you sad  
 So often—tell me, John. I'm glad  
 That we've indulged in advertising,  
 But—having met you—it would seem  
 You feel all life's a shaky dream."

As in an airless room a curtain  
 Parts to admit the evening breeze,  
 So John's exhausted and uncertain  
 Tension admits a transient ease,  
 And Liz's lenient mediation  
 Smooths out his doubt and hesitation.  
 She looks at him: "Don't be afraid  
 I'll find what you say bland or staid."  
 Relieved of the unspoken duty  
 Of cleverness and coolness now  
 John brings himself to speak, somehow,  
 Of truth, ambition, status, beauty,  
 The hopes (or dupes) for which we strive,  
 The ghosts that keep the world alive.

2.48

But talk turns, as the meal progresses,  
To (heart-unsettling) movie stars,  
The chef's (mouth-watering) successes,  
The ills (mind-boggling) of their cars,  
To cats, to microchips, flotation  
Of corporate bonds, sunsets, inflation,  
Their childhoods . . . while, along the way,  
A bountiful, rich cabernet  
Bestows its warm, full-bodied flavor  
On everything they touch upon,  
But most of all on Liz and John  
Who, fluent as the draught they savor,  
In phrase both fulsome and condign  
Sing praise of Californian wine.

2.49

Cut to dessert. An apt potation  
Of amaretto. They forgo  
The cinema for conversation,  
And hand in hand they stroll below  
The fog-transfigured Sutro Tower,  
A masted galleon at this hour,  
Adjourn for ice cream, rich and whole,  
At Tivoli's, near Carl and Cole;  
Next for a drive—refreshing drama  
Of changing streets and changeless bay  
And, where the fog has cleared away,  
The exquisite bright panorama  
Of streetlights, sea-lights, starlight spread  
Above, below, and overhead.

The night is cold. It's late November.  
 They stand close, shivering side by side,  
 Chilled by the ice cream, yet an ember,  
 A flare, ignited by the ride,  
 This staring at the lights together,  
 Defends them from inclement weather.  
 They stand, half shivering, half still,  
 Below the tower on Telegraph Hill,  
 Not speaking, with a finger tracing  
 The unseen lines from star to star.  
 Liz turns. They kiss. They kiss, they are  
 Caught in a panic of embracing.  
 They cannot hold each other tight  
 Enough against the chill of night.

Daybreak. John wakes to sunlight streaming  
 Across an unfamiliar bed.  
 "A cream duvet? I must be dreaming—  
 With lilac hexagons—instead  
 Of my plain blanket—and the ceiling:  
 An open glass skylight revealing  
 Clear sky—and what's this on my feet?  
 A cat! My God!—" With swift heartbeat  
 He starts as, through the door he's facing,  
 Liz enters with a coffee tray  
 In negligible negligee.  
 She pours two cups. Without embracing  
 They sit, their eyes infused with sleep  
 And love, and drink the potion deep.

It's Friday, though; the office beckons.  
 (No time for sleep or love, no time  
 To shave now.) John's boss frowns; he reckons  
 There's been a hitch: "Oh, hi, John—I'm  
 A bit concerned about this bubble  
 Memory. . . ." John strokes his stubble  
 And hums as beatifically  
 As a sun-sated bumblebee  
 Besotted by the soft vibration  
 Of his own pollen-dusted wings,  
 Oblivious to other things  
 Than his congenial meditation.  
 He says, "What bubble memory?"  
 His boss gawks at him pityingly.

But Liz, with promptitude and pertness,  
 Displaying a resplendent smile,  
 A near-extravagant alertness,  
 And murmuring, "When in doubt, file,"  
 Storms through (in spite of all distractions)  
 A block of six Secure Transactions  
 In record time. Her colleagues sigh:  
 "Poor Liz—I'm sure she must be high."  
 (One mutters: "Coke—she looks so hyper."  
 Another: "Acid can be rough."  
 I wonder where she gets the stuff."  
 A third: "Speed leads to speed." With ripper  
 Worldliness, her boss says: "She's  
 Hooked on a stronger drug than these.")



## 2.54

John's watch beeps out the hour of seven.  
 Liz meets him, but this time outside  
 A theater near the Tree of Heaven  
 To see the movie they denied  
 Themselves last night. They choose to tender  
 Ill-judged obeisance to Fassbinder.  
 Ten minutes of *Veronika Voss*  
 And John says, "Liz, I'm at a loss.  
 What's this about?" "Beats me!" "Your attic  
 Or my flat?" "Either! Mine?" "Let's go."  
 Through the skylight the Pleiads glow  
 And soon, despite the operatic  
 Dissonances of Charlemagne,  
 The loving pair make love again.

## 2.55

The loving pair has bit the apple  
 Of mortal knowledge. As we see  
 The rosy half-light of love's chapel  
 Halo their ardent heads, should we  
 Hymn them in accents hushed and holy?  
 Forbear, O Gentle Reader. Slowly,  
 Ah, slowly, from their whim-swept height  
 Of rash delirium and delight  
 All sober inklings of perspective  
 Sink in the Wash of tenderness. . . .  
 Far better, since my life's a mess,  
 To spray the mooncalves with invective.  
 Why do they look so pleased, when I  
 Am loverless, and pine, and sigh?

Who was it said, "Love is the friction  
 Of two skins"? From "Your place or mine?"  
 There follow weeks of sweet addiction  
 To insular if sparkling wine.  
 Liz, now addressed by John as "honey,"  
 Responds to him with "funny bunny."  
 Their diction has, alas, become  
 Incomprehensible and numb.  
 Their brains appear to be dissolving  
 To sugary sludge as they caress.  
 In lieu of fire, force, finesse,  
 We have a ballet now involving  
 A pretty pas de deux instead,  
 With common Walkmans on their head.

Judged by these artless serfs of Cupid,  
 Love is not blind but, rather, dumb.  
 Their babblings daily grow more stupid.  
 I am embarrassed for them. Come,  
 Let's leave them here, the blessed yuppies,  
 As happy as a pair of puppies,  
 Or doves, who with their croodlings might  
 Make even Cuff and Link seem bright.  
 Let's leave them to their fragile fictions—  
 Arcadia, Shangri-la, Cockaigne—  
 A land beyond the reach of pain—  
 Except for two slight contradictions,  
 To wit . . . but what transpires next  
 Is furnished later in this text.

# THREE

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## 3.1

As Liz and John move out of focus  
Into an amorous mist, let's shift  
Our lens, Dear Reader, to a locus  
An hour south along that rift  
That unnerves half of California:  
Not just the crusty cohorts born here  
But all who earn their bread and salt  
Along the San Andreas Fault.  
Commerce and learning, manufacture  
And government proceed above,  
And nature's loveliness, and love;  
Beneath them lies the hideous fracture,  
Author of the convulsive shocks  
That rip the hills and split the rocks.

### 3.2

A tow-haired boy sits with his father  
Upon a rock that caps a hill.  
The son (Paul) says that he would rather  
Catch centipedes. The father (Phil,  
John's school chum, whom we mentioned earlier)  
Looks on amused as Paul grows surlier.  
Paul's six, his father's twenty-eight;  
And as they sit and altercate,  
Phil rests his hand on his son's shoulder.  
"When I was his age," Phil recalls,  
"My moods were as unfixed as Paul's.  
I wonder why, as we grow older . . ."  
Paul cuts in: "Dad, you're going bald."  
"I know," replies Phil, unenthralled.

### 3.3

Phil meditates on his condition:  
"They say that our maternal genes  
Determine our predisposition  
To lose hair. . . . If that's true, that means . . .  
(Crumbling a dry oak leaf, he scratches  
His head, and fingers his bald patches  
Exploratively, rubs his nose,  
And takes his glasses off.) . . . Suppose . . .  
(His brows crease up in meditation.)  
. . . Instead of losing hair, it were  
To coat our forehead like a fur  
And then usurp, in swift migration,  
Our eyes, cheeks, lips. . . . I guess, all told,  
It's good that we grow bald when old."

### 3.4

Soothed by such counterfactual reason  
Phil's thoughts turn from his homely face  
To the crisp features of the season:  
The straw-gold hill, this oak-strewn place,  
With here the flutter of a dusty  
Sparrow, and there the encroaching rusty  
Lichen upon the rock where Paul  
Sits singing to himself, and all  
The hillsides burred with skeletal thistles  
And thornbush, and the clear cool air  
Presaging winter rain, and there  
A mockingbird with chacks and whistles  
Liquidly aviating through  
A sky of Californian blue.

### 3.5

Two brittle oaks in dark rigidity,  
Bare-branched and canted, crown the crest.  
Above the rock with swift fluidity  
A scrub jay flashes to its nest  
—A cyan flicker—where the greenery  
Of mistletoe revives the scenery  
Entangled in the generous boughs  
Of its old host; and cattle browse  
Along the moister gullies, scattering  
As joggers, pulsing with intent,  
Strive ridge-wards, hell- or heaven-bent,  
Stern-visaged, gasping, frothing, battering  
The patient earth with the curt beat  
Of itchy soles and athletes' feet.

### 3.6

The distant cattle's baleful lowing,  
The distance runners' stoic pace,  
The way the distant world is going  
Crazy—the space and missile race—  
The job Phil left in Datatronics  
(Hive of robotics and moronics)  
Preoccupy him as he smokes  
At ease beneath the tilting oaks.  
While firms were wooing him and clamoring  
To lease from him his soul and brains,  
Phil shocked his friends and slipped his chains.  
The SOS his heart was hammering  
Had grown too loud to be ignored. . . .  
Thus Phil reflects; his son is bored.

### 3.7

Paul now petitions for a story.  
“What? Oh, OK. Let's see . . . (Phil blinks.)  
. . . This one is called *Chromiska's Glory*.  
About a cat . . . (He pauses, thinks.)  
. . . There was a cat who, when a kitten,  
Liked drinking ink, and had been bitten  
By several rats. . . .” “How large?” “This big.”  
“Oh! . . . Go on, Dad.” Phil snaps a twig.  
He rubs his nose in concentration.  
“Now as a kitten she had lapped  
Up so much ink. . . .” Paul listens, rapt.  
His father warms to his narration.  
Paul cups his chin, the plot swings free,  
And twenty minutes pass like three.



### 3.8

“. . . And that is why the cat Chromiska  
 Grew silver-haired that winter night  
 Down to her last eyelash and whisker.  
 When people asked, was it from fright,  
 Her friends said no, but would not tell them  
 About the snowstorm that befell them—  
 And to this day, the reason's known  
 To you, me, and the cats alone.”  
 Phil sips a Michelob, and, serious,  
 Looks at his son, whose deep brown eyes  
 Return his gaze with pleased surprise.  
 Paul says, “Chromiska!” Then, imperious:  
 “Tell me another, Dad.” Phil starts  
*The Story of Three Apple Tarts.*

### 3.9

“Once, in a country green and hilly  
 There lived three bakers. One was fat  
 And friendly, one was slim and silly,  
 And one had whiskers like a cat.  
 You should have smelt their warm bread baking,  
 But, best of all, when they were making  
 Fresh apple tarts, that's when the scent  
 Rose to a grateful firmament. . . .”  
 “What's ‘firmament?’” Phil, somewhat chastened,  
 Says, “Sky. Where was I? Well, up there,  
 There was a great and greedy Bear  
 —I'll point him out tonight—who hastened  
 To find out where this glorious scent  
 Was coming from. So down he went.

## 3.10

He heard the silly baker humming  
 A song called 'Apple of My Heart,'  
 While the bewhiskered one was drumming  
 And yelling, 'Sweet as apple tart!'—  
 And the fat baker roared with laughter  
 And shouted, 'Appily ever after.'  
 The hungry Bear now grew afraid.  
 He smelled the fresh-baked tarts, all laid  
 Deliciously upon the table.  
 He stood and trembled near the door  
 Till he could stand the smell no more.  
 He thought, 'If only I were able  
 To steal one tart—one tart, that's all.  
 I'll leave them two. I promise.' . . . Paul!"

## 3.11

For Paul has upped and gone exploring  
 And now is nowhere to be found.  
 Phil wonders, "Was my epic boring?  
 Where's he gone off to? . . ." On the ground,  
 Stretched out, examining a spider,  
 Paul sprawls, his mouth expanding wider  
 As, suddenly, he sees it rise.  
 Phil walks up to him where he lies  
 And puts his hand upon his shoulder.  
 His son says, "Wow, Dad, did you see?  
 It went straight up into the tree."  
 Phil answers, "Son, it's getting colder.  
 Put on your coat." Paul says, "Dad, get  
 A spider for us as a pet."

"No." "Why not?" "Spiders have weird habits."

"I like them." "I don't." "I do." "Let's

Get something we both like, like rabbits."

"Why rabbits, Dad?" "They make great pets.

Your mother used to like. . . ." Phil falters,

Halts in mid-utterance and alters

What he had meant to say. "Well, son—

You want a spider? We'll get one.

Put on your coat now. . . ." As they linger,

Paul sees a green patch on the plain.

"A field?" "A lake, when filled with rain."

"And that?" Paul points a questioning finger

At Stanford's roofs of clay-baked red.

"A school." . . . "You talk like Mom is dead."

## 3.13

An abrupt torque of pain and sorrow

Wrenches Phil's heart. He stares at Paul.

(Claire's haunted eyes.) "First thing tomorrow

We'll get that spider for you." All

Diversion is in vain. Though quiet,

Paul's heart beats with a sudden riot

Of lonely fear. At first he keeps

Himself in check, but then he weeps,

Turns from his father, half accusing;

Without a word, he sobs and cries

And folds his arms across his eyes

And sits and hugs himself, refusing

Solace or love or father's hand,

Lost in his forfeit motherland.

## 3.14

Phil puts his arms around him, kisses  
 His grimy face and says, "Don't cry. . . ."  
 "Poor boy," he thinks, "I guess he misses  
 His mother even more than I.  
 It's been a year, Claire, since your leaving.  
 If you just knew how he's been grieving—  
 Or what it's like to be alone  
 When you are six. Couldn't you phone  
 Or write just a few lines, or visit  
 Him sometimes—at the very least  
 Send him some small gift from back East?  
 Are you too busy? Poor? What is it?  
 Why can't you write? Why don't you? Why?  
 You love your son as much as I.

## 3.15

A year. A year. That snooty tweedy  
 Son-of-an-East-Coast-bitch—I thought  
 You'd see right through his act, his weedy  
 Compliant charm—or would have fought  
 The flattery, pressure—what?—temptation?  
 —What a laugh!—whimsy, inspiration—  
 O God, I wish I'd never seen  
 Your face—I wish I'd never been  
 Married—Claire, Claire, we loved each other.  
 We lived together for six years.  
 I've shed too many tedious tears  
 To cry again. Paul had a mother  
 Who kissed him, read to him in bed,  
 But he's right, she's as good as dead.

## 3.16

You said I tried to dominate you.  
 What gave you that idea—Claire—  
 Why would I want to?—Do I hate you?—  
 I think of you and I despair  
 Of any happiness without you.  
 What wretched loveliness about you  
 Makes me still long to see you when  
 You've done to me what to most men  
 Would have . . . What's changed? What could have  
 changed you?  
 You must have loved me to resist  
 Your family's unsubtle twist  
 When they insisted I'd deranged you—  
 Claire Cabot marrying Philip Weiss—  
 For all their Wasp stings of advice.

## 3.17

And living happily ever after—  
 Amen—as a good atheist Jew  
 Should say. Christ, I can hear their laughter:  
 'Poor Claire, we thought he wouldn't do.'  
 'Marry in haste, repent at leisure.'  
 At least your great-aunts got some pleasure  
 Out of the wreck. Perhaps it's true  
 They knew you better than you knew  
 Yourself—when you were sweet and twenty  
 And I was dumb and twenty-one. . . .  
 But we were happy, had a son,  
 Invested in a piano, plenty  
 Of furniture, a Ford Capri,  
 Insurance, dishwasher, TV . . .

. . . The works. Sometimes we'd light a fire,  
 I at the keyboard, and you'd sing—  
 Like the old days in the Bach choir  
 Where we first met. Remembering  
 Those evenings with the darkness coming,  
 Your voice, the whispering flames, my humming—  
 While, like an unequal metronome,  
 Paul thumped the floor—I think our home  
 Was what I'd always longed and prayed for.  
 What crept into our happiness?  
 What made you leave me, Claire? I guess  
 Disfiguring is what dreams are made for.  
 A fool in bliss, what made me feel  
 Our rings were not soft gold but steel?"

Such thoughts melt through the frozen river  
 Of his sad mind, and yet out loud,  
 Seeing Paul quietly weep and shiver,  
 He says, taut-featured, head half bowed,  
 "No, Paul, she's gone away." "Forever?"  
 "I just can't tell you, son—but never  
 Think you're alone. You've got me." "When  
 Will *you* leave me?" Phil, shocked, stares, then  
 Holds Paul (still snot-nosed) to him tightly,  
 And says, "Don't say that. You are all  
 And everything I care for, Paul.  
 I'll never leave you." Then, more brightly,  
 "In fact, you know, you'll be the one,  
 When you've grown up, to leave me, son.



### 3.20

Now, let's go home. . . . It's getting chilly,  
And we've got dinner to prepare."  
Paul gets a free ride down the hilly  
Track to the road, and once down there  
Reluctantly climbs off Phil's shoulder  
Into the small Volkswagen: older,  
Less fancy than the Ford Capri,  
But now, with two instead of three,  
And (since the break with Datatronics)  
No money coming, as Phil says,  
The right car for these straitened days:  
Secondhand, squat, no supersonics  
("Zero to ninety in seconds flat"),  
But tough and friendly for all that.

### 3.21

Zucchini from the kitchen garden,  
Potatoes, turkey, kiwi fruit,  
Jell-O that won't consent to harden,  
And cups of chocolate constitute  
The evening meal. Queen of their haven,  
The merry widow Mrs. Craven  
—Plump, sage, and sixty-two—drops by  
With a postprandial pumpkin pie.  
"Now eat this—I don't want to store it."  
"Ah, Mrs. Craven, you're a star!"  
"Baloney! Both you youngsters are  
Starving to death. I can't ignore it."  
With this their landlady carves three  
Great wedges out with gourmet glee.

"A little brandy, Mrs. Craven?"

"Well, thank you. . . . Phil, you must take care

Of your good looks. You're all unshaven.

Your shirt's unpressed. Look at your hair."

Phil grumbles, "Mrs. Craven, baking

Pies to expand my girth, and making

Fun of my looks—that's really low!"

"My daughter swears you're handsome." "Oh!"

Rowena Craven, racy redhead,

Who blares her stereophonic way

To craft fairs all around the bay,

Peddling her quilts, committed Dead-head

Who totes her bootlegged tapes about,

Thinks Philip Weiss is just far out.

## 3.23

Herself embroiled in the peace movement

(She's taking Russian in night school

Three times a week "for world improvement"),

Rowena thinks Phil's ultra-cool

To leave his job for the sole reason,

"To go on would have been high treason

To common sense and humankind."

Last Thursday evening, when she dined

In Palo Alto with her mother,

She mentioned her new flame. "Oh dear!

Who's the poor man?" "He lives near here."

"How near?" "Next door." "Oh, choose some other

Quarry, Rowena. Please don't crush

Poor Phil's heart into quivering mush."

## 3.24

Now Paul yawns as he nibbles candy,  
 And the pie's vanished, bite by bite,  
 And Mrs. Craven's drunk her brandy,  
 And the time's come to say good night.  
 Now they're alone, and Paul, though sleepy,  
 Insists Phil read him "something creepy"  
 Out of the grisly Brothers Grimm.  
 Phil smooths his pillow, reads to him.  
 The boy ingests the gruesome diet  
 With equanimity, but soon  
 His eyes close. Now Phil hums a tune  
 In a voice low, unedged, and quiet  
 Until he sees that sleep has come:  
 A tune from Brahms Claire used to hum.

## 3.25

To adjust a portrait too one-sided,  
 I ought to state that *in re* Claire  
 Informed opinion is divided.  
 Her family frowned at Phil's crude air,  
 Then shrugged, and tried to absorb their burly,  
 Rogue son-in-law who, curt and surly,  
 Splattered (to Claire's grief) needless yolk  
 Upon her nest of gentlefolk.  
 Phil's scorn of "country-clubbing rabble,"  
 His jangling views, his uncouth jokes,  
 And (once, at Christmas with Claire's folks)  
 His use of "queynte" to win at Scrabble,  
 Resulted in a virtual ban  
 On Phil from the whole Cabot clan.

Post-marriage incompatibility  
 Of taste and style and interest,  
 Now hammering on love's fragility,  
 Exposed its contract to the test.  
 Phil's vigor, once his great attraction,  
 Exhausted Claire now; her reaction  
 To argument was to withdraw  
 Into her life and close the door.  
 Fiercely from Florida, Phil's mother,  
 Old Mrs. Weiss, defended Claire,  
 Declaring with a Delphic air  
 That Phil would never find another  
 Woman like her, and was to blame  
 For Claire's defection when it came.

To shelter Paul from the anxiety  
 Erratic visits might create,  
 Claire remained absent. The propriety  
 Of this is open to debate,  
 But not the tilt of her intention:  
 Her pain and loss and apprehension  
 At separation from her son  
 Grieved her as much as anyone.  
 Bewildered by this harsh estrangement,  
 Phil closed the piano, sold Claire's pets,  
 Paid off the bulk of their joint debts  
 And, following the rearrangement  
 Of his curbed state, as an unplanned  
 Office of love, took Paul in hand.

It happens that, a few months later,  
 A concert of three string quartets  
 Draws Liz back to her alma mater.  
 She phones John, "I've got tickets; let's  
 Go down to Stanford. Sue'll be playing.  
 Ed won't be there, despite my saying  
 That sibling solidarity  
 Concerns him just as much as me.  
 I hope Sue isn't disappointed. . . ."  
 "The program?" "Mozart, Schönberg, Brahms."  
 "Ah well, that certainly has charms—  
 Though you know, darling, how disjointed  
 These jumbled periods make me feel.  
 Where are they playing?" "Dinkelspiel."

"Schönberg's an ulcer-generator."  
 "Oh, don't be stodgy, John." "OK,  
 It's a date, honey." Two days later  
 They hear the Ionian Quartet play:  
 Four students. Sue draws dark and mellow  
 Lyrical magic from her cello  
 In Mozart's last quartet in D.  
 O loveliness, constrained and free!  
 Ah, Mozart, prince of music makers  
 Who (for the miracle you gave)  
 Lie buried in an unmarked grave!  
 Now the world movers and world shakers  
 —Archbishops, stewards, counts, and kings—  
 Rot voiceless, you still lend us wings.

Rich, bright, enrapturing, enthralling  
 Tapestry! As Liz hears them play,  
 Tears come into her eyes, recalling  
 That half-forgotten childhood day  
 When, at the insistence of their mother,  
 She and her sister and her brother  
 Were press-ganged into lessons. Ed  
 Soon dumped his violin, instead  
 Sustaining through his adolescence  
 (By turns) guitar, trombone, and sax.  
 Liz's viola bow grew lax.  
 But a melodious iridescence  
 Of joy today envelops Sue  
 In her Mozartian debut.

"What a magnificent requital  
 For all Mom's pains. Too bad she's ill.  
 It's two hours' drive to the recital  
 Down from our place; Dad's not young. Still,  
 Sue said she'd tape the Mozart for them.  
 Oh well, I'm sure Schönberg would bore them. . . ."  
 John jams her thought waves to complain,  
 "This sandwiched Schönberg is a pain. . . ."  
 Then, in a tone more sour and surly,  
 ". . . If only they would condescend  
 To shift this crap to either end,  
 We could arrive late or leave early.  
 Thank God I've brought my earplugs—" "John!"  
 "Calm down, hon. I won't put them on."



Engulfed in Schönberg's cerebral clatter,  
 John writhes, and looks intensely ill;  
 Then sits up sharply. "What's the matter?  
 John—dear," Liz whispers. John says, "Phil!  
 That's him there—Berkeley—engineering—  
 His son, too—when we've finished hearing  
 This horror, let's go say hello."  
 So in the interval they go  
 Over to where his friend is showing  
 His son the rules of tic-tac-toe  
 On the verso of the program. "Whoa—  
 Philip, old buddy, how's it going?"  
 "Not too bad," smiles Phil. "And this is . . . ?"  
 "Oh, let me introduce you. Liz . . .

## 3.33

. . . Meet Phil—and Paul—Weiss . . . Liz Dorati."  
 "Hello." "A pleasure." "Say what, Phil—  
 The two of us are throwing a party  
 On Friday night. Housewarming. Will  
 You join us? Liz has been inviting  
 Horrendous hordes . . . hey, what's that writing?"  
 "Nothing," Phil mumbles, "Tic-tac-toe. . . .  
 If Paul can spare me, sure, I'll go."  
 "Well, young man, will you free your father?"  
 "Yes," Paul concedes, "if I can stay  
 With Chuck Lamont when Dad's away." . . .  
 "Phil, coffee after this?" "I'd rather  
 Split following the Brahms. It's late,  
 And Paul has school at half past eight . . .



. . . This Friday, then. . . . What was I saying?  
 Oh, yes, the back of this will do  
 For your address. . . . What brilliant playing!  
 That cellist . . . "She's my sister, Sue."  
 "You're serious?" "Yes." "She's quite amazing.  
 All four are good, but without raising  
 Her voice above the others, she  
 Illuminates the other three.  
 No stridency, no ostentation,  
 Clear, moving, fine . . . your sister is  
 A marvelous musician, Liz.  
 Please pass on my appreciation."  
 "Tell her yourself on Friday, Phil.  
 She'd like that." "She'll be there?" "She will."

John nods, "A word, Phil . . . (Liz, excuse us) . . .  
 Come early—we two veterans will  
 Find something crazy to amuse us—  
 Just like old times." "Old times," says Phil.  
 John gently says, "Phil, I'm real sorry  
 About this thing with Claire. . . ." "Don't worry—  
 These things are for the best. Last week  
 Our papers came through. . . . Let's not speak  
 Of this; instead of an outpouring  
 Of my disasters, what of you?  
 What's the worst trauma you've been through?"  
 "This Schönberg. It's obscenely boring."  
 "Ah, John, the same cantankerous wit.  
 My friend, you haven't changed a bit."

John thinks: "But you've changed . . . your vocation.  
 Why did you drop your job? If you  
 Come early for the celebration  
 We could clear up a thing or two."  
 He asks, "Phil, how did Datatronics  
 Take your departure? Histrionics?"  
 "Oh, no such luck! As soon as I  
 Checked in my badge and said good-bye,  
 They took on someone else. . . . But, really  
 . . . (Phil smiles) . . . to change the subject, Liz  
 —Your new friend . . . and housewarmer—is  
 Lovely, I think—although we've merely  
 Exchanged two words . . . I'm glad for you."  
 "Thanks, Phil!" John's pleased; and flattered too.

The lights have dimmed. Now they're returning.  
 Throats clear. Brahms' A Minor begins.  
 The brisk allegro. Then a yearning  
 Warm ductile length of lyric spins  
 Its lovely glimmering thread at leisure  
 Inveiglingly from measure to measure  
 With a continuous tenderness  
 So deep it smooths out all distress,  
 All sorrow; ravishing, beguiling . . .  
 And on and on till silence comes.  
 Paul whispers, "That's the tune Mom hums!"  
 Phil's eyes are closed, but Paul is smiling,  
 Floating on a slow tide of Brahms,  
 Back in his absent mother's arms.

# FOUR

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## 4.1

“Liz, dear, it’s been just lovely meeting  
Your friends, and John; what a nice boy.  
We hope that soon. . . .” Without completing  
Her exhortation to enjoy  
A copula more sacramental  
(Resulting in the incidental  
Production of grandchildren—three  
Seems best—to dandle on her knee),  
Mrs. Dorati hugs her daughter  
And drives off with rheumatic care.  
Liz stands and breathes the sharp night air,  
While from the house keen squeals of slaughter  
And wrath attest that Liquid Sheep  
Have just commenced to rant and weep.

## 4.2

So much for the Vivaldi. Thinking,  
 “Mom’s got out in the nick of time,”  
 Liz turns back. “Ah, the hostess!” Drinking  
 His seventh glass of gin and lime,  
 Professor Pratt, fine-tuned historian  
 (Renowned creator of *Victorian  
 Architecture in Pittsburgh; How  
 Pittsburgh Was Lost and Won*; and now,  
 With plump grants from the Frosch Foundation  
 —No less voluminous as he  
 Hops up the academic tree—  
*Pittsburgh—The Savior of the Nation*),  
 Roars in her ear as she goes by  
 And holds her with his bulbous eye.

## 4.3

“Professor Pratt, how good to meet you . . .  
 (John’s really left me in the lurch) . . .”  
 “At last, my dear! I thought I’d treat you  
 To new directions in research  
 On Pittsburgh.” “Thanks, but with this yelling,  
 Professor Pratt, it would be selling  
 Your theories short to try . . . (There’s John—  
 That’s odd—he’s got a new suit on—  
 And why’s he kicking at the table?) . . .  
 Excuse me. . . .” Liz goes over. “Hi!  
 Something wrong, dear?” “Yes! Just as I  
 Was hoping things had gotten stable,  
 As if to prove that all is flux,  
 Your squalid cat pissed on my tux.”

"Poor Charlemagne. He's agitated.  
 It's this noise, dear. Please don't make waves."  
 "Nonsense. That cat should be castrated—  
 Unless," John splutters, "he behaves. . . ."  
 "John, dear, don't go all stiff and stuffy.  
 Look round you. Everyone's so scruffy  
 A tux looks odd—take my advice.  
 Oh, by the way, Mom thinks you're nice. . . .  
 I wonder why Dad couldn't make it. . . ."  
 Liz ripples on, while John thinks, "Drat  
 That mangy misbegotten cat.  
 I hate the beast, and I can't fake it . . ."  
 (While Charlemagne, from the back room,  
 Yowls out symmetric spells of doom.)

But now with vigor fierce and frantic,  
 In a new number, "Love Dispriz'd,"  
 With thuds and screechings corybantic  
 (The neighbors have been neutralized  
 By being invited to the frolic),  
 The Liquid Sheep with hyperbolic  
 Frenzy are squirming in the spasms  
 Of uncontrollable orgasms  
 To Janet's mad, mesmeric drumming. . . .  
 Then, suddenly, silence. "More! More! More!"  
 The audience howls for an encore—  
 But there can be no second coming  
 For Liquid Sheep, who, mute and spent,  
 Disband to seek out nourishment.

Now John keeps Philip circulating.  
 "Rose, meet my old friend Philip." Rose  
 Finds the Sheep "too, too enervating."  
 She smiles at Phil and blows her nose.  
 But English unofficial roses  
 Are not as bland as he supposes,  
 And Rose, whose nasal septum throbs  
 With coke, dilates between her sobs  
 And snorts, on "Daddy's super bashes";  
 Then, wilting from chic gibberish  
 Into a bruised Americish:  
 "But not all cultural attachés  
 Are like my dad, for heaven's sakes!  
 Still, that's the way the biscuit breaks."

Phil frowns, and sets down his manhattan.  
 He dips one arm of his thick specs  
 —Daubing its tortoiseshell ground pattern  
 With bold green guacamole flecks—  
 Into a nearby bowl, and licks it,  
 Massages his blunt nose, and picks it,  
 Grunting, "You're really something, chick!"  
 He thinks, "If this won't do the trick,  
 I'm stuck." But Rose by now is fleeing  
 And Phil's left blessedly alone,  
 Content in an inviolate zone.  
 He chuckles. But alas, Liz, seeing  
 Him by himself, steers him to where  
 Janet and Sue, with hybrid flair,

Discuss, "Is acid rock agogic?"  
 And "How does Bach relate to punk?"  
 As Jan expands with pedagogic  
 Verve on the genesis of funk,  
 Her new friend states, "*Ein Heldenleben*  
 And *Warum ist das Licht gegeben*  
 . . . (Snatches of which she sings out loud  
 —Shy Sue, forgetful of the crowd) . . .  
 Apotheosize pan-Germanic  
 Grandeur and gloom. . . ." Phil wishes he  
 Could crawl off unobtrusively,  
 But heedless of his spiraling panic  
 Liz wedges in with "Janet, you  
 Know Phil . . . Phil, meet my sister, Sue."

Phil, faced by Janet—Claire's friend—trembles:  
 "Hi, Jan, long time no see!" But Jan  
 Observes him as if he resembles  
 A putrefied orangutan.  
 Once Claire and Jan had double-dated  
 With Phil and John. Once Claire, elated,  
 Stopping her ears to Cabot screams,  
 Had wed the pauper of her dreams.  
 "Claire's not to blame," thinks Janet stoutly.  
 Thus by default the fault is Phil's.  
 Jan sets her gaze at Look that Kills  
 While Phil admires the floor, devoutly  
 Twirling his glass like a prayer wheel,  
 And gnaws his lip with vampire zeal.



4.10

Jan says, "Excuse me, Sue. I'll see you."  
 Phil's knees feel like papaya pulp.  
 Sue asks, "Phil, why did Janet flee you?"  
 "Don't know," evades Phil with a gulp:  
 "Sue—Sunday night—the 'Royal' trio—  
 I thought you played it with great brio. . . ."  
 And Sue, diverted, smiles and says,  
 "So you were there?" With warm-eyed gaze  
 She looks at Phil and thinks, "I wonder  
 What it's about—I'm sure John knows—  
 He's looking at us—I suppose  
 Some unforgotten feud or blunder."  
 Across the room, John gloats to Liz,  
 "She's falling for him—bet she is!

4.11

We'll get old Phil hitched up, believe me—  
 Yes, it's reciprocal—I'm sure—  
 Look at his face—he can't deceive me."  
 Liz thinks, "That's somewhat premature. . . .  
 I'd hardly bounce to that conclusion. . . ."  
 Around her, reveling in confusion,  
 In attitudes of vague collapse  
 Among fruit punch and brandy snaps,  
 Her legal colleagues sit discoursing  
 With Liquid Sheep and stroke their fleece  
 While, leaning on the mantelpiece,  
 Frowning, aloof from all this horsing,  
 Her brother Ed decants Bordeaux  
 On the white woolen rug below.

#### 4.12

Now Bjorn the Swedish runner's leering  
 At Rose with cold, appraising lust.  
 She shudders and adjusts an earring.  
 With reassuring spite and trust  
 The Van Camps battle on, unthinking:  
 "No, darling, I have *not* been drinking.  
 Thanks for the sweet thought, anyway."  
 "It's nothing, darling. Any day!"  
 While, bowed down with the gray futility  
 Of his dank thesis, Kim Tarvesh  
 Ogles convexities of flesh  
 And maximizes his utility  
 By drowning in his chilled Chablis  
 His economics Ph.D.

#### 4.13

But now Professor Pratt's recaptured  
 His fugitive, and Liz endures  
 The bludgeonings of this most enraptured,  
 Most indefatigable of bores.  
 He raves of western Pennsylvania  
 With zealotry approaching mania:  
 ". . . Had we not taken Fort Duquesne,  
 My dear, the French would still remain  
 Entrenched in a confederation  
 From Louisiana to Quebec.  
 I tell you, Pittsburgh saved our neck—  
 Pittsburgh—redeemer of our nation!  
 My fourth book reexamines this.  
 It's called *The Pratt Hypothesis*. . . ."

## 4.14

Phil downs vermouth and bourbon, sinking  
 Out of a world of loss and pain.  
 He drinks and he continues drinking  
 And having drunk he drinks again.  
 Inspired by a warm confusion  
 In a soft stratum of illusion,  
 The amber in his glass becomes  
 A gold elixir that benumbs,  
 That steadies as it sends him reeling.  
 A sunflower in a frame of chrome  
 Reminds him of his childhood home,  
 And in an access of swift feeling  
 He sees, with vision like a knife,  
 Into the very heart of life.

## 4.15

He thinks of Paul. He thinks . . . John hails him  
 Across the clouds of smoke-filled air,  
 Wrestles his way through, and assails him  
 With "Now that we've achieved this rare  
 Moment to talk—we'd better use it!  
 Here's a straight question—don't refuse it—  
 Why have you left your job?" "To save  
 The world," replies Phil with a grave  
 Decorum. "Ah," says John. "Fantastic!  
 Guess we young yuppies all should go  
 Do our own thing." Phil murmurs, "Oh—  
 Young yuppies—now—that's pleonastic. . . ."  
 "Touché," says John; then, "Phil, you're mad.  
 What better job could you have had?"

If John sounds blunt and acrimonious,  
 It's not surprising. What in Phil  
 Seemed more refreshing than erroneous  
 Behavior once, while they were still  
 At college, now excites causticity.  
 Phil's amicable eccentricity  
 Unsettles John now that it's come  
 To rest a bit too close to home.  
 Or it may be that, overtaken  
 By his defensive doubts, he shrinks  
 Into a quilled attack. Phil thinks:  
 "John doesn't like his totems shaken.  
 Before I've threatened him, he fires."  
 By way of answer, Phil inquires:

"And your job gives you satisfaction?"  
 "It's fun—it's well-paid—it's a new  
 Challenge—" "What is it, John?" "Compaction  
 Of payloads. . . . Phil, it can't be true  
 That you—the whiz kid of computers,  
 Beloved of bosses as of tutors,  
 The author of that learned tract  
 On guidance systems—could in fact  
 Blow your career—and for dumb slogans."  
 "To save the world—what's dumb in that?  
 Before you blow our planet flat  
 With all your payloads and your blowguns,  
 We interfering, peace-drugged jerks  
 Might save your skins—and jinx your works."

#### 4.18

"And how do you propose to do it?"  
 "Well, Lungless Labs; that's for a start.  
 We'll picket it, disrupt it, sue it—" *—*  
 "Phil, Lungless Labs won't give a fart.  
 They'll slam you straight into the slammer  
 Where you can practice Russian grammar  
 Until . . . (By ones and twos a knot  
 Grows round the disputatious spot) . . .  
 Sense penetrates your soft ingenuous  
 Cerebrum." "John, you've missed the point,"  
 Says Phil: "The world is out of joint;  
 And such acts, though they may seem tenuous  
 To you, give heart to us; what's more,  
 Bring new peace fodder to our door."

#### 4.19

Speech strained and clarified by passion  
 —His S's remain S's still—  
 In unantagonistic fashion,  
 Eschewing escalation, Phil  
 Resumes: "John, take a look around us.  
 Imagine that the first bombs found us  
 Just as we are—as here we stand,  
 A glass of liquor in our hand.  
 There by the door is Van Gogh's painting  
 Of sunflowers. Here are all our friends.  
 And suddenly our small world ends,  
 And our vile dust is swept up, tainting  
 The hills, the vineyards, and the seas  
 With irremediable disease.

So tell me, how much will it please us  
 That mankind with its crazy ways  
 —Bach, Rembrandt, Socrates, and Jesus—  
 Will burn to ash and swiveling haze?  
 Will it console us to be knowing  
 In the swift instant of our going  
 That Red Square, like our children's crèche,  
 Will soon be charred or ulcerous flesh?  
 And then, when the soft radiation  
 Descends on what's not been destroyed  
 —Trees, whales, birds, wolves—the birthless void—  
 Think how the crown of earth's creation  
 Will murder that which gave him birth,  
 Ripping out the slow womb of earth.

Is it just 'we' who feel this terror?  
 Do you think 'they' can't understand  
 What will come down through aim or error  
 Upon their great and fragile land?  
 We *must* stop— . . . (Caught by sudden sadness  
 He fumbles) . . . —if we *can*—this madness,  
 We common people of goodwill. . . ."  
 A young man stands and stares as Phil  
 Says, ". . . Fallout can't tell Omsk from Reno. . . ."  
 He stands there wordless, half in love,  
 Drinking Phil's speech, the image of  
 El Greco's *Felix Paravicino*:  
 The same pale, slender, passionate face,  
 Strength and intensity and grace.

It's Ed. Now Liz has introduced him  
 (At his request). Ed, rarely short  
 Of words, finds Philip's have reduced him  
 To numbness. On the tennis court  
 Or with his advertising rabble  
 Ed spouts forth a distracting babble  
 Of witty entertaining trash  
 Till his companions long to smash  
 Their rackets on his simmering cranium  
 Or seal his lips with editing tape;  
 But two sure passwords for escape  
 Have been discovered: One's Uranium;  
 The other, God. All talk of these  
 Causes Ed's babbling brook to freeze.

Now host and hostess, drawn by duty,  
 Have vanished, but—to stay with Ed—  
 At twenty-three, though quite astute, he  
 Seems easily dispirited;  
 Although his energy's appealing,  
 It serves the function of concealing  
 Rifts of anxiety so deep  
 Some nights he finds it hard to sleep.  
 (Liz thinks this trait comes from their mother.)  
 Both Sue and Liz adore Ed: he's  
 Warmhearted, fun, and quick to please;  
 But neither understands their brother  
 When his designs and words are skewed  
 By what they term his godly mood.



Phil looks at Ed: intense, athletic,  
 Silent—the sort of man whom he's  
 Uneasy with. But Ed's ascetic  
 Tension betrays his own unease;  
 And by now Phil's free-floating status  
 (Buoyed by spirituous afflatus)  
 Projects goodwill on all mankind—  
 And so, in half an hour, we find  
 The pair engaged in conversation,  
 Which, now that he's regained his cool  
 And half slipped back to playing the fool,  
 Revolves round Ed's prolonged narration  
 Of how he happened to procure  
 A green iguana from a store.

“ . . . They had a sale on small iguanas—  
 Babies—a span long, kind of cute.  
 Sure, I'd gone in to buy piranhas,  
 But seeing them, I knew they'd suit  
 My image: I could take them walking  
 Through the Financial District, talking  
 To them about the price of gold.  
 We wouldn't make the centerfold  
 Of *Playgirl*, as they aren't too pretty,  
 But what the heck, I didn't care:  
 Traffic would swerve, and folks would stare  
 —I had it figured out—the city  
 Would halt, the cops would come and say,  
 'Get those darn things out of the way!' ”

But, sadly, Arnold Schwarzenegger  
 —I got just one—looks really strange:  
 His legs keep getting bigger and bigger  
 But not his torso—Should I change  
 His food?" Ed asks with some disquiet.  
 "Don't know," replies Phil. "What's his diet?"  
 "Salads, and larvae—and bonemeal."  
 "Why that?" asks Phil. "Because I feel  
 His jaw's so rubbery and floppy  
 He may need extra calcium." "No.  
 The phosphorus-calcium ratio  
 Is far too high in bonemeal. Copy  
 My method: cut that bonemeal out,  
 And feed it vitamins till it's stout.

To feed it bonemeal is to maim it."  
 "You've kept iguanas, Phil?" "Oh, sure—  
 Iguanas, rabbits, dogs, you name it!  
 My wife—but I don't any more . . .  
 (Phil's speech grows slurred) . . . We got a spider—  
 Paul and I call it Easy Rider."  
 "Who's Paul?" "My son. He lives with me."  
 Ed frowns at Phil: "Why shouldn't he?"  
 "Oh! I'm divorced," says Phil. "You married?"  
 "No, no—" "Well, don't! Women are turds.  
 That whole snake pit is . . . for the birds,"  
 Phil mutters—but his slurs have carried  
 To Jan, who with ferocious mien  
 Injects herself into the scene.

"Phil, you're obnoxious . . . (Like a razor  
 Her voice dissects him) . . . when you're drunk."  
 Her eyes bore through him like a laser.  
 "What . . . ? What . . . ?" In an amnesic funk,  
 "What did I say?" asks Philip (thinking,  
 That's Jan . . . she's pretty nice . . . likes drinking . . .  
 What's made her mad?) ". . . Hey, have a drink—"  
 He offers her a glass. "Men stink!"  
 Janet exclaims with tingling fury.  
 "You puke all over us, then say,  
 'What did I do?' file us away  
 As saint, virago, nag, slut, houri  
 Or household pet or household drudge—  
 God—Claire was right. . . ." Phil does not budge

From where Jan leaves him, rooted, staring.  
 He leans in foggy shock on Ed.  
 Then in a voice drunk and despairing:  
 "I'm plastered! What was it I said?"  
 "Nothing you meant. You're right. You're plastered."  
 "I'm going . . . home. . . ." "Unless you've mastered  
 The art of driving straight when drunk,  
 Once you're behind that wheel, you're sunk!  
 I'll drive you home. Come back tomorrow  
 To fetch—" "I live near Stanford, Ed."  
 "Oh . . . well, in that case, share my bed—  
 Just don't try driving!—You can borrow  
 My toothbrush too. Come on, let's go—  
 Good night, Liz—Bye, John—Homeward ho!"

#### 4.30

They totter car-wards. Now Ed's driving  
 Toward his spartan lodgings, where,  
 Within two minutes of arriving,  
 Stretched on the bed, Phil sees a chair  
 Piled high with shirts, a tennis racket,  
 A Bible, an unopened packet  
 Of guitar strings, a saxophone,  
 Shaving cream, razor and cologne. . . .  
 A commentary on Aquinas  
 Rests on the floor, while on a shelf  
 Lies the august *Summa* itself,  
 Next to (in order) *Conquering Shyness*,  
*The Zen of Chess*, *The Eightfold Way*,  
*Theories of Film*, and the *Pensées*.

#### 4.31

Phil looks around at Ed's housekeeping.  
 Ed yawns, and strips off shirt and shoes.  
 Silence outside. The iguana's sleeping.  
 This quiet grid of avenues  
 With red-flowered gum for decoration  
 Lies deep in slumber and sedation.  
 "It suits me, Phil. The flat's quite small,  
 But there's a garden, after all—  
 And a small pool for the iguana. . . ."  
 Phil's bleary eyes rest on a bowl  
 Of fruit, a crucifix, a roll  
 Of film, a photograph of Lana  
 Turner, who smiles across the floor  
 At Holbein's sketch of Thomas More.

"My patron saint." "Which one?" Ed, grinning,  
 Says, "Go to sleep!" and turns to pray.  
 He asks forgiveness for his sinning,  
 Gives thanks for the expended day,  
 Consigns his spirit to God's charity. . . .  
 Now Philip, with exiguous clarity  
 And some bewilderment, sees Ed  
 Cross himself twice, then come to bed.  
 Lights out. Phil mumbles, "What a party!  
 I really blew it then with Jan.  
 Ed, thanks a lot. I mean it, man—  
 I haven't yet met a Dorati  
 I didn't like . . . (Across the bed  
 He reaches out and touches Ed) . . .

. . . Good night." Ed fears to answer. Trembling,  
 He moves his hand across the space  
 —What terrifying miles—assembling  
 His courage, touches Philip's face  
 And feels him tense up and go rigid.  
 "I'm sorry," Ed says, in a frigid,  
 Half-choking voice, "I thought you might—  
 I didn't mean—I mean—good night."  
 Taut with a cataleptic tension  
 They lie, unspeaking. Phil thinks, "Why  
 Be so uptight? He's a great guy.  
 I've never bothered with convention.  
 God! It's a year that I've been chaste . . . ,"  
 And puts his arm around Ed's waist.

Now, just as things were getting tenser,  
 And Ed and Phil were making love,  
 The imperial official censor  
 —Officious and imperious—drove  
 His indiscriminating panzer  
 Straight through the middle of my stanza.  
 Now, Gentle Reader, is it right  
 This swine should put my Muse to flight,  
 Rooting about among my pearly  
 Wisdom till he finds orts that he  
 Can gobble down with grunting glee?  
 Forgive me, Reader, if I'm surly  
 At having to replace the bliss  
 I'd hoped I could portray, with this.

I'll move the ménage to mañana,  
 But under protest. Saturday  
 Dawns bright and clear, and the iguana  
 —Fantastic dragon of green clay,  
 Great saurian from realms primeval!—  
 With scraping, scuffling, and upheaval  
 Bestirs himself now in his shed.  
 Ed yawns and half gets out of bed,  
 Returns and nuzzles Philip's shoulder,  
 Puts on his jeans, and goes to get  
 An avocado for his pet.  
 He says, "Poor Schwarz. It's getting colder.  
 This heat's kaput. Tonight, instead,  
 You can sleep underneath the bed."

The warty beast observes Ed coldly,  
 Stares at the green and mottled pear  
 He proffers. Noisily and boldly  
 He crawls toward him, unaware  
 Of the loose leash that Ed is holding.  
 Ed slips it round him, gently scolding:  
 "Now watch that dewlap—mind those spines—"  
 But Schwarzenegger undermines  
 All of Ed's efforts at persuasion  
 —By jerking, clawing—until he  
 Obtains his avocado. "We  
 Are now prepared for an invasion  
 Of our quiescent neighborhood.  
 You want a walk? . . . (The head bobs.) . . . Good!"

Ed leaves, upon the kitchen table,  
 A note: *Dear Phil, Please help yourself  
 To breakfast. Sorry I'm not able  
 To make it. Coffee's on the shelf.  
 I'll be back soon.* Ed and his lizard  
 Now do their rounds: a comely wizard  
 And his unsightly basilisk.  
 Behind, two neighbors' children risk  
 Utter and prompt annihilation  
 Should the familiar's fiendish eyes  
 Turn on them. "You'll burn up," Pam cries.  
 She quakes in fear and veneration.  
 "Coward!" says Gabrielle in a tone  
 Of scorn. "You'll only turn to stone . . .



You scaredy cat!" Pam begins crying.  
 Swiftly the reptile eyes look back.  
 Gabrielle gasps. Pam, petrifying,  
 Awaits the fiery-tongued attack.  
 "Hello," says Ed, "meet my iguana,  
 Brought all the way from Ecbatana  
 In the mysterious land of Wales  
 For kids to stroke his shiny scales."  
 Pam thaws to Ed's enlightened coaching:  
 "Here's how to pet the friendly beast.  
 He isn't slimy in the least."  
 Pam frowns and touches him, reproaching  
 Her friend (who's having none of that)  
 With "Yeah? Now who's a scaredy cat!"

Perfecting their aerobic labors,  
 Once more around the block they creep,  
 Greeted by mailmen and by neighbors.  
 When Ed returns, Phil's still asleep.  
 But, upon waking, to his credit,  
 He does not try to expunge or edit  
 —With, "Geez, I had so much to drink  
 Last night, I really cannot think  
 What happened . . ."—what in fact transpired.  
 He smiles at Ed: "Good morning." "Hi!  
 Coffee?" "You bet." Ed's somewhat shy.  
 "This coffee really gets you wired,"  
 Phil says. "It's just like . . . (With a groan) . . .  
 Christ! Paul! Ed, may I use your phone?"

"Sure. Phil—if Paul has no objection—  
 Would you—I've got this weekend free. . . ."  
 Phil dials, nods, gets the connection.  
 "Joan? This is Phil. Is Paul—I see—  
 I'll wait. . . . Hi, son, how are things going?—  
 Chuck's baseball cap? Great!—So they're showing  
 What? *Star Wars*? No, I can't allow—  
 Now, young man, don't you teach me how. . . .  
 Paul! Did you hear me? *Star Wars*—Never!—  
 I don't care what she lets him do—  
 What's that? Chuck will make fun of you?—  
 Well, just this once then—But don't ever . . .  
 (Alas! that such Affected Tricks  
 Should flourish in a Child of Six!)

## 4.41

. . . You're welcome—You're a tricky fellow—  
 Does Monday suit you?—You don't care? . . .  
 (Phil laughs) . . . You're having fun!—Don't bellow:  
 It sounds worse than a madhouse there—  
 See you then, son—No, nothing, staying  
 With a friend—Ed—yeah, that's right, playing! . . .  
 (Phil shakes his head) . . . Now give the phone  
 To Mrs. Lamont . . . Hello there, Joan.  
 Thanks for all this—Not Sunday, Monday,  
 Yes, after school—Yes, he can see  
*Star Wars*—Say hi to Matt for me!—  
 That's very kind. I hope that one day  
 I can take care of Chuck for you  
 When you've got other things to do."

## 4.42

The weekend kicks off with a glorious  
 Brunch at an open-air café.  
 Champagne and omelettes. Ed's censorious  
 Conscience is dormant for a day.  
 They drive across to Sausalito;  
 Later, divide a vile burrito  
 From Taco Hut, and wash it down  
 With a Dos Equis, cool and brown.  
 Ed suggests tennis next, and trounces  
 His friend with effortless panache;  
 To cool themselves they take a splash  
 In Schwarz's pool, where Phil denounces  
 Schwarz as the dullest, dimmest, and  
 Least soulful beast of sea or land.

## 4.43

The iguana stares: obtuse, phlegmatic,  
 Full five feet long from tail to snout,  
 He complements Ed's sharp, erratic  
 Essence (as wurst does sauerkraut).  
 With evening, Ed and Phil go walking  
 Through the calm city—laughing, talking;  
 A mentor's what Ed needs; and Phil,  
 Warm and Socratic, fits the bill.  
 At night, Ed brings in his iguana.  
 Phil eyes him warily, while he  
 Eyes Philip just as warily.  
 Phil tries to bribe him. A banana?  
 The monster bloats his jowls at this,  
 Emitting his hoarse gular hiss.

"Phil, don't annoy him." "The causation  
 Should run from him to me instead . . .  
 But I suppose I'm on probation.  
 Where will he sleep?" "Beneath our bed."  
 "Beneath our *bed*? His least vibration  
 Will rock the room to its foundation."  
 "Don't slander Schwarz." "Well, on your head  
 Be it if one of us is dead  
 By dawn—" "It's just for the duration  
 That the heat's knocked out in his shed.  
 I'll fix it. If it's cold," says Ed,  
 "And Schwarz goes into hibernation,  
 It could be months. . . ." The quadruped  
 Advances now with torpid tread.

They sleep. (There is no other option.)  
 Their ectothermic chaperone,  
 Taking to his in-house adoption,  
 Sinks into slumber like a stone.  
 Ed goes next day to church, confession;  
 He strays home with a lost expression,  
 And mumbles, "Phil . . . I don't know quite  
 If what we're doing is . . . is right."  
 "What do you mean?" asks Philip, puzzled:  
 "We both—" "I know," says Ed at length,  
 "I've prayed to God to give us strength  
 To—Phil, I—O my God, I've muzzled  
 Love's only true voice, Jesus Christ,  
 Who came to earth and sacrificed

His life for me . . . for me, a sinner."  
 Phil looks at Ed, then says, "My friend,  
 Let's fix that heating. After dinner  
 We'll talk this out." But dinner's end  
 Sees Ed in new heart altogether,  
 As if a cloudburst of black weather  
 Had been dispersed and, rinsed by storm,  
 The night is generous and warm.  
 Phil looks at his good-looking lover's  
 Face as he prays: its casque of peace  
 Cleansed of all turbulent caprice  
 And guilt, and, as they pull the covers  
 Over themselves, says, "Ed, I'm glad  
 For these three evenings that we've had. . . ."

What does Phil see in Ed? Why does he  
 Seem so committed to him? True,  
 Once at a party, drunk and fuzzy  
 —John would be shaken if he knew—  
 Phil made it with a guy at college.  
 (Well, once or twice.) And he'd acknowledge,  
 Even when married, now and then,  
 His eye might stray toward other men.  
 But that's it. And, though unconventional,  
 That too seems meager cause why he  
 Should fall for Ed so speedily.  
 Not that affection is intentional  
 Or that, in matters of the heart,  
 We should pull leaf and leaf apart. . . .

But still: Phil's always been attracted  
 By vulnerable people; Ed,  
 Eager, confused, intent, abstracted,  
 Is passionate in both speech and bed.  
 How good it is to be admired;  
 And how much more to be desired!  
 Ed's restlessnesses, sudden calms,  
 And, as he lies in Philip's arms,  
 His sad and serious expression  
 Affect Phil more than he can say.  
 Thus, in a strange, contagious way,  
 Ed's very lack of self-possession  
 Reduces Phil's, and so destroys  
 The outer suburbs of his poise.

Next morning, at first light, Ed, waking,  
 Kneels down in silence on the floor.  
 A calm and chilly dawn is breaking  
 Over the bay. As his first chore,  
 He goes to nurture his iguana  
 With three persimmons, a sultana,  
 Some lettuce, and an unripe yam  
 (A favorite, with a dab of jam).  
 Now Phil awakens from his coma:  
 "Monday! I guess I'd better call  
 The Peaceniks, then head south for Paul."  
 They drive down to the Café Soma  
 (On 12th and Howard, close to where  
 Ed works); and order breakfast there.

Over large cups of coffee, steaming  
 And fragrant, Ed says, "Phil, last night  
 I almost thought that I was dreaming.  
 But now—I know it wasn't right.  
 I have to trust my faith's decisions,  
 Not batten on my own volitions.  
 The Bible says, if a man lie  
 With a man, he must surely die.  
 It's in Leviticus, chapter 20,  
 Verse 13—which means it's as true  
 For me, a Christian, as for you."  
 Phil laughs: "That old book, Ed, holds plenty  
 Of rules that may have made sense once  
 —Take shellfish—but you'd be a dunce

To trim your heart by its sharp letter.  
 That kills, as someone sometime said.  
 What's wrong with sex? The more the better  
 If you like someone." Flushing red,  
 Ed frowns and says, "Don't bring in shellfish.  
 That's trivial. . . . How can I be selfish  
 And lust for flesh instead of truth?  
 It's like a kid with a sweet tooth  
 On a no-sugar diet breaking  
 Into a cookie store for me  
 To put myself where I can be . . ."  
 "Tempted?" prompts Phil: "No point my taking  
 Exception to your version of  
 Who first suggested making love."



"Phil—please—don't . . . how can I explain it?  
 The point is that my body is  
 Not mine alone—I don't disdain it—  
 But it's God's instrument—my bliss  
 Is in his will—and its perfection  
 Resides in love, whose chief projection  
 Is to give life. All other use  
 Falls short of this. It is abuse  
 Even if lovers feel they're loving.  
 When our will fails, we've got to pray,  
 'Help thou my unbelief.' That way . . ."  
 "That's bullshit. Ed, what are you proving?  
 That two men or two women don't . . ."  
 "Phil, try to understand." "I won't.

I can't . . . (His voice shakes.) . . . You were saying,  
 Before I interrupted, God  
 Will help our unbelief, our fraying  
 Resolve. But what was wrong or odd  
 With last night's loveliness between us?  
 Given a God, if he had seen us  
 And he is just and loving-kind,  
 Why should you think that he would mind  
 My touch, your trembling, our caresses,  
 The loving smart in your clear eyes,  
 My hands ruffling your hair, our sighs?  
 If anything, I'd say he blesses  
 The innocent bodies that express  
 So forthrightly such happiness.

That's how I feel. But for the lecture  
And weekend, thank you, Ed." His eyes  
Meet Ed's, and with a sad conjecture  
Ed asks, "We'll keep in touch?" They rise.  
"Sure, sure," Phil mumbles. "You can write me."  
Ed says, "Phil, why don't you invite me  
Down to your place sometime perhaps?"  
"Yes, anytime, feel free. . . ." They lapse  
Into a bitter silence. Gilding  
The great bole of a churchyard oak  
The angled sun now shifts to soak  
With liquid light Ed's office building,  
Near which, with nothing more to say,  
The two shake hands and turn away.

# FIVE

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## 5.1

A week ago, when I had finished  
Writing the chapter you've just read  
And with avidity undiminished  
Was charting out the course ahead,  
An editor—at a plush party  
(Well-wined, -provisioned, speechy, hearty)  
Hosted by (long live!) Thomas Cook  
Where my Tibetan travel book  
Was honored—seized my arm: "Dear fellow,  
What's your next work?" "A novel . . ." "Great!  
We hope that you, dear Mr. Seth—"  
". . . In verse," I added. He turned yellow.  
"How marvelously quaint," he said,  
And subsequently cut me dead.

## 5.2

Professor, publisher, and critic  
 Each voiced his doubts. I felt misplaced.  
 A writer is a mere arthritic  
 Among these muscular Gods of Taste.  
 As for that sad blancmange, a poet—  
 The world is hard; he ought to know it.  
 Driveling in rhyme's all very well;  
 The question is, does spittle sell?  
 Since staggering home in deep depression,  
 My will's grown weak. My heart is sore.  
 My lyre is dumb. I have therefore  
 Convoked a morale-boosting session  
 With a few kind if doubtful friends  
 Who've asked me to explain my ends.

## 5.3

How do I justify this stanza?  
 These feminine rhymes? My wrinkled muse?  
 This whole passé extravaganza?  
 How can I (careless of time) use  
 The dusty bread molds of Onegin  
 In the brave bakery of Reagan?  
 The loaves will surely fail to rise  
 Or else go stale before my eyes.  
 The truth is, I can't justify it.  
 But as no shroud of critical terms  
 Can save my corpse from boring worms,  
 I may as well have fun and try it.  
 If it works, good; and if not, well,  
 A theory won't postpone its knell.

#### 5.4

Why, asks a friend, attempt tetrameter?  
 Because it once was noble, yet  
 Capers before the proud pentameter,  
 Tyrant of English. I regret  
 To see this marvelous swift meter  
 Demean its heritage, and peter  
 Into mere Hudibrastic tricks,  
 Unapostolic knacks and knicks.  
 But why take all this quite so badly?  
 I would not, had I world and time  
 To wait for reason, rhythm, rhyme  
 To reassert themselves, but sadly  
 The time is not remote when I  
 Will not be here to wait. That's why.

#### 5.5

Reader, enough of this apology;  
 But spare me if I think it best,  
 Before I tether my monology,  
 To stake a stanza to suggest  
 You spend some unfilled day of leisure  
 By that original spring of pleasure:  
 Sweet-watered, fluent, clear, light, blithe  
 (This homage merely pays a tithe  
 Of what in joy and inspiration  
 It gave me once and does not cease  
 To give me)—Pushkin's masterpiece  
 In Johnston's luminous translation:  
*Eugene Onegin*—like champagne  
 Its effervescence stirs my brain.

## 5.6

. . . But back to Ed. It's Monday. Seven.  
 Day's over at the office grind.  
 Ed walks back to his car. To leaven  
 The sadness that besets his mind  
 He broods on coffee. Should he favor  
 The brand name of Encore or Savor?  
 What tag, what label would work best?  
 What media strategy? Depressed,  
 He drops a quarter to a wino,  
 Stands by a storefront shirt display,  
 Observes his hair in disarray  
 And smooths it absently. "Well, I know  
 I'll never hear from him again,"  
 He thinks with unaccustomed pain.

## 5.7

It's dark. He drives. The street lamps glimmer  
 Through cooling air. The golden globes  
 By City Hall glow, and the glimmer  
 —Like sequins on black velvet robes—  
 Of lights shines out across the water,  
 Across the bay, unruffled daughter  
 Of the Pacific; on the crests  
 Of hill and bridge red light congests  
 The sky with rubies. Briskly blinking,  
 Planes—Venus-bright—traverse the sky.  
 Ed drives on, hardly knowing why,  
 Across the tall-spanned bridge. Unthinking,  
 He parks, and looks out past the strait,  
 The deep flood of the Golden Gate.

## 5.8

Subdued and silent, he surveys it—  
 The loveliest city in the world.  
 No veiling words suffice to praise it,  
 But if you saw it as, light-pearled,  
 Fog-fingered, pinnacled, I see it  
 Across the black tide, you'd agree it  
 Outvied the magic of your own.  
 Even tonight, as Ed, alone,  
 Makes out Marina, plaza, tower,  
 Fort Point, Presidio—he feels  
 A benediction as it steals  
 Over his heart with its still power.  
 He thinks, "I'll phone Phil. No, instead,  
 Better to write him, as he said."

## 5.9

He drives home, feeds Schwarz, starts inditing  
 The fragment reproduced below.  
 He shakes his head, stares at his writing:  
*Dear Phil, Forgive me, I don't know*  
*How you'll react when you receive this.*  
*Perhaps you'll think, "I don't believe this.*  
*We talked for two whole days. What could*  
*Be left that I've misunderstood?"*  
*Let me explain, Phil, my position. . . .*  
 Ed, muttering, "This won't do at all,"  
 Crumples the sheet into a ball,  
 Lobs his uneloquent petition  
 Into a corner of his room,  
 And sinks back into hamstrung gloom.



## 5.10

Something has stung Ed's heart so badly  
 That now he wends his quipless way  
 From home to work to home so sadly  
 (Without the energy to play  
 Guitar or tennis or the jester)  
 That all his office buddies pester  
 Him to reveal his cause of woe.  
 When Ed replies he doesn't know,  
 It's only partially evasion.  
 The truth is, Ed's himself unclear.  
 As a strict rule he's tried to steer  
 Away from men of Phil's persuasion.  
 From common funds of lore he's learned:  
 "Fall for a bi, and you'll get burned."

## 5.11

Why is it then that Ed, unshielded  
 From passion's fallout (or attacked  
 By Cupid's minutemen), has yielded  
 His heart to Phil? The very fact  
 That Phil was married, and is living  
 With his young son, succeeds in giving  
 Him the attraction, in Ed's eyes,  
 Of someone sound and worldly-wise.  
 Will Phil provide him with direction?  
 Could Ed's long quest be at an end?  
 Is Phil, at last, "that special friend"?  
 But how, Ed wonders in dejection,  
 Even if they do meet, can he  
 Make Phil consent to chastity?

A month goes by. Ed's tennis-playing  
 Resumes. His quips resume. He works  
 Efficiently, without betraying  
 The intermittent pain that lurks  
 Below his smile by day, appearing  
 In his dark eyes as night is nearing.  
 He feels that there's no hope at all,  
 Yet waits in hope that Phil might call,  
 And once or twice he's almost lifted  
 The telephone to ring his friend,  
 Or tried to write, but in the end  
 The common doubt of those born gifted  
 With his uncommon looks prevails  
 And his unfixed intention fails.

At length, instead of phone or letter,  
 He thinks, "I ought to visit Sue.  
 I missed her concert, and I'd better  
 Redeem myself. . . ." Without ado,  
 One Friday afternoon, arriving  
 After an hour of freeway driving  
 At Sue's door with his pet in train,  
 He kisses her. "Hi, sis!" In vain  
 Does Sue with chess, Casals, and cooking  
 Try to restrain her restive guest.  
 At six o'clock he flies the nest.  
 "Sue, help me out with this. I'm looking  
 For an address on Cowper Street—"  
 "Who's is it?" "Phil's. We . . . said we'd meet."

Phil and his son, while cooking dinner,  
 Play tic-tac-toe. But sharp-eyed Paul,  
 Who sees that there can be no winner  
 When players know the game at all,  
 Says, "Teach me chess, Dad." Phil is worried.  
 "Such things," he thinks, "should not be hurried.  
 The boy's too bright for his own good.  
 Would Claire . . . would Spock suggest I should  
 Encourage him in this precocity?  
 He could become within a week  
 A wide-eyed fianchetto freak—  
 And yet, to crush his curiosity. . . ."  
 But suddenly, with knock and din,  
 Ed and companion tumble in.

"Ed!" "Dad, what's that?" "Phil, I'm intruding,  
 I know, but—" "No, you're not, sit down.  
 Just chain that brute up." "You're alluding  
 To Schwarzenegger?" "Yes, you clown.  
 Can't you see Paul's scared?" "I'm not, really—  
 Dad—promise—" Paul says insincerely.  
 "Paul, this is Ed." "Hi, Ed." "And this  
 Is my iguana." With a hiss  
 The beast completes the introduction.  
 "So, Ed, what brings you here today?"  
 Ed misconstrues his hopes to say  
 —Half scared himself of misconstruction—  
 "I've just dropped by to see if you . . .  
 I mean, I'm really visiting Sue."

"Well, stay and eat." "Sure?" "Do you doubt me?"  
 Paul breaks in with "Ed, teach me chess!"  
 "I guess you two can do without me,"  
 Says Phil with magnified distress:  
 "I'd better go and warm the dishes."  
 Ed, catering promptly to Paul's wishes  
 (For all Doratis, after all,  
 Wallowed in chess when they were small  
 And harbor no inane compunctions  
 About the burdened infant brain),  
 Talks of black rooks, white knights, profane  
 Bishops, the monarch's leisured functions,  
 Passed pawns—*tsarinas soi-disant*—  
 And sidelong butchery *en passant*.

Paul's eyes expand. His small head's bubbling  
 At this grand glimpse of a new world.  
 Dumb at his master's feet, not troubling  
 His discourse, somnolently curled,  
 The iguana gently heaves, completing  
 The Dutch interior. While they're eating  
 From time to time Phil looks at Ed,  
 Who flushes a dark rapid red.  
 Paul falls asleep, still at the table.  
 Phil carries him to bed. "Not ill—  
 Just tired—overtaxed." When Phil  
 Returns, Ed says, "I'm glad you're able  
 To bear my company at all."  
 "What do you mean?" "I meant to call—

Or write, Phil—but the thought obsessed me . . .  
 (Ed looks down) . . . that you liked—I mean—  
 I don't know—but it still depressed me—  
 I've been around gay bars—that scene  
 Where if you're handsome, people paw you  
 —I guess you've never had them claw you  
 As if you were a hunk of meat . . .  
 (Phil frowns) . . . but—Phil, let me complete  
 What I—I mean—” Phil's mind is reeling.  
 He cuts in: “I don't understand.  
 What's your point, Ed?” (He takes his hand.)  
 Ed says, “I guess it's just a feeling—  
 That you just like—a fear, I guess—”  
 “That I just like your body?” “Yes.”

“I like it, sure.” “See what I told you?”  
 “Ed, go upgrade your personal file.  
 Your superego's undersold you.  
 You're a nice guy as well. Don't smile  
 So wryly. There's no doubt about it.  
 But all this talk—let's do without it.  
 This vivisection hurts my head.  
 I say we ought to go to bed.  
 We seem to sort things out much better  
 When horizontal . . . hey, don't blush!”  
 Ed stands: “I'm sorry—got to rush—  
 I promised Sue—” “Well, I won't fetter  
 This fine fraternal flair and fuss,  
 But come have breakfast here with us.

And ask Sue too." Six kinds of cereal,  
 Waffles and syrup, sausage, jam,  
 Scrambled eggs, French toast—an imperial  
 Repast next morning—bacon, ham,  
 Hot coffee, quiche, cream cheese and bagels,  
 Brie, fruit, banana bread—inveigles  
 The appetite of each potluck guest  
 Who at the sovereign behest  
 Of Mrs. Craven, organizer  
 Of Phil's Alfresco Breakfasts, comes  
 To bloat himself until he numbs  
 His sense and palate—and supplies her  
 With a like moiety to share  
 With old friends in the open air.

A (criminal) lawyer and a (civil)  
 Engineer talk of safety laws;  
 A (moral) philosopher of the Devil  
 While angel cake melts in his jaws.  
 Her red locks graced with a camellia,  
 Rowena stands and bats her cilia.  
 Anne Gunn, the artist, wields her fork  
 With graphic verve, impaling pork.  
 Beneath the heavy-branched magnolia  
 The din of decibels grows dense.  
 Phil, seeing, backed against a fence,  
 Ed sunk in sullen melancholia  
 Among this crush of strangers, walks  
 Over to him, and smiles, and talks.

"Two mornings each month—alternating  
 Sabbaths for Christians and for Jews—  
 We hold these breakfasts, celebrating  
 —Hi, Joan, hi, Matt—Ed, please excuse  
 Me just a—I see Chuck is playing  
 With Paul again—as I was saying,  
 To celebrate—but, Ed, where's Sue?"  
 "At home. She says hello to you—  
 Jan and her cronies from the city  
 Are coming for a couple days.  
 Stanford's museum, you know, displays  
 Some fine Rodins—" "Well, it's a pity."  
 "But celebrating what?" "Oh yes—  
 Just that we're still alive, I guess!"

"Phil, isn't that a bit excessive?"  
 "Well, actually, it's an excuse  
 To meet and eat—but it's impressive  
 How much we get done. Grapefruit juice?  
 Look, Ed, stop nibbling and start eating—  
 Yes, you! Your empty plate's defeating  
 The purpose of this enterprise. . . .  
 I see Rowena's making eyes  
 At—better watch out—once she falls for  
 Someone—across a crowded room  
 Or even here—it's certain doom.  
 She's looking your way now! This calls for  
 Evasive . . . too late! By my thumbs,  
 Ed—wards the guided missile comes. . . .



. . . Hi, Krakatoa, how's it going?"  
 "Hello, Phil—who's your friend?" "Ed." "Hi!"  
 Miss Craven, with her coiffure glowing  
 Into the startled morning sky,  
 Pinches Ed's ass from friendly habit.  
 Ed, like a schizophrenic rabbit,  
 Ekes out a terror-stricken smile.  
 And now, with her beguiling guile,  
 Rowena, after politicking  
 For strategy versus Lungless Labs,  
 Swerves: "Phil, I know you're up for grabs  
 Today. I'm going olive-picking.  
 I want you—and your cute friend here—  
 To join me." And she tweaks Ed's ear.

"Sorry, Rowena dear, I'm busy."  
 "You're not. I've asked your son." "Ah . . . well,  
 Rowena, I've been feeling dizzy.  
 I ought to lie down for a spell."  
 "Nonsense. A brisk walk's just what's needed.  
 You'll feel much better once you've heeded  
 My unprofessional advice,  
 Practical, priceless, and precise.  
 I am, you know, a doctor's daughter.  
 Besides, Paul, Chuck, Matt, Joan, and Mum  
 Are coming, so you've got to come!"  
 Thus undermined, as calves to slaughter,  
 Stripped of all reasonable recourse,  
 Phil and Ed yield to matchless force.

"Where's Schwarz?" Phil humors Ed, who's glowering.  
 "Back in the car." "Let's let him out."  
 On the back seat the iguana's cowering.  
 At Ed's approach he flails about  
 With his long tail in fierce frustration.  
 Ed leaps back with an imprecation.  
 Only when pacified with quiche  
 Does the green beast receive his leash.  
 Yet, smarting still from the indignity  
 Of his incarceration, Schwarz  
 Lunges and jerks in fits and starts  
 Of uninhibited malignity  
 (Bobbing his head in truculent show)  
 At guests as they prepare to go.

Anne Gunn, who draws delight from sketching  
 The unearthlier products of the earth,  
 Decides that Schwarz is "rather fetching."  
 The others give him wider berth.  
 Some leave to play football or footsie,  
 Some for a matinee of *Tootsie*,  
 To watch a high school tennis match  
 Or tend their vegetable patch,  
 Study statistics, skunks, or Serbia,  
 Shop, sail, or swive, stretch out and snooze,  
 Or smoke a joint, or strum the blues,  
 Repair the doodads of suburbia,  
 Plan out the Lungless Labs campaign,  
 Or dream of real estate in Spain.

Paul and the three Lamonts, Rowena  
 And Mrs. Craven, Phil, and Ed  
 Are left. Phil hums a sonatina  
 While lyrics from the Grateful Dead  
 Pour out in imitation finer  
 Than ever parakeet or mynah  
 Accomplished, from the lesser red-  
 Capped Craven. Now from the homestead  
 They've sallied forth with poles and plastic  
 Trash bags (unused) to Campus Drive  
 Where rows of olive trees survive  
 —Gnarled, silver-shimmering—the drastic  
 Legions of cars that foul the street  
 With the vile vapors they excrete.

Now Chuck and Paul are sternly slaying  
 Space monsters in the olive trees.  
 Below them, Matt Lamont, displaying  
 Ornithological expertise,  
 Mild-manneredly remarks, "No, darling,  
 That's not a grackle, that's a starling.  
 It's just got grime upon its coat."  
 Matt and Joan claim that they'll devote  
 Their lives, once they've retired at forty,  
 To "birds and orchids" (Private joke:  
 Birds and/or kids—significant stroke).  
 He calls her cultural and haughty  
 And horticultural—while she,  
 Maintaining green-thumbed dignity,

Backs her belief in cultivation  
 With the most brilliant plot in miles:  
 Aristocratic conflagration  
 Of standard roses; fragrant isles:  
 Lemongrass, lemon balm, and lemon  
 Geranium; pear and persimmon;  
 Fat orchids by the live-oak tree:  
 Rich, various, all in harmony;  
 No mean feat for a pediatrician  
 (Full time) with son and home to boot  
 And (each way) half an hour's commute.  
 Her husband, Matt, is Phil's physician,  
 Addict of crossword, bird, and pun  
 And second father to Phil's son.

The iguana with delight arboreal,  
 Pacific in the olive boughs,  
 Lies basking. But with gladiatorial  
 Proddings the Space Invaders rouse  
 Him from his sweet siesta. Shaking  
 With shock, with fear and fury quaking,  
 He drops down six feet to the ground  
 While round him hoodlum hoots resound.  
 As he withdraws to Ed's protection,  
 Rowena laughs: "Schwarz ought to be  
 The emblem of World Amity."  
 Ed grunts, "I don't see the connection."  
 "Well, for a start, rather than fight  
 Violence with violence, Schwarz takes flight.

Besides, his species of iguana  
 Is just as difficult to find  
 In Moscow, Washington, Havana,  
 And Bonn: he's truly nonaligned.  
 A creature of herbivorous habit,  
 He wouldn't wish to harm a rabbit.  
 His bloodless vegetable love,  
 Vaster than empires, ought to move  
 Mankind to less carnivorous custom.  
 Lastly, he shows—he chose a spot  
 With olive branches—how, if not  
 To love our enemies, to trust 'em.  
 In short, in deed, thought, sign, and soul  
 He'd honor his symbolic role."

Before Ed can respond, a clamor  
 Breaks forth above. Ed hears Chuck say,  
 "You're my *worst* friend." The brittle glamour  
 Of allied triumph's given way  
 To a postbellum fit of feuding.  
 Paul growls, with Achillean brooding,  
 "I killed him first." "No, it was me."  
 Irreconcilability  
 Threatens to lead to total breakdown,  
 But when Matt shouts, "You shrieks, don't shirk—"  
 The foes, in common dread of work,  
 Are reconciled and, as they shake down  
 Strings of black fruit from the ripe tree,  
 Are captured by Matt's kodakry.

From irresponsible flirtation  
 Aimed at the irresponsible Ed,  
 Rowena, Queen of Machination,  
 Now moves to soap up Phil instead.  
 Alas, unlathered by her blathering,  
 Phil concentrates on olive-gathering.  
 His hands incarnadined with juice,  
 His shirt-sleeves dark with pulp and puce,  
 He toils with sweat-drenched brow and collar,  
 Humming, but without let or lag  
 Stripping the fruit from twig to bag  
 Till he hears Mrs. Craven holler,  
 "That's all, folks. We've got three bags full.  
 So let's go home, and gather wool."

And so they do. The fruit lie soaking,  
 Immersed in water in her tub,  
 And Mrs. Craven, laughing, smoking,  
 And gesturing with her cigar stub,  
 In undejected recollection  
 Talks of her husband, with affection  
 Revamping her black-humored joke  
 Of how he died though she would smoke.  
 "Rowena, you're just like your father—  
 You worry that the world will end.  
 What if the heavens do descend  
 On Chicken Little's head? I'd rather  
 Not fret my whole existence through  
 When there's so little I can do."

Late in the afternoon, out walking,  
 Phil says to Ed, "Rowena seems  
 Quite keen on you. Why are you balking?"  
 "She doesn't figure in my dreams.  
 Your chest's the one she wants to lean on,"  
 States Ed: "But even if she's keen on  
 Me—which I doubt—women, I find,  
 Don't turn me on." "Christ, what a bind!"  
 Phil laughs. "You're like a starving pigeon  
 Who just can't bring himself to eat  
 Barley or rice, yet thinks the wheat  
 He likes is poisoned. Your religion  
 Doesn't square too well with your lust.  
 I wonder which first bites the dust!"

"You find that funny?" "No, not really."  
 "Why did you say what you just said?"  
 "I didn't mean to mock. I merely  
 Enjoyed the contradiction, Ed.  
 Things puzzling, contrary, or ironic  
 Revivify me like a tonic—  
 And inexplicabilities  
 Accost us even from the trees.  
 Look—there's my favorite 'conference maple,'  
 Of all the many hundreds, one  
 Where at the setting of the sun  
 Birds congregate—as if by papal  
 Fiat a chattering conclave  
 Of cardinals crammed a narrow nave."



Despite himself, Ed grins. "You're pretty  
 Free with your similes today.  
 Because your sacrilege is witty  
 This time I'll let you get away.  
 Watch out, though, if your wit gets grosser—"  
 But now, as they're approaching closer,  
 The hubbub's risen to a pitch  
 That makes their pelted eardrums twitch  
 And pulverizes conversation.  
 The birds are screaming, and the pair,  
 Awed by their ardor, stand and stare.  
 Incomprehensible elation  
 Floods through their spirits, as the light  
 Dies with the sound, and it is night.

Dark night and silent, calm, and lovely,  
 That stills the efforts of our lives,  
 Rare, excellent-kind, and behovely . . .  
 No matter how the poet strives  
 To weave with epithets and clauses  
 Your soundless web, he falters, pauses,  
 And your enchantment slips between  
 His hands, as if it's never been.  
 Of all times most imbued with beauty,  
 You lend us by your spell relief  
 From ineradicable grief  
 (If for a spell), and pain, and duty.  
 We sleep, and nightly are made whole  
 In all our fretted mind and soul.

They walk, not daring to do violence  
 To the still night by force of speech.  
 What do friends need to say that silence  
 Will not say better? As they reach  
 The house, they hear Paul's high-pitched piping.  
 He sits at Phil's typewriter, typing  
*Jackdaws love my big sphinx of quartz,*  
 While Schwarz, who's feeling out of sorts,  
 Yawns redly. Paul now sees them, utters  
 A war whoop and insists that Ed  
 Play chess. When Paul's been put to bed,  
 As Ed prepares to leave, Phil mutters,  
 "Ed, stay tonight. Sue's got guests. Please?"  
 He smiles at Ed, and Ed agrees.

Next morning in the St. Ann Chapel  
 Ed sinks into the Latin mass.  
 Although he does his best to grapple  
 With the degenerate morass  
 Where his sick soul is doomed and drifting,  
 He finds the plainsong too uplifting  
 To concentrate (to his chagrin)  
 On unoriginal thoughts of sin.  
 Confession helps to ease the pricking  
 Of his relentless conscience. Ed  
 Now rejoins Phil. The deep wine-red  
 Blood of the olives they were picking  
 Has left on the white tub a stain,  
 Dark, inerasable, profane.

Instructions come from Mrs. Craven  
 With quartermasterly aplomb,  
 The piercing vision of a raven,  
 The animation of a bomb:  
 "Drain out the bathtub, Paul—Ed, weigh out  
 A pound of salt—Rowena, lay out  
 Dry towels on the table—Joan,  
 Twelve lemons from that tree! . . . I'll phone  
 Some restaurants for their empty pickle  
 And mustard jars. . . . Matt, olive oil!—  
 Rinse the fruit once more, Chuck—Phil, boil  
 The water—Sure, I'll pay a nickel  
 For every jar. (They're worth two bucks  
 Apiece!) Now, turmeric's the crux. . . ."

The salt's mixed as the water's heated.  
 An egg's released upon the brine.  
 It floats! The first stage is completed.  
 Phase two: In stratified design,  
 Bands of plump olives and thick slices  
 Of lemon, dusted well with spices,  
 Are laid inside each pickling jar.  
 Now into each packed reservoir  
 A sluice of cooling brine is pouring.  
 A seal of olive oil to spare  
 The olives from the ambient air—  
 And the jar's set aside for storing.  
 The lid's screwed tightly; sighs are heaved;  
 The label's stuck: the task's achieved!

The sixteen jars are now divided  
 Among the workers, two jars each.  
 By now it's evening. Ed's decided  
 He must drive back—unto the breach  
 Once more, once more back to the city,  
 To Monday's mundane nitty-gritty  
 Of nine to five. He hears Phil say,  
 "You're a real hit with Paul. Look, stay  
 Another night, Ed. In the morning  
 Before the rush hour, you can go.  
 As for my feelings, well. . . ." And so  
 Ed stays on and, as day is dawning  
 Across Phil's double bed next day,  
 Packs bag and beast, and drives away.

# SIX

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## 6.1

How beautiful it is, when waking,  
To find one's lover at one's side;  
The delicate slow light is breaking  
Irresolutely through the wide  
Bay windows of their bedroom, falling  
On Liz's hair, and John's recalling  
How last night she untied it, how  
It flowed between his hands; but now  
She lies asleep, unswiftly breathing;  
Her thoughts are not with him, her dreams  
Traverse the solitary streams  
Of inward lands, yet her hair, wreathing  
The pillow in a mesh of light,  
Returns to him the fugitive night.

## 6.2

Or after earnest hours of earning  
 (Surveys to check, reports to file),  
 How wonderful it is, returning  
 To the retreat of a friend's smile  
 And a shared meal; to know, if only  
 For this one night, one won't be lonely;  
 That the obtrusion of the day  
 —Its grit and strain—will wear away.  
 This story's time lens is retreating—  
 Not with intention to confuse  
 But rather to update the news:  
 It is two months since their first meeting.  
 Liz has invited John tonight  
 To dine with her by candlelight.

## 6.3

Over a lenten supper (Liz's  
 New diet, chiefly celery  
 And bean curd) conversation fizzes  
 With its old liveliness: their spree  
 Of baby babble, if belated  
 In its morendo, has abated,  
 And some of what in speech and trait  
 It served to mask or mitigate—  
 John's acid bolts of irritation  
 Once inoffensively concealed  
 In swathing gurgles—lie revealed;  
 Or Liz's soft infatuation  
 With the gestalt group she attends.  
 But, for all this, the two stay friends.



Prone to excessive sugar-eating,  
 Liz vows to cut it down this year.  
 She finds each week's gestalt group meeting  
 Sustains her will to persevere.  
 A regulated distribution  
 Of contraband's the best solution—  
 Not total abstinence, but, say,  
 A spoon or two (or three) a day  
 (Liqueur but not dessert exempted).  
 Such is the regimen she's sworn.  
 The temperate schedule that she's drawn  
 To curb desire is first attempted  
 One Saturday when John's away.  
 By ten her nerves begin to fray.

By noontime, sugar-crazed and restive,  
 Her will deserts her. She would give  
 Up Charlemagne for one digestive,  
 No, half a gingersnap. Why live  
 If life is pain and deprivation?  
 Untimely ripped of sweet sensation  
 Her taste buds salivate in vain.  
 And now the aura of migraine  
 Lays siege around her field of vision.  
 Darkness descends upon her eyes.  
 With ice bags round her head she lies—  
 Imagining (with shocked precision)  
 Her body suddenly immense  
 With carbohydrate corpulence.



While Liz "reactivates holistic  
 Modes of ingestion," John, although  
 Intrinsically antagonistic  
 To est, gestalt, the whole trousseau  
 Of answers "ready-made but flaky"  
 (To use his words), maintains a shaky  
 Rein on his tongue, but can't resist,  
 Occasionally, a baiting twist:  
 "Liz, unimpulsive, square, and prudent,  
 Before you wholly waste away,  
 Inform your suppliant, I pray,  
 Of what new fad are you the student?"  
 When John is in this kind of mood  
 Liz threatens she'll boycott all food.

They go to the ballet together,  
 See movies once or twice a week,  
 Take walks; the February weather  
 Lures the quince blossoms to a peak  
 Of pinkness on the leafless hedges.  
 Mimosas bloom, and springtime edges  
 Into the city fragrantly.  
 Another month, and now we see  
 Them poring over want ads, searching  
 The dossiers of real estate  
 Agents. . . . Eureka! A sedate  
 Queen Anne Victorian is perching  
 —Capacious and heaven-sent—  
 High on a hill, first floor for rent.

Despite its turret and its shingles,  
 Its size lends it a sober air.  
 Its architecture deftly mingles  
 Three styles with ecumenic flair—  
 A cuvée equable yet zestful.  
 It's true, the wallpaper's unrestful:  
 The previous occupant, inspired  
 By zeal for innovation, hired  
 Two out-of-work avant-garde artists  
 Who set to work obediently  
 But in short order proved to be  
 Ungovernable a-la-cartists;  
 With drools of chocolate, olive green,  
 And salmon pink they smeared the scene.

But, as Liz says, it has potential.  
 Their evenings and their weekends they  
 Now spend on stripping the sequential  
 Layers of mismatched paint away.  
 Now they've retrieved the handsome molding.  
 John waves his knife with joy, beholding  
 The petals of a grand rosette  
 No longer choked and overset  
 With plaster on the reborn ceiling.  
 Now, lost in a creative dream,  
 He rollers triple coats of cream  
 Upon the walls; and Liz is kneeling  
 With rag and polish to restore  
 The luster of the hardwood floor.

Fluorescent fixtures are abolished  
 And mellower lamps placed in their stead;  
 The wide bay windows, washed and polished,  
 Pour spendthrift sunlight on the bed.  
 Liz measures rugs, and John displaces  
 Chic cabinets with old bookcases,  
 Soft sofas in beige corduroy  
 And (so that Charlemagne won't deploy  
 His claws on drapes) a post for scratching.  
 Once they have moved in, they invite  
 Their whole acquaintance to the rite  
 Of housewarming. But since we're catching  
 Up with events described above,  
 We'll shun redundancy and move

## 6.11

Directly to the morning after.  
 The sun shines brightly in. The birds'  
 Aubade replaces last night's laughter,  
 Professor Pratt's impassioned words,  
 The broken glasses, the emetic  
 Sheep music, even the splenetic  
 Yowls of the vengeful Charlemagne;  
 And all is quiet once again.  
 Slack, honey-humming weekend morning,  
 Sweet sanctuary from a world  
 In which we're whipped and whisked and whirled!  
 John sloths in bed awhile, then, yawning,  
 Attends to coffee. Liz sleeps on,  
 Though once or twice she murmurs, "John."

John reads the *San Francisco Chronicle*,  
 Sipping his dark Colombian brew.  
 He chuckles over an ironical  
 Column by Hoppe, turns to view  
 The visceral grouches of the crabby  
 Herman curmudgeon, scans Dear Abby,  
 Miss Manners' prim, refreshing views  
 On etiquette, and then the news—  
 Which tells no more than the survival  
 Of greed and fear and pain and hate.  
 John sighs, and thinks of Liz, and Fate,  
 Warmed by the solace of arrival:  
 A loner who at last has come,  
 In a new house, to a new home.

John looks about him with enjoyment.  
 What a man needs, he thinks, is health;  
 Well-paid, congenial employment;  
 A house; a modicum of wealth;  
 Some sunlight; coffee and the papers;  
 Artichoke hearts adorned with capers;  
 A Burberry trench coat; a Peugeot;  
 And in the evening, some Rameau  
 Or Couperin; a home-cooked dinner;  
 A Stilton, and a little port;  
 And so to a duvet. In short,  
 In life's brief game to be a winner  
 A man must have . . . oh yes, above  
 All else, of course, someone to love.

Ah, John, don't take it all for granted.  
 Perhaps you think Liz loves you best.  
 The snooker table has been slanted.  
 A cuckoo's bomb lies in the nest.  
 Be warned. Be warned. Just as in poker  
 The wildness of that card, the joker,  
 Disturbs the best-laid plans of men,  
 So too it happens, now and then,  
 That a furred beast with feral features  
 (Little imagined in the days  
 When, cute and twee, the kitten plays),  
 Of that familiar brood of creatures  
 The world denominates a cat,  
 Enters the game, and knocks it flat.

Let me recant. Did I say enter?  
 Indeed, he was already there,  
 The *ab initio* resenter  
 Of the whole pastel-tinged affair—  
 The grizzled cat, grim and disdainful  
 Of human weakness, lets his painful  
 Love of his mistress-heroine  
 (Who saved his life once) shrive her sin;  
 But as for John, the old tom tabby  
 Scratches his proffered hand of truce.  
 No tribute lamb chops can seduce  
 Him from his hate. His coat, grown shabby,  
 Conceals an ever-green-tongued flame  
 Of jealousy time cannot tame.

## 6.16

Why scratch a scratching post when trousers  
 Present themselves? Why bite a bone?  
 Why hunt mere mice like lesser mousers  
 When, having gnawed the telephone  
 Receiver when you sensed the presage  
 Of an impending urgent message  
 From John's curt boss, who can't afford  
 To waste time, you can short the cord?  
 Why vex yourself with paltry matters  
 When a report named *Bipartite*  
*Para-Models of Missile Flight*  
 Can casually be torn to tatters?  
 And why, in short, crave vapid food  
 When you can drink your foe's heart's blood?

## 6.17

Blood! This is no farfetched analogy.  
 In this connection it's germane  
 To note his psychic genealogy:  
 The warrior blood of Charlemagne  
 Brims with—a bonus for a rhymers—  
 The hunting spirit of Selima,  
 The wits of Fritz, the fierce élan  
 Of the exultant Pangur Bán.  
 The grand Tiberian Atossa  
 And the electric Cat Jeoffry  
 Are honored in a pedigree  
 Long as your arm and high as Ossa.  
 I list these but to illustrate  
 The hybrid vigor of the great.



## 6.18

How does John dare, the loathed intruder,  
 To breach the bounds of his domain,  
 Usurp his realm, or, to be cruder,  
 To rape his solitary reign—  
 Inviolable since when, as a kitten  
 —Lost, ear-torn orphan—he had smitten  
 Liz's soft schoolgirl heart with love?  
 How dare John think—Great Cats above!—  
 Cohabitation spells immunity?  
 That sordid catnip could replace  
 His mistress's nightly embrace?  
 And how, with cavalier impunity  
 Dare *he* share Liz's bed and, more,  
 Lock Charlemagne outside the door?

## 6.19

Is it then come full circle for you,  
 Old Cat, old friend, who pawed the door  
 Of a strange house till Lizzie saw you,  
 So many swift-spent years before?  
 Is it surprising that that kitten,  
 Famished and fearful, should have bitten  
 Her arm with hunger and relief,  
 Or proved half watchman and half thief?  
 To supplement his ample ration  
 Liz gave him sips of chardonnay.  
 (Not a wise habit, by the way.)  
 He loved her with a loyal passion  
 And showered her with vineyard mice,  
 Truly, a homage without price.



Year followed year. Liz followed knowledge,  
 Then a career; and Charlemagne  
 First followed game, then Liz to college,  
 As faithful (though not as inane)  
 As Mary's lamb or bumbling bassets.  
 Blessed with the atavistic assets  
 Of pride and deep-throated delight  
 In freedom, what was his by right  
 —His time's use—he, in willing deference,  
 Whenever Liz was sad or bored,  
 Gave to the mistress he adored.  
 One hand upon a work of reference,  
 One on his gray and orange fur,  
 She stroked him, while he purred to her.

What did that purr reflect? The tender  
 Fealty of a one-person cat?  
 Or memories of nights of splendor  
 When with a snarling caveat  
 The territorial marauder  
 Scattered his rivals in disorder  
 To quench some she-cat's arching wiles  
 Upon the clattering star-lit tiles?  
 Or, as he aged, the sweet security  
 Of love that mellows in old casks  
 Whose ebbing essence molds and masks  
 The vintage of its youthful purity?—  
 Old Cat, who with the injured roar  
 Of lions, once more paws the door!

"O Charlemagne, thou little knowest  
 The mischief done." John stares at his  
 Defunct report. "That was the lowest  
 Blow that you could have struck." And Liz,  
 Distressed in almost equal measure  
 At her cat's glee and John's displeasure,  
 Reproaches Charlemagne in slow  
 And serious terms. ". . . But, John, I know  
 It's just a temporary reaction—  
 House-moving has disturbed his poise,  
 And then that party and that noise . . . ,"  
 While Charlemagne with satisfaction  
 Enters the bedroom calmly, sits  
 On the duvet and warms his wits.

That night Liz works late. John retires.  
 She scans tracts on insurance law,  
 On Acts of God and covered fires.  
 With twitching hands and quivering jaw  
 John, naked, bursts into the study.  
 "Jesus Christ! Liz—your fucking buddy—  
 That hellish—God!—I'll kill the beast!"  
 "John . . . John, calm down, calm down, at least  
 Tell me what happened. Did you tease him?"  
 "Me tease him? That freak climbed the bed  
 And urinated near my head.  
 Enough's enough! Liz, don't appease him.  
 Have that cat neutered. It'll cure  
 All his aggressions, that's for sure."

When John's invective grows too torrid  
 ("I'll cut them off myself," et al.),  
 Liz exclaims, "John, don't be so horrid."  
 "Well, ship him off to Senegal  
 Or somewhere—Liz, you'd better do it—  
 Or—mark my words—that cat will rue it."  
 "Oh, darling, don't be so annoyed."  
 "What should I be then? Overjoyed?"  
 "Of course not, dear. I'm very sorry.  
 Let's change the sheets. He's twelve years old.  
 He really has a heart of gold."  
 "I'll bet!" "Well, dear, try not to worry.  
 As for that other thing, that would  
 —At his age—do more harm than good."

"So what should I do—grin and bear it?"  
 "Make sure the bedroom door is locked!"  
 That night Charlemagne tries to tear it  
 Down, but defeated, head half cocked  
 In caution and in concentration,  
 Turns his mature consideration  
 To where John's briefcase, custom-made  
 In Polish pigskin, has been laid,  
 Open, at John's desk in the study—  
 And, using more of skill than force,  
 Deals with the matter in due course:  
 A disembowelment unbloody  
 But satisfactorily complete:  
 Reprisal sudden, stern, and meet.

Next morning comes John's ultimatum,  
 Not frenzied so much as resigned.  
 "Some people like cats, and some hate 'em.  
 I must be of the second kind.  
 Excuse me if I'm sounding bitter.  
 I did my best to like this critter,  
 But, Liz, it takes two—and your cat  
 Just loathes my innards—and that's that.  
 He isn't woolly-brained or witless.  
 Today my briefcase is his prize.  
 Tomorrow he'll gouge out my eyes.  
 Believe me, Liz, it scares me shitless.  
 Either you get that cat declawed  
 Or I'll—so help me—have 'em sawed

Right off!" "No! No!" "What are you fearful  
 Of—for Christ's sake—they're only nails!"  
 But as he looks into her tearful  
 Horrified gaze his heart prevails.  
 She sits there still, without replying.  
 John says, "Liz . . . Lizzie, please stop crying.  
 Darling, I'm sorry I upset—"  
 "They're not! They're not! Ask any vet,"  
 Liz bursts out, reaching for a tissue,  
 "Ask Janet—and you'll know you're wrong."  
 John offers peace, but it's not long  
 Before he's prompted to reissue  
 His threat; and Janet is the moot  
 Court judge brought in to try the suit.

She sits, on each side an assessor—  
 More whimsical than wise, and known  
 As Cuff the Great and Link the Lesser.  
 “As of this point in time” they’ve shown  
 A lamentable fluctuation  
 In judicative concentration  
 Beyond a close search of the scene  
 Of the alleged crimes. They have been  
 Into the bedroom. It has pleased them  
 To test the duvet with more pains  
 Than justify the likely gains,  
 And extra-legal force has eased them  
 Into the yard, where they’ve amused  
 Themselves, consorting with the accused.

There Charlemagne with calm urbanity  
 Points out the well-scratched peppertree.  
 Avuncular, the soul of sanity,  
 With not a quark of jealousy,  
 He takes them wandering through the garden  
 Digging for gopher burrows. Pardon  
 This brief excursus; in the court  
 Where an injunction’s being sought  
 Against John’s threatened operation,  
 The judgment has come in. Jan says:  
 “You’re right, Liz. There are other ways.  
 Declawing is a mutilation;  
 A clawless cat grows far more tense  
 And takes to biting for offense.

However, Liz, you've got to take him  
 To see a cat psychiatrist.  
 I know a good one, and she'll make him—  
 No, don't look stunned—such things exist!  
 I should explain this. My apologies!  
 Well, cats, like humans, have psychologies,  
 And so. . . ." John bursts out: "Jan, you're nuts!"  
 "But if a cat—" "No ifs and buts!  
 This whole damn place is going bonkers—  
 Liz's gestalt, now a cat shrink.  
 Before I'm pickled in this sink  
 I'm catching the next flight for Yonkers.  
 Ciao, California! Land of nuts,  
 Fruits, vegetables—and their cats and mutts."

Liz adds, "Jan, it's a poor suggestion.  
 Charlemagne's a well-balanced cat.  
 His disposition's not in question."  
 "I wouldn't put it quite like that—"

Says John with some heat, "well, Jan, maybe. . . ."  
 Liz says, "John, Charlemagne's no baby.  
 He won't leap through those hoops. Just let  
 Him simmer down with time." "Your pet,"  
 John growls, "is a lopsided menace.  
 You have a choice. Either agree  
 To Jan's shrink, or depend on me  
 To string his reverend guts for tennis  
 Rackets and violins instead.  
 That should appeal to Sue and Ed!"

Liz knuckles under; and John snappily  
 Changes the subject. "Well, Jan, how's  
 The Sheepfold faring? Pretty happily?  
 Why, just last Sunday, as we browsed  
 In ShipRecs Liz spied your creation.  
 The album cover's a sensation."  
 "Well, did you like what it contained?"  
 "You know, Jan, I'm so addle-brained . . .  
 (John stares intently at his fingers)  
 . . . When listening to post-Beatles stuff. . . .  
 It must be good, though. . . ." "That's enough!"  
 Jan groans. All three laugh. Jan's smile lingers:  
 "Well, did you buy it, treacle bun—  
 Or count on me to give you one?"

Yes, you lack faith; no, you're a miser!"  
 Liz says, "We bought one, Jan." "Oh, good!  
 I'll write *For Johnny and Eliza:*  
*Co-patrons of my livelihood.*"  
 "I'd put it," John says, "more concisely.  
*John. Liz. Love. Jan.* will do quite nicely."  
 Jan signs, and Liz goes on to ask  
 About her latest sculptural task.  
 "Well, at the moment, Tutankhamen  
 On a raft, spearing—in midstream—  
 The God of Evil: that's my theme."  
 "I hope it goes well." Jan says, "Amen!"  
 Ingests the rest of her Pernod  
 And drives back to the studio.



Charlemagne's sent to Psycho-Kitty  
 Three times a week, and time goes by.  
 September gilds the bustling city  
 Once more, and autumn's lullaby,  
 Weaving through chatter and commotion,  
 Sounds dreamily from bay to ocean.  
 The world, for all its grief and grame,  
 Goes onward very much the same.  
 The fog thins out; the rain increases.  
 With less than customary zest  
 Jan sits in the Café Trieste  
 And meditates upon the pieces  
 Of her fragmented life and art.  
 "The thing is, never to lose heart."

Grandma's old dictum's too simplistic  
 Of course, but what's my A to Z?  
 'Go with the flow'—that nihilistic  
 Invertebrate philosophy?  
 What happens when the flow stops flowing?  
 Do I give in or keep on going?  
 My love life's dammed. My art is stuck.  
 I drink too much. My music's muck.  
 I'd better stop this maudlin listing  
 Or it'll draw me to the brink  
 Of—well, I guess that Cuff and Link  
 Confirm my reason for existing.  
 Oh yes, and friends. Why don't I call  
 John for a spiritual overhaul?"

"Hello. John here. . . . Oh, hello, Janet. . . .

Yes—no, I wasn't working late.

What? . . . Nope, it's Phil who wants to ban it.

Like you, I'm paid, Jan, to create! . . .

Hey, Jan, don't blow up for no reason.

That was a joke. . . . What? Out of season?

All right, it's been withdrawn in haste.

I guess it was in dubious taste.

But Jan, you're really a virago!" . . .

Across Jan's face a veil of pain

Passes, but soon she laughs again,

As if there were a fine embargo

Against such words as, without leave,

Enter her heart, and make it grieve.

## 6.37

". . . Tomorrow? Sorry, Jan; I'm busy:

Phil; then a tennis match with Ed. . . .

Next week's not too good . . . I and Lizzie . . .

Say what, I'll call you back instead."

Jan puts the phone down in dejection

While with remedial affection

The quipster-quadrupeds appear

To climb her knee and lick her ear.

"Not now," says Jan. She sits there, thinking,

While the clock ticks, and minutes pass,

Watching a cube melt in her glass.

The cats are still; they sit there, blinking,

Till summoned: "Octopuss, come here."

Cuff butts her chin; Link tastes a tear.

Next day is Sunday. In the morning  
 Phil drops in to see John and Liz:  
 "Sorry—it seems I can't stop yawning. . . ."  
 John laughs: "I'd say the reason is  
 Ecstatic sex from dusk to sunrise."  
 "Your wit, John, wouldn't make a bun rise."  
 "Bet I'm right, though." "That's as may be."  
 "Who is she, Phil?" "Well, wait and see."  
 "It's not like you to be mysterious  
 With your old buddies, Philip Weiss."  
 "Later, John—Liz, I need advice  
 —No joking, please—this thing is serious—  
 About the Lungless March this week."  
 "*That* thing," John mutters with some pique.

"I thought this was a social visit."  
 "It is, John. I just thought I'd ask  
 Liz if—" John breaks in: "Well, Phil, is it  
 Or isn't it?" A troubled mask  
 Slips over Phil's face. Liz says, puzzled,  
 "Free speech among friends can't be muzzled.  
 Out with it, Phil—what's on your mind?  
 Let's leave formality behind."  
 "My question is," says Phil, "can going  
 Limp when arrested be construed  
 To be resisting?" "That's a shrewd  
 Query," Liz murmurs: "True, you're slowing  
 The process, but they couldn't claim. . . .  
 Still, I'd go quietly all the same.

The cops have quite a bit of latitude.  
 They could at least make out a case.  
 A lot depends upon your attitude. . . ."  
 "I think this whole thing's a disgrace,"  
 John bursts out, "*and* undemocratic."  
 "Right on, John!" Phil says with emphatic,  
 Surprised assent. Taken aback,  
 John says, "No, I meant *your* attack  
 Upon the lab, not what they're doing!  
 You've got the courts. You've got the press.  
 You've got the vote. To use duress  
 Is inexcusable. You're screwing  
 Your country while you claim to be  
 The high priests of humanity."

"Look, John, we've talked this out already."  
 "If that spitfire phenomenon,  
 That spout of gas, hot and unsteady,  
 Could be called talk, we may have done.  
 As I remember, you waxed lyrical,  
 But when it came to an empirical  
 Hardheaded look at the real world,  
 I found that you had gone and curled  
 Up in a corner, drunk and driveling  
 About iguanas or some such  
 Garbage. We didn't talk too much  
 That night, and I can see you swiveling  
 Out of my aim again today."  
 John's words draw blood; Phil turns at bay.

"All right, John, if you want discussion,  
 Get on with it: we've got free speech."  
 "Well, for a start, if you were Russian,  
 That wouldn't come so glibly. Each  
 Artist or writer there, each poet  
 Who's seen the truth and tried to show it  
 To his compatriots has been banned,  
 Starved, or reviled in his own land—  
 Or worse—I doubt I need to tell you  
 About the fate of Mandelstam.  
 Spout here: you'll come to little harm.  
 Spout there: the KGB will sell you  
 A ticket to a dexterous shrink  
 Who'll drug you dumb to help you think.

I'll bet a month of psychological  
 Incarceration wilts your wit;  
 That soon, instead of demagogical  
 Heresy you'll howl holy writ.  
 Big Bishop knows what's proper for you,  
 Expels you if he can't ignore you,  
 Infects his pliant flock with spies  
 And bloats his paper—*Truth*—with lies.  
 Try demonstrating there: publicity  
 Will cost more. Drop your job there: wait  
 For the swift bear hug of the state. . . .  
 But if you credit their duplicity,  
 Go bow before the monolith—  
*Give* them the rope to hang us with."

John stops, face dark with agitation.  
 Phil, startled by his vehemence,  
 Starts flashing fire, but moderation  
 Prevails: "John, all you've said makes sense—  
 Except that I'm not an apologist  
 For that regime or that psychologist.  
 I'm an American, and I'm glad.  
 But their state wouldn't look so bad  
 To someone sunk in unemployment  
 —Of which we've plenty—or disease.  
 Bankrupted by his medical fees  
 I doubt that he'd get much enjoyment  
 From all his fabled freedoms, or  
 Could let his daughter study law.

I'll even add that their despotic  
 Religiosity for Marx  
 Acts like—to quote him—a narcotic,  
 While privileged ecclesiarchs  
 Grow fat on *blat*, cut queues and corners,  
 And like battalions of Jack Horner  
 Extract plump plums from the joint pie;  
 And that they gag, harass, and spy  
 On anyone who thwarts the party;  
 And hire hacks; but if our forte  
 Is that we're free, and don't support  
 Our own soft choir of castrati,  
 We support those who've given birth  
 To the one race-reich left on earth.

But why did we get into all this?  
 I know—you said . . . but never mind.  
 As for the apocalypse: I'd call this  
 Not theirs or ours. Humankind  
 Extends beyond our grim theocracies  
 Or constitutional plutocracies.  
 This world of ours, this atmosphere  
 All of us breathe . . . (Phil pauses here  
 And laughs) . . . I see why you accuse me  
 Of waxing lyrical. . . . Anyway,  
 How can you think of we or they  
 When we're both in the soup? Refuse me  
 Support, that's fine; but, John, don't doubt  
 I know what I'm going on about. . . .

## 6.47

. . . I'll leave some literature here for you.  
 I don't mean to evangelize.  
 For all I know the stuff will bore you.  
 But try to see it through our eyes. . . ."  
 At this, Phil leaves with John (who, calmer,  
 Has slowly loosed his cancrioid armor)  
*The Fate of the Earth*—a tract by Schell—  
 And two by Caldicott, as well  
 As several slim brochures describing  
 This Friday's march upon that place,  
 That heartland of the missile race  
 Named Lungless. Finally, imbibing  
 A reconciliatory hit  
 Of dope, Phil murmurs, "Got to split."



"Phil, wait a second, here's a present  
 For Paul: an abalone shell."  
 "Thanks, John," Phil smiles, and with a pleasant  
 Handshake—a kiss for Liz as well—  
 And a brief nod at Dr. Spooner  
 ("I piked your lot") drives off. No sooner  
 Has John breathed thanks that he's survived  
 Phil's phalanxes, than Ed's arrived.  
 Liz hugs her brother: "Hello, handsome,  
 Why aren't you dressed for tennis?" Ed  
 Wryly exclaims, "Makes me see red!  
 We've got this big campaign on, and some  
 Dodo's just left us in the lurch  
 —I've just had time to go to church—

He left on Thursday, with no warning—  
 So we're all working overtime.  
 Well, that's the news this Sunday morning!  
 I'm sorry, John . . . Liz, that's why I'm  
 All suited—but I must be going!"  
 Liz smiles at Ed; then, startled, showing  
 Signs first of shock, then bafflement,  
 Thinks, "Surely there's some accident. . . .  
 How can . . . and yet, what other meaning . . . ?"  
 And even after Ed has gone  
 Seems so preoccupied that John  
 Asks, "What's the matter, Liz?" But leaning  
 Check on hand, Liz, abstracted, stares  
 Out of the window, unawares.

# SEVEN

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## 7.1

When fear grows too intense to handle,  
We shrink into a private smile,  
Surprised when here and there a candle  
Drives back the dark a little while,  
A little space, before it gutters;  
Or in the madness a voice utters  
Words full of calm that to us seem  
To bear the dry light of a dream  
And stain our waking with more sorrow.  
The night of hate that covers earth,  
The generous country of our birth,  
The single land from which we borrow  
All that is ours—air, insight, tears,  
Our fragile lives—for a few years,

That night of hate grows dense around us.  
 We laugh through what we can't dispel,  
 While apathy and terror hound us  
 On well-intentioned paths to hell.  
 Best to concede, to the septic chorus  
 Of the world's counsels, what's good for us,  
 And let them, if they choose to, mar  
 Our common earth with civil war.  
 Live day to day; relieve a little  
 What sorrow lies within our scope;  
 A moratorium on hope  
 Will, if it makes our laughter brittle,  
 Lend peace until that day of wrath  
 When the smooth doomtoys hurtle forth.

What, after all, is earth's creation?  
 A virus in the morgue of space.  
 What's Mozart but a weird vibration  
 Congenial to a brain-sick race  
 Rabid with virulence. Why bother  
 If things like these should maul each other  
 And, dying, yelp that they have won?  
 If clouds of dust occlude their sun  
 From them, it still shines undiminished  
 In its small galaxy. No change  
 Of note is likely when this strange  
 Irradiated beast has finished  
 Vomiting filth upon its bed  
 Of inhumanity, and is dead.

Some disagree. Heroic, silly  
 —Whichever—they have gathered here  
 In the pre-dawn, dew-damp and chilly,  
 On one of two days in the year  
 When light and night share day's dimension  
 In equal halves. To ease their tension  
 (For near them, where a cyclone fence  
 Delimits the circumference  
 Of Lungless Labs, police stand sentry,  
 Guarding a road, checkpost, and gate),  
 They sing aloud, and celebrate  
 Fall's somber equinoctial entry  
 By lighting candles in an arc  
 Against the encroachment of the dark.

Dawn rises over Lungless redly.  
 The pioneers of the blockade  
 Are joined now by a motley medley;  
 A marching carnival parade  
 Starts out from Lungless Park, cavorting  
 Along to Lungless Labs, supporting  
 Those who risk prison to defy  
 The weaponry they all decry.  
 Young couples, schoolchildren, grandmothers,  
 Old hippies, punks with hair dyed green,  
 Staid-suited men who've never seen  
 Another demonstration, others  
 Who've been to scores, walk hand in hand  
 Toward the place where death is planned.

## 7.6

Those who devise these weapons—decent,  
 Adjusted, family-minded folk—  
 Don't think they plan death. Their most recent  
 Bomb (which, as an engaging joke,  
 They dubbed "the cookie cutter") batters  
 Live cells and yet—this is what matters—  
 Leaves buildings and machines intact—  
 This butchering brainspawn is in fact  
 Soothingly styled a "radiation  
 Enhancement device" by these same men.  
 Blind in their antiseptic den  
 To the obscene abomination  
 Of the refined ampoules of hate  
 Their ingenuity helps create,

## 7.7

They go to work, attend a meeting,  
 Write an equation, have a beer,  
 Hail colleagues with a cheerful greeting,  
 Are conscientious, sane, sincere,  
 Rational, able, and fastidious.  
 Through hardened casings no invidious  
 Tapeworm of doubt, no guilt, no qualm  
 Pierces to sabotage their calm.  
 When something's technically attractive,  
 You follow the conception through,  
 That's all. What if you leave a slew  
 Of living dead, of radioactive  
 "Collateral damage" in its wake?  
 It's just a job, for heaven's sake.

They breed their bombs here; others aim them  
 —Young targeteers at their controls—  
 At living souls, to kill and maim them  
 (Although their unemotive goals  
 Talk not of “death” but “optimizing  
 Effective yield”), while, mobilizing  
 Uncertain radar, we explore  
 The skies and prod ourselves to war.  
 Then, locked inside their lethal closet,  
 Go codes received, launch keys in place,  
 Bright crew-cut zombies will efface  
 All humankind. Too late to posit  
 What made them fire from the hip.  
 A flight of geese? A faulty chip?

Fatigues, down jackets, and bandannas,  
 Handicapped veterans in wheelchairs,  
 American flags and rainbow banners,  
 A band for Sousa, priests for prayers,  
 A replica of the grim reaper,  
 Placards—“I am my brother’s keeper,”  
 “Nice folks don’t use nukes,” “Work for life,  
 Not death,” and a huge “Strive with strife”—  
 Quarreling, waving, wrangling, singing,  
 The lively unanimous throng,  
 Two thousand minds, two thousand strong,  
 Submerge their disagreements, bringing  
 Common concern and hope to bear  
 Against the smithy of “hardware.”



## 7.10

Phil hears the crowd from where he's standing,  
 Engaged in a brisk conference  
 With two TV reporters. Handing  
 Out pamphlets labeled *Common Sense*  
*About Our Common Fate*, Phil mentions  
 Briefly their plans and their intentions:  
 "We'll have a speech by Father O'Hare;  
 Then, in small groups, we'll walk out there  
 And cross that line of demarcation.  
 While we block traffic going through,  
 The cops will grab us two by two  
 —That's standard for a demonstration—  
 And haul us off to jail—in those  
 Yellow school buses, I suppose.

## 7.11

As evidence of our sincerity  
 We won't resist." The TV crew  
 Shoot several reels off with celerity,  
 Thank Phil, and turn to interview  
 A Lungless Labs spokeswoman: "Really,  
 These games cost the taxpayer dearly,  
 And have a minimal effect  
 Upon the labs. To misdirect  
 Attack upon an institution  
 That serves the nation's a perverse,  
 Quixotic, petulant, or worse,  
 An un-American resolution.  
 As every president can attest,  
 What we do here is for the best."



Phil looks around him. An inflated  
 Blue whale with *Save the Humans* scrawled  
 Across its side is inundated  
 By clambering children. The so-called  
 Elders for Peace are pressing flowers  
 On the police. A sergeant glowers,  
 "Ma'am, please step back across that line. . . .  
 Ma'am, that is no concern of mine. . . .  
 No, thank you, ma'am, it's not a marriage."  
 Phil chuckles. A new vision nears:  
 A woman with a placard steers  
 A cat strapped in a baby carriage  
 Toward him. "Almost looks like Liz. . . .  
 Good heavens . . . surely not!" It is.

"Liz! Liz!" Phil shouts. "This is fantastic!  
 What are you doing here? And John—  
 Where's he?" With an enthusiastic  
 Bear hug Phil beams a smile down on  
 Liz, who, one hand held down, restraining  
 Charlemagne (whose great-lunged complaining  
 Has risen several decibels)  
 And one hand on a sign that spells  
*Cats and attorneys are disarming.*  
*Why aren't we all?* gasps out, "Ow! Phil,  
 Let go of—Charlemagne, keep still!  
 Don't—Ouch! That wasn't very charming!  
 Look, you've drawn blood, I hope you're glad.  
 Now, Charlemagne, don't make me mad. . . .

. . . Perhaps I oughtn't to have brought him.  
 He isn't used to the melee.  
 It's the jazz band that's overwrought him . . .  
 But, Phil, as I was going to say,  
 John isn't here. Did you expect him?"  
 "Well, no, it's just that I connect him . . ."  
 "Thanks, Phil!" Liz smiles: "That isn't too  
 Astute—or flattering—of you.  
 I too can . . . by the way, how's Eddy?"  
 "Eddy?" asks Phil, "Oh, Ed—I see.  
 I don't . . . why are you asking *me*?"  
 But now the microphones are ready,  
 Father O'Hare says, "Friends, a word—"  
 And the brief parley is deferred.

Bespectacled, short, nervous, chubby,  
 With few gray hairs for sixty years,  
 And scruffy cassock, the priest's tubby  
 And unimposing form appears  
 A curious temple for the oracle;  
 And every hint of oratorical  
 Expectancy is squelched when he,  
 Bent down on an unsteady knee,  
 Two fingers fumbling with his collar,  
 Gathers the notes his jittery hands  
 Dropped on the ground; but when he stands  
 And starts to speak, the pudgy scholar  
 (By nature; activist by choice)  
 Holds them with his soft resonant voice.

## 7.16

Now both blockaders and supporters  
 Are silent as the priest says, "Friends,  
 Sisters and brothers, sons and daughters,  
 The little time each of us spends . . .  
 Can everyone at the back hear me?  
 Yes? Excellent—and all those near me—  
 Not too loud? . . . Well, these few short years  
 We spend pursuing our careers,  
 Our needs, our longings, our obsessions  
 Upon this earth, once gone, are dead.  
 Of some who've spent their time, it's said  
 They gathered manifold possessions;  
 Of some, they broke their lives for wealth;  
 Of some, their striving broke their health.

## 7.17

Of some it's said they learned to master  
 The secret fusion of the sun,  
 Of some that they ran, rode, swam faster  
 Than till their advent man had done,  
 Of some, they eked life out as drudges,  
 Of some—but any way one judges  
 Their lives or ours, to dole out blame  
 Or praise, one attribute may claim  
 To cut across all our partitions  
 Of wealth and vigor, fame and wit:  
 Did they serve life? Or injure it?  
 These are more naked oppositions  
 Than can sieve truth in every case,  
 But we may use them when we face

Choices such as, today, we're facing.  
 What is our will in life? To race  
 As, lemming-like, mankind is racing  
 To liquidation, or to face  
 With what small strength we have, the massive  
 Machine of omnicide, impassive,  
 Oiled by inertia and by hate  
 And the smooth silver of the state?  
 Today we meet in celebration  
 Of life; some have their children here;  
 And all of us are of good cheer.  
 Indeed, with our incarceration  
 In those yellow school buses, we  
 May find ourselves compelled to be

As little children. Let's inquire  
 With the same childishness as they,  
 Should we not try to douse a fire  
 That threatens to consume away  
 Not just our home but the whole city?  
 Or with a worldly-wise and witty  
 Shrug and rejoinder should we turn  
 The volume up and let Rome burn?  
 Well, we have gathered here this morning  
 In disparate but harmonious voice  
 To show that we have made our choice;  
 That we have hearkened to the warning  
 That hate and fear kill; and are here  
 Confronting death and hate and fear.

Hate is a subtle weed; vagaries  
 Of soil and time give it new growth.  
 Only the food of hatred varies;  
 England and Germany were both  
 Our bitterest enemies; we hated  
 Each of them. Yet when we had sated  
 Our enmity and made them friends,  
 Hate found new sustenance for its ends.  
 The English gone, it found the Spanish.  
 Japan defeated, China served  
 To keep its lethal life preserved.  
 Its victim crushed, it would not vanish.  
 Even before we'd reached Berlin,  
 Moscow was our new sump of sin.

Hate shifts with diplomatic fashion.  
 To love is to be resolute.  
 By Christ's own sacrifice and passion,  
 We cannot flinch, we must not mute  
 The strength and grace of his humanity  
 By acquiescing in insanity.  
 Neither crusading frenzy nor  
 The specious pleading of 'just war'  
 Permits the least justification  
 Of that which, once used, will ensure  
 That God's creation won't endure.  
 Without hate, without hesitation,  
 Taking our freedom in our hand,  
 Let us each pledge that here we stand.

Though Catholic, I make no apology  
 For quoting someone we've proclaimed  
 The arch-monk of our demonology  
 These several hundred years. I aimed  
 To show that in this murderous weather  
 That threatens, we will stand together,  
 As now; and with our common breath  
 Cry out against our common death.  
 Catholic and Episcopalian,  
 Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist,  
 Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, atheist,  
 We are all here; no one is alien  
 Now radiation's common laws  
 Impel us into common cause.

It was once asked on Belsen's ashes,  
 'Where were you then? Where was the Church?'  
 If once more our high sentence clashes  
 With our inaction, we need search  
 No further for complicit stigma  
 Than those hands bearing the enigma  
 Of blood and body in the mass.  
 Please God, this will not come to pass.  
 Our bishops' recent pastoral letter  
 On nuclear arms demands a freeze.  
 Today our own archdiocese  
 Of San Francisco's an abettor  
 —They've lent us transport—in this fight  
 Against the law, but for the right.

## 7.24

I have heard some who denigrate us  
 Claim that we wish to abrogate  
 The constitutional hiatus  
 Between religion and the state.  
 Our job, they say, is to be godly  
 While the state goes on acting oddly.  
 The scripture for their vision is  
 'Give unto Caesar what is his.'  
 Let me observe that separation  
 Of church and state does not exempt  
 The church from action, may not tempt  
 The state from all examination  
 Of conscience, and ought, lastly, not  
 To serve as partisan buckshot.

## 7.25

There are occasions when morality  
 And civil law are in dispute.  
 Granted its sole officiality,  
 Civil law is not absolute.  
 If we accept our obligation  
 Not to accept annihilation  
 Or that, in our name, bombs are hurled  
 At others elsewhere in the world,  
 The quote above needs its addenda.  
 Students who gloss a narrow text  
 Should read the passage that comes next;  
 It is suggested that we render  
 Things that are God's to God, as well  
 As stocking Caesar's citadel.



What Caesar, battling for democracy,  
 Unasked, relinquished his regime?  
 What cotton king decried slavocracy?  
 What cat forwent its dish of cream?  
 If we expect disinterested  
 Judgment from Congress, from our vested  
 Arms gluttons—from the White House down—  
 We're living in cloud-cuckoo-town.  
 We cannot wait for legislation.  
 There is no shame in following  
 Thoreau and Anthony and King,  
 The old traditions of a nation  
 That once, two hundred years before,  
 In its own birth resisted law.

There is no time, when escalation  
 Bloats our stockpiles with overkill,  
 When secular proliferation  
 Means that a score of nations will  
 Soon hatch these eggs, and when with manic  
 Slaver we froth the world to panic,  
 To nourish niceties. We must pray,  
 Reflect, and act in any way  
 —Peaceful; that needs no emphasizing—  
 That may decelerate, reduce,  
 Or ban the inception, test, and use  
 Of weaponry so brutalizing  
 Its mere birth brings opprobrium down  
 Upon the name of Lungless Town.

Workers of Lungless Labs—when dying  
 Will you be proud you were midwife  
 To implements exemplifying  
 Assault against the heart of life?  
 You knew their purpose, yet you made them.  
 If you had scruples, you betrayed them.  
 What pastoral response acquits  
 Those who made ovens for Auschwitz?  
 Indeed, it's said that the banality  
 Of evil is its greatest shock.  
 It jokes, it punches its time clock,  
 Plays with its kids. The triviality  
 Of slaughtering millions can't impinge  
 Upon its peace, or make it cringe.

Killing is dying. This equation  
 Carries no mystical import.  
 It is the literal truth. Our nation  
 Has long believed war was a sport.  
 Unoccupied, unbombed, undying,  
 While 'over there' the shells were flying,  
 How could we know the Russian dread  
 Of war, the mountains of their dead?  
 We reveled in acceleration  
 At every level of the race;  
 And even now we're face to face  
 With mutual extermination  
 We talk as blithely as before  
 Of 'surgical strikes' and 'limited war.'

There is no victory, no survival,  
 And no defense, no place to hide,  
 No limit, and indeed, no rival  
 In this exhaustive fratricide.  
 We'll all fall down. Despite resilient  
 Airs of omniscience, our brilliant  
 Leaders, when all is said and done,  
 Have no solution, no, not one.  
 With quaint autumnal orthodoxy  
 They point out that America's best:  
 The Russians can't, they say, protest.  
 That only means we must stand proxy  
 For those who cannot speak, but are  
 As much opposed as we, to war.

Ten hostages is terrorism;  
 A million, and it's strategy.  
 To ban books is fanaticism;  
 To threaten in totality  
 All culture and all civilization,  
 All humankind and all creation,  
 This is a task of decorous skill  
 And needs high statesmanship and will.  
 It takes a deal of moral clarity  
 To see that it is right to blitz  
 Each Russian family to bits  
 Because their leaders' muscularity  
 —Quite like our own—on foreign soil  
 Threatens our vanity or 'our' oil.

*Quo warranto?* By what authority,  
 I ask you in the wounds of Christ,  
 Does strength confer superiority  
 Over God's earth? What has enticed  
 Mere things like us into believing  
 The world may be left charred and grieving  
 In man-made doom at the behest  
 Of patriotic interest?  
 It's come that close. A Russian freighter  
 —In autumn 1962—  
 Halted before the line we drew  
 To cut off Cuba. Minutes later,  
 And our own manly president would  
 Have finished off mankind for good.

To those who with tall intellectual  
 Prudence sniff at our brashness and  
 State that our stance is ineffectual,  
 That with our puny sling to stand  
 Against this latter-day Goliath  
 Is not wise, let me ask, 'How dieth  
 The wise man? As the fool.' To turn  
 Your face from horror will not earn  
 You an indulgence. Help us fight it.  
 Two hundred years ago, indeed,  
 Who would have dreamed slaves would be freed?  
 That's one example, and I cite it  
 To show how conscience, starting small,  
 In God's good time, may conquer all.

From history we may learn two lessons:  
 How slowly—and how fast—things change.  
 Whether the permanent quiescence  
 Of fear—or life—occurs, it's strange  
 Not to know how long we'll be striving,  
 Or which succeeds in first arriving;  
 But whether we prevail or lose,  
 One thing is certain: we must choose.  
 God won't forsake you or ignore you—  
 So don't forsake him. Let me close  
 With Deuteronomy's plain prose.  
 Here it is: 'I have set before you  
 Life and death . . . therefore choose life.'  
 Or, as that sign says, 'Strive with strife.' ”

The priest sits quietly down. Applauding,  
 The crowd now rises to its feet.  
 Liz nudges Phil: “Well, Phil, according  
 To your lights—this is in complete  
 Confidence—did his Bible bluster  
 Pass your severe Judaic muster?”  
 Phil smiles, “I ought to tell you, I'm  
 Renting a rabbi for next time.  
 But sure, I'm used to it. Remember,  
 I was once married to a goy.  
 And even Paul himself, poor boy,  
 Has been polluted with an ember  
 Or two of gentile coal in his  
 Severe Judaic fire. But, Liz,

Quit baiting me, and let me bait you.  
 How come your masters let you go?  
 I don't mean to insinuate you  
 Don't have your own views, but, you know,  
 Today's a weekday. Cobb & Kearny  
 Must miss their golden-haired attorney.  
 And doesn't John lament and grieve  
 That you've absconded without leave?  
 I can't believe that this excursion  
 Carries his blessing." "Phil, you're wrong.  
 Actually, John expressed his strong  
 Approval of our day's diversion.  
 His exact words were 'Go to hell—  
 And take your fucking cat as well!'

I think tonight that I'll appease him  
 By treating him to dinner at  
 The Tree of Heaven. That should please him. . . .  
 Keep in those claws, Magnificat!  
 Just one hour more. We'll soon be going  
 Back to the car. . . . Phil, when he's showing  
 This kind of restlessness, it's best  
 To humor him. . . . Will they arrest  
 You soon? It looks like they're beginning  
 To block the roadway." "Well, not yet.  
 The game's just under way. I get  
 To enter in the second inning.  
 Why don't you get arrested too?"  
 "Phil, I'm not as extreme as you."

"Extreme?" "I mean, I'm not committed  
 In the same way." "I see." "But, Phil,  
 If you've got something quarter-witted  
 That I can do to help, I will.  
 And Phil . . . I really do admire you."  
 "Well, Liz, you could—but no—they'd fire you."  
 "What?" "Well, I thought that legal aid. . . ."  
 Liz looks downcast: "No, I'm afraid  
 That's the one thing that I can't proffer.  
 The firm would squawk . . . but taking care  
 Of Paul perhaps—could I help there?"  
 "Well, thanks, Liz, that's a generous offer.  
 If you could spare an evening, yes,  
 Please visit him at this address.

Tell him I'm fine, and will be coming  
 Home soon; and to be good." By now  
 The Lungless intersection's humming  
 With cars, crowds, and police. Somehow  
 —Now as offender, now as warden—  
 The monitors maintain a cordon  
 Across the road. All traffic stops.  
 With tactical arrests the cops  
 Disrupt the barrier for a minute.  
 While the blockade's re-forming, two  
 Deft cars (work badges checked) get through  
 The metal fence; and once within it,  
 Their drivers, irked at having been  
 Delayed, revert to their routine.



In choreographed concatenation  
 The demonstrators quietly go  
 Across the line of demarcation  
 And lay themselves down in a row.  
 The traffic halts; they are arrested;  
 With sharp civility requested  
 To walk, and on refusal, dragged  
 To the school buses, where they're tagged  
 With plastic handcuffs. Once inside them,  
 The ex-blockaders, unsubdued,  
 Revived by the bright yellow mood  
 Of their detention buses, ride them  
 Singing "Give Peace a Chance," locked tight  
 In a slow transport of delight.

Now a diversified assortment  
 Of persons wedded to the cause  
 Appears, whose singular deportment  
 Draws larger measures of applause.  
 A figure high on stilts approaches  
 The roadway at high speed, encroaches  
 On the exclusionary zone  
 That the police claim as their own,  
 But it's not easy to arrest her  
 When her arms float four feet above  
 Their heads, and her well-trained pet dove  
 Sullies their caps. Who dares divest her  
 Of her appendages? Who'll bell  
 The dove—at risk of his lapel?

A coffin, fashioned like a missile,  
 Is shouldered by a dozen friends.  
 A human pine tree, full and fissile,  
 Decked in pine branches, greenly wends  
 Its way into the intersection,  
 Splits up and joins the insurrection,  
 While skeleton-suited youths throw flowers  
 On the windshields of halted cars.  
 Her grandson's snapshot, square and cheerful,  
 Pinned to her chest, hair in blue rinse,  
 A doughty dame tries to convince  
 An officer, who, almost tearful,  
 Gasps, lugging her toward a bus:  
 "Ma'am, this thing isn't up to us."

Meanwhile, to counterpoint this strenuous  
 Nonviolence, on the sidelines  
 A sponsor of the march (ingenuous,  
 But perspicacious too) assigns  
 Two-minute slots for public sharing  
 Of audience response. Declaring,  
 "The floor is free now. If you'd like  
 To say a few words, here's the mike,"  
 He chairs a talk show, "Nuclear Witness."  
 The TV cameras close in.  
 A pastor talks on "Crime—or Sin?"  
 A doctor on "Fallout and Fitness,"  
 And several others on why they  
 Decided to protest today.

When no one grabs the mike, the previous  
 Speaker asks someone in the crowd  
 To follow him, and by this devious  
 Tactic the shyest or most proud  
 Invitee's shamed into consenting  
 —However fearsome or tormenting  
 The thought of public speech may be—  
 To pool his feelings. Suddenly,  
 To Liz's horror, an alarming  
 Voice rings out: "You there, with the pram  
 And cat—you're speaking next." "I am?"  
 "Yes, you, attorney who's disarming."  
 Liz says, "I just can't, there's no way—  
 Oh, Jesus, Phil, what'll I say?"

"Anything, Liz—it doesn't matter.  
 If you can talk for hours in court . . ."  
 "That's different." "Bullshit. Just don't spatter  
 Your speech with jargon." With a snort  
 Phil grabs the mike and hands it to her  
 While the unflustered interviewer  
 Asks her her name: "Now feel at ease  
 To speak on anything you please.  
 It's just two minutes." At first nervous,  
 Liz thaws. She says, "There's something I  
 Have often thought of. If we die  
 —We humans, that is—it may serve us  
 Right for our silliness and hate.  
 But what we cannot vindicate

Is killing all the other fauna  
 That have developed on the earth.  
 On field or floe, in every corner,  
 From Maine to Thule, from Minsk to Perth,  
 They'll die. I'm not exaggerating.  
 The reason is illuminating;  
 Blinding, in fact. With ruined eyes  
 A cheetah, or an insect, dies  
 —And lingeringly—of starvation.  
 Deplete the ozone layer by two  
 And let more ultraviolet through—  
 Voilà! We've blinded dumb creation—  
 Although its delegate, my cat,  
 Would claim he's not as dumb as that.

Well, we are. It's been calculated  
 If only half our bombs explode  
 —Just half, that's all—we'll have created  
 A quite sufficient overload  
 Of nitrogen oxides to gobble  
 Up half our ozone. We may squabble  
 About percentage points; what's clear  
 Is that each shrew, each fly, each deer  
 Who isn't wearing tinted glasses  
 Will suffer retinal burns, go blind,  
 And starve, and die. And so, mankind  
 —That radiant species—when it passes  
 Will leave the generous bequest  
 Of death and blindness to the rest."

Liz stops, and puts the mike down. Twenty  
 Seconds pass. No one speaks at all.  
 She looks at Phil: "Jargon aplenty,  
 But none from law!" A caterwaul  
 Reminds the world that dumb creation  
 Is happiest in its habitation—  
 Or, rather, in its habitat.  
 At any rate, Liz strokes her cat,  
 Appeasing his dissatisfaction:  
 "I'll take you home. Don't cry—I will. . . .  
 I must be off now. Good luck, Phil—  
 I'd better take corrective action.  
 His mood's sunk downwards far too far . . ."  
 And wheels him townwards to the car.

# EIGHT

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## 8.1

Evening; Phil's house. "What's the detergent  
That's kept your soul unsoiled this time?  
You've always known the problem's urgent  
But haven't knelt down in the grime  
To help your friends, Ed, by investing  
A few days of your life protesting.  
Do you imagine, if you pray,  
The megatons will wilt away?"  
"No." "Well?" "Well—Phil—it's the mentality  
—Us : them—the last thing that we need—  
That's the first thing these protests breed.  
Self-righteous superficiality  
Won't extirpate the roots of sin  
Or cure us of the mess we're in."

## 8.2

"And what's your plan for—extirpation?"

"To curb our own complicity

In violence and in exploitation.

We are ourselves the enemy.

This man builds bombs—but am I using

More than my share of goods, abusing

The birthright of my fellows? Do

I dominate them? . . ." "Ed, that's true

—Why even bother to deny it—

But as a practical recourse

Your mea culpa lacks all force.

It's far too slow. I just can't buy it.

By the time your catholicon

Acts on our guts, we'll all be gone.

## 8.3

. . . Oh, by the way, have you met feisty

Father O'Hare?" "No, what's he like?"

"Brimstone cum brains, I'd say, and Christ—he

Knows how to wield a wicked mike;

And more, to act on what he preaches."

Ed smiles: "I read one of his speeches

Last week—*Priest Blasts Nukes*." "Yes, that's how

The press reported it. Well, now,

You two should meet, Ed. He's compelling.

It may do you some good to find

A man of God who doesn't mind

The temporal dunghill. There's no telling

What the impromptu thunderstroke

Of his discourses might provoke.



## 8.4

But I don't mean to preach. The tension  
Of the last week. . . ." Ed says, "I know.  
I'm glad I'm not the first to mention  
Prison; but, well, how did things go?  
Are you all right?" "Oh, sure! They held us  
In circus tents, which served to weld us  
Into coherent troupes of clowns. . . .  
I guess it had its ups and downs."  
"Why tents?" Phil laughs: "We were too numerous  
To fit in Lungless County Jail."  
"The food, Phil?" "Neither cakes and ale  
Nor bread and tears." Phil waxes humorous  
While Ed grills him (with serious mien)  
On their ten days of quarantine.

## 8.5

The red and green big tops that housed them  
Brought forth a Mardi Gras esprit.  
The sentence they were offered roused them  
To staunch remonstrance. Finally,  
In lieu of a two-year probation  
(Effectively an authorization  
That pawned their First Amendment right  
To go on fighting the good fight),  
The county prosecutors, rattled  
By their refusal to play ball,  
Allowed that time served plus a small  
Fine would suffice. Thus the embattled  
Jailbirds, bedraggled but unclipped,  
Sang their way out to their own script.

## 8.6

Some of them—a selected sample—  
 Pleading not guilty when arraigned  
 —Among them Phil—as an example  
 To hearten others who, strength strained,  
 Had delegated their decial  
 Of arms to them. Their jury trial  
 (“Wilfully and maliciously  
 Obstructing traffic”) is to be  
 Held the next month with high publicity.  
 “Necessity” is their defense:  
 A doctrine born of common sense  
 And common law that waives complicity  
 When present public hazard proves  
 The force an impugned act removes.

## 8.7

As Phil talks on, his eyes grow radiant.  
 Ed thinks of the first time they met.  
 The weeks have warped the placid gradient  
 On which his even wheels were set.  
 Neither the sense, at every meeting,  
 Of his heart’s full and rapid beating,  
 Nor the abrupt and scalding rush  
 Of redness to his face, the flush  
 When he feels Phil’s eyes resting on him,  
 But something infinite and slow  
 And tide-like holds his life in tow.  
 The salt of human love upon him,  
 To it his leached will yields control,  
 Whether it stings or heals his soul.

## 8.8

And yet it seems as if a curtain  
 Of doubt has dropped across his eyes.  
 "The affairs of men rest still incertain";  
 And Ed begins to agonize.  
 Is this some mere infatuation  
 Fastened to need and admiration?  
 Can it survive the abrading years  
 Or even till next week? Ed fears  
 That in a sense quite fundamental  
 He knows Phil less than when they met.  
 Phil speaks with openness, and yet  
 Refrains from all but accidental  
 Reflection on his earlier life,  
 His previous loves, his former wife.

## 8.9

"Phil—" Ed begins with hesitation,  
 "Why don't you ever talk of Claire?  
 Sometimes, when we're in conversation  
 I almost sense that she is there,  
 As though your outward eyes were seeing  
 Me here before you, but your being  
 Imagines her—as if you feel  
 It's a betrayal to reveal  
 What she was like—it's like a stricture  
 Has seized you. I can't visualize  
 Even the color of her eyes,  
 Her hair. Why don't you have a picture  
 Of her—for Paul's sake—anywhere?  
 Her name, too—is it Clare or Claire? . . .

## 8.10

I know I've no rights in this matter.  
 It's just, somehow, I'd like to know."  
 Phil laughs, "Ed's trumpet tries to batter  
 The battlements of Jericho.  
 Brown. Brown. And with an *i*. Quit bugging  
 Me, will you, Ed—I'm sick of lugging  
 This tragic burden week by week.  
 Some light refreshment—so to speak—  
 Is what I thirst for. Ed, I love you,  
 But don't exhume this; there's no sense  
 In scouring ruins. Why condense  
 The happiness that floats above you  
 By seeding it with doubt and pain,  
 Crystals that force it down as rain?"

## 8.11

Ed's quiet for a while. Phil's quiet.  
 Paul's off at the Lamonts' today.  
 The fridge hums, happy with its diet  
 Of ice cubes. Clocks click time away,  
 Contented with its circularity.  
 Phil yawns. The crackling fissiparity  
 Of popcorn on the stove returns  
 Him to the present—and he burns  
 His thumb endeavoring to extract it.  
 "You OK? Let me help!" Ed gets  
 Butter and garlic salt; and sets  
 Some napkins out. Now they've attacked it  
 With starved abandon. "Whoa! It's hot  
 —You're right—but really hits the spot! . . .

. . . Do you like cooking, Phil?" "Not really.

I can't abide its cruelty."

"Cruelty, Phil?" "Right—you don't merely

Pop corns, you beat eggs, wilfully

Stone cherries, whip cream, chop and skewer,

Are happier when cheese is bluer—

And then there's batter, rack of lamb,

And squash, and mace . . . ad nauseam.

No. Violence and exploitation

Of co-comestibles would be

A sin. My conscience troubles me

With delicate denunciation:

Far better not to cook, and starve

In purity, than baste and carve."

## 8.13

Ed frowns. "I wish you'd check your humor.

I sometimes think that you and John

Metastasized from the same tumor.

It's not that it goes on and on

But that there's something cutting to it."

Phil laughs at Ed, "I guess I blew it!

I'm not like John, though. Ed, don't frown. . . .

It's late . . . (He yawns) . . . Should we walk down

To Printers Inc, and get some coffee?"

"Yes, let's. I need a change of mood.

And, by the way, do they have food?"

"Sure—brownies, muffins, fudge, cake, toffee—

Most of the stuff's so good it hurts—

And all supplied by Just Desserts."

The enchanted bookstore, vast, rectangular,  
 Fluorescent-lit, with Bach piped through  
 The glamorous alleys of its angular  
 Warren of bookshelves, the dark brew  
 Of French roast or Sumatra rousing  
 One's weak papillae as one's browsing  
 Lead to the famed cups, soon or late,  
 That cheer but don't inebriate.  
 Magical shoe box! Skilled extractor  
 Of my last dime on print or drink,  
 Mini-Montmartre, Printers Inc!  
 Haven of book freaks, benefactor  
 Of haggard hacks like me, who've been  
 Quivering for years to your caffeine.

Replete with coffee and confection,  
 Some talk of olives, some of Paul,  
 Ed browses through the children's section.  
 "*The Wind in the*—no, he's too small—  
 And a bit old for Beatrix Potter—  
 But *Charlotte's Web* perhaps—that's got a  
 Spider as well . . . Now for myself. . . ."  
 Ed wanders to a sheltered shelf,  
 Communes with Ambrose and Augustine,  
 And seeks assistance in his search  
 For histories of the early church.  
 "We don't have much, sir; Bamm is just in. . . ."  
 "Something more academic?" "Well,  
 That's not the kind of book we sell.

But we could order it. . . ." Ed, thanking  
 Him for his pains, moves on to Chess.  
 He finds Phil leaning on a flanking  
 Bookshelf, engrossed in *Watercress*,  
*The Wonder Plant, and How to Grow It*.  
 Ed smiles. Phil says, "Not that you'd know it,  
 But watercress, I ought to state,  
 Is one of eight V's in V-8."  
 Ed laughs: "My dad too likes to dabble  
 In—he's the meanest trivia nut  
 In all Sonoma County—but  
 Talking of eight V's, let's play Scrabble. . .  
 D'you have a set?" "Sure. Let's go home  
 And bicker over *zho* and *clomb*."

Back home, to sips of Cherry Heering  
 ("Tastes like cough mixture," ventures Ed),  
 Phil demonstrates his pluck and daring—  
 Flamboyant sorties on the red,  
 Long words impervious to Ed's challenge,  
 All seven letters used in *phalange*—  
 While Ed's words, wary, composite,  
 Short, closed, pointworthy, bit by bit  
 Chew up the board in ruthless nibbles,  
 Sealing Phil's options one by one;  
 And when at last the game is done  
 And Phil (stuck with a beached Q) scribbles  
 The final score, Ed smiles in glee  
 At Phil (who smiles, but ruefully).



"Let's see that score . . . (Ed's eye alights on  
 A previous game) . . . Hey, Phil, who's R?"  
 "Rowena." "Oh." "Tough player—fights on  
 Even when obviously too far  
 Behind to stand a chance of winning.  
 And even though at the beginning  
 I'd cream her, since she's had a go  
 At Russian, monsters like *zemstvo*  
 Have scored her a few touchdowns." "Do you  
 See much of her?" "Oh, now and then.  
 She has a thing for single men—  
 As you know, Ed." "I never knew you  
 Thought of yourself as single." "Well,  
 Single, divorced—it's hard to tell. . . .

. . . I sometimes feel they're both as lonely.  
 Oh well, I guess it's time for bed."  
 "Phil, if—I mean—tonight I only  
 Want sleep." "Now what's the matter, Ed?  
 Don't you—" "I do, Phil, but—" "But what?" "It's  
 Just that—" "Rowena?" "No, it's not. It's  
 Too hard to—look, I can't explain."  
 "Ed, don't play games with me again."  
 "I love you, Phil—but my desire  
 Goes beyond sex. Lovers indeed  
 Must shed more than their clothes. They need  
 To shed their bodies. Flesh and fire  
 Can meet but can't merge. It's a state  
 Only our souls can consummate.

If lovers cannot cease caressing,  
 Isn't it that they long to find  
 Their bodies' unity expressing  
 A truer unison of mind?  
 For us this oneness is reality.  
 Can't we dispense with the banality  
 Of intermediary ends?  
 Phil, let's just—why can't we be friends—  
 And find this craved complementation  
 Of our true selves in its true form,  
 The love that keeps our spirits warm  
 Through the shared touch of conversation?"  
 Phil's eyes have filled with troubled pain.  
 He thinks, "Oh no, Ed. Not again."

Ed says, "You're sad, Phil. I can't bear it  
 To see your eyes look so disturbed,  
 As if, endeavoring to share it,  
 I've let my heart run wild, and curbed  
 All your ebullience and elation."  
 "Well, Ed, search out your own salvation,"  
 Phil answers harshly: "Since your charm  
 Will keep you fairly safe from harm,  
 And you've insured yourself with heaven,  
 Do me the courtesy to abstain  
 From commentary on my pain.  
 I'm off to bed. It's past eleven.  
 Sleep on the bed, or on the floor,  
 Whichever boosts your godly score."

"Phil—" Ed holds Philip's shoulder tightly:  
 "Sit down. Don't go. Don't talk like that."  
 "Like what?" retorts Phil, his teeth whitely  
 Gnawing his lip: "You want more chat,  
 More Bible bilge to get your rocks off?  
 Well, I am going to get my socks off.  
 Don't fool yourself that I'm aggrieved.  
 Ed, I'm a lot more bored than peeved.  
 Good night, sweet prince. Say a Hail Mary  
 For my benighted soul, but please  
 Keep your bloodcurdling sympathies  
 Out of my ears. And now, Good Fairy,  
 Flit as you like with your limp wand—  
 I'm sleepy, and I can't respond."

## 8.23

Ed, with a right hook swift and vicious,  
 Knocks Phil down. Dazed, Phil makes a slow  
 Lunge for Ed, who, with adventitious  
 Timing, swerves straight into the blow.  
 Phil grabs him by the throat, half throttling  
 Him with the fury he's been bottling.  
 Now Ed's on top, his jaw contused,  
 And Phil's left eye and cheek are bruised.  
 He tries to struggle, but Ed, younger  
 And stronger, keeps him pinned. But now  
 Quite suddenly—and God knows how—  
 As if their unrequited hunger  
 For blood's assuaged, the murderous peers  
 Start laughing through their angry tears.

Ed feels his jaw. Then, dazed and shaking,  
 Gets up. Phil views the mess around—  
 Books, Scrabble tiles. . . . His eye is aching.  
 Ed picks a bookend off the ground.  
 Phil says, "Don't bother, Ed, just set it  
 Back on that shelf—no, no, I'll get it. . . .  
 Now sit down." Phil too sits down; and  
 Murmuring, "Ed, give me your hand,"  
 Rests his left cheek against it, closing  
 His eye that's pulsing black with pain.  
 "My fault, Ed. I won't yell again.  
 Now what was it you were proposing  
 Before our intermission?" "Just  
 That you don't treat me with disgust."

Phil slowly says, "If I was saddened—  
 And caustic, maybe, too—well, yes,  
 I guess I was, Ed—I was maddened  
 By hearing your loved voice express  
 Your own contempt for our lovemaking.  
 Crass lust—when every time I'm taking  
 You in my arms, thinking how true,  
 How clear, how fine our love is, you  
 Are thinking—what?—that this explosion,  
 This passing twitch blasphemes God's will—  
 That we are pigs drunk on our swill  
 And filth—and that your soul's corrosion  
 Goes so deep, you must hide and flee  
 To some dark cave of sanctity?

Why, Ed? These aren't the Middle Ages.  
 This is the twentieth century.  
 What facet of our love outrages  
 Your puritanical purity?  
 Your church itself is strict or lenient  
 According to what's most convenient—"

"Phil, that's not so. It's crystal clear  
 To anyone who is sincere  
 And doesn't start from scorn, the church's  
 Teachings are much the same as when  
 Christ came to save his fellowmen.  
 It is a rock. You think it lurches  
 With every fad? Well, read some more  
 Church history, and you'll learn the score."

"So, Ed, what is your conscience urging?  
 That you be chaste your whole life through?  
 That's mad!" "Jerome, though, died a virgin."  
 "Too bad that that's too late for you."  
 Ed frowns: "I can still strive for purity  
 Of heart—" "... While in its sweet maturity  
 Your lovely body dries unused?  
 Ed, if that's so, you'll have abused  
 Your self—and God's gift—far more truly  
 Than any flagrant sensualist.  
 Does earthly beauty just exist  
 For contemplation? Why, unduly,  
 Would God create a perfect form  
 If not to make our lives more warm?



It seems to me a curious fashion  
 To give a man an appetite,  
 Then tell him a starvation ration  
 Is all he's due for. I don't quite  
 Get why religion makes you grateful.  
 I would say, Ed, that it's a hateful,  
 A pretty odious-spirited trick  
 To make you as you are, then stick  
 The pin of infinite damnation  
 Into you. Tell me what you've done  
 That you should need forgiveness. None  
 Of those stock yarns of explanation  
 About the Fall of Man will do.  
 What have you done? And I mean you.

Is this self-knowledge so reliable?  
 Aren't your *ad gloriams* an excuse?  
 Isn't, while you invoke the Bible,  
 A chastity belt its actual use?  
 And if that fails, there's compensation:  
 In Dostoevskian prostration  
 You can confess: your soul is sick,  
 And you're a worm. A glorious trick!  
 It serves to make your conscience calmer,  
 Your sins more piquant when you fall,  
 And gives you, for no cost at all,  
 Your weekly shot of melodrama—  
 With a chained audience; while you play  
 Lead role, the priest can't run away. . . ."

Ed sits, white-knuckled, eyes aglitter  
 With anger as he hears his friend.  
 Phil's arguments sound strangely bitter.  
 Determined now to make an end  
 Of this whole wretched, drawn-out topic,  
 He seems to shed his philanthropic,  
 Contained demeanor, and to act  
 As overwrought as Ed, in fact:  
 "... You know, Ed, sometimes you resemble  
 Some sensitive fanatic ass  
 Still stuck in catechism class."  
 Ed's eyes grow dark, and his lips tremble:  
 "Is that the best you can distill  
 About religious feeling, Phil?"

## 8.31

He speaks to Phil, but cannot face him.  
 Phil glances at his injured face.  
 A sudden impulse to embrace him  
 Arrests his heart, but can't displace  
 What now amounts to an obsession  
 To clear the agenda at this session.  
 He says: "No, Ed. It's that you act  
 Like some goddamned religious tract.  
 How long will you keep contemplating  
 The universe in Gothic font?  
 Ed, you just don't know what you want.  
 That's what is so exasperating.  
 One day we're lovers, and the next  
 I'm gagged with sacramental text."



Ed thinks: "And your robust assurance,  
 Your self-accepting psychic bounce  
 Frustrates me sometimes past endurance."  
 He says, "Phil, don't you have an ounce  
 Of doubt? uncertainty? anxiety?"  
 "At least it isn't clogged with piety.  
 Must we go on in this way, Ed?  
 Let's have a clean affair instead  
 Of this mud-spattered and moronic  
 Farce where all passion is denied."  
 Ed says: "I just can't, Phil. If I'd  
 Not tried to keep our love platonic,  
 I'd have debased myself, and been  
 False to my reason, and unclean."

As someone skilled in charioteering  
 By rein and will and effort must  
 Control his horses' frantic rearing,  
 The body's turbulence and lust  
 Must yield to reason's interventions.  
 Chrysostom, following Plato, mentions—"  
 "Fuck Chrysostom. Fuck all the fools  
 Who play the game by others' rules. . . .  
 You have a mind too, Ed. Why don't you  
 Go by what *your* heart says is right?  
 Do you remember our first night?  
 Do you remember it? Why won't you  
 Defer to that strong love instead  
 Of spectral voices in your head?"

Your weekly whims and oscillations  
 Will drive me crazy. Help me, Ed—  
 I can't subsist on conversations  
 When what I need. . . . I've never said  
 It's such a big deal, but by hammering  
 On this one nail, you've got me clamoring  
 For—Ed, it's just absurd to keep  
 A sword between us when we sleep.  
 When your heart's aching with desire,  
 Should something that you've somewhere read  
 By someone two millennia dead  
 Convince you that your heart's a liar  
 And that the truth's this rigmarole  
 Of dogma, charioteers, and soul?

Let me say something that will free you,  
 Whichever fork you choose. Love's whole  
 Or else it's nothing. I can't see you,  
 Ed, as this disembodied soul.  
 I cannot fracture my emotions  
 Or twist delight to mystic notions.  
 What I now feel, I won't hold back.  
 What we once shared, I cannot hack  
 In bleeding chunks out of my cortex.  
 Give me your hand, Ed . . . God, it's cold!"  
 "I guess so." Ed withdraws his hold  
 And pulls back from the swiftening vortex  
 In desperate strokes, till he's on shore,  
 Trembling, but steadier than before.

No more to say. They change. Unsleeping,  
 On the same bed they lie apart  
 (What terrifying miles), each keeping,  
 Unshared, his bitterness of heart,  
 The longing each feels for the other,  
 Their unburnt love. Perhaps another  
 —Who knows—attempt by Phil to touch  
 His shivering friend—Is it too much  
 To ask of him?—could still unite them;  
 But obdurate now, he won't plead,  
 Demean his pride, reveal his need . . .  
 A hundred reasons—why recite them?  
 Ed falls asleep at last, but Phil,  
 At two, at three, is wakeful still.

Wakeful by the loved body, hours,  
 Hours to lie, untouched, apart,  
 While memory's unpitying powers  
 Gouge out the past, and lost thoughts start,  
 Shaming the will with their insistence,  
 Against all counter of resistance. . . .  
 At dawn, Phil falls into a sleep  
 That's as exhausted as it's deep.  
 When he wakes, Ed has packed. "That glowing  
 Black eye—what will you say to Paul?"  
 "Don't know. And you?" "A drunken brawl. . . ."  
 Phil, you'll discover easygoing  
 Refreshment soon, I know. It's I . . ."  
 "Ed, close the subject." "Right. Good-bye."

# NINE

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## 9.1

Impervious to pleas and pity,  
To tender bribes and winning wiles,  
The stratagems of Psycho-Kitty,  
Lamb, catnip, scratching post, and smiles,  
Charlemagne in his guts and sinews  
Detests John still, and John continues  
To rave whenever wronged, and flail  
His arms around his head, assail  
His foe with missiles and invective,  
And mutter, "It's that cat or me,  
Liz . . . Lizzie, darling, can't you see  
Beyond that mentally defective  
Moth-eaten teddy bear to what  
A swollen cyst of spite he's got?"



"John, darling, try to understand him.  
 He's a brave, fine, and useful cat."  
 "He'd be more useful if I canned him  
 For rat food—though I doubt a rat  
 Could stand the stench—Liz, it's pathetic  
 That this senescent, enuretic,  
 Ungrateful flea pad is our pet.  
 He's had a long life. We should get  
 Rid of—" John stops as Liz stares wildly  
 At his flushed face. She turns to go,  
 Then, turning back, exclaims, "You know,  
 He's always acted pretty mildly  
 Before you first moved in with me. . . ."  
 "I see." "You don't see." "Yes I see.

## 9.3

You cat freaks are, quite simply, crazy.  
 You'd weep more tears for one lost pet  
 Than for a flood in Sulawesi.  
 It serves me right—that's what I get  
 For thinking I had your affection.  
 Well, next time, greater circumspection  
 Is what is called for . . . "Stop it, John—  
 When you go on and on and on  
 I love you, but I just can't stand you.  
 I'm going out to buy some steak  
 And bread, and take a walk. . . ." "Well, take  
 Your anti-nuclear cat to brand you  
 With Agent Orange—that's a name  
 More suited to his joyless frame."

"Good plan. I think I will." Liz leaves him  
 To chafe alone against his wrongs.  
 Suddenly everything aggrieves him:  
 Cat, house, work, Liz's tuneless songs,  
 Her tofu-eating, kefir-drinking,  
 Her "Darling, what have you been thinking?"—  
 Quirks that delighted him at first,  
 Through the months' mill wheels suffer worst  
 Of all the bills of love discounted—  
 The bills and coos of dateless love.  
 Alas, alas, as high above . . .  
 —To quote—"As high as we have mounted . . .  
 (Ah, Wordsworth!) . . . do we sink as low";  
 And John finds it indeed is so.

## 9.5

These pretty whims that used to rivet  
 His eyes so fondly on Liz now  
 Convince him that she's off her pivot.  
 Why else would she so thwart him? How,  
 Ignoring clear empirical data  
 Of felony (which that man-hater,  
 The miscreant cat, leaves everywhere  
 From soggy duvet to mauled chair),  
 Can Liz eschew all objectivity,  
 All logic, every legal trait,  
 To justify or mitigate  
 That scumbag's every vile proclivity?  
 Could he have known, when first they met,  
 This amnesty she'd grant her pet?

He mopes around, distraught, distracted;  
 Tries to read, can't, looks out: the sky,  
 Birdless, unclouded, blue, refracted  
 Through the day's smooth lens, strikes his eye.  
 He sighs, gets up, puts on a sweater,  
 An easier pair of shoes. "I'd better  
 Leave this apartment for a bit  
 Or I'll—" But as he tries to fit  
 The wrong key in the lock, a yellow  
 Volkswagen halts and blares its horn  
 With the wild will of the newborn.  
 "For Christ's sakes! What's wrong with that fellow?  
 Hey, stop that—Oh, it's Phil—hey, hi. . . ."  
 "Hi, John, I just thought I'd drop by.

How are you? How's Liz? How's it going?"  
 "OK. She's out. And pretty good—  
 I guess." "You guess?" "Sure." "Well, you're showing  
 Signs of acute strain." "Phil, we should  
 Go for a walk—look, don't be lazy—  
 Staying in there will drive me crazy."  
 "What's happened, John?" "A lovers' tiff.  
 It's not worth mentioning. . . ." "Bullshit! If  
 You keep on clenching and unclenching  
 Your fists like that, it's best to say  
 What's on your mind. And anyway  
 I'm curious now. . . ." "I've had a drenching  
 In the cold spring of Truth." "What's that?"  
 "That—more than me—Liz loves that cat."



"I knew you never loved that cat, John."  
 "Come on, Phil, you know what I mean."  
 "Well, I don't see what's wrong with that, John!  
 You're the intruder on the scene.  
 It's not unfair . . ." "But how could Lizzie . . ."  
 "I think it shows that she's not dizzy  
 In her affections that she won't  
 Jettison Charlemagne." "Phil, don't  
 Defend her . . ." "John, I don't care greatly  
 Whose side I'm taking. With a friend  
 You ought to speak your mind. I tend  
 To think a mere Johnny-come-lately,  
 However much he pleads and plots,  
 Can't be the one to call the shots."

John frowns. A premature but mellow  
 Carved pumpkin grins down from a high  
 Bow window. Ginkgos, green and yellow,  
 Trace fall's itinerary. A spry  
 October breeze gusts up and blusters.  
 The pyracantha, whose red clusters  
 Blackbirds get stoned on till they lurch  
 Unsteadily about in search  
 Of their lost nests, is now fermenting  
 Its friable pulp, and bumbling bees  
 Hum round the pomegranate trees;  
 And resinous cedars, gently scenting  
 The sun-seeped air, anesthetize  
 The garish sumac's autumn dyes.

John frowns. "I guess I never knew that  
 A cat's designs could scupper mine.  
 One lives and learns. Of course, it's true that  
 Everything still may work out fine—  
 And so I sometimes think it's foolish  
 To lay down terms. Why be so mulish  
 When, given time . . . yet, as Keynes said,  
 In the long run we are all dead.  
 It's not just that, though, Phil. My freedom  
 To be alone—to watch football—  
 And to eat junk food . . . these days all  
 I do is *buy* books. I can't read 'em.  
 I'm dragged off to some dumb ballet,  
 Some feeble concert, or worse play.

It's not that we don't love each other.  
 We're a good match: Liz dresses well;  
 She's dynamite in bed—but, brother!  
 Her cerebellum's shot to hell.  
 I never thought I'd have a roomie  
 Who whimpered like a goddamned doomie!"  
 "A doomie?" "You know—someone who  
 Thinks all Jane Fonda says is true.  
 She has these exhibitionistic  
 Extravagant compulsions—that  
 Spiel of the anti-nuclear cat  
 Is just one instance: journalistic  
 Inanity, but all the same  
 She loved that fizzy gulp of fame."

"And Charlemagne?" "To give him credit,  
 He mauled the press photographer  
 Who bumptiously presumed to edit  
 His pose by fluffing up his fur. . . ."  
 Phil laughs as John goes on describing  
 The bitterness he's been imbibing,  
 And offers sympathy, advice,  
 Encouragement, and all things nice  
 That he can give without betraying  
 His own beliefs; and by and by  
 John simmers down. . . . "But, Phil, your eye!"  
 "Oh, that? That's nothing! You were saying . . ."  
 "No, Phil, your left eye looks a bit  
 Contused." "It's odd you noticed it . . ."

"How did it—" "Can you see it clearly?"  
 "Oh no, it's very faint—but if  
 You're at this angle . . ." "So it's nearly . . ."  
 "What was it, Phil—a lover's tiff?"  
 "I . . . guess so." "When?" "Last week." "Fantastic!  
 You've gone back to your orgiastic  
 Pre-Claire routine! Now, play by play,  
 And man to man, let's hear . . ." "No way!  
 It's private." "Nonsense!" John says, frowning:  
 "You've grilled me—come on—fair is fair—  
 Shake off that surreptitious air.  
 Who did that to you? Quit the clowning!"  
 "Who do you think?" "I must confess  
 I can't so much as start to guess. . . ."

. . . Someone I know?" "Yes." "So I've seen her."  
 "Not quite, but—" "Sue?" "No." "Rose?" "No." "*Jan?*"  
 "You're on the wrong track." "Not Rowena?"  
 "No." "Phil, I give up." "Ed's the man."  
 "Ed?" "Yes." "You *don't* mean Ed." "Yes." "Jesus!"  
 "Don't gape at me—I'm not a rhesus  
 Monkey with AIDS." "Oh, Jesus, Phil!  
 You mean that . . . It's not possible. . . ."  
 John stammers, shakes his head; then, shivering,  
 Emits a small bleat of disgust  
 At this malformed and sickening lust,  
 And turns away; while Philip, quivering,  
 Feels his fists clench and disengage  
 In insult and astonished rage.

"Oh, Jesus, Phil—but you were married!"  
 "Thanks, John, it had escaped my mind."  
 "But—I see why the thing miscarried—  
 Oh, Jesus, Phil—what do you find  
 In—What do two men *do* together?"  
 "Try it yourself sometime. But whether  
 You do or don't—I doubt you will—  
 Stop whimpering, 'Oh, Jesus, Phil!'  
 That makes me sick. What you require  
 Is a brain transplant. How you dare  
 To diagnose my love for Claire  
 . . . (And at this point Phil's voice climbs higher  
 In fury) . . . I too must confess  
 I can't so much as start to guess."

As brother grimaces at brother  
 When a dense veil of hate descends,  
 They stare with loathing at each other  
 Who just two minutes past were friends.  
 Instinctively together turning  
 Back to the house, the car, discerning  
 With instinct what the other feels,  
 They walk in silence. John's head reels:  
 "He was my roommate while at college—  
 Thank God he didn't. . . . I'd have knocked  
 His head off. . . ." Phil, enraged and shocked,  
 Thinks, "John's a fool for all his knowledge—  
 And, what is worse, a cruel fool  
 With the compassion of a mule."

They're at the door. John, hesitating,  
 Straining against himself to see  
 Past the revulsion insulating  
 Him from all warmth and sympathy  
 Toward his friend, feels bound to utter,  
 "Well . . . come in." Phil begins to mutter  
 A brusque excuse; but with a grin  
 Liz, from a window, waves them in:  
 "Come in, you guys. I was just baking  
 Bran muffins. . . . Good to see you, Phil!  
 She thinks: "Do I detect a chill—  
 Or is that the attorney making  
 Unwarranted deductions? No—  
 It really looks as if it's so."

Inside, John mutters, "Quite delicious."  
 Phil growls, "Delicious! Got to go."  
 Liz muses, "More and more suspicious."  
 Phil rises: "Getting late, you know!"  
 Liz frowns: "All right, but your permission  
 To leave depends on one condition:  
 Tell me what you two talked about.  
 You looked so stern when I looked out."  
 John blanches: "Nothing!" Liz laughs, taking  
 His hand in hers: "Now, that's a lie.  
 Well, Phil?" "Oh, just that Ed and I  
 Had an affair!" But John, now quaking  
 With anger barely in his rein  
 Blurts before Liz can speak again:

"I'm going out—I just can't take this  
 . . . (He stands) . . . You've got your answer. Glad?"  
 Liz says, "John—John—for goodness' sake, this  
 Isn't the way—it's not that bad.  
 Look, Phil's your friend—" John shouts, dumbfounded:  
 "And Ed's your brother! I'm astounded  
 That you can act so cool when he  
 And Phil—. . . (He shudders helplessly.) . . .  
 Anything goes in this damned city.  
 Your brother's either sick or mad  
 —And you know what? You're just as bad  
 —And your gross cat—It's a real pity  
 Ed hasn't seen a shrink—And you  
 . . . (He turns on Phil) . . . should see one too!"

Phil gets up and walks out. Liz, dizzy  
 With disbelief, sits still, and stares.  
 John looks at her: "Oh, don't sulk, Lizzie.  
 I didn't throw him out." Liz glares:  
 "Well, don't you think that Phil's offended?"  
 "Liz, he offended you. It's splendid  
 How you can blame me. . . ." "What's the use?  
 Christ, sometimes, John, you're so obtuse!"  
 Liz stands up with abrupt decision.  
 She's hoping—how, she does not know—  
 She can bring peace: that Phil, although  
 No doubt concussed from the collision  
 Can somehow still be mollified.  
 His yellow car's still parked outside.

Head on the steering wheel, Phil's shaking.  
 Liz walks outside and murmurs, "Phil?"  
 He looks up, sees her. "If you're making  
 Ambassadorial goodwill  
 Gestures for John. . . ." Liz says, "I'm really  
 Here for myself—and I'm sincerely  
 Sorry, Phil—look, unlock this door—  
 Thanks . . . (Liz gets in) . . . I knew the score  
 A month ago." Now Phil's incredulous.  
 "That Ed . . ." "That you and Ed . . ." "You *knew*?  
 You mean, Ed spilled the beans to you?"  
 "You did, as well. Though fairly sedulous,  
 Sunday before the equinox  
 You both wore the same mismatched socks."



Phil looks at Liz with awe: "Amazing!  
 We thought that we were so discreet!"  
 "Forensic training," Liz states, gazing  
 Out of the window at the street,  
 Where near the curb a few late flowers,  
 Survivors of pre-winter showers,  
 Clusters of lilies of the Nile—  
 Dark-foliaged, purple—reconcile  
 The gazer to the hardening season.  
 Liz says, "The last days of the sun.  
 We ought to savor them, each one.  
 I wish we could—well, there's no reason  
 Why we should not—drive to the bay  
 And take a walk. What do you say?"

"Sure, Liz," Phil smiles in admiration.  
 He starts the car. ". . . And, by the way,  
 I owe you my appreciation  
 For visiting Paul the very day  
 That you returned from Lungless." "Really,  
 It wasn't much—John and I merely  
 Decided we'd drive down to dine  
 On the peninsula, and combine. . . ."  
 "Well, Paul was very pleased." "Rowena  
 Asked after you." "Ah, yes, she tried  
 To march with us—but her van died  
 Halfway to Lungless. So you've seen her?"  
 "That's right," Liz murmurs: "She was there  
 At the Lamonts'. What lovely hair!"

"Er, yes," Phil says: "I sometimes wonder  
 If I am quite enough for Paul.  
 He disobeys me—all my thunder  
 And static has no force at all.  
 I'm not much good as a role model."  
 "Why not?" "For one thing, I don't toddle  
 In time to laws I don't like." "Phil,  
 Your son will grow up fine. He will.  
 Who knows—the fact you're demonstrating  
 May help to save him from the ranks  
 Of ostrich-humans." "Thanks—and thanks  
 For the two *Tintins*. Paul's ingesting  
 That glorious goop with as much joy  
 As I did when I was a boy."

Liz laughs, "So you were brought up on it?  
 I was, as well. What marvelous books.  
 I wish someone would write a sonnet  
 About them. I'm on tenterhooks  
 Whenever each new one's translated!  
 I think they're more sophisticated  
 Than Asterix—and far more fun."  
 "So do I—Liz, which was the one  
 In which Bianca Castafiore,  
 With 'O my beauty past compare'  
 Lures the Police Chief to her lair?"  
 Liz laughs, "I don't recall that story. . . .  
 Wait! Wait! I sense a sudden flash  
 —By the whiskers of Kürvi-Tasch—

Wasn't it *King Ottokar's Sceptre*?"  
 Phil frowns: "Oh, it's too long ago! . . .  
 I once worked out who was inepter,  
 Thomson—or Thompson." "Who?" "You know,  
 I think it was . . . no, I've forgotten.  
 Thundering typhoons! What a rotten  
 Memory—Liz—I can't believe  
 That both of us. . . ." And the two grieve  
 That that bright world, so just and splendid,  
 Of Haddock, Gorgonzola, Waggs,  
 Moon rockets, grog, Red Rackham's swag,  
 And foul-mouthed parrots could have ended  
 In adulthood, where truth and light  
 Do not win out as if by right.

Phil asks Liz how she came to be there  
 That day at Lungless. Liz says, "Well,  
 Those books you left inveigled me there.  
 John didn't read them. . . . I could tell  
 You were—surprised." "I was. Belated  
 Congratulations—your speech rated  
 An A plus—meaty and concise."  
 "And how was prison?" "Paradise!  
 Like-minded souls in dense proximity—  
 Juggling, hair-braiding, foot massage—  
 We did our own things, by and large,  
 And worked plans out with equanimity,  
 By, as they say, consensus—whence  
 We formed the new verb: 'to consense.' "

They park the car by the Marina.  
 The surface of the cobalt bay  
 Is flecked with white. The moister, keener  
 October air has rinsed away  
 The whispering mists with crisp intensity  
 And over the opaque immensity  
 A deliquescent wash of blue  
 Reveals the bridge, long lost to view  
 In summer's quilt of fog: the towers,  
 High-built, red-gold, with their long span  
 —The most majestic spun by man—  
 Whose threads of steel through mists and showers,  
 Wind, spray, and the momentous roar  
 Of ocean storms, link shore to shore.

Gulls veer and scream. As they go strolling  
 Along the bay to Fort Point, as  
 The noonday sun glints off the rolling  
 Wake of a yacht by Alcatraz,  
 Liz touches on the electricity  
 Sparked off by Charlemagne's publicity—  
 Not at home only, but at work:  
 When senior partners, whom her "quirk  
 Of judgment" startled to the lining  
 Of their three-piece suits, told her she  
 "Must cease forthwith," Liz quietly  
 Informed them she would be resigning  
 "As of next month" if they construed  
 Her private actions as imbued

With unprofessional indiscretion,  
 Especially since (—and here they went  
 From beet to gray in swift succession—)  
 She sought their leave to represent  
 —On an unpaid and independent  
 Basis, of course—the odd defendant  
 Who, as she saw it, fell between  
 Conscience and law. Liz would have been,  
 She reckons, fired in a second  
 Had tokendom—she was the sole  
 Woman attorney in the whole  
 Iviid establishment—not beckoned.  
 Starched stiff with reprehension, they  
 Frowned, fumed, and let her have her way.

“So if you think it’s advantageous,”  
 Liz says, “feel free to pick my brains.”  
 Phil laughs: “You really are courageous!”  
 Liz blushes, and then ascertains  
 The details of the mass arraignment.  
 “What’s your aim, Phil,” she asks, “attainment  
 Of a good verdict—or good press?”  
 Phil says, “Well, really both, I guess.  
 But surely there’s no contradiction?”  
 “Well, not as such,” Liz says, and smiles,  
 “But some flamboyant courtroom wiles  
 Enhance your chances of conviction.  
 Play to the gallery, and the judge  
 May treat the whole defense as fudge.”

They wander for a while, not saying  
 Too much, then stroll out on the pier  
 By Old Fort Point. Surfers, displaying  
 Sinuous equestrianism, steer  
 Their boards on the in-pouring rollers;  
 On shore, the eight-year-old controllers  
 Of motley skateboards swiftly skim  
 In competition bright and trim  
 Past fishermen, gulls, rocks, and breakers,  
 While high above the Golden Gate,  
 Nestling the fort, in unornate  
 Magnificence across the acres  
 Of whitecapped sea, the golden span  
 Hangs for the world to hymn and scan.

They climb the cliff to its approaches  
 And start to walk across the bridge  
 To the Marin shore, when Liz broaches,  
 Without the fluff of verbiage,  
 The subject that, once manifested  
 A month ago, has since arrested,  
 On one trained spot, her stethoscope  
 Of sisterly concern: "I hope  
 You two are suited for each other."  
 Phil hesitates, then starts to speak,  
 "I doubt it, Liz. I felt last week  
 I'd never understand your brother.  
 He's heaven-struck. What are the odds  
 Of mortals versus saints and gods?"

Liz laughs, "Consorting with celestial  
 Beings is typical of Ed."  
 Phil grimaces, "Where we weak bestial  
 Affective devils fear to tread—  
 In terror lest some gross tumescence  
 Should jar the luculent quintessence  
 Of little Rupert Brooke. Oh, Liz—  
 I love the bastard, but he is  
 So inaccessible: pollution  
 Is all he—maybe that's why he's  
 Keen on a nuclear power freeze—  
 I doubt that any elocution  
 Of mine could . . ." "Phil, give Ed a chance.  
 He's young; I'm sure he'll change his stance.

You know, he sees you as heroic. . . ."  
 Phil sighs, "That's finished. As for me,  
 Try wrestling with Paleozoic  
 Concepts of sin from ten to three  
 On Friday night—Christ, I'm so lonely—  
 This past year's been—God knows I only  
 Want to—O God knows what—to live  
 Without this emptiness—to give  
 A little love, to get a little.  
 He's got his thoughts, though; I've got mine.  
 We're through, Liz; I don't mean to whine  
 About how unjust life is—it'll  
 Hurt less with time, I know, somehow.  
 But we both know it's over now."



Liz sighs, and Phil resumes, "I shouldn't  
 Be talking this way, least of all  
 With you, Liz—I'm upset—I wouldn't  
 Have brought it up if. . . ." With a small,  
 A gentle nod of comprehension  
 Liz looks away while with some tension  
 Her own hand grips the low guardrails.  
 "I think that . . ."—and her voice now fails—  
 ". . . I think I understand the feeling."  
 Then, with an effort: "Well, love's fun  
 At first . . . but living with someone  
 You love can be less than appealing  
 If everything's just great in bed  
 Yet nothing's shared inside your head."

Phil says, "You know, Liz, this rigidity  
 Of John's is less a function of  
 Innate intemperate rabidity  
 Than of a childhood lack of love. . . ."  
 (He meditates that what's ironic  
 Is that their sudden and cyclonic  
 Soap opera should whirl and blare  
 Above a now-defunct affair.  
 Odd too that John, with all his learning,  
 Who likes Brahms, reads Mann, and quotes Keynes,  
 And who not long since honed his brains  
 At Berkeley of all places, burning  
 With moral odium thus should rend  
 His friendship with his oldest friend.)

Liz adds, "You're right, Phil. John's not vicious—  
 Or unaffectionate or unkind.  
 He's generous, he's not malicious.  
 It's that at times he's almost blind.  
 I've got my share of immaturity  
 And silliness and insecurity—  
 But John finds every quirk a goad  
 To make him bubble or explode.  
 Though he's himself as self-divided  
 As me—or anyone—he fails  
 To comprehend this when he flails  
 His cutlass round; if less one-sided,  
 I'd take his jokes in better part. . . ."  
 She reins her thoughts back with a start. . . .

"But, Phil—we shouldn't be dissecting  
 Those whom we love behind their backs."  
 "Oh, I don't know," says Phil, reflecting,  
 "I now yearn less for heart attacks,  
 Passion's angina, and love's blindness  
 Than company and warmth and kindness.  
 Perhaps I'm harder to disarm,  
 And cherish courage more than charm. . . ."  
 He looks at Liz. ". . . I'm only speaking  
 For myself, Liz." Liz turns away  
 And gazes out across the bay  
 To where a band of smog lies, streaking  
 The Oakland hills with a low haze,  
 And as she speaks her voice betrays

Her pain—that she's almost betraying  
Lover, and brother: "Phil, don't say  
Words that, once said, there's no unsaying.  
We should walk back. Who knows—things may  
Get better. . . . Anyway, it's Sunday.  
Let's cross the bridge: this is the one day  
Of the whole week the seaward view  
Is open." Phil smiles. "Saturday too."  
They cross. The westward arc of ocean  
Beyond Point Lobos gleams with light.  
Phil lifts a hand to shield his sight,  
And Liz with quietened emotion  
Asks him how Paul is, and they talk  
With their old ease, along their walk.

# TEN

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## 10.1

The clapboard church with the white steeple  
On a gray, frozen day extrudes  
A complement of cheerful people;  
Resuscitating platitudes  
With neighborly conviviality,  
They thank God that his liberality  
Has touched their valley's ripening vines.  
If for Thanksgiving he assigns  
A sunless mist, that is small reason  
To cavil at his subtle ways—  
For this last month's unbroken rays  
Of sunshine sweetened the slow season  
To a grand harvest, nonpareil  
For cabernet and zinfandel.

## 10.2

All the Doratis and their neighbors  
(Whose scattered clans rejoin today)  
Rest from their individual labors  
And go to church to nod or pray.  
They mill outside now that Thanksgiving  
Service is over, now the living  
Vines are asleep, and the repair  
Of harvesting machines, the care  
Of injured tractors, and the tending  
Of the new crush (for those whose crop  
Ferments in fragrance, drop on drop  
In their own cellars) mark the ending  
(A day of pious, ritual cheer  
And gossip) of the vineyard year.

## 10.3

Old Mike Dorati, who's been farming  
His benchland loam for forty years,  
Doffs his hat briskly as the charming  
Bevy of Levasseurs appears:  
Juliet, Judy, and Joanna,  
Each head draped in a silk bandanna,  
Escorted by their parents, breeze  
Out of the church; and by degrees  
The sky thins and the sunlight glistens  
On the white steeple and the vines,  
The misted redwoods and moist pines,  
While Mike Dorati coughs and listens  
To Peter Levasseur complain  
Of winter's harsh forecast of rain.

## 10.4

"It's nothing short of devastating.  
 Last year we lost our best topsoil. . . ."  
 While Levasseur's cheeks glow, berating  
 The storms that threaten to despoil,  
 With coursing floods, the hillside reaches  
 Of his merlot, Mike says, "That teaches  
 You, Pete, to plan a bit ahead.  
 You should have planted—as I've said  
 To you ten thousand times—that fescue  
 Along your rows, and near that pipe—  
 I'll show you how—and look, don't gripe  
 At the deaf sky when you can rescue  
 Your miracle mud through your own toil.  
 Just grow that grass and hold that soil. . . .

## 10.5

. . . Liz, Ed, Sue, I'm just going over  
 To Pete's. . . . Where's Mom? Art? John? . . . OK!  
 I'll try to be home soon. . . . No, clover  
 Won't mat it in that stable way.  
 If I were you. . . ." They leave their father  
 And drive back home. Sue says, "I'd rather  
 Dad quit consulting for a day.  
 How often do we come to stay?"  
 Ed shrugs: "Guess he's a workaholic."  
 "But on Thanksgiving? People take  
 Advantage of him." "Hey, don't make  
 A martyr out of Dad. To frolic  
 Knee-deep in mud in place of rest  
 Is just the sport that he likes best. . . .

## 10.6

. . . But, Sue, please help me solve a mystery.”  
 “Sure, Ed.” “Well, Sue, it deals with Art,  
 Your ardent fan of local history  
 And the mild mango of your heart.”  
 “What about him?” “Well,” Ed says, sighing,  
 “How can one man be—without trying—  
 So boring, doughy, stiff, and weak?”  
 Liz frowns, and gives Ed’s nose a tweak:  
 “You little beast—he isn’t boring.”  
 Sue punches him. Ed holds her arm:  
 “Ouch, sis, I didn’t mean no harm!  
 Sure, I don’t like his violent snoring  
 And his fat smirk—but that apart,  
 I really don’t object to Art.”

## 10.7

Back at the ranch, with two prospective  
 Sons-in-law wandering in train,  
 Mrs. Dorati, with reflective  
 Pauses to ease arthritic pain,  
 Walks slowly to the graystone winery,  
 Flame-red in its autumnal finery  
 Of Boston ivy, through the fields  
 Of straggling splendor whose air yields  
 The late rich musk of grapes decaying  
 Into the earth, leaves trampled down  
 To humus, and the tattering brown  
 Vine bark, its darkened scars betraying  
 The vines’ sharp battles, won and lost,  
 Each year, with virus, pest, and frost.



## 10.8

Impressed into the preparation  
 Of the great feast, the two houseguests  
 Drift down a vapid conversation  
 Whose stream John suddenly arrests  
 By asking Art with a mock-hearty  
 Insouciance, "Did Madame Dorati  
 By any chance, Art, question you  
 About your plans regarding Sue?"  
 Art's knife halts its potato-peeling.  
 He looks at John and grins: "I'll say!  
 So she's begun on you today?"  
 And in a flush of fellow feeling  
 The two compare notes, and decide  
 How many kids each must provide.

## 10.9

But for duplicative insurance  
 Mrs. Dorati's drawn aside  
 Her son, whose filial endurance,  
 Fancy, and tact are sorely tried  
 As he attempts to duck and parry  
 Her fervid pleas that he should marry:  
 "You shouldn't let time pass you by.  
 What girl's the apple of your eye  
 Currently, Ed?" "Mom, I'm too busy,"  
 Ed groans, "for girls—and all that stuff.  
 I'm twenty-three. There's time enough.  
 Why don't you hassle Sue or Lizzie?  
 Gee—it's already half past one.  
 I'll go see if that turkey's done."

10.10

Two hours later, spent and bloated,  
 Like pythons who have swallowed pigs,  
 All in the household are devoted  
 To groaning gently, after swigs,  
 "What's on TV?" and reminiscing  
 About old times, friends who are missing,  
 And movies shot when Ed was two  
 Of Liz admiring baby Sue.  
 At last they settle down to viewing  
 That blood sport, football—in its way  
 Almost as vicious as croquet—  
 While Charlemagne's contented mewling  
 (Tail across paws, and head atilt)  
 Blends with the coffee's bubbling lilt.

10.11

At each Thanksgiving now he perches  
 Upon a lower chair, to purr  
 Out long delight, then yawns, and searches  
 For his young Persian friend, whose fur  
 Is black and whose one eye is golden,  
 And to whom Charlemagne's beholden  
 For tours of his own old domain:  
 The Winery Cat, the scourge and bane  
 Of the upcoming generations  
 Of upstart field mice who cavort  
 In the new grass, fresh, green, and short,  
 That clothes the valley's undulations  
 In daubs of life among the lines  
 Of leafless and exhausted vines.

As for cold Schwarz, the cats ignore him—  
 In much the same way that John shrinks  
 Whenever Ed attempts to draw him  
 Into small talk; they sip their drinks  
 And warily appraise each other.  
 Meanwhile, Sue's talking to her mother  
 About the scholarship she's won  
 To go to Paris. "We've begun  
 To think we should defer our wedding. . . ."  
 Mrs. Dorati's face falls: "Sue!  
 Oh dear! Oh darling, not you too!"  
 And starts to cry. She fears she's heading  
 Toward a grandchildless last age  
 Which no young spirit will assuage.

She thinks of aches that now beset her,  
 That swell her joints with rheumatoid  
 Arthritis, the stiff limbs that fetter  
 The brisk gait that she once enjoyed—  
 The freeing bliss when she would sally  
 Out just at dawn into the valley  
 Where now at dawn she can't unrein  
 Her spirit from her crippling pain.  
 Sue strokes her mother's arm and mumbles,  
 "Just for a year, Mom, or two years . . ."  
 While by the fire as evening nears,  
 Mr. Dorati's bishop stumbles  
 Into oblivion, and Liz smiles,  
 And spreads curt havoc in his files.

John watches TV; reads; is restive;  
 Smiles weakly at old family lore  
 With jollity more forced than festive.  
 Erratic fragments of speech draw  
 His thoughts from their withdrawing orbit:  
 "Lemon and salt . . . that should absorb it  
 —Or most of it, Mom . . . black ones . . . no,  
 You don't need lye . . . Phil told me so. . . .  
 I guess you're right—you haven't met him. . . ."  
 John's mouth turns southwards in distaste,  
 As though a bug that he's erased,  
 Half reemerging, will not let him  
 Run his clean subroutines at will.  
 He thinks: "Get out of my life, Phil."

John's volatile exasperation,  
 His semi-rational unease  
 Finds self-fulfilling confirmation  
 Wherever his mind turns. He sees  
 His friend's impenitent freewheeling  
 As weird; when he heard Liz revealing  
 That Phil and Ed's affair had died,  
 Oddly enough it verified  
 The image of a loose careering  
 Cannon aboard a listing deck.  
 Phil's salvos at High Nuclear Tech—  
 And Liz's legal volunteering—  
 Oppress John dimly, mind and heart. . . .  
 "Coffee?" He comes to with a start.

## 10.16

Coffee; and eggnog; and as twilight  
 Drifts through the trees, and a gold cloud  
 Floats singly over the hills to highlight  
 The ambient darkness, and a shroud  
 Of silence falls upon the nesting  
 Birds, and the fevered earth is resting,  
 Sue brings her cello down and plays  
 A Bach suite that in earlier days  
 Her mother loved—and still loves—only  
 Where she once smiled, it now ensnares  
 Her in a web of grief. She stares  
 Down at her mottled skin, her lonely,  
 Bent hands. She thinks: “Don’t weep. Don’t pray.  
 It’s pain. It can’t be wished away.”

## 10.17

She stares, and memory estranges  
 Her from the room, the firelight.  
 Like seashells high on snowy ranges,  
 Forgotten thoughts return tonight,  
 And as her daughter plays, she’s drifting  
 Back to her childhood, where the shifting  
 Silhouettes flung against the wall  
 Were those of . . . “Well, but why recall  
 . . . (She gently pulls herself together) . . .  
 Those times when, with the kids all here  
 —God knows where they will be next year  
 With Sue in France—and God knows whether  
 We’ll all be living—I should praise,  
 Not fault, these migratory days.”

## 10.18

Now it is midnight, and in keeping  
 With long-standing Dorati laws,  
 Each of the visitors is sleeping  
 In his own upstairs room. Art's snores,  
 Conducted through the wall, are merging  
 With John's dreams: now a storm is surging;  
 Now a slow sea beast snarls and grunts;  
 And now a railway engine shunts.  
 John sleeps through all this; and on waking  
 Heads down for breakfast, where his host  
 Regales him, over tea and toast,  
 With brief accounts of tartan-making,  
 The dusky-footed wood rat, and  
 The history of the ampersand.

## 10.19

But all with such a warmth of spirit  
 That John, though stunned, is charmed. Each wad  
 Of data shoots past, and to hear it  
 So beguiles John, he starts to nod,  
 And yawns a bit and, half addressing  
 Himself to coffee, tries expressing  
 His own scant views on this and that.  
 Mr. Dorati, smiling at  
 His young friend's spirited demeanor,  
 Says, "John, I'm pruning vines today.  
 Why don't you join me. By the way,  
 Where is my wife? You haven't seen her? . . .  
 Marie . . . Marie. . . . She likes to walk,  
 Though lately . . . well, I shouldn't talk

About such tedious things . . . but lately . . .  
 Marie . . . ah, there you are . . . my dear,  
 A walk perhaps?" And with the stately  
 Decorum of a cavalier  
 Gives her his arm. The trio wanders  
 Into the vineyard, and Mike ponders  
 What to prune first. "I may as well  
 Start on this block of zinfandel. . . .  
 Shears . . . thanks . . . you know, John, we're attacking  
 The core of winemaking today.  
 Good pruning—good grapes. And I say:  
 Let the grapes speak! Apart from racking,  
 Don't fiddle, filter, fuss, or fine—  
 You'll leach the zest out of the wine. . . ."

Mrs. Dorati stands and watches  
 As John learns how to clip and prune.  
 A willing laborer, though he botches  
 A ragged limb or two, he soon  
 Snips rough canes through with clean facility,  
 Counts spurs for optimal fertility,  
 Sweats in the sun and laughs out loud,  
 Is callused, weary, pleased, and proud.  
 Back in the winery, corks are popping—  
 For now, with post-Thanksgiving haste,  
 Folk come from near and far to taste  
 Dorati reds; and fruit flies, dropping  
 In dense and tipsy clusters, seethe  
 Round vintages uncorked "to breathe."



At dusk, the daily round completed,  
 The company splits into twos:  
 The cats range in pursuit of fetid  
 Quarry while Ed and reptile snooze  
 Before the TV; in the attic  
 Sue and her boyfriend with ecstatic  
 Pangs of discovery and rebirth  
 Sift through an old trunk and unearth  
 Love letters of Hungarian cousins,  
 A blind and legless teddy bear  
 (With a stitched smile that mocks despair),  
 Two statues of the Buddha, dozens  
 Of unused stamps from Liechtenstein,  
 And bills for sacramental wine.

Down plaited streams of family history,  
 Alive with flotsam, on they glide!  
 They try to worry out the mystery  
 Of the old wine bills and decide  
 The vineyard's product-mix decision  
 Veered churchwards during Prohibition.  
 That solved, Art wonders: "Sue, are these  
 Two bronzes Japanese or Chinese?"  
 "Don't know! Too bad Jan couldn't make it  
 To the vineyard. I did invite . . .  
 But you know Jan . . . she said she *might*. . . .  
 As for this teddy bear, let's take it  
 Down, and ask Dad and Mom if they  
 Know how it came to be this way."

Downstairs, Sue's father makes the fire.  
 "Real gems, our kids!" he says, and looks  
 At sleeping Ed. The flames rise higher;  
 The old folks settle down with books:  
 He with *Tom Jones*, she with a thriller  
 Entitled *Jack the Lady-Killer*.  
 Though he reads his, and she reads hers,  
 From time to time a thought occurs  
 That must be shared—for instance, whether  
 Arsenic grows into one's hair—  
 Or how Tom plots his debonair  
 And raffish gambits. Thus together  
 They pool their prose, and intertwine  
 Their lives along a common vine.

Outside, the red sky dyes the river  
 That murmurs down the valley, where  
 The leafless weeping willows quiver  
 And where at dusk a shivering hare  
 May be seen poised or crouched or bounding.  
 There Liz one spring saw an astounding  
 And lovely sight just after dawn—  
 A gray doe suckling her young fawn.  
 The doe looked round, unagitated  
 By Liz (then nine), who held her breath,  
 And who, though frozen half to death,  
 Volitionlessly stared and waited  
 Until the fawn had drunk its fill  
 And doe and fawn slipped off uphill.

Now she and John are slowly walking  
 By the red water, hand in hand.  
 Warmed by the memory, not talking,  
 Liz slips into that early land;  
 While John, whose hard-worked limbs are aching,  
 Senses a broad contentment taking  
 Him forwards to the future. "Liz,  
 It strikes me that perhaps it is  
 Time we two should, well, be more serious.  
 It's been a year since we first met. . . .  
 Your folks suggest we ought to get . . ."  
 He trails off with an unmysterious  
 Ellipsis, and waits, confident  
 Of Liz's tremulous assent.

"Give me some time, John." "Time? But surely—  
 We love each other well enough. . . .  
 Why are you acting so demurely?"  
 Liz says, "There's more to life than love.  
 I've got to think this out." Still holding  
 Each other's hand, but with John scolding  
 Her gently, a bit puzzled, they  
 Walk homewards by a shorter way  
 Across the vineyard. As engaging  
 As at the best of times he is,  
 He turns to other things; but Liz  
 Discovers consternation raging  
 Within her heart, and has no clue  
 Of what to say, feel, think, or do.

Next day, by one of life's mischances,  
 Mrs. Dorati tries to broach  
 The grandchild question. As she glances  
 At Liz with unexpressed reproach,  
 Liz looks about: cats and iguana  
 Lie sunk in somnolent Nirvana  
 In sunlight; Ed and Sue have gone  
 To fetch the mail; and Art and John  
 Can be seen in the distance, pacing  
 About the vineyard; and it's clear,  
 With no hope of diversion near,  
 That Liz is imminently facing  
 —Her dad lies dozing in his chair—  
 An ordeal that she cannot bear.

It warms up with the observation  
 Of how considerate, how polite,  
 How well-dressed, and in conversation  
 How well-versed John is, and how bright.  
 Liz shuts her book. Her mother, gazing  
 Mistily at her spouse, who's lazing,  
 Half absent, in his chair, first veers  
 To married love, the ripening years,  
 The boon of children, how she's yearning  
 To see the same joys settle on  
 Their lives as well . . . , then brings up John  
 Once more—and Liz, her earlobes burning,  
 Suddenly rises, and without  
 Comment or protest, walks straight out.

10.30

The coda of this brief, upsetting  
Duet (for one voice) is observed  
By Mike Dorati, who (forgetting  
That peace is often better served  
Not by alertness but by sleeping  
Through all alarms) looks at his weeping  
Wife, and his daughter, who now stands,  
Her book gripped tightly in her hands,  
Immobile, in the dewy cover  
Of new grass quilting the long soil  
Between the vines; while, in a coil,  
A red-winged hawk lists high above her.  
He sighs: "I'll talk to Liz, my dear.  
Don't be upset, love. You stay here."

10.31

He walks into the vineyard. "Lizzie . . ."  
He pats her hand. Her eyes are wet.  
"Come, Liz, don't get into a tizzy  
For nothing. I know you're upset  
About this, but you know your mother. . . ."  
He kisses her. ". . . Now, if your brother  
And sister shrugged it off, I'm sure  
You can as well, my dear. Now you're  
The eldest and most understanding. . . .  
Mom misses you a lot. This year  
You've hardly visited us here.  
Not that, my dear, I'm reprimanding,  
But you don't realize it can get  
Lonely at times. Now I'd just let

The storm blow over. Liz, remember,  
 Your mother's aches and pains increase  
 In winter, and it's late November.  
 Now go in, darling, and make peace.  
 And keep off things that could upset her.  
 She's not got long—I mean, it's better  
 If you go in and hold her hand . . ."  
 Liz cuts in: "I don't understand.  
 She's not got—what?" In sudden terror  
 She sees her father's face fall. "Dad—"  
 Though silent, his unfeigning, sad  
 Eyes hold no hope, no hope of error.  
 Dry-eyed with pain, at last Liz speaks:  
 "When did—" "We've known now for some weeks."

Elsewhere, John's thinking, "What a sunny  
 Morning this is! I feel today  
 The world's at peace. I've got a funny  
 Feeling the tides have turned my way.  
 It's just as well," he muses breezily,  
 "That Lizzie didn't yield so easily.  
 Anticipation's rather nice.  
 This waiting adds a certain spice. . . .  
 Inaction's made me quite insightful! . . .  
 Let me . . . (and here he yawns) . . . salute  
 Life, liberty, and the pursuit  
 Of laziness. It's quite delightful!"  
 He stares at the cerulean sky  
 And the jet contrails arcing by.

On whether this delirious laziness  
 Would please him if extended, John  
 Confesses to a certain haziness;  
 But right now, as the sunlight on  
 The white dew, striking at an angle,  
 Unblends on every drop to spangle  
 The vineyard with prismatic light—  
 Or as a black-swarmed, southward flight  
 Of starlings whirs and swirls and clusters  
 Like coffee grounds in liquid air,  
 All John can do is stand and stare.  
 At length, reluctantly, he musters  
 The will to go and fetch a file:  
 “One hour’s work shouldn’t cramp my style.”

The mail lies on the front hall table.  
 John’s curious; he riffles through  
 The pile, and murmurs, “Here’s a cable;  
 For whom? Marie . . . and here are two  
 Copies—why two?—of the *Smithsonian*.”  
 He idly flips through “Amazonian  
 Artifacts,” “The Cults of Thrace,”  
 “Lear’s Birds.” . . . Out of its hiding place  
 Behind the door, with swift propulsion,  
 A gray and orange mass streaks by,  
 Chased by a black puff with one eye.  
 John views the vision with revulsion.  
 “Quite a thick letter here for Liz. . . .  
 I wonder who its author is.”



The fuzzy postmark's no assistance.  
 There's no return address. John thinks,  
 "That's odd." And then a frigid distance,  
 A disbelieving hatred sinks  
 Into his gaze as the handwriting  
 Nudges his memory, igniting  
 Cold glints of fury in his brain.  
 He stands there, scoured with shock and pain.  
 Liz enters; as she brushes past him  
 To go into the living room  
 He grabs her shoulder: "I presume  
 You plan to lead him on and cast him  
 Off with the same alacrity  
 That he's dropped Claire—or you've dropped me.

Well, I hope you enjoy each other."  
 Liz quietly says, "John, let me go. . . .  
 I must go in and see my mother."  
 John drops his arm. He cries out: "So—  
 You don't deny this thing?" Liz, staring  
 At John, a desperate, despairing  
 Incomprehension in her glance,  
 Now slowly winds out of her trance.  
 "What is it?" "What? O God! This letter."  
 "Who's it from?" "Phil." "What does it say?"  
 With jealous loathing and dismay  
 John thrusts it in her hands: "You'd better  
 Find out yourself. It's your mail." Liz  
 Says, "John, I don't know what it is. . . .

10.38

. . . Some anti-nuclear stuff? That trial . . .”  
 “Then open it.” “Why?” “Open it.”  
 “Not now.” “So much for your denial.”  
 “Denial?” “Don’t give me that shit!”  
 Liz cries, “I love you—don’t abuse me—  
 John, I can’t take it—don’t accuse me  
 Of having an affair with Phil—  
 Don’t drive me to it—or I will.”  
 And blinded by a fit of weeping,  
 As if her heart were breaking, she  
 Makes for the door unsteadily—  
 And when (a sick repentance seeping  
 Into John’s heart) he tries to clutch  
 Her hand, she shudders at his touch.

10.39

Mrs. Dorati, driven thither  
 By John’s voice in fortissimo,  
 Turns from the doorway in a dither  
 Of indecision. “Mom, don’t go—”  
 Liz sobs, and holds her mother tightly.  
 Mrs. Dorati gently, lightly,  
 Passes her hand through Liz’s hair,  
 And Liz, in misery and despair,  
 Says, “Mom—Dad told me. I’m so sorry  
 I ran away. I love you so.  
 You should have told me.” “Yes, I know;  
 I didn’t want to cause you worry—  
 I really don’t believe it still. . . .  
 Sometimes I even hope it will

Just disappear, as if by magic. . . .  
But, Lizzie, I could live for years,  
So, darling, it's not quite as tragic  
As it originally appears.  
It's in the liver. It's not painful  
It's *these* that . . . ,” and with a disdainful  
Look at her knobbled hands, she smiles.  
Up in his room, John packs his files  
And clothes, and thinks: “Thank God I vanished  
When she came in—I hate a scene.”  
Soon, grimacing, as if quinine  
Had smeared his teeth, self-damned, self-banished,  
He starts his car. When Ed cries, “Wait!”  
John glares through him with transferred hate.

# ELEVEN

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## 11.1

The clapboard church with the white steeple  
On a gray, frozen day extrudes  
A complement of cheerful people.  
Clicked in expansive attitudes,  
They brave the shriveling church-step weather,  
And later, in bright knots together,  
Crowd the front porch of the vineyard,  
Half bombed, half waiting to bombard  
With hugs, confetti, and confection  
The bride and groom—who've left the church  
And vanished, some suggest, in search  
Of a spot where, without inspection  
By the lewd crowd, a private kiss  
May sanctify their nuptial bliss.

## 11.2

The paragon of geniality,  
 Mr. Dorati now extends  
 Epithalamic hospitality  
 To neighbors, relatives, and friends:  
 "So glad you could . . . oh, thank you, Peter!  
 Of course you'll have a chance to greet her. . . .  
 Quite sudden, yes . . . but there you are . . .  
 Young folks, you know. . . . You're right, it's far  
 Too chilly . . . let's go in . . ."; and Mr.  
 Dorati guides the Levasseurs  
 Toward the cake, while Judy purrs  
 To Juliet, her elder sister:  
 "I never thought I'd see the sight  
 Of Liz Dorati dressed in white."

## 11.3

Mrs. Dorati's eyes are puffy.  
 Rowena's choking back a sob.  
 The Winery Cat, with fierce and fluffy  
 Abandon, savors glob on glob  
 Of cream and chardonnay compounded.  
 Now Charlemagne has deftly bounded  
 Toward the tall-tiered wedding cake,  
 Baroque with maculate swirl and flake  
 Of chocolate, marzipan, and icing.  
 Though fuddled by the wine he's sipped,  
 He notes how Paul and Chuck, equipped  
 With knives, are violently slicing  
 The cake for human guests to eat;  
 And, growling, beats a foiled retreat.

## 11.4

Old Mrs. Weiss, flown in from Florida,  
 Looks furious at the whole affair.  
 She meditates: "What could be horridier  
 Than Phil divorcing that nice Claire?  
 Where's the boy now—and where's this hussy?"  
 And hobbling forward, with a fussy  
 Impatience brooking no dissent,  
 She moves to where her diffident  
 Daughter-in-law stands, and with quavering  
 Passion exclaims: "Young woman, you  
 Have no conception what to do.  
 You're not a patch on Claire!" Then, wavering  
 —A waiter pouring champagne nears—  
 Turns on her heel and disappears.

## 11.5

Phil, half engaged in self-decral  
 Induced by the champagne he's spilt  
 On Joan Lamont, describes his trial:  
 "Enough to make an orchid wilt!  
 The judge was like a prosecutor.  
 He aimed his legalist peashooter  
 At every clause of our defense.  
 This failed to hold! That made no sense!  
 As for the doctrine of necessity,  
 It was irrelevant to the case!  
 And so this derelict frog-face,  
 This ball of ignorant obesity,  
 Threatened to send us back to jail. . . ."  
 Phil gestures as he tells the tale

## 11.6

And spills champagne in a new shower  
 Upon his friends. "Oh, sorry, Matt. . . .  
 The way some folks abuse their power  
 Is something to be marveled at! . . .  
 Here, have some cake . . . ah, there's my mother. . . ."  
 Phil tipsily attempts to smother  
 Her with a hug, while with a glare  
 She shakes him off, and snorts: "Take care!  
 If Paul complains to me about her,  
 I'll catch the next flight out . . . you'll see!  
 You're a real fool, Phil. As for me  
 —And Paul—well, we can do without her. . . ."  
 Matt muses, "The señora's drunk.  
 She looks as sozzled as a skunk!"

## 11.7

Ed kisses Liz; with gallant lightness  
 He wishes her all happiness.  
 He goes to greet Phil, but a tightness  
 Within his chest acts to compress  
 His breath, and to subvert all action:  
 The crowded room—the old attraction—  
 Phil drunk—inspirited—merge to move  
 Ed's heart toward his former love.  
 He stands there wordless, cold, and trembling.  
 "What should I do?" he thinks. "Will he  
 Embrace me? Shake hands? Speak? All three?"  
 Phil turns and sees him; and, dissembling,  
 Ed makes a feeble joke about  
 Phil's wearing black; and wanders out.



## 11.8

Free of the smoke, his eyes still smarting,  
 He breathes the winter vineyard air.  
 Meanwhile, inside, the toasts are starting.  
 Now someone laughs—and from somewhere  
 The clink of glasses, next the quiet  
 Moments of drinking, then a riot  
 Of simultaneous speech, the loud  
 Sound cycles pulse out from the crowd.  
 Here Mrs. Craven shakes her stogie;  
 And there, supported by twin sticks,  
 Old Mr. Cobb, now eighty-six,  
 Stands, talking to an older foggy  
 About the happier days of yore:  
 Of slump, depression, and the war.

## 11.9

Ed thinks, "I'm acting like a martyr.  
 Bad form on Liz's wedding day!"  
 He walks back in. The menacing garter,  
 The flinging of the white bouquet,  
 The canapés, the reminiscing,  
 The crush, the chaos, and the kissing,  
 The twirling pairs, the tilting cake,  
 The thirties tunes "for old times' sake,"  
 The vast permuted introductions  
 With older couples who appear  
 To be at ease with no one here,  
 The contradictory instructions  
 Fed to the caterers and the band,  
 Lure Ed back to a brighter land.

## 11.10

Bewildered by the fraught frivolity  
 He sees around him, Kim Tarvesh,  
 A joyless guest amid the jollity,  
 Dreams of his thesis—that dense mesh,  
 That spongy marsh of curly deltas  
 In which all year he wastes and welters.  
 While round him voices rise and fall  
 In oral goulash, Occam's call  
 Leaches his vision of variety:  
 He mumbles, "In all likelihood  
 An n-dimensional matrix could  
 Succinctly summarize society. . . ."  
 (Poor Kim Tarvesh—we must recall  
 He's an economist after all.)

## 11.11

Art laughs, "Well, Jan's not here—you blew it!  
 So, Sue, you owe me twenty bucks."  
 Sue looks depressed. "I guess I knew it . . .  
 But hoped, perhaps . . .," and as Art tucks  
 The bill away says, somewhat sadly,  
 "I think this thing's been handled badly. . . .  
 Well, each according to her taste,  
 But why such unconsidered haste?  
 It's not like Liz at all . . .," and, frowning,  
 Sue bites a leaf of marzipan  
 And looks at her extended clan:  
 "Liz seems so happy, though. She's clowning  
 With Phil now. . . . Would she carry on  
 So unconstrainedly with John?"

## 11.12

Mr. Dorati seeks his daughter  
 Amid the crowd and tugs her sleeve:  
 "Liz, dear, a word . . . (and now he's brought her  
 Toward the door) . . . Liz, I believe  
 That you're aware of what you're doing.  
 I'd hate to see you sad, or ruing  
 The day that you became a wife. . . .  
 You do love Phil?" "Not on your life!"  
 Liz giggles: "Oh, Dad, don't look gloomy—  
 I like him, though. Here, have some more!"  
 And rapidly begins to pour  
 The Korbel. "Dad, he's gentle to me."  
 "Well, Liz," her father says, perplexed,  
 "Should I be pleased, appalled, or vexed?"

## 11.13

Liz walks toward Phil. She's thinking, "Whether  
 It's love or not means nothing much.  
 Love by itself's a tightening tether,  
 A habit-forming drug, a crutch. . . .  
 I like Phil, and he likes and needs me.  
 And then, there's Paul too . . . and that leads me  
 To wonder about Charlemagne.  
 . . . (She takes Phil's arm, and sips champagne.) . . .  
 It's a full household. Though I wouldn't  
 Say I'm impulsive, and though Dad  
 Must think I've lost my head, I'm glad  
 We've married with such haste. I couldn't  
 Hope for a better better half:  
 A good kind man who makes me laugh."

11.14

To link this chapter of the novel  
 To John's departure, sketched before,  
 Requires a flashback. (I should grovel  
 At this cheap stratagem, and, more,  
 My bard card should be burned.) Dear Reader,  
 In mitigation, let me plead a  
 Drainage of brain. Perhaps you'll wait  
 Till it's recharged? . . . You indicate  
 I must continue with the story?  
 ". . . Nae man can tether time or tide;  
 The hour approaches Tam maun ride. . . ."  
 Well, dinna fidge—I willna bore ye.  
 (A safe bet: if you've read till here,  
 You must possess an iron ear.)

11.15

Her mother's illness, the traumatic  
 Parley with John, Phil's long brief read,  
 Left Liz so drained, pale, and erratic  
 In thought, mood, look, and word that Ed  
 (Himself perplexed by John's behavior)  
 Stepped in as psychiatric savior,  
 Steeped her with brandy for her good,  
 And soothed her, as a brother should.  
 Slowly the bruising shock diminished.  
 Ed asked her: "Do you love John still?"  
 And Liz in turn asked: "What of Phil?"  
 The phrase, "God knows—but that's all finished!"  
 Now economically supplied  
 The sad response on either side.

11.16

That Monday morning, at the trial  
 Of Phil (and four more peaceniks), Liz  
 Despite the judge's blunt denial  
 Of her chief argument—with fizz  
 And flair and vehemence and fury—  
 Contrived to split the Lungless jury:  
 “You are the judges in this court,  
 And no one else!” And so, in short,  
 Though somewhat low on legal logic  
 (Since the judge ruled she could not plead  
 Necessity), Liz veered with speed  
 To an assault more demagogic  
 And, startlingly, achieved a breach.  
 This is a fragment of her speech:

11.17

“ . . . People of Lungless Town! I beg you,  
 Don't smile at the malignant growth  
 That kills you. Lungless Labs may egg you  
 —With business, Uncle Sam, or both—  
 To take their word God's imprimatur  
 Is theirs, and that no agitator  
 Ought to persuade you to deny  
 Their bombs and God and apple pie—  
 An interlocked and cozy trinity—  
 The very thing to wean you from  
 Too much fine scrutiny of the bomb  
 Or the fouled wells of your vicinity—  
 Though their carcinogenic waste  
 Is rather an acquired taste. . . .”

11.18

If these seem feeble words as written,  
 They capture none of Liz's hold  
 On that packed courtroom. Phil sat smitten;  
 The pressmen scribbled notes; the old  
 Disgruntled judge (who just last Monday  
 Sentenced O'Hare) feared this was one day  
 His lawful victims might elude  
 The harvest of their turpitude.  
 The impassioned advocate was wearing  
 A cambric blouse, a wine-dark suit,  
 An air both fragile and acute—  
 And there was something in her bearing  
 That seemed to make her flame and burn  
 With sorrow, and with high concern.

11.19

After the courtroom celebrations,  
 Liz took her client out to lunch.  
 He said, "Thanks, Liz. Congratulations!  
 That was superb . . . but I've a hunch  
 That something's happened to upset you.  
 Don't bite your lip. Tell me. I'll let you  
 Speak without interruption, Liz;  
 I promise. Look, I'll bet it is  
 Something to do with John. . . ." Liz, crying  
 Through her mascara on her mousse,  
 Said, "Phil—it's over—it's no use—  
 I'll never marry him." Phil, sighing,  
 Said, "Are you sure?" Liz bent her head.  
 "Oh well then, Liz, try me instead."

Liz burst into astonished laughter.  
 Phil watched her with uncertain eyes.  
 She wiped her streaming tears, and after  
 A sneeze or two asked, "Is that wise?"  
 "Wise?" "Sure, Phil—we don't love each other!  
 To borrow wisdom from my mother,  
 It's love that makes the world go round!"  
 "That's bullshit!" grunted Phil. "I've found  
 That love's a pretty poor forecaster.  
 I loved a woman—and was dropped.  
 I loved a man—and that too flopped.  
 Passion's a prelude to disaster.  
 It's something else that makes me sure  
 Our bond can last five decades more.

There's lots of things I like about you:  
 Your guts and gumpion, gait and girth. . . .  
 Oh, sure, I'd get along without you,  
 But, Liz, for what such things are worth,  
 We could be happy with each other."  
 Phil stopped, then added, "There's another  
 Reason as well: I'm certain Paul  
 Wouldn't object to you at all."  
 "Oh, is that so?" Liz smiled, "How flattering!  
 I'm unloved, but not quite blackballed.  
 A great proposal. I'm enthralled!"  
 "Oh, please, Liz, this suspense is shattering,"  
 Phil groaned, and paused for her to speak.  
 Liz laughed, "All right. First thing next week."



11.22

Phil started. "Liz, don't joke. I'm serious."  
 "So am I, Phil—I like you too—  
 You're stimulating, unimperious . . .  
 What's more, you've opened up my view  
 To the whole world. . . . And I'd far rather  
 Marry a man who's a good father  
 Than someone . . . I too don't feel sure  
 I can trust passion any more. . . ."  
 "But next week—Liz? Why, even sending  
 Out cards takes time . . . and John? and Ed?"  
 Liz quietly says, "What's dead is dead.  
 Drawing things out to a heartrending  
 Finis won't help. My mother's ill.  
 The earlier the better, Phil."

11.23

Just as we find that the catalysis  
 Of trauma or euphoria jerks  
 Us into acts where fine analysis  
 Could fling a frisbee in the works  
 (How often, though, such rash transactions  
 Prove happier than our prudent actions),  
 Liz and Phil, too, together hurled,  
 Flew forth to nest a snigger world.  
 Liz's initial time span doubled,  
 But two weeks later, man and wife  
 Set sail on the calm pond of life.  
 One quadrant of this, though, was troubled:  
 Though Liz meant well, she seemed to act  
 Toward John with rankling lack of tact.

## 11.24

John sat at home. The invitation  
 Liz sent him burnt his heart to frost.  
 As if he feared contamination  
 By something touched by her, he tossed  
 Her letter in the trash can, tearing  
 Into fine strips the gilt card bearing  
 The wedding date and winery crest  
 (R.S.V.P.); and half possessed  
 By disbelief, half by revulsion,  
 Shuddering to think two weeks had changed  
 Her smooth-faced love to mold, deranged  
 By cynical rage, scorn, and repulsion  
 In turn, with galvanizing hate  
 He wrote Liz a short note to state

## 11.25

(1) That he had received her letter;  
 (2) It had been destroyed unread;  
 (3) —And the earlier the better—  
 Liz should remove each clue and shred  
 Of paper, furniture, and clothing  
 That served to activate his loathing.  
 When she came round—she had the keys  
 To do the needful—it would please  
 John to be absent; through her mother  
 She could inform him of the date  
 She found convenient. He would wait  
 Her word on this; and (4) if other  
 Business remained, his lawyers would  
 Meet her, and clear things up for good.

John mails his letter; though it's petty  
 (And though he well perceives this) he  
 Can't keep from scattering black confetti  
 —His hatred wilts his decency:  
 His mouth is dry: his lacerated  
 Welt-ridden ego's aggravated  
 His will to bring grief on the heads  
 Of the incipient newlyweds.  
 So all her talk of love was spurious—  
 He should have known she was the type  
 To hook, then chuck him—her false hype—  
 His credulous trust . . . John grows as furious  
 At his gulled faith as at what he  
 Sees as her suave duplicity.

Lost in a savage transportation  
 Of grievance, he won't own that he  
 Helped generate this new equation.  
 Selective sensitivity  
 To his ills, blindness to their feelings  
 Of equal injury, his dealings  
 With Phil and Liz to him seem just  
 Reprisal for their breach of trust.  
 Phil sends a note; John does not read it.  
 "Some plausible and soothing froth,"  
 He thinks, drunk on a bitter broth  
 Of cynicism. "Well, I don't need it!"  
 Lonely, and injured in his pride,  
 His sorrow festers though denied.

None of his woes will lead to weeping.  
 He's not the type to cry—big boys  
 Don't cry—unless, with his will sleeping,  
 In dreams, at two at night, the ploys  
 Of recollection in a madness  
 Of uncontrol set free his sadness  
 Into his pillow; and his face  
 Grows taut next morning with disgrace—  
 With salt upon his cheeks, as shaming  
 As a wet dream—the spoor of tears  
 Insinuatingly appears  
 To pock his swindled features, maiming  
 His poise until, cologned and dressed,  
 He stares once more at Everest.

Work! Mighty projects need completion—  
 Mountains to flatten, seas to drain,  
 And bombs to build . . . Each day's accretion  
 Of labor settles on his pain  
 Its nacreous coat of insulation.  
 And if this trick of desperation  
 Is also madness of a kind  
 —More sleight of will than peace of mind—  
 At least it numbs him to the treachery  
 Of those he loved. . . . But love . . . John sighs,  
 And the thought hardens in his eyes  
 That any falsity or lechery  
 —If the heart's cold and stamped with scorn—  
 Can be indulged in, or be borne.

## 11.30

And so, with the accumulation  
 Of unindulgent days, combined  
 With the indulgent fermentation  
 Of one-night stands, John, now resigned  
 To loneliness, without compunction,  
 Flexes his charm in clean disjunction  
 From his sore heart, sifts bars each night  
 For "cute chicks," by next morning's light  
 Ejects the used and using stranger,  
 Shaves, dresses, drives to work, works, then,  
 As night falls, rakes the bars again  
 For a new conquest, free from danger,  
 In this athletic masque of lust,  
 Of trust or the demise of trust.

## 11.31

Had Liz left him, he'd have confided  
 In his best friend; or if estranged  
 From Phil, his lover could have guided  
 His lost heart homeward, and exchanged  
 His bitterness for understanding;  
 But now no current countermanding  
 The icy flow of his closed pain  
 Touches his coast. He thinks again  
 Of Janet, but since he's ignored her  
 These many months, is too ashamed  
 To call her; what's more, in his maimed  
 Misogyny, he can't afford her  
 Solicitude: for if she's kind  
 He would be forced to change his mind.

In San Francisco's snowless winter  
 The gray weeks rinse themselves away.  
 Liz thinks of John. A painful splinter,  
 Drawn in more deeply day by day  
 —Not of remorse so much, or fretful  
 Resentment, as of a regretful  
 Sense that when old friends fall apart  
 Things are not well—afflicts her heart.  
 John's note to her, harsh and censorious;  
 Phil's hand stretched out across the rift  
 Repelled outright; their New Year's gift  
 To John—a small, expiatorious  
 Italian alabaster dove  
 Mailed back without response, thanks, love,

Or (what did Liz expect?) civility—  
 All force on her what she's half known:  
 That, undermined in his virility,  
 John's pain-averse life has grown  
 More loveless than before he met her.  
 No tenderness can gash or fetter  
 One who's seen through it all before.  
 Though void of hope, Liz makes one more  
 Attempt at reconciliation:  
 Her card, a single pleading line,  
 Arrives, ill timed, at Valentine.  
 This seals her excommunication;  
 John credits, almost with relief,  
 That Liz has tried to mock his grief.

Throughout the season, John, tormented  
 By moods in turn depressed and foul,  
 Soothes himself at the well-frequented  
 Mixed singles bar, the Winking Owl.  
 Whom should he meet one night that winter  
 But Bjorn, the preening Swedish sprinter  
 Who at John's housewarming had gazed  
 Lasciviously at Rose, appraised  
 Her coldly but in vain, and later  
 Slickly seduced and lured to sleep  
 Lucinda of the Liquid Sheep.  
 From time to time he used to date her;  
 At other times—and she knew this—  
 He hungered for a change of bliss.

Tonight Bjorn tries to put the make on  
 A dainty little doe-eyed lass.  
 She proves no meager match to take on,  
 Drinks up his drinks, fends off his pass  
 ("So long, big boy!"), and leaves him stranded,  
 Full-fraught with lust, but empty-handed.  
 When round he casts his baleful eyes,  
 Bjorn notices, to his surprise,  
 John sitting in an alcove, talking  
 To a lithe nymphet clad in red.  
 Bjorn meditates, "And so to bed. . . .  
 But why's John here?" And after stalking  
 His doe to no effect, Bjorn walks  
 Across to John, and grins, and talks.



Next day Bjorn mentions to Lucinda  
 He saw John at the Winking Owl.  
 The flame of rumor has struck tinder;  
 Lucinda lets out a sharp howl  
 Of mirth—and inside half an hour,  
 Thanks to the awesome branching power  
 Of Ma Bell's web, the fourth-hand news  
 Hits Jan, whom it does not amuse.  
 She talks to Sue, but Sue's no wiser.  
 Saddened as Jan is by the way  
 John's friendships have all gone astray,  
 She thinks, "Though I'm no temporizer,  
 It's best, for once, to wait and see.  
 He may not relish help from me."

Besides, it happens, she's so busy  
 Preparing for a summer show  
 In a small gallery, so dizzy  
 With sculpture, drink, and drums, that though  
 In slacker times she might have worried  
 About John more, her life's too hurried  
 For more than sympathy: the claims  
 Of cash flow and artistic flames  
 Have rendered her so incandescent  
 With inspiration (and with fear  
 As each month's ides of rent draw near)  
 That even Cuff and Link's incessant  
 High wails, intense and Siamese,  
 Upon occasion, fail to please.

So though Jan suffers for him—really,  
 Why she still does is hard to say;  
 He's treated her less than ideally—  
 She can't divert an hour his way.  
 "It's just not possible," Jan's thinking. . . .  
 "Still, if I dropped in at the Winking  
 Owl, I suppose, to have a drink,  
 I might . . . in fact, I really think,  
 Tomorrow, since the band's not playing. . . ."  
 Somehow, in short, Jan finds the time.  
 John's absent when she enters. "I'm  
 A fool," she thinks. "Here I am, paying  
 Two dollars for a measly beer.  
 How do I know that he'll appear?"

He does. With startled recognition  
 He sees her face across the crowd.  
 Through Michael Jackson's taut rendition  
 Of "Beat It," shatteringly loud,  
 Jan tries to say, "Hey, how's it going?"  
 John frowns, walks over to her, slowing  
 Just once as a young woman's eyes  
 Rest on him with a smooth surmise.  
 "Who's that?" asks Jan. John shrugs his shoulders.  
 "Someone. Who knows? You like it here?"  
 She's quite a babe! Another beer?  
 Night on the town, huh, Jan?" Jan smolders  
 At John's cool tone, but murmurs, "It's  
 My night off. Sure, I'll have a Schlitz."

As John surveys his singles heaven,  
 Her heart is irked by his hard-boiled  
 Slick patter: "... That one gets a seven. . . .  
 That's Martha: well-stacked but shop-soiled. . . .  
 Wow! Check the goods out on that cutie. . . .  
 But, heck, I'm failing in my duty—  
 You're a newcomer here, and, Jan,  
 I've got to help you get your man. . . .  
 You like that fellow? No—too hairy . . .  
 —Of course, I'm not a judge—. . . or that  
 Blond-haired dude? Hey, he's staring at  
 You now, Jan—No, looks like a fairy . . .  
 But curly hair turns on some chicks."  
 Jan snaps: "And I'm turned off by hicks."

John's commentary halts. "But, baby,  
 It's you who told me long ago  
 To seize the day—remember?" "Maybe—  
 But at the time I didn't know. . . .  
 And as for 'baby,' kindly can it.  
 That turns me off as well. Just Janet—  
 Got that?" She finishes her Schlitz:  
 "... My God, this singles bar's the pits.  
 I've got to get you out. I'm going  
 To a café. You come as well. . . ."  
 What's on Jan's mind John cannot tell,  
 But, revved for takeoff like a Boeing,  
 She sweeps him up into the blue:  
 Café Trieste, and tea for two.

So there they sit—and John is smiling,  
 And Jan is not—and John says, “Jan?”  
 And Jan thinks, “He’s forever riling  
 Me—why don’t I dislike this man?  
 Politically he’s close to Nero.  
 For tolerance he scores a zero  
 Despite his catacombs of books.  
 Am I just turned on by his looks? . . .  
 At one time I was mad about him.  
 Still, we broke up, and time’s slipped by  
 And I’m still here. In those days I  
 Could hardly think of life without him.  
 Poor Jan,” she thinks, “I wish I could  
 Have been there. I’d have done me good.”

She laughs, and John looks up from sipping  
 His tea and asks, “Well, what’s the joke?”  
 “Nothing,” says Jan, “I was just slipping  
 Back to our days of fire and smoke!”  
 “Ah,” John replies, and stares around him,  
 Alarmed that she’s about to sound him  
 About his recent unsuccess.  
 But Jan laughs, “We’re both fools, I guess.”  
 Her voice—or something—has restored him  
 To gentleness. “If I was rude,”  
 He mutters, “blame it on my mood.”  
 She thinks: “I know why I adored him.  
 Not for his looks . . . well, that’s half true . . .  
 It’s simply that he loved me too.”

## 11.44

She smiles again: "What a poor reason—  
 But—oh well—it will have to do."  
 Aloud she says, "John, it's the season  
 The whales swim down the coast. Do you  
 Want to drive up the Shoreline Highway  
 This Sunday afternoon? It's my way  
 Of simmering down when life is rough."  
 John says, "Well, my life's calm enough.  
 Admittedly, if I were wilting  
 With loneliness, Miss Nightingale,  
 Your panacea of a whale  
 Would suit me fine. But since my jilting  
 —Now that monogamy's removed—  
 I find my love life much improved."

## 11.45

Jan quietly slices through the specious  
 Fat of John's speech to his hard wound.  
 She says: "Look, John, don't be facetious.  
 You're wrong: it's not that I impugned  
 Your interactions with society  
 Or your amours in their variety.  
 I wanted you to come, that's all.  
 But don't decide now. Why not call  
 Me on the weekend?" . . . Thus on Sunday  
 A picnic hamper packed for two,  
 Binoculars, sketch pad, corkscrew  
 And two files (to be read by Monday)  
 Usurp the rear of John's Peugeot  
 As northward to Muir Beach they go.

## 11.46

From the tall overlook, the indented  
 Shoreline extends in cliffs and bays  
 And promontories through the scented  
 Wind-sheared sage northwest to Point Reyes.  
 Northward, Mount Tamalpais lowers;  
 Southward, through leather ferns, wildflowers  
 —Tangling and twining through the lush  
 Confusion of coyote brush  
 And winter weeds—the blue Pacific,  
 Unwrinkled as a pond, defines  
 With wharves and cypresses and pines  
 Three edges of the hieroglyphic  
 Of San Francisco, still and square  
 And sun-bleached in the ocean air.

## 11.47

Beyond the surf in smooth migration  
 The great gray whales serenely go  
 South from their summer habitation,  
 The Arctic, down to Mexico.  
 Swimming and surfacing, submerging  
 Below the overlook, then verging  
 The shore, they blow a trail of spouts  
 Along their exodus. John shouts,  
 “Hey, look! There’s two—a calf and mother,  
 Wouldn’t you say?” Jan frowns: “Right here  
 It’s a bit early in the year  
 For that, but maybe in another  
 Couple of . . .” John says, “If we can,  
 Let’s meet again next Sunday, Jan.”

11.48

If Jan's surprised, she shows no inkling  
Of it at all. The rug is spread,  
The wine uncorked, and now they're sprinkling  
Salt on the eggs, and on the bread  
They pile cheese, lettuce, and salami  
Enough to satisfy an army.  
The sea breeze with its spice and bite  
Adds accent to their appetite.  
And when they've finished, Janet, leaning  
Against a pine tree, pen in hand,  
Sketches the precipice and sand,  
While John thinks, "Dammit—I've been meaning  
To read these files all day. How come  
I'm so relaxed my brain's gone numb?"

11.49

Next weekend, gusts of squally weather  
Assail the coast, and they decide,  
Instead of driving north, to tether  
Their plans for Sunday to a ride  
On the bell-jangling locomotion  
Of city streetcars to the ocean.  
There they walk, hemmed in by the gray  
Residuum of a sunless day:  
The seethe of broken breakers sheeting  
Flat wastes of gray and glassy sand,  
And then, sucked seaward from the strand,  
A murky turquoise wash retreating,  
With half a hiss and half a sigh,  
West into mist and cloud and sky.



11.50

"God—what a day! God—how depressing!"

Says John: "Let's walk along the shore."

"Real yuck!" says Janet, acquiescing,

"Just for another hour more."

"Last Sunday it was crisp and sizzling,"

John mourns, "and now it's dank and drizzling."

Jan sighs, "We're bound to be wet through,

And then we'll both come down with flu . . ."

". . . And die," adds John. "How disagreeable:

Drizzled to death, and in our prime—

With not a soul to care a dime . . .

But since our fate is quite foreseeable,

We're doomed, and might as well extend

This outing to its bitter end."

11.51

They stroll past driftwood, gnarled and whitened,

And braids of black where inlets pass

Into the sea, gray pebbles heightened

By green abraded gems of glass;

Large, yellow-beaked, orange-legged, fluffy

White gulls that strut among the scruffy

Plebeian pigeons by the pier;

Two parents yelling, "Shane, come here!

Come here this instant!"; frayed graffiti,

WHISKEY and MOM carved in the sand;

A collie splashing onto land,

Twig between teeth and an entreaty

—Once more, please!—written in his eyes;

Sand dollars, sandpipers, sand flies. . . .

Jan sees a smooth, wave-worn sand dollar.  
 "Intact!" she thinks, and rubs it clean.  
 Far off somewhere the voices holler,  
 "Shane! Shane! . . . Shane! Shane!" and in between  
 The lunging water lifts and crashes  
 Down on the sand and spills and thrashes,  
 But Jan hears nothing as she stands,  
 Looking at what lies in her hands:  
 A cinquefoil perforated flower  
 Pricked out upon a disk of white—  
 Defectless emblem of delight  
 And seal of oceanic power.  
 She looks out seaward, unaware  
 Of the mist moistening her black hair.

With open eyes, lost in reflection,  
 Dreaming across the ocean, Jan  
 Lets her mind trace its curved projection  
 Beyond Hawaii to Japan,  
 Envisioning her old grandmother  
 In midlife journeying to another  
 Language and continent and life,  
 A pauper migrant's menial wife.  
 With moral tags and bitter humor  
 She built a fort against the ache  
 Of exile for her husband's sake,  
 And when he died, of a brain tumor  
 In '43, lived thirty years  
 Without complaint and without tears.

11.54

Jan looks around where John stands, facing  
The static contours of the land.  
"For the Atlantic!" Jan says, placing  
The mystic circlet in his hand.  
"Huh? A sand dollar," John smiles, turning  
The object round: "A welcome earning:  
Four sand quarters or ten sand dimes. . . ."  
They walk on. Through the mist at times  
The Cliff House looms, immense and sunless.  
Offshore, from Seal Rock, through the dark  
Chilled drizzle sea lions belch and bark,  
And everything is foul and funless,  
Unanimated, bland, and bleak—  
Except the Musée Mécanique.

11.55

Among its mirrors, pianolas,  
Gumdrop machines, and biographs,  
Refreshed by lukewarm Coca-Colas,  
They pass an afternoon of laughs,  
A rambling romp that only finishes  
When, as the pallid light diminishes  
Over the sea, Jan says, "I must  
Go back now, John." John looks nonplussed.  
Jan smiles, "I've got to earn my living. . . .  
I've had a great time. Thanks a lot."  
John, more surprised now, says, "For what?  
My company?" With some misgiving  
He goes on: "How about next week?"  
Kissing her quickly on the cheek.

# TWELVE

---

## 12.1

John's nights are free, Jan's days. Their meetings,  
On weekend afternoons, are rare.  
And yet, the pattern of their greetings,  
The counted hours that they share,  
Drive him from his embittered brooding  
Against the cosmos—all, excluding  
His erstwhile friends. There, in his eyes,  
There is no balm of compromise,  
No herb of reconciliation.  
To talk of them, to speak their names  
Is to immerse him in the flames  
Of hatred, the intoxication  
Of a now long-fermented brew  
That burns his spirit through and through.

## 12.2

A waste, a puerile waste and pity,  
 Jan thinks, that these three former friends  
 Will not meet somewhere in the city  
 —Some neutral café—make amends  
 Or peace or mutual restitution,  
 Perform some ritual ablution  
 Of their ill will, and recognize  
 That life is short and that time flies,  
 Etcetera—and that, all things taken  
 Into account, John, Liz, and Phil  
 Have less of ill than of goodwill;  
 But when she mentions this, so shaken  
 Is she by John's extreme response,  
 She drops the matter—for the nonce.

## 12.3

When one considers how pain mangles  
 John, who believes he's duped by love,  
 When one considers that triangles  
 Such as the one described above  
 Lent five-star tragedy material  
 To Shakespeare and the Greeks, ethereal  
 Dream bubbles such as Janet blows  
 Of universal love expose  
 An aspiration somewhat artless  
 In one whose art's far from naive.  
 It's true that Jan does not believe  
 John's stance is reasonless or heartless;  
 She sees it, though, as rigid. Well,  
 Perhaps that's so; it's hard to tell.

## 12.4

Some claim the coast of California  
 Is seasonless, that there's no snow  
 To flavor winter. Others, born here  
 Or fleeing here—glad to forgo  
 The option of frostbitten fingers  
 And housebound months as hoarfrost lingers  
 Upon the firs, less picturesque  
 Than deadening, while from their desk  
 They'd stare past dark eaves fringed with icicles  
 Well into March, and scarcely dare  
 To breathe the east or midwest air—  
 Now yield, with tank tops, frisbees, bicycles,  
 Dogs, cats, and kids and tans and smiles  
 To spring's precocious warmth and wiles.

## 12.5

It's spring! Meticulous and fragrant  
 Pear blossoms bloom and blanch the trees,  
 While pink and ravishing and flagrant  
 Quince bursts in shameless colonies  
 On woody bushes, and the slender  
 Yellow oxalis, brief and tender,  
 Brilliant as mustard, sheets the ground,  
 And blue jays croak, and all around  
 Iris and daffodil are sprouting  
 With such assurance that the shy  
 Grape hyacinth escapes the eye,  
 And spathes of Easter lilies, flouting  
 Nomenclature, now effloresce  
 In white and lenten loveliness.



## 12.6

John views his disregarded garden  
 Where flowers and weeds hold equal sway.  
 He feels his resolution harden:  
 "It's springtime, and it's Saturday.  
 Jan is an excellent adviser.  
 I ought to call her and apprise her  
 That I need help in my attempt  
 To keep my backyard couth and kempt."  
 But when Jan comes, instead of dealing  
 With mulch, mimosas, and manure  
 They take a ride along the shore  
 And, with a vernal verve of feeling,  
 Talk of the past, of the old days  
 Before they went their separate ways.

## 12.7

No wistfulness but, rather, laughter  
 Tinges their speech. Do they refer  
 To different beings? Even after  
 She says to him and he to her  
 That first love's best by definition  
 They seem to state a proposition  
 So distant from their lives that they  
 Are quite untouched by it today.  
 John lives each week, and takes things easy.  
 Love's a mere word. Though it's a blast  
 To screen old reels, the past's the past.  
 If it intrudes, it makes him queasy.  
 Singed once, he will not yield again  
 Words that might cause him future pain.



## 12.8

But week by week, as springtime urges  
 Him into the caressing sun,  
 And the rain lessens, and March merges  
 With April, and the benison  
 Of days, their tread and their profusion,  
 Distract his heart from its contusion,  
 His visits to the bars decrease.  
 If now and then he finds release  
 From his aloneness with a stranger,  
 His new companionship with Jan,  
 Confined to daylight, helps him span  
 The darkness safer from the danger  
 Of the crude misery that drove  
 Him into unknown arms for love.

## 12.9

One Tuesday night, the cancellation  
 Of a performance frees the Sheep  
 To savor the unique sedation  
 Of soundlessness and early sleep.  
 Jan turns her talents to creating  
 Sushi and sashimi. While waiting  
 For John (her guinea pig), she sets  
 The chopsticks out, regales her pets  
 With scraps of herring, then, abstracted,  
 Turns to her sculpture, *Mother Hen*,  
 Chisels away at it, and when  
 The doorbell buzzes in protracted  
 Protest, thinks, "Damn! Who can that be?  
 Oh, John, of course! How dumb of me."

## 12.10

She yells a cheerful "I'm just coming,"  
 Runs down the stairs two at a time,  
 Hugs him, and with unconscious drumming  
 (Chisel on door), remarks, "John, I'm  
 Sorry, I'm in the very middle  
 Of . . . it's that hen . . . she's such a riddle. . . .  
 Go take a walk around the block  
 And come back here at eight o'clock."  
 John thinks, "She hasn't changed much, really,  
 In all these years." When he returns  
 They eat, and talk; and John's heart burns  
 With an old longing—is it merely  
 Night, or her unchanged waywardness?—  
 And he says, "Jan?" and she says, "Yes."

## 12.11

Tonight a quilt of peace surrounds him.  
 He dreams of nothing. He is free  
 Of all volition. It astounds him  
 How little now the enmity  
 Of the crass world, its fickle illness  
 Impinges on his crypt of stillness.  
 He sleeps, his cheek against her breast,  
 Unagitated, more at rest  
 Than when, the sensual excitement  
 Of strangers' lovemaking endured,  
 He flees to sleep with no accord  
 Between release and the indictment  
 His heart makes, that his love, hard sealed  
 With bitterness, rots unrevealed.

## 12.12

Yet, tender as is their lovemaking,  
 John gives his voice no leave to own  
 What his hand's touch, what his lip's quaking,  
 Unknown perhaps to him, has shown  
 More forthrightly than declaration;  
 And if Jan's heart knows the elation  
 It knew six years ago when they  
 Were lovers, she does not betray  
 By open word—for fear of sweeping  
 A turbid patina of dust  
 On the clean fabric of their trust—  
 That, as her heart was in his keeping  
 Once, and the sharer of his pain  
 And gladness, so it is again.

## 12.13

That Saturday the coaxing weather  
 Confetties the blue bay with sails.  
 John hires a small boat; together  
 They guide it out to watch the whales  
 For the last time this year, migrating  
 Northward again, and aggregating  
 In pods and pairs, but far from shore.  
 Though grocery shopping is a bore,  
 Tonight it almost seems a pleasure:  
 With friendly passion they discuss  
 The rival tastes of octopus  
 And squid, and how one ought to measure  
 The additives in bread and meat;  
 Then go to Jan's to cook and eat.

## 12.14

Next morning is spent bedbound, lazing—  
 Until they hear the church clocks strike  
 Eleven, while the cats, appraising  
 The alien in Jan's bed, unlike  
 Charlemagne or the Winery Persian,  
 Display no vestige of aversion  
 Towards it, glad to rub their furs  
 Or butt their heads with fervent purrs  
 Against the legs of Tutankhamen  
 And John with equal nonchalance.  
 At twelve they scratch the fridge, and dance.  
 For John and Jan a bowl of ramen  
 Capped with a raw egg serves for brunch,  
 But Cuff and Link have squid for lunch.

## 12.15

And so the days pass. On occasion  
 They see a Hitchcock matinee.  
 At other times, at Jan's persuasion  
 They go kitsch-hunting for the day.  
 Jan manifests a greater relish  
 The more ornate, bizarre, and hellish  
 The objects she unearths: two pink  
 Brass-gilded faucets for her sink,  
 A Mickey Mouse phone and receiver. . . .  
 John looks shell-shocked, and cannot square  
 (Of course, it's all her own affair,  
 He thinks) a green ceramic beaver  
 —Its teeth bared in a putrid smile—  
 With Jan's own sober sculptural style.

## 12.16

Jan works long hours, tense, inspired.  
*Ma Hen*, her maiden work in stone,  
 Is finished, and her brain is tired  
 And her hand aches, and she's alone;  
 But time's short now. She must make progress  
 On *Biased Portrait of an Ogress*,  
 The final sculpture for the show.  
 With only fifteen days to go,  
 "No time, no time, no time!" keeps dinning  
 Into her ears. At last, two days  
 Before the deadline, Janet says,  
 "Oh God! A drink! It's done!" and grinning  
 In gratified collapse, makes short  
 Work of four glasses of white port.

## 12.17

Meanwhile, though John's received a bonus  
 And a promotion, an unease  
 Has seeped into his mind: the onus  
 Of his work troubles him. He sees  
 With a dark clarity, that either  
 The bombs will fall or not, and neither  
 Alternative gives cause for pride.  
 If (a) they obsolesce inside  
 Their silos, then his life's expended  
 Creating something never used.  
 Or else, if (b) . . . but John's refused  
 To assume this, and has long defended  
 The assuring axiom that the more  
 The bombs, the less the chance of war.

"Ah, well, my own work only deals with  
 A minor part of what we do. . . .  
 The silverware we eat our meals with  
 Could wipe the human race out too. . . .  
 And anyway, I've always reckoned—  
 Better to die in one swift second  
 Than with a bayonet in the crotch. . . ."  
 He builds his case back, notch by notch.  
 But when he adds, "Jan, these psychotic  
 Peaceniks have no respect for law,"  
 She quietly says, "My mother saw  
 Her law-abiding, patriotic  
 Father interned, by law. He died  
 In '43, while still inside."

June tenth begins Jan's exhibition  
 In a small gallery, Marcus Ladd,  
 A revamped warehouse in the Mission.  
 It looks good, and Jan's proud and glad—  
 Till the art critic of *The Clarion*  
 Flaps to the scene in search of carrion  
 And glares in vulturine disgust  
 At her live works. He writes: *I trust*  
*Miss Hayakawa's terse aridity*  
*(Which she no doubt deems spare and fine)*  
*Does not mislead colleagues of mine*  
*(Though their vulgarian stupidity*  
*Rarely deserves such trust for long)*  
*To judge these feeble works as strong. . . .*

*This exhibition, bland and themeless*  
*—Bronzes and plasters, wood and stone—*  
*Promiscuously strung in schemeless*  
*Sequence strives vainly to disown*  
*Its formalism and immaturity.*  
 The great man's spoken. With security,  
 The critics, free to take their cue  
 From the first trump of his review,  
 Now slither forth their own reviewing.  
 These worms who, senile/trendy, hung  
 Their hearts on soup cans and bat dung,  
 Disparage Jan's exhibits, spewing:  
 "Unsettled," "vacuous," "inbred,"  
 "Cold," "marrowless," "unethnic," "dead."

Jan weeps in private with frustration.  
 For all her courage she can't bear  
 This universal condemnation.  
 But she is lucky—in that where  
 Others in such a situation  
 Have turned away from their vocation  
 With hurt and hopelessness and doubt,  
 Her spirit will not flicker out.  
 John's heart goes out to her, but really,  
 In the sad hours that ensue  
 There isn't much that he can do.  
 She feels she's failed, and he can merely  
 Hold her hand, frown, and iterate,  
 "Your time will come, Jan. Just you wait."



In fact it's this that Jan, with laughter,  
 Repeats to those who sympathize  
 With her, or with her works—who (after  
 Reading *The Clarion* with bright eyes)  
 Quote in a sad voice, soft with gloating,  
 A phrase or two "that's just been floating  
 Around these days. . . . I might have read  
 It somewhere. . . ." But Jan feels half dead  
 Now that night's fallen, and she's climbing  
 The stairs. She gives the cats a kiss.  
 "John's right. I can't give in to this.  
 It's all a quirk of time—or timing—  
 Or something—Lord, do I feel beat!  
 Now what would you two like to eat?"

Next day Jan happens to be present  
 At Marcus Ladd when Liz and Phil  
 Come to look round. "Ah, what a pleasant  
 Surprise!" Jan shouts. Phil laughs: "Jan, will  
 You show us round yourself?" "Delighted!"  
 Liz says: "We read what that benighted  
 Creep of a *Clarion* critic wrote."  
 "Oh, him!" says Jan, and clears her throat:  
 "But, Liz, you look . . . Well, *are* you?" Flushing,  
 Liz says: "We haven't wasted time!  
 Paul's dubbed me Doubly Lovely. I'm  
 Now in my sixth month! Talk of rushing. . . ."  
 Jan smiles: "At eight this Friday night  
 I'm throwing a party. Come. All right?"

The party, planned to start at seven,  
 Once meant to mark the show's success,  
 Will act now as a wake to leaven  
 Its burial. Jan, through her distress,  
 Thinks, "It's a fine chance—what could match it?—  
 To force a burial of the hatchet. . . .  
 It's good I asked them to come late.  
 I'll have John softened up by eight.  
 By nine they'll see their feud's a pity.  
 By ten, tears streaming from their eyes,  
 They'll pledge a love that never dies. . . .  
 Now watch out, drive straight, Walter Mitty!"  
 Jan's let her fertile fancy goad  
 Her pickup halfway off the road.

This stalwart vehicle that's carried  
 Jan and her sculpture round for years,  
 Now rusty and, of late, much harried  
 By the complaints of age, appears  
 To be on its last legs (a metaphor  
 Hardly well-tuned), and not much better for  
 Checkups and oilings and repair,  
 It coughs and spasms now that a chair  
 And desk, with John's help, are transported  
 Up to his house: Jan's grandmom's old  
 Furniture which Jan isn't bold  
 Enough to risk to the assorted  
 Wine stains and cigarette burns and knocks  
 Of Friday night's prospective shocks.

12.26

On Friday morning, preparations  
Complete for that night's revels—rare  
Foresight for Jan, whose inclination  
Is to leave all such things to prayer—  
She drives to Stanford. Sue, who's leaving  
For France on Monday, has been grieving  
That, hassle-bound, she can't attend  
The celebration of her friend.  
So Jan drives down; and while assisting  
Sue in her packing, sheds a tear  
That she won't see her for a year,  
And Sue too, twisting and untwisting  
Her hands, is silent as they part. . . .  
But now Jan's pickup will not start.

12.27

No coaxing, gear manipulation,  
Or bluster has the least effect.  
At last Jan in exasperation  
Says, "Well, I guess I should inspect  
The bus and train timetables. Let me  
Work this thing out, or it'll get me  
Into real trouble. John can hold  
The fort—but since I haven't told  
Him they'll be there, I'd better call them  
And ask them to come later still.  
Yes, that way I'll be sure I will  
Be home to see John doesn't bawl them  
Out of the house. . . . What's Liz's new  
Number up in the city, Sue?"

Jan phones; Phil makes a fresh suggestion:  
 "Jan, I phoned Matt Lamont today.  
 Since he's my doc, I had a question  
 About Liz. . . . Fine! . . . Well, anyway,  
 Matt said in passing he'd be coming  
 Northward today. How about bumming  
 A ride up with him. Here's his phone. . . .  
 He's taking off some time with Joan  
 And Chuck; the three of them are going  
 For two weeks—up to Oregon. . . .  
 Oh, if you really want some fun,  
 Ask how his orchids have been growing. . . .  
 Eight-thirty then, Jan? . . . Yes, that's right.  
 Better call soon. See you tonight."

## 12.29

Jan phones, walks over. "It's no trouble  
 At all," says Matt. "Meet my wife, Joan.  
 And this is Chuck. . . . Excuse the rubble—  
 It's a rock garden. We've not grown  
 Cacti before—it's quite exciting—  
 We hope, by next year. . . . Now, stop fighting  
 With Mom. . . . Joan, dear, it's getting late. . . ."  
 Matt breaks off here to arbitrate  
 Between them on the question whether  
 Chuck's *Star Wars* weaponry should go  
 With them to Oregon—and so,  
 When in an hour they're all together  
 (Appeased, prepared, and locked and packed)  
 Inside the car, and the car's backed

Out of the driveway, it is getting  
 Darker, and Jan now fears she's late.  
 The moon is thin. The sun is setting.  
 She glances at her watch: "It's eight.  
 I won't be there in time to screen them  
 From any sparks that fly between them."  
 She thinks, "Please, John, don't be a fool.  
 I love you. Please don't lose your cool."  
 The radio's tuned to a jazz station;  
 Chuck, in the back, is half asleep  
 On Joan's arm; Jan tries hard to keep  
 Her mind, meanwhile, on Matt's damnation  
 Of legislators who betray  
 Bird sanctuaries along the bay.

Joan laughs, "Now, Jan, don't let Matt bore you!  
 Don't listen to him with such deep  
 Attention, or he'll fall flat for you. . . .  
 Sweetheart, it seems Chuck's gone to sleep. . . .  
 You know, Jan, as a rule, Matt's never  
 So voluble—I haven't ever  
 Seen it before—with someone he's  
 Just met. . . . Well, darling, shall we seize  
 Janet and take her with us? . . ." Slowly,  
 Dusk turns to dark, and from the car  
 Jan sees how, star by star by star,  
 The sky, now constellated wholly,  
 Domes over the fluid freeway, bright  
 With red and silver lanes of light.

Back in her studio, John's perplexity  
 Increases as the minutes pass.  
 He makes sure that the chilled convexity  
 Of everybody's champagne glass  
 Is smoothly brimmed; but all his suavity  
 Fails to disguise his heart's concavity.  
 "Where's Jan?" he thinks, half sad, half cross.  
 "She's always late. I'm at a loss  
 To talk to any of these arty  
 Weirdos and freaks. . . . Oh, oh, there's Bjorn,  
 Courting that Sheep with crumpled horn. . . .  
 Dammit, where's Jan? This is her party!"  
 His ponderings abruptly freeze  
 As, turning to the door, he sees

—O God! How could Jan do this to him?  
 To leave him no excuse for flight  
 Or subterfuge, to superglue him  
 To the host's chair, then to invite—  
 Liz and Phil here? As pale as paper,  
 As if he'd just inhaled the vapor  
 Of Love Canal, face white with strain,  
 John pours two glasses of champagne,  
 Then, walking to the door and handing  
 Them to the guests—a gesture planned  
 So as not to have to take their hand—  
 Mutters, "In here—or on the landing—  
 Enjoy yourselves. As you can see,  
 I've got my work cut out for me."

He turns around abruptly, leaving  
 Liz and Phil chilled. Liz wants to flee  
 This bitter vision. Phil, retrieving  
 A tinge of equanimity,  
 Says, "Liz, let's speak to Jan," then, seeing  
 Jan isn't there, thinks, "Is she being  
 Deliberately elusive? Or  
 Didn't she get a ride? I'm sure  
 Matt hadn't left yet when I told her  
 To call him." He goes up to John  
 And asks him, "John, where's Janet gone?"  
 "Not here yet." John's eyes flash and smolder.  
 "Well, may I use the phone?" "Feel free,"  
 John says with tight civility.

Phil dials the Lamonts'. Arriving  
 At the conclusion that they've gone,  
 He tells John: "The Lamonts were driving  
 This evening up to Oregon.  
 Jan got a ride with them. I'm guessing  
 Friday night traffic is what's messing  
 Their timing up. An hour more,  
 And Jan will be here, that's for sure."  
 John thinks, "I'm not so sure about it.  
 It's quite a standard Janet jape  
 To set things up, and then escape.  
 But Oregon? Sure, I don't doubt it. . . .  
 Damn, damn that woman and her wiles—"  
 And then, despite himself, he smiles.



Jan's absent, but her party's swinging.  
Funny that no one seems to care,  
John muses (now the phone is ringing)  
Whether or not the host is there.  
He squeezes through the reveling fever  
Toward the phone, lifts the receiver:  
"Yes . . . Hayakawa . . . What? Police? . . ."  
All sounds around him swiftly cease.  
Phil looks at John: eyes closed, and gasping  
As if for life and breath, he stands,  
The Mickey Mouse phone in his hands,  
Reiterating without grasping  
Three words that gradually sink in  
As he repeats them: "Next of kin?"

# THIRTEEN

---

## 13.1

A month has passed. The moon is rising.  
A balmy night in late July  
Rests on the city, exorcising  
The summer fog. Around the sky  
The great imputed constellations,  
Differently seen by different nations,  
And that great current over all  
That Janet's grandmother would call  
The Silver River, faintly glowing,  
Counter the city's glittering grid.  
The Transamerica Pyramid  
Spears up in light. A breeze is flowing  
(Quiet as love that's left unsaid)  
Through the straight streets. And Jan is dead.

13.2

And Matt. And Joan. The one survivor,  
 Saved when Joan flung herself across  
 His body, is Chuck. The other driver  
 —A high school kid—was at a loss  
 When he came to: "I didn't mean it,"  
 He sobbed. "If only I had seen it!"  
 Though bruised, and limp as a rag doll  
 With shock, remorse, and alcohol,  
 He was unharmed. A trial ended  
 The term of his repentance; here  
 He pleaded guilty. For a year  
 His license is to be suspended.  
 The dead are dead; and why destroy  
 The youth—the judge thought—of a boy?

13.3

A month has passed. Chuck is now staying  
 With Liz and Phil. His broken arm  
 Is healing. Cuff and Link are playing  
 With Charlemagne. No serious harm  
 Has come to Liz—the shock bypassed her;  
 Phil, shielding her from the disaster,  
 Dealt with the details of the late  
 Matthew and Joan Lamont's estate.  
 Again tonight the moon advances,  
 A casual crescent, fine and high,  
 A sort of innocent passerby  
 Across the city of Saint Francis,  
 Across the freeway, red and white,  
 With last month's curvature and light.

## 13.4

Patron of your beloved city,  
 O San Francisco, saint of love,  
 Co-sufferer in searing pity  
 Of all our griefs, whom from above  
 Birds would alight on, singing, feeding  
 Within your hands—hands pierced and bleeding  
 With Christ's own signs—who, stigmatized  
 As dupe and clown, apostrophized  
 The sun in its white blistering starkness  
 As brother, and the blistered moon  
 As sister, and who, blind at noon,  
 Opened your heart and sang in darkness—  
 And where it was, sowed light, look down.  
 Solace the sorrows of your town.

## 13.5

Phil, more distressed by the calamity  
 Than he himself shows, sometimes sees  
 His son and Chuck, in quiet amity,  
 Playing—and Chuck abruptly freeze  
 And—gasping, sobbing, wheezing, crying—  
 Relive again his mother's dying:  
 The blood, the broken sleep, the scream:  
 Was that, or is this now, a dream?  
 One day Phil, shattered by his pleading  
 To "take me back home," drives him down  
 To his old house. The grass is brown  
 In patches, and the flowers want weeding;  
 But brilliant in their summer bloom  
 Geraniums mass outside Chuck's room.

## 13.6

The boy stands there, pulls off a petal,  
 Sniffs it, and frowns, then tries the door;  
 Touches the monogram of metal  
 His father cast the year before;  
 Reads, "M,J,C," and stands there silent;  
 Then with a sudden rage, a violent  
 Plea in his voice, shouts, "Let me in.  
 It's my house—and I live here." Thin  
 Hysteria seizes him. Phil, stroking  
 The boy's head, says, "Sure, Chuck, sure, sure . . .  
 Here we are." Chuck bolts through the door  
 And shouting in a voice half choking  
 With fear and dust, "Mom! Mom! Dad! Dad!"  
 Runs through the rooms as if he's mad.

## 13.7

"It's me—it's me—Chuck. Mom! Dad!" Stumbling  
 With tears that blind him, Chuck falls down  
 And hurts his other arm. Phil, mumbling,  
 "Oh, Chuck! Oh no!" drives through the town  
 To Mrs. Craven's for assistance.  
 Chuck, silent now, shows no resistance  
 As Mrs. Craven laughs, "So, Chuck!  
 Looks like you're really out of luck:  
 Both parents—now both arms!" and, tying  
 A bandage, says, "Now for some fun. . . .  
 A doctor's wife and doctor's son  
 Should make great partners. Let's go flying! . . .  
 Sure, he'll be safe. I've learned to fly. . . .  
 Sure—here's my license: twelfth July!"

Phil smiles at her with resignation:  
 "Ah, Mrs. Craven, now we've gone,  
 Who's here to save you from temptation?  
 You'll be in space next." "Well, for one—  
 Rowena! Since she's been elected  
 To City Hall, as a respected  
 Councilor, she feels bound to see  
 Her mother acts judiciously."  
 Phil laughs, "Well, well! Congratulations!  
 What happened to her quilts? Her van?  
 Her Grand Quest for the Perfect Man?"  
 "All gone! These days it's perorations  
 On public spending, property tax,  
 And programs that deserve the ax. . . ."

Sitting in the small Cessna, flying  
 Along the algae-tinted shore  
 Of the long bay, Chuck squints down, trying  
 To make his house out. Then with awe  
 He points: "That's it back there. I see it—  
 With the red flowers. That must be it,"  
 And laughs out loud with sudden joy.  
 When Mrs. Craven gives the boy  
 A hug, he once again grows quiet.  
 She says, "Look, Chuck, life's tough! When you  
 Are lonely, or just feeling blue,  
 Come over—we two'll stage a riot.  
 How does that sound?" Chuck, somewhat bleak,  
 Replies, "I might be blue next week."

13.10

Are the dead, too, defiled by sorrow,  
 Remorse, or anguish? We who live  
 Clutch at our porous myths to borrow  
 Belief to ease us, to forgive  
 Those who by dying have bereft us  
 Of themselves, of ourselves, and left us  
 Prey to this spirit-baffling pain.  
 The countries round our lives maintain  
 No memoirists and no recorders.  
 Those who are born are too young, those  
 Who die too silent, to disclose  
 What lies across the occluded borders  
 Of this bright tract, where we can see  
 Each other evanescently.

13.11

The night John heard that Jan was dying,  
 Trembling, and dazed with grief, he drove  
 To the hospital where she was lying,  
 Sunk in a coma. When he strove  
 To induce the starched and startled nurses  
 With incoherent tears and curses  
 (—Since he was not her next of kin  
 And looked half crazed, to let him in  
 Seemed rash to them—) merely to let him  
 Say just one word to her, just one . . .  
 They told him it could not be done  
 Until their supervisor met him.  
 “She’ll be down soon,” they sighed, and fled.  
 She came. But Jan by then was dead.



## 13.12

It was the weekend. Numb with sorrow  
 John sat at home, lost in the thought  
 That if she'd been alive, tomorrow  
 They'd planned a trip. . . . In fact he ought  
 To get the picnic hamper ready  
 And phone Jan. . . . With a dim, unsteady  
 Terror of fact, his deepening grief  
 Shook from belief to disbelief.  
 The unforgiving realization  
 Of his own love now pierced his heart  
 So savagely and wrenched apart  
 His spirit with such desperation,  
 He felt he never would regain  
 The fervor to outlive this pain.

## 13.13

In those first days, a taut emotion  
 Of guilt and panic seized his heart.  
 The vehement delusive notion  
 That somehow he had played a part  
 In Janet's death, and was ineligible  
 To share her dying, grew intelligible  
 To his despair-demented brain.  
 Helpless to stem or to restrain  
 The tears that were forever starting  
 For no immediate cause at all,  
 Afraid, and avid, to recall  
 Their every meeting, every parting,  
 His first sight of her face, his last,  
 He sank his life into the past.

## 13.14

As if some random psychedelic  
 Drunkard or lunatic or child  
 Had left a daubed and reckless relic  
 On his mind's walls, with bright and wild  
 And unaccountable lucidity  
 —So forcible in their vividity  
 That his perceptions seemed unhinged—  
 Old images of Jan impinged  
 On his dimmed life. At work, or driving  
 To work, or after work, at home,  
 She seemed to be with him, to come  
 To him (thus brokenly surviving)  
 Like a rich revenant of life—  
 Seizing a chisel or a knife,

## 13.15

Or standing in the doorway, looking  
 At him with an ironic smile  
 When he, for once, was late; or cooking  
 Some dish he dared not say was vile  
 For fear she'd angrily ignore him  
 Or instigate the cats to claw him  
 Or light an anxious cigarette. . . .  
 It seemed to him that to forget  
 Her for a minute, for an hour  
 To be without her, was a fate  
 More painful than this pain—a state,  
 Besides, so much beyond his power,  
 The thought seemed as dismissive of  
 His sanity, as of his love.

## 13.16

Some days, it seemed, the analgetic  
 Monotony of work relieved  
 His heart. His boss was sympathetic;  
 But though he saw John was bereaved  
 And felt for him, his air of curtness  
 And John's own deepening inertness,  
 Distance, and apathy deterred  
 Much speech. And now, the work that blurred  
 The edges of his pain, constraining  
 His thoughts for eight hours of the day  
 To griefless objects, in a way  
 Appeared to him a kind of feigning,  
 A fraud which, while it brought relief,  
 Itself, at one remove, dealt grief.

## 13.17

Sometimes his unassuaged obsession  
 To find some pattern in, some cure  
 For Jan's death, led to an expression  
 Of prayer—less to reassure  
 His heart with hope or superstition  
 Than, with quotidian attrition,  
 To abrade its pointlessness and pain—  
 Yet what could he expect to gain  
 (He wondered) scouring thus for reasons  
 For one terrestrial incident  
 A universe as innocent  
 Of the night sky, the altering seasons,  
 And human passion as of steel,  
 Alcohol, or a steering wheel?

## 13.18

By day the city shines, and nightly  
 Glows with the stars. A month goes by.  
 The crescent moon, slimly and whitely,  
 Rests in the lenient evening sky.  
 In Golden Gate Park, John is walking.  
 Near him, he hears a couple talking:  
 "Well, I don't really want a ring."  
 "Why not?" "It's kind of threatening.  
 I'd think of you without volition,  
 Not just at times when I decide!"  
 They laugh. . . . John thinks, since Janet died,  
 For him, at least, there's no decision,  
 When every day in every place  
 He's haunted by her eyes, her face,

## 13.19

Even her voice. . . . He fears he's going  
 Crazy. . . . He sometimes hears her say  
 His name . . . not when the day is flowing  
 Out with the tide, when twilight may  
 Extend its mist of imprecision  
 Beyond the premises of vision,  
 But in bright daylight, sane and clear,  
 He hears what no one seems to hear.  
 The bustle of the cafeteria  
 Continues; and his boss goes on  
 Talking, deaf to her voice, and John,  
 Cut off from him by a hysteria  
 That soaks through him like a high tide,  
 Sets down his fork, and walks outside.

## 13.20

Or late at night—when after turning  
 The lights out, he's in bed alone,  
 He hears her voice, and waves of yearning  
 Drench his taut body to the bone,  
 And a sick turmoil of desire  
 Stirs through him with a craving fire  
 For her, her hand to touch his hair,  
 Her indrawn breath, and everywhere  
 The unique musk of excitation  
 Her body breathed when they made love.  
 Each night, like dreams, strange figments of  
 Their nights recur, prefiguration  
 Of dreams themselves. One night he dreamed  
 He stood by the seashore. It seemed

## 13.21

A woman with white hair was standing,  
 Her back to him, before a grave.  
 The other mourners were disbanding.  
 She alone stood there still. A wave  
 Of pity and incomprehension  
 Swept over him. With close attention  
 He saw her knotted fingers, pale  
 With age, her body stooped and frail,  
 Her head bent, as if she were weeping.  
 He could not see her face or tell  
 Whose grave it was. A streetcar bell  
 Disturbed the air; and he was sleeping  
 In a dark room, and Jan was there,  
 Her gnarled hand on his silver hair.

He woke; as if a grip were choking  
 The life from him, gasping for breath,  
 He flailed and wept. Such dreams, evoking  
 The present vision of his death,  
 Random and steep, without cessation,  
 Half terror and half consolation,  
 Infect his nights; and through his days  
 The pressure of his longing plays  
 Tricks with his eyes. He sees her buying  
 A yellow rose, a bunch of ferns  
 From a street vendor. When she turns,  
 A stranger's face observes him crying.  
 He tries to speak, but his dismay  
 Constricts him. Irked, she turns away.

The knowledge that he never mentioned  
 His love for her, or heard her say  
 That she loved him—his well-intentioned  
 Design to keep all pain at bay,  
 To shield him from the agitation  
 Of passion with the insulation  
 Of casual conduct, light and bland—  
 Hurts like a nail torn from his hand.  
 She died alone, with no one near her.  
 Wretched to think he could not go  
 Into her room, he feels that though  
 She could not hear him, or he hear her,  
 If somehow he had said a word  
 Of love, she would have somehow heard.

## 13.24

Weak with uncertainty and bitten  
 By suppurating pain and love,  
 Yearning for some small proof, some written  
 Message from her, not thinking of  
 How he can bring himself to do it,  
 He sits at Jan's old desk, goes through it  
 Drawer by drawer, page by page  
 —Old bills, old letters—to assuage  
 His thirst for some clue, some solution—  
 And there, with his old letters, sees  
 The note he wrote to Anne T. Friese  
 Inviting her (in his locution)  
 "To dinner following a play  
 If you are free next Saturday."

## 13.25

He looks at it. The sweet persuasion  
 Of longing says: Take this as proof  
 She loved you, saw through your evasion  
 And knew your love, was not aloof  
 From you; and without pride or rancor  
 Kept all you gave her. Do not hanker  
 For clarity; you cannot find  
 It now, or ever; be as kind,  
 As generous, and as incisive  
 With your grief as you know she'd be.  
 She loved you undeludedly  
 Though—self-protectively derisive  
 Of love, deluded and self-maimed  
 (Or unillusioned, as you claimed)—



You gave her nothing. . . . John sits, staring  
 At the old desk with thoughts like these,  
 Too self-reproachful, with no bearing  
 On his slight note to Anne T. Friese—  
 More, it would seem, on the grief gnawing  
 His mind as, day by day, withdrawing  
 From every thought but those that bring  
 Her life to life, he tries to wring  
 Meaning from things that have no meaning,  
 And scrapes at rusted words that yield  
 Few glints of insight. The dark field  
 Has little gold for all his gleaning.  
 He haunts the past, but with no gain  
 Of certainty to ease his pain.

Meanwhile the papers, true to fashion,  
 Whose candid columns overspill  
 With delicacy and compassion,  
 Sniff out, with truffle-hunting skill,  
 A local human-interest story:  
 Young Artist Mown Down in Her Glory;  
 And press Jan's parents, as they reel  
 With private anguish, to reveal  
 Relics of their distinguished daughter—  
 For now the critics, Janus-faced,  
 And those with wealth and time and Taste,  
 Scavengers at a scene of slaughter,  
 Flock to her show; and Marcus Ladd  
 Pulls off the greatest coup it's had.

The brassy *Clarion*, as appalling  
 In its lickspittling of the dead  
 As in its comprehensive mauling  
 Of what was young, and lived and bled,  
 Issues an article deploring  
 Those who found Janet's sculpture boring.  
 Enticed by her postmortem rise  
 The journal scurries to revise  
 Its judgment: *What some call aridity*  
*In Hayakawa's work (and there*  
*Are untrained eyes that deem it bare),*  
*Seen rightly, is a tense fluidity,*  
*A classic leanness that at length*  
*Will be applauded for its strength. . . .*

*Such startling sureness and maturity*  
*And sense of form for one so young*  
*(Which braved long years of sad obscurity*  
*And the crude taunts detractors flung)*  
*Leave us no doubt that Hayakawa*  
*Will rank with Moore and Kurosawa,*  
*Or even—this is hard to gauge—*  
*With Pollock, Ashbery, and Cage.*  
 With the same zeal with which they pulped her  
 (But with a new tune: "It's too bad—  
 Indeed, insulting—Marcus Ladd  
 Hardly befits a major sculptor"),  
 The critics, like a scabrous scurf,  
 Now dandruff back upon their turf.

## 13.30

Would it have given Jan some pleasure,  
 This fat—albeit fickle—praise?  
 Would she have looked at it at leisure,  
 Stood at the mirror, tried a phrase—  
 “Too big . . . too baggy . . . too belated,  
 But just the boost for which I’ve waited;  
 Perhaps I’ll land a grant at last!”  
 Or would such flatulent bombast  
 From such a source have made her scornful  
 Of her own work? Or turned her head?  
 Or left her cold? Since Jan is dead—  
 Survived by nothing but two mournful  
 Cats, and her parents, and the stray  
 Thoughts of a few friends—who can say?

## 13.31

The city’s resting in late summer  
 Beneath its foggy pleasure dome;  
 And Liquid Sheep have a new drummer;  
 And Cuff and Link have a new home.  
 September nears; and Cuff is leaping  
 Onto the chair where Link is keeping  
 A fierce lookout for Chuck and Paul—  
 Who on their cream furs shaved a scrawl,  
 A ragged C or L, a marker  
 To help distinguish them—a bold  
 Brown glyph: where shaved and therefore cold,  
 A Siamese’s hair grows darker.  
 Poor Cuff and Link find meager peace  
 From Chuck’s assaults and Paul’s caprice.

## 13.32

While the frenetic foursome tussle,  
 The embattled adults strive to keep  
 A zone of refuge in the bustle:  
 Charlemagne's curled up, half asleep,  
 On the piano, where Phil's sitting,  
 And Liz hums tunelessly while knitting. . . .  
 Thus the young yahoos coexist  
 With whoso list to list to Liszt. . . .  
 Phil thinks: "It's so abrupt, it's numbing.  
 Last August, it was Paul and me—  
 And now it's two, plus two, plus three:  
 Seven! and soon an eighth is coming. . . .  
 Hope it's a girl. It would be good  
 For the boys too. . . . Perhaps I should

## 13.33

Tell them to stop the racket. Oh well,  
 Liz doesn't seem to mind. It's great  
 That she and Paul have got on so well!  
 And Chuck's learned chess too. . . . We'll vacate  
 This place soon; maybe in November;  
 It's fine for four, but . . . I remember,  
 When Paul was born, Claire and I thought  
 Our house too small. . . . Why have I brought  
 Claire into this? Liz looks so happy—  
 Unlike in spring, when she was sick.  
 That yoga's really done the trick. . . .  
 And even Charlemagne's less scrappy  
 Since Cuff and Link moved in. That's strange . . .  
 I thought cats . . . odd how things can change.

—And do change. . . . As for Chuck, poor fellow,  
 I can't tell if he likes it here.  
 Still, Mrs. Craven seems to mellow  
 Him down a bit. But if, last year,  
 Someone had told me she'd quit smoking  
 I'd bet my life that he was joking.  
 Of course, if someone said she'd fly  
 I'd do the same. . . . I wonder why  
 Matt left that note about adoption  
 —It's kind of eerie—in his will:  
*If we both die, we hope that Phil. . . .*  
 Of course we'll want to take the option.  
 Things may be tight; but if we must,  
 I'm sure we could apply Chuck's trust. . . .

I only wish Liz weren't so worried  
 About her mother. I suspect  
 That's the main reason why she's hurried  
 Into all this. But why dissect  
 Our happiness? It's self-defeating . . .  
 Like all this chocolate she's been eating:  
 'It makes no difference, now I'm fat—  
 I want an It's-It, and that's that!'  
 Well, one month more. . . . I wonder, after  
 The baby's born, if Mom will deign  
 To visit—and at least refrain  
 From mentioning Claire. I'd like to draft her  
 Into the baby-care routine.  
 Most grandmothers enjoy that scene. . . .”

"So little time!" Phil thinks; the extended  
 Household, and the Lamonts' estate,  
 And his new part-time job have ended  
 That sedentary if not sedate  
 Era of talk and contemplation,  
 Whose slow-maturing culmination,  
 The Lungless March, throve on the zest  
 And leisure those like Phil possessed. . . .  
 He looks with envious admiration  
 At the immobile Charlemagne,  
 The quondam scourge of Liz's reign,  
 Survey the room from his high station,  
 Retired, at last, by bent and right  
 Her beadsman now, who was her knight.

So little time. . . . Now Liz's mother  
 Puts her affairs in order, tends  
 Her pain, and by one means or other,  
 Contrives to meet her various friends.  
 The family drives up to Sonoma  
 Each week; each week the fused aroma  
 Of dust and diesel, leaf and grape,  
 Imbues the reddening landscape.  
 While Paul and Chuck run round at leisure  
 And speculate, "I bet she dies  
 Before the baby's born!" she cries  
 At the inimitable pleasure  
 Of seeing the young ruffians play  
 Out in the vineyard, far away.

There is no hope now of remission.  
 Her looks betray the suffering borne  
 With every passing week's attrition.  
 Liz soothes her father as, heart torn,  
 He does his rounds of vineyard duty:  
 "Ah, Liz, your mother was a beauty—  
 And still is, if the truth be told.  
 We thought we two might have grown old  
 Together. . . . What makes this so crazy  
 Is that she's only fifty-five. . . ."  
 Liz thinks, "Please, God, keep her alive  
 Another month. . . ." Toward the hazy  
 Horized dust they slowly walk,  
 Sharing the lapsing balm of talk.

While Paul is mocking Liz's waddle  
 To Chuck's enraptured shouts and hoots,  
 And both together try to swaddle  
 The Winery Cat, a car horn toots.  
 The car halts; out step beast and bwana.  
 Ed walks inside, while the iguana,  
 Tied to a nearby redwood tree,  
 Drops its slow head, and clammily  
 Observes the amber sunshine falling  
 Upon the graystone winery. . . .  
 A fat, enamored bumblebee  
 Chases the Winery Cat, who's hauling  
 A mauled and trembling mouse indoors  
 To Chuck and Paul's amazed applause.



## 13.40

Schwarz sees the duo, and starts hissing. . . .

Inside the house, the tearful Ed

Is saying something as he's kissing

His mother's cheek; she lies in bed;

The window's open, and the fragrant

Late summer scents, the sweet and vagrant

Calls of a mockingbird lilt through;

She sits up, looks out at the view.

Now they're discussing Ed's vocation.

Ed says: "No, Mom, not yet. I may

Find someone who can point the way

Or wait, perhaps, for inspiration.

I don't know. I'll decide . . . next year."

She smiles: "Now don't look sad, Ed, dear."

## 13.41

Ed says: "Mom, let me write a letter

To Sue. . . ." His mother says: "Now wait;

Listen to me. I think it's better

To leave things as they are. I'd hate

To have her leave France and come flying

All the way home to see me dying.

Everyone knows the thing has spread,

But who can tell when I'll be dead?

If I hang on for six months after

Sue flies back, must the poor girl stay

And suffer while I waste away?

Not on my life, Ed!"—and with laughter

Not wholly free, yet not untrue,

She adds, "I'd do the same with you."

Dinner is strained tonight. Ed's father  
 Suggests Ed work at the vineyard  
 Next year. But Ed replies, "I'd rather  
 Follow my own nose, Dad. . . ." (They've sparred  
 About this in the past, though lately  
 His father's arguments have greatly  
 Increased in frequency and thrust.)  
 Ed turns to Liz and Phil. ". . . I must  
 Tell you this—though you won't believe me. . . .  
 Last evening—you know how well-dressed  
 John is—I've always been impressed—  
 I saw—the light did not deceive me—  
 John, in a crumpled suit, unshaved,  
 Walking on Market. . . . When I waved,

He kind of stared, then recognized me—  
 And then—just sort of slunk away.  
 He looked real—sleazy. It surprised me. . . ."  
 Phil stares at Ed in sharp dismay.  
 Liz puts her arm round Phil—"Love, shouldn't  
 We try to find . . . I mean, why couldn't  
 We write his father? He's in Kent—  
 I could find out—and if we sent. . . ."  
 Phil says, "Liz, don't get agitated.  
 It really isn't good for you.  
 If there was something we could do. . . .  
 The fact is, he's so isolated  
 By all this pain and bitterness.  
 There's not much we can do, I guess. . . ."

When dinner's done, the two boys bully  
 Their "Uncle Ed" (a name he hates)  
 Into a game of chess. When fully  
 Engulfed by foemen, Ed stalemates  
 The battle by a machination  
 That wins extreme disapprobation  
 From Paul, who claims it "isn't fair."  
 Ed laughs, and gets up from his chair.  
 "Have, by the way, you two decided  
 What the new baby's going to be?"  
 "A boy," Paul says assuredly.  
 "Bet not," says Chuck, who's always prided  
 Himself on thinking such things through:  
 "Bet you a dollar." "Bet you two!"

The baby's born in late September:  
 A bald and podgy nine-pound boy.  
 The household greets its latest member  
 With vast jocosity and joy.  
 At the bewildered Cobb & Kearny  
 Liz hands cigars to each attorney,  
 Then takes six months maternity leave.  
 Chuck's lost two bets, but does not grieve.  
 The baby weaves his web of magic:  
 The three wise cats admire his crib;  
 Phil says, "He's beautiful!" (a fib);  
 And Liz, no longer polyphagic  
 And bulbous, now attempts once more  
 Habiliments that she once wore.

Why all this madness over babies?  
 —And how come even Mrs. Weiss,  
 Who spurned Liz as if she had rabies,  
 Agrees abruptly to be nice;  
 What's more, consents to come and visit!  
 Is it their helplessness? What is it?  
 These idiots with insistent ids  
 Who yowl when their unbridled bids  
 For love or milk go unregarded  
 For seven seconds—or who bawl  
 For no substantial cause at all—  
 Why are these egotists bombarded  
 With kisses, hugs, and smiles to spare?  
 Others, I think, deserve a share.

How ugly babies are! How heedless  
 Of all else than their bulging selves—  
 Like sumo wrestlers, plush with needless  
 Kneadable flesh—like mutant elves,  
 Plump and vindictively nocturnal,  
 With lungs determined and infernal  
 (A pity that the blubbering blobs  
 Come unequipped with volume knobs),  
 And so intrinsically conservative,  
 A change of breast will make them squall  
 With no restraint or qualm at all.  
 Some think them cuddly, cute, and curvative.  
 Keep them, I say. Good luck to you;  
 No doubt you used to be one too.

Marie Dorati is in raptures  
 About her flesh-and-blood grandchild.  
 "Look at that nose, Mike—it recaptures  
 My father's nose. Look, look, he smiled. . . .  
 Oh, what a darling—what a beauty—  
 What name have you . . . oh, what a cutie! . . .  
 What name have you decided on?"  
 Liz says: "We think we'll call him John."  
 John Weiss looks troubled, then starts crying.  
 Phil picks him up, and calms him down.  
 He gurgles, and Liz laughs, "You clown!"  
 Then rocks him gently, hushabying  
 Him off to slumber, while Marie  
 Leans on her pillows painfully.

She is near death; and one week later  
 No longer suffers any pain.  
 No cancer now can macerate her.  
 Immune to the October rain  
 That twinged her bones, her ashes mingle  
 With vineyard earth till not a single  
 Mark of her being signifies  
 A spot where something of her lies.  
 She dies in the mid-harvest season.  
 The crush is on, and nothing yields  
 To the imperative of the fields:  
 Mike works on; no one thinks it treason;  
 They know the vines grant no reprieve.  
 He grieves, but with no time to grieve.

Days pass, and on the golden birches  
 The mockingbirds sing lucidly.  
 A soft sun shines. A blue jay perches  
 High on the knotted peppertree.  
 The whales move southward. Snail tracks harden  
 In Matt and Joan's unguarded garden,  
 And wrinkling unplucked olives thrive  
 Along the curve of Campus Drive.  
 Magnolias shed their vein-bruised petals.  
 The vineyard turns a fiery red.  
 In John's yard, each untended bed  
 Grows thick with weeds. Inside, dust settles  
 Through his disordered rooms. He holds  
 A note he stares at, then unfolds.

He hesitates a minute, eyeing  
 The script; then reads on. When he's done,  
 His chest is tight, and he is crying.  
 It says, *Dear John, We have a son.*  
*We hope that you'll be his godfather.*  
*We've called him John. We would far rather*  
*Have you than any other friend.*  
*Please speak to us, John. In the end,*  
*We'll all be old or dead or dying.*  
*My mother died two weeks ago.*  
*We thought perhaps you might not know.*  
*Phil and I send our love. Liz.* Sighing  
 A harsh, prolonged, exhausted breath,  
 John feels his heart revisit death.

Depleted by his pain, he slowly  
Walks to Jan's desk. What did not last  
In life has now possessed him wholly.  
Nothing can mitigate the past.  
He gently touches Jan's sand dollar.  
It soothes him in the ache, the squalor  
That is his life, and she seems near  
Him once again, and he can hear  
Her voice, can almost hear her saying,  
"I'm with you, John. You're not alone.  
Trust me, my friend; there is the phone.  
It isn't me you are obeying.  
Pay what are your own heart's arrears.  
Now clear your throat; and dry these tears."



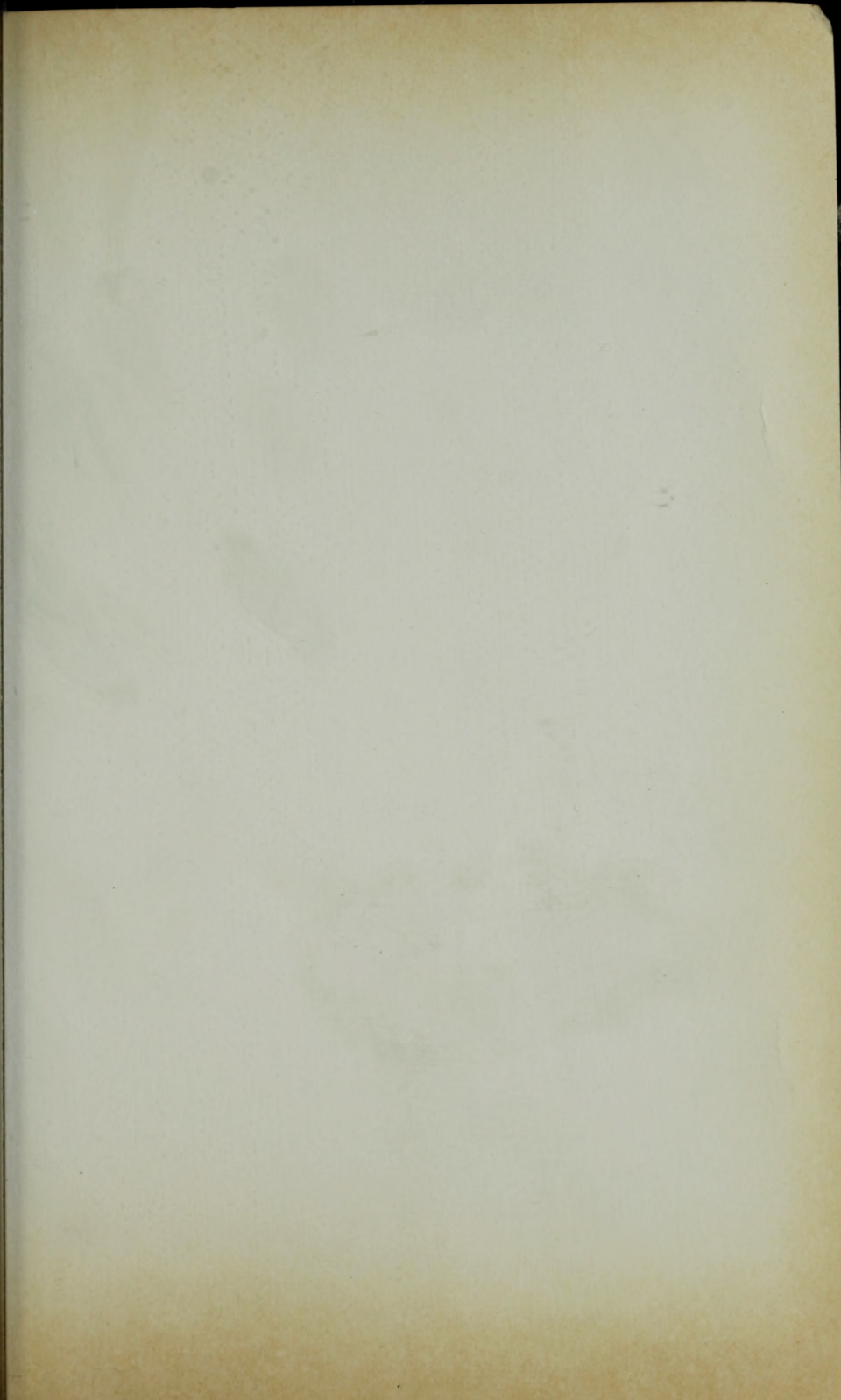


# About the Author

The author, Vikram Seth, directed  
By Anne Freedgood, his editor,  
To draft a vita, has selected  
The following salient facts for her:  
In '52, born in Calcutta.  
8 lb. 1 oz. Was heard to utter  
First rhymes ("cat," "mat") at age of three.  
A student of demography  
And economics, he has written  
*From Heaven Lake*, a travel book  
Based on a journey he once took  
Through Sinkiang and Tibet. Unbitten  
At last by wanderlust and rhyme,  
He keeps Pacific Standard Time.

## About the Author

The author, William Seth, director  
of Anna Freud's, his editor,  
To draw a veil, has selected  
The following edition for her  
in 22 parts in 4 volumes.  
B.P. 1 on West Coast to start  
Four volumes (one, two, three, four)  
A student of geography  
And economist, he has written  
Five thousand Latin, a travel book  
Based on a journey in our town  
Through Sinking and Tiber Unbroken  
At last by wandering and flying  
His books for the Spanish Time





"*The Golden Gate* is at once a bittersweet love story, a wickedly funny American novel of manners and an unsentimental meditation on mortality and the nuclear abyss. Always witty—and still, in its reticent way, profound—the book paints a truthful picture of our dreadful, comic times."  
—David Rieff, *Vanity Fair*

"Like the bridge for which it is named, Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* is a thing of anomalous beauty: a long narrative poem set in present-day San Francisco.... Seth writes poetry as it has not been written for nearly a century, that's to say, with the intention that his work should give pleasure to that ideal Common Reader for whom good novelists have always aspired to write."

—Thomas M. Disch, *Washington Post Book World*

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