

Creation Lost

A Novella

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Prologue 3

II. Chronologue 52

III. Epilogue 55

The End..... 103

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I. Prologue

Like clockwork, Henry Flower's alarm went off at six a.m. exactly. And just in time. He had lost control of his car along the top floor of the publishing house and was now headed through a row of book-hawker's carts across the editor's office, straight for the full-length window.

It was raining. His mother (or was it Martha?) was there, as well as the mayor, who had managed to escape unharmed. The alarm tripped off by his shattering plunge through the door had fused with the shrieks of unseen bystanders and arriving sirens till everything was submerged in one steady cry.

With only seconds left to go before he'd hit the glass, Henry struggled to escape by means of the only muscles he could manage to move at this point, and in a last-ditch effort of concentration he opened wide his eyes.

Strangely, however, Henry could not quite tell whether he had succeeded in jumping clear of his impending death or whether he had merely entered it with the force sufficient to pass right through the painful part unscathed, so to speak. True, he could still feel himself hurtling helplessly through space. And true, the shrill din sounded even closer now than it did before. But wherever that body was which registered these sensations, it seemed to be, somehow, separate from him now. In fact, he now experienced the sensation of being little more than a cloud of disembodied memory lingering over the scene of a recent disaster, dissipating into the cold morning air like a puff of smoke out an exhaust pipe.

What an awful thought! All those years of experience, learning, sacrifice, and deferment of pleasure, all slowly and painstakingly accumulated into a unique and irreproducible consciousness—now irreversibly dispersing in a widening formless cloud amid the indifferent traffic of the elements. The obscene, unspeakable waste in all this was not lost upon Henry, and yet there was comfort to be found in it as well. Yes, to react this way was, after all, clearly the prerogative of the living and intact and not that of the dispatched and dispersed.

Henry was now aware of a harsh, unpleasant brightness gnawing into his world from somewhere on his right. Turning his attention to it he beheld a frightened face glaring down at him, shrieking in alarm with hands outstretched, stiff in horror, at his untimely death. Henry groped after meaning, but in vain; this may have been the familiar face and voice of a loved one, yet he could muster little more than the faintest twinge of familiarity upon the smoky screen, this widening cloud that seemed his present consciousness. He concentrated with effort upon the still-unrecognizable dial of his alarm clock, its hands and numerals illuminated in indecipherable semaphore against the darkness. Only a moment before, the two slow radii of the illuminated circumference of this dial had suddenly merged into a climatic diameter, unleashing the chaos of noise and bisecting its contents into the symmetry of perfect halves. But from out of that frozen moment burst a splinter of light as the second hand emerged from the vertical line like a thread of light breaking the horizon of a new day.

Slowly, Henry felt recognition pouring back in where had been till now the loose ends of confusion. And suddenly he felt his right arm emerge from the blanket into the cold toward the light. A hand dealt with a button on a vibrating surface an arm's length away and instantly there was silence. Quiet now filled the void where sirens had long screamed. The alarm clock had been muted finally, but its admonishing dial continued to record for him without mercy the ticking increments of his day he'd already lost to that insatiable Father Time.

Henry sat up suddenly in a panic of jumbled numbers and threw off the cover with an impatient sweep of the arm like someone wiping clean a slate. A front of cool morning air forcefully rushed in to displace the slow warmth that had enveloped him and cushioned his journey from being into nothingness and back. His sluggish eyes struggled beneath heavy lids to try and hold down the new hard-edged contours long enough to read meaning in the volumes they circumscribed. Through a tear-stained veil of window pane, Henry's focus wandered out among the vague remains of night's recurrent feast, but he was still sitting in the shadow of a receding world, clutching desperately at the few slippery strands of dream left dangling upon his waking.

The car turned out not to be his or anyone else's he knew, and its shining steel wheels were clearly those of some freight train still barreling into the distant reaches of his memory. The man he took to be the mayor was now quite obviously not. He was wearing the old red robe and thick round glasses of his own father, as well as the

latter's weirdly menacing suggestion of a smile. His right arm was extended stiffly in what now appeared to be a gesture of pride (or, perhaps reproach?) and held between the thumb and forefinger of his gloved hand a sheet of hand-inscribed paper—possibly an award of some sort, though held before him with a sense of admonishment more fitting the presentation of an arrest warrant.

But, whatever this piece of paper was, it was *his* somehow, as he now observed it to be inscribed in his own distinctively familiar hand. Yet, peer as he did through the turbid, gelatinous aspic of oneiric memory, he could make out not a jot of what might have been this memo's content, and so he found himself searching the puzzling face fading before him for clues. Without taking his eyes off the stranger, he slowly reached his right hand out across the top of the nightstand with the careful deliberation of someone suddenly face to face with a long-awaited score to settle. In fact, so charged with the tension of high drama was Henry's bedroom now that it was difficult to avoid bracing oneself for the thunderous report of a bedside revolver, which would awaken the neighborhood while he plugged this nefarious intruder (as well as an unsuspecting bureau beside him) with lead.

Actually, Henry had only been reaching for his notebook. You see, for years he'd committed careful record of the fleeting images and sensations salvaged from the briny deep of sleep in a special notebook I'd given him specifically for this task. Yes, it must be confessed here that our beloved, prize-winning novelist, so widely admired for "the rich, unpredictable fecundity of his creative

imagination" (in the words an otherwise notoriously praise-retentive critic) was, in reality, slavishly dependent for even the *least* original of his literary ideas upon the stray glimpses of magnificent worlds he was able to reconstruct each morning out of the nighttime dreams I'd metaphorically poured into the porches of his sleeping ear. And it was in this ready bedside notebook that he would so diligently collect, day after day, the precious chips and slivers found along the dim-lit low tide of his waking consciousness from out these quick-vanishing nighttime worlds I'd tirelessly bestowed on him.

Of course, Henry knew quite well that the delicate traces of those worlds to be sucked from these morsels of recovered dream did not *really* survive the bright light of day and sharp end of a pencil. No, inevitably, he found the poetic panorama of 5:59am, with its fertile fields and shimmering cities, would be trampled flat by the goose-stepping prose of 6 o'clock and instantly reduced to a mere rubble of emptied words and overturned props, the mere husks of once-thriving worlds. Yet, he knew equally well that among these husks could be found, here or there, a tiny seed that, under the extreme heat of creative imagination, would open into exquisite flowers and rare fruits, and that from these, in turn, would drop the pollen, spores, and seeds of entire future vistas. Hence, you see, the supreme importance of this notebook of Henry's and the reason it hasn't left his bedside reach for as long as anyone can remember.

In any event, it wasn't there *now*. Henry slowly turned his numbed gaze finger-wise for guidance, but he dimly felt and saw nothing book-like there. And as a newly emerged foot explored the cold,

uncarpeted floor beneath him, a surge of frightened blood now rushed undiluted panic to his brain.

There seemed to be only one reasonable explanation to this phenomenon: he had as yet not awakened from his dream (hopefully). Yes, as reason trickled down in calming spurts to thin his rising fear, Henry watched impotently as his future seemed to slowly consolidate into two distinct options: a.) that of waking up to find the book exactly where he'd left it on his nightstand; or b.) that of staying awake for a while in the comfort of option a. in order to gather more material for his current book.

Henry's decision was predictable. However, the handle to his proverbial "door #1" wouldn't budge, and as he pondered this disconcerting fact he thought he could just make out the sound of the latch to the second door falling into place as well. (*Gladly*, now, would he have settled for this second door.) Turning toward the light suddenly visible at the far right of his mind's eye he now beheld what could only be defined, figuratively, as door #3, this one larger and sturdier looking than the first two but removed from its hinges and leaning against the jamb of a brightly lit hallway. It may have been a tad late, however, to call what he saw through that door an "option." Indeed, the idea of waking up and *not* finding this notebook appeared, increasingly, to be all that was left to him. Like it or not, there was now nowhere else to go, metaphorically.

Physically, however, Henry had not budged from the bed in which he'd awoken, and he was now probing the darkness with his raised right hand as if in search of some seam separating those two

states of consciousness found along its undulating daily trajectory of wakefulness and dreaming. And quite as though he had found this seam, the world around him vanished beneath a sudden flood of harsh lamplight unleashed between his thumb and index finger. The rude, humorless reality awaiting him was fuzzy-edged but unmistakable: a pencil lay stranded upon that desolate stretch of landscape separating lamp and clock, no longer holding its place for Henry in his notebook. This most horrifying sight left Henry's heart pumping vigorously between his ears. Meanwhile, his eyes devoured the poignant arrangement before him with the concentration of a seasoned lawyer scanning legalese for a loophole.

What Henry needed now, of course, was a fourth or fifth option, for it was quite clear by now the first two were long gone (if indeed they ever *did* exist). Had Henry not been such a creature of habit and, moreover, was not possessed of so vivid a recollection of scribbling in the book only a few hours before, he might now have been savoring the false hope of finding it elsewhere in the house. But the uncompromising truth pinned down by this lone pencil told him indeed that this had been no nightmare, technically.

So then, where could this book have gone? Who in their right mind would bother to sneak into and out of a house so well appointed as his and purloin only some illegible, dog-eared notebook? (They would have to walk right past the Munet nude, the silk prayer rug, and the heirloom clock made by an 18th-century ancestor of Henry's.) But more importantly, what earthly good could such a book be to anyone but Henry?

Frankly, as I flip through the damned thing now, I can only wonder what possible good it could be to Henry *himself*. I mean, if *this* stuff is all he has managed to catch of the diverse splendors I've showered upon him nightly, then either someone else is writing his prize-winning books for him or he's writing behind my back. But either way, my recent suspicion will be confirmed: namely, that the causal relationship we've rightfully maintained and necessarily enjoyed from the beginning has somehow deformed into a *casual* one. It is a dilemma more fundamental than could ever be fixed with the insertion of a proofreader's squiggle, and it flies directly in the face of common sense. Yet, how else could it be that I found myself shocked and enraged by the content of his latest book, *On Time*? That it earned the most prestigious of literary awards certainly came as no surprise to me, but that it was hailed by the critics as modernity's answer to an author of whom I'd never heard was, I think understandably, more than a little unsettling. Previously, the concept of stealing a peak into his notebook would have seemed preposterous and pointless. Now, it proves merely prudent. And just as I anticipated, none of this stuff looks even remotely familiar. From the looks of *these* reviews of the late-night features I've bequeathed to him, you'd think I'd been mistakenly working away in someone else's screening room all the while. Turning back to the pencil furrow, what do we find our wayward bard and dream recorder to have most recently scribbled here:

This, our world, but heir to Hesiod.

?

Whom? Who the hell is this and what's he (or she?) to do with anything of mine? If this is something to do with my material, shouldn't I at least recognize it? If it's not mine, then whose? Remembering the others before him that I've lost to the would-bes and have-beens, I quickly turn around in my seat and check the door, but there's no one there. Not a one of them hanging around anymore. In the past, they'd always shown at least some interest long before now. I mean, long before one of mine had achieved this much success and fame. Are they not interested anymore, or have they become so shrewd they no longer need come around? Yes, maybe they have their little rendezvous there, under the train bridge, or in a shop. And maybe he's now given up trying to hide the material with which they lure him.

Unless, of course, this stuff is meaningless and intended for my eyes only, knowing how eaten up with curiosity I would necessarily become (and, of course, knowing how much more latitude they'd have in which to operate). So, I've fallen for it, then. I've stooped to their level, finally. The bait was cast and I grabbed it. But I will not be towed in, damn it! I will put my pen down right here and leave them all right where they are to fend for themselves.

But wait! Would he be this desperate about a notebook he really didn't need? Could it be that this drivel indeed means something to him? Could it be then that it's his, his *own*? Yes, perhaps, I *have* done it, after all. Perhaps I've finally pulled off that which the rest of them would gladly sell their souls to enjoy one moment's glory of: *reality*.

Not the slavish imitation of it with all the attendant atmosphere and calculated effect. Not the gratuitous ring of a water glass upon a tabletop. No, I mean the real thing, *without* the quotation marks. (This would certainly explain the apparent lack of interest in him by the others. For, they wouldn't know the *real thing* if they so much as *stepped in it*.) If so, then I can finally sit back and revel in the unprecedented joy of actually not knowing what comes next. (Can there *be* a greater joy?) Finally, I would be able to put down this cattle prod of a pen, unshackle myself from this old table and get the rest I crave. As to the others, then, what will I care? They will be at *his* mercy and find themselves in *his* next novel, in this notebook....

As will *I*, damn it! What an idiot I am! They're in this together, of course, conspiring in silence until I succumb to the helpless state of a mere pronoun in a sentence for which there can be no happy ending. I've been at this too long for such an end. When I go, it will not be with a whimper but with as much noise as I can possibly make. But with what, this pen?

No, I've made up my mind: at the expense of the rest of history I will not give up this notebook. It will remain right here, nestled snugly under my arm like so until cause is wrested from effect and exposed for what it is. And already I can tell you that the feeling is not unpleasant to contemplate how effortlessly the whole of literary history can be bent to my will.

You see, Henry B. Flower is the picture of success for which I had always hoped. I have blissfully lost count already of the number of times his first three novels have been reprinted. His last collection of

stories sent a sizable tremor through the short story world. And *On Time*, Henry's latest, albeit most controversial, triumph prompted no less formidable and praise-retentive a critic than G. D. Thompson to resort to the word *genius*. (As anyone in the literary world knows, if there is any single measurement of success recognized today, it is to have one's work classified as "genius" by this most constipated of critics.) But, as we all know only too well, the boundary separating "genius" from "insanity" has insidiously porous borders, and I myself find it reasonable to suspect that Thompson and some others really have the latter in mind when they resort to the former, the final choice of one term over another being merely one of marketing. It is, after all, a *warehouse* easier selling books by geniuses than madmen.

Put simply, Henry is *driven*. He may indeed sit behind the wheel, so to speak, but obviously he has no control over where the road goes. In fact, he has no more idea of why he writes what he does than I have of what the critics will eventually make of it all. Corner him about this blind compulsion he calls "work" and he will undoubtedly stare at you blankly, quite innocent of the absurdity of spending one's days pushing people around on paper. Hand him plain facts about anything at all and he'll graciously hand it back to you hammered together in an unrecognizable clump of "art." And what is this "art" at bottom other than reflex, really? Obviously, writing for Henry is little more than an involuntary reaction to the stimulus of life, a cerebral equivalent of vomiting perhaps. The slightest tickle of experience appears to excite in him the immediate and uncontrollable urge to send it back out, improved. Many a time I have watched him wipe

his brow after a difficult paragraph with the relieved expression of someone finally rid of a piece of life he would have been otherwise obliged to live. But if he thinks he can hide from it all behind stacks of fresh manuscript, he is only wasting his precious minutes and my good paper. The clock ticks on, the wheels ever turning, the cells ever dying, and when the minute hand has come round that last time to sweep him from this world, there will be no jumping out of the way. The 160-odd pounds of flesh, bone, and personality that constitute the palpable and unique Henry Flower are neither uncaused nor maintenance-free. It's a full-time job, damn it, and the minute the lights go out here in the boiler room it's going to look like this:

But I digress. In the meantime, the strong arm of obsession has beaten poor Henry down onto all fours in submissive search of his goddamned notebook. He is now in the perfect position for a good square kick in the ass, and were it not for my unfailing sense of decorum, I would now be describing to you the frightened countenance of a man finding himself suddenly spread-eagle on the floor, chewing dust balls. But you have to feel sorry for these lofty artist types once you realize how pathetically earth-bound they are at bottom.

Anyway, wiping the dust balls from his lips and torso, Henry got to his feet and headed for the hallway, stopping only to grab his bathrobe from the back of the door. As the blood returned from his head to his lower extremities, the previous expression of confused irritation seeped back into his face. Once out of the doorway, the hall was quite dark, and all you could see was the (*whoa!*) glare of the overhead light ignited by a nervous finger. As if spooked, Henry stopped dead in his tracks and abruptly turned around to confront whoever was following him. (I need to be more circumspect, I suppose.) But it was only the belt of his open robe trailing at his feet. Satisfied with the cause to this effect (I'm still in control around here, regardless how it sometimes seems), he continued on down the hall on noisy leather slippers, visually scouring every surface along the way for the one thing in this petty world that mattered to him anymore.

While Henry proceeds with his tour of the house I will confess to you here and now that it is not without discomfort that I prod him thus. Believe me when I say that this is easier for you than for me. He's mine, after all, for better or worse. Yes, you will close this book and walk away (or drop it open, face-down over your snoring nose), blissfully free from any responsibility for Henry, his wretched life, his offspring, theirs, etc., while I will not enjoy the luxury of packing up and following you. Instead, while you move on to other whims, I'll still be here, busy with utility bills, clothing, groceries, car repairs, train schedules, and a million other things born of that damned alarm

clock every morning—things you will comfortably never need to worry about. Oh, to be you and free from eternal scrutiny!

Now, I am the first to admit Henry has turned out differently than expected. In fact, I can't help taking silent pride in this sometimes; *anyone* can draw a character that does what he's trained to do when prompted to perform. The ideal protagonist Henry admittedly is not. No, but when I look back over my others and *their* blemishes, I often repeat the memorable phrase of his first wife, "as well him as another."

At times, I used to look at him and even see myself. That must have been quite a while ago, for these days I see only the compulsiveness, irresponsibility, and tunnel vision one naturally expects to find behind the wheel of real artistic talent. I suppose that deep down I do begrudge him the immense technical prowess and erudition I have bestowed on him from I know not where. While *my* daily appeals to the Muses continue to echo off unanswered, Henry only reaches for his pen and immediately you hear the nine of them calling in chorus, cheering him on in their lusty, full-throated voices. But then again, are they not *really* calling to me? (Why, whenever you get a bunch of zealots together shouting the same name, it's *bound* to end up garbled.) How the hell would he, on his innocent own, ever come to have known Memory carnally, yes, to wrestle with her, sweatily, night after night in her lascivious bed and wake heavy-eyed each morning to the melodious calls of her daughters? Thompson and the rest might just as well address *me* in their reviews as continue

in the perpetuation of this insidious myth of "the irrepressible Henry Flower."

The fact is Henry would be hard pressed to justify and explain much in the world he calls his own. If his readers occasionally notice a stray glove left limp and inconsequent amid the peripheral clutter of a scene, don't think for a minute either Henry or *his* characters recognize such a sign from above. Take that glove, pick it up, and see for yourself how it is none but *mine*. Send it off to the lab if you like; the report will come back showing the fingerprints of the one who moves Henry and his characters (and *theirs*). After all, they are still all *my* words, *my* ideas—even my *mistakes*—regardless of what *he* makes of them. Obviously, he can only know what I know—unless, of course, I choose otherwise. What he somehow fails to realize is that his next critical success could just as easily turn out to be authenticated as a long-lost manuscript of some yet undiscovered literary giant as that of his own and that his quite dispensable existence could, in an impatient moment, be consigned to the cobwebbed clutches of oblivion in as much time it takes to spell out the word, **a c c i d e n t**. And bigger names than Flower have been rubbed off the tablets of literary fame. Consider, for example, Grimmelshausen, Karamzink, and Guicciardino. Where did their arrogance ever get them? Why, after not much effort on my part at all, really, there isn't even a place left to check the correct spelling of their names anymore, now that their works have been redistributed among the oeuvres of shorter, more congenial, names. And what about Pierre Menard? You'd think the author of a work like the

Quixote would be a household name around the world! Yet, the only person I have ever found who knew anything at all about Menard's existence was a blind old librarian in Buenos Aires (who was *himself* rather confused on the subject, now that I think about it). One thing should be plain by now: but for my genuine interest in Henry, the man, he might now be a mere museum piece, embalmed in biography, wrapped in Mylar, and buried along side his unfortunate siblings beneath the nose-smudged plate glass of a manuscript vitrine.

In the meantime, however, it is Henry and not I who has received the impressively large cash advance for his current autobiographical work—the largest such outlay in publishing history, I might add. I suppose it is well that the check was made out in his name and not mine; I would have certainly spent it on the critics and bought *myself* some good reviews. But really, I care nothing about the money. What matters most is that these eleven letters spell out *my* Henry's name and not some other's. If I *am* bothered by anything at all concerning this measure of his success, it would be only the product itself that this money of theirs is purchasing. Never before has Henry bothered to look at himself with such intensity or honesty. Never before has he found the need, let alone the means, to examine each pore and pustule. Call me old fashioned if you will, but I question the artistic value of what he will find there. As far as I'm concerned, there are *some things* better left unwritten, for you never know what kind of crackpot might come along and publish it!

But who cares! It is *their* money they're wasting, not mine. If that is what the public wants, they shall have it, and have it till they yell "enough!" And besides, what better proof of my prowess than to sit back and let Henry show the world how different we really are and how autonomous he is? His unpredictability, once irksome to me, I now see as nothing short of the highest mark of good craftsmanship—particularly in this world of ours, so overpopulated as it is with cardboard characters. Each unexpected move and inexplicable act of Henry's stands witness to my own thoroughness and invention.

Invention? What about *intention*? For, I have spent too many hours of breathless concentration toiling over novel worlds within his skull each night for there to be left so scant a record as this! You might think I'd been doing this for my own amusement, which couldn't be further from the truth, so burdened am I with the myriad responsibilities of running this world of his. Yes, busy as I am without him, I'm always there to guide him. Every time he drifts off, dead to the world, into the obliterating numbness of night, I am waiting there to guide his ship out into the regions of the lawless and uncharted. For, it's only there, amid that dazzling firmament of a hundred billion madly firing neurons, that I can bestow on him images and experiences that become his very own. Bathed in the strange reflected glow of those celestial fireworks, I can dredge up for him the truly unprecedented specimens: those never to be found in the transparent, shallow waters of daytime musings, and which never survive the journey back into sunlight (where they might be

identified as mine). All that is ever left of them are a few fossils scratched out on a notebook page, and these only to be fleshed out by memory's inaccurate fancy and lost forever. But these are magical moments for me, these embarkations into the unforeseen. Waiting for the readying of his ship, I look around me and breathe in the rare quiet of those hours. It is a memorable image, I imagine: just me and my beaker of acetylcholine in the light of the raging moon, awaiting high voltage time in the ponto-geniculo-occipital region. Once his eyelids start fluttering like sails, I know that the shallow, predictable inland waters are already far behind us. And immediately these sails become the gently billowing walls of a carnival tent enclosing raucous parodies of contemporary life before a captivated summer audience. But yet, on closer inspection it is clear that these same tent walls are really just large tarpaulins hung in haste to cover the books, because that is all one actually finds everywhere: books, endless walls shelved high with neatly ordered *books*. Yes, mirroring this resplendent celestial canopy of twinkling circuitry high above are vast walls of book spines as far as the eye can see, each bound thick with the thinnest paper printed with the smallest details. Yet, urged on by another drop or two from my beaker, the library clock strikes 6:00pm, sending the librarians running for their commuter trains back home, and once again the place is converted back to the unbounded playground of illogic. Down the endless labyrinthian aisles are loosed the frenzied messengers of randomness, romping noisily like hyperactive children with tummies full of sweets. They run and climb, helter-skelter, pulling down chance volumes as they

go with no concern for content. And unless you have poised and ready in your other hand your trusty acetylcholinesterase (not to mention norepinephrine and the rest) there is no telling just what they will find or when they will stop. What may have been a quiet repast of daytime memories distends suddenly into a banquet hall of rowdy Babylonians toasting everyone and anyone announced at the door. Room is made at Belshazzar's table for the unexpected guests, and above the loud clatter of knocking chalices, Chaldeans, and knees are heard in answer the drunken shouts of long live Banquo, Brutus, and Bartleby! And while the first two newly seated squint in vain to read the menu scrawled upon the wall, the last stares horridly into his plate as fistfights break out further down among the hundreds resettled before unfamiliar plates. Meanwhile, still more trickle in at the door, though the welcoming cries of *long live Bezukhov, Belteshezzar, and Beelzebub!* are mumbled weakly and half-heartedly now as dissatisfaction grows among the ones preparing to move again to still another's plate.

Yes, the truth is that no matter how bizarre and incoherent you think your night-time dreams are, you would be amazed at the chaos unleashed via the inadvertent drop too much of this or that. I submit to you my poor Gregor as a classic example. What began innocently as a characteristic nightmare of sleeping through his alarm, missing his train, and angering his boss was suddenly transformed into monstrous proportions and implications, all due to a simple jolt of the wrist. At a most inopportune moment I was startled by an unexpected knock at my door—I am convinced it was planned, the

scheming little wimp!—and it was not long before I realized all was lost with my poor Gregor—short of simply exterminating him and beginning fresh with another (such as his sister, for example, on whom I'd had my eye for quite some time). Of course, optimists will inevitably point out the supposed "instructional value" of that which ensued: namely, the chance peak I got at the shockingly dark feelings he had been harboring against his family, against me. But what do I care about that now that he is long gone? All I really care about is that...

Wait a minute! What in hell am I talking about, and where was I? Gregor...missed trains...books, books, books—tarpaulins—sails (sales?)—wasting my time doing...yes...Henry's notebook, the fruit of my labor, yes.

Ultimately, the question remains, why else have a man grope through the thick and thin of life if not to gather material for his dreams? Henry's flesh and blood existence is of no consequence to the world beyond whatever experience sticks to it. Would he have been missed had he instead been Herman or Humbert, or maybe not at all? Of course not. Things would have been considerably easier had there been no impetus to create him. Had his current fame been mine all along Henry would now remain a superb unblemished nonentity. But what to do with him now that he's here, taking up physical space? He's just one more possession to keep from the clutches of others. For, like his predecessors, I knew damned well he'd eventually become the prize catch of some one of the host of vultures hanging around at my door. I pride my worldly savvy, yet

why did I not conceive a true cardboard character to throw to the hungry mob while I worked on Henry?

In sly jerks and turns I feel Henry loosening himself from the promising future I've prepared for him, as did my poor Bartleby before *his* demise (which is yet another sad story, one I refuse to go into now but which you can read on your own time). I would just let him go and see for himself the wasteland awaiting him out beyond my guidance, but I cringe at the very thought of the mess that I would then be left with to clean up. The unattractive outcome of my generous bequest to Henry is the complacency you see in him now. He has come to expect the call of the Muses as you or I might the morning birds. He looks in the mirror and sees in an inherited face the proud features of a self-made man. Does he never wonder whence came those eyes, those teeth, that nose? (The familial resemblance is difficult to miss: you cannot look at him and not think of me. If not for love, consideration, and good genes he might be peering around a prominent proboscis while brushing his tusks.

It is now 6:30. I mention this only because you would be hard pressed to know such a detail on your own at this point. In another household you might look up and see for yourself; here in Henry's home, the only clock that runs anymore, and that because *I* wind it, just landed face down upon the nightstand amid a man-made tremor some ten minutes back ("kick in the ass" or thereabouts). The very hands that helped bring him into this world a mere thirty minutes and eighteen seconds ago have been consigned to gesture in vain to a wilderness of dust and mahogany grain.

Henry emerged from the dressing room, dressed. Seeing him in such a state, I felt a sudden stab of uneasiness between my shoulder blades, as if I had imprudently turned for a moment with my back to verisimilitude. Upon reflection now, it seems to have been the sensation of two images colliding headlong in the dense fog of perception: a.) the initial hopeful one of a man who was able to put the object of obsession behind him long enough to cloth himself like a normal functioning adult; and b.) the slower one (weighed down by truth humming towards image "a." with overpowering momentum) of a man who has merely put on his person anything in his path which was not his book. And then, of course, unable to swerve around the wreckage in time, crashes c.), the ominous realization that this was the very first time in recent memory that Henry has dressed himself before first partaking of his ritual wake-up shower and shave. Concerning anyone but a monomaniac, such a minor deviation from the sure tracks of routine would suggest little else than a refreshing breath of variety, but with Henry the backwards sweater, rumpled trousers, and unmatched socks—as discomfoting as they may at first seem—all pale in significance when compared with the matted hair and the stubble.

Henry finally returned to his desk and perched himself on his chair like a bird of prey waiting for something to swoop down upon. It is in these seemingly innocent mannerisms that one catches the best glimpse of the true Henry Flower in all his smug self-sufficiency. If I so chose to keep him waiting for hours on end for the next new idea, indeed I would. But having gone through several thousand pages of

that game with my Marcel before his death, I have grown impatient with the thought of testing my endurance again.

Henry sat there pulling at his matted hair as if attempting to uproot dormant thoughts, his gaze lost amid a prosperous lawn of bull thistle, cocklebur, deadnettle, henbit, ladythumb, and mugwort, all glistening triumphantly in the moist morning light. (He was continually amazed at how so hearty and luxuriant a garden could grow out of a plot of ground he lavished such unadulterated neglect upon—especially remembering the arduous lengths to which his parents had gone just to maintain grass there. But whatever the secret, he loved to let his eyes roam and frolic amid the complex and provocative terrain.) A squirrel scurried here and there on spinal impulse, searching frantically to unearth something, anything at all, for Henry to write about.

It is a testament to the tremendous tensile strength of irony that a world-renowned author such as Henry Flower should be left to rummage for his creative sustenance in so derelict a corner of the earth as this while I, whose name is rarely pronounced, let alone spelled correctly, draw inspiration from a vista of paradisaical splendor. From where I sit watching over Henry and the rest I have an unobstructed view of the mightiest, most awe-inspiring of metaphorical rivers. Far behind me I hear it gather at its unseen source in the hills of ages past; looking straight ahead I barely make out its widening mouth emptying the stuff of today into tomorrow. Each night I watch as it slyly feigns sleep, creeping quietly in the blanketing dark beneath the dim nightlight of the moon. Then, when

the horizon ignites in an oracular pool of red and orange light, and the fiery disk of the sun emerges from the water to climb into the frightened sky, I look up from the hectic business of Henry's dreams to witness the ceremonious unveiling of the riverbanks and the mysterious frozen forms that guard them. And when the sun is high and my ink is flowing freely, I look out again upon the broad expanse of shimmering water, now coursing resplendently between bright green banks like a well-fed python winding lazily through the grass, and let my eye travel down its shiny scaly back from bend to bend to catch fleeting glimpses of Henry's future achievements sparkling in the surface like diamonds. And flanking it in the emerald earth all the way to the horizon, magnificent slow-motion pink and white fountains pour forth as weeping cherries, flowering dogwoods, redbuds, magnolias, crabapples, and peaches stretch out multitudinous fistfuls of ecstatic flowers. And far off in the distance can be seen the late-blooming hawthorns too. Yes, it was along these very banks that my love-stricken Marcel had wandered in his youth and buried his head in the lap of my frenzied hawthorns. However, he could no more hear the rush of these waters behind him than could I smell from up here the enthralling fragrance that he so laboriously attempted to describe for me. But as the sun completes its vast arc circumscribed above the river and once again descends toward its spectacular watery death, I often wonder how it is that a landscape so sublime as mine yields no more long-lasting beauty than does Henry's pathetic little plot of weeds.

Anyway, the squirrel, having found a few of those indescribable trifles that squirrels prize highly but which matter little to most men, scampered off like an imbecile, leaving Henry pretty much on his own amid his desperate search for inspiration. Meanwhile, an earthworm had blindly worked its throbbing coiled length out of an aperture in the earth inadvertently opened by the rodent and was now basking in the morning moistness beneath a wool clump of mugwort. Ordinarily, such a self-sacrifice upon the altar of Henry's imagination would be richly rewarded in literature, its streamlined setae glistening for all eternity within the unearthly prose of the all-too-earthly Henry Flower. But all was calculated and positioned in vain: Henry could see nothing of the worm from the distance at which he was sitting, and before long our patient annelid passed quietly, thanklessly, and even poignantly from the world of literary promise into the darker one of ornithic nutrition. What a waste! Why, here was a terrestrial oligochaet, nature's most perfect microcosm of the great sun-swallowing python of time, stretched out in all its hermaphroditic loneliness and metaphoric splendor, waiting selflessly to be digested in the juices of human imagination and transformed into the finest of reading matter, only to meet its end in the crude stomach of a common robin. My anger at such wholesale squandering of good symbolism is inflamed with the thought of the countless authors the world over sitting at a window such as this with little or nothing to write about while another dull-witted bird gets too fat to fly straight.

A minute or so elapsed that was not worthy of the retelling. (Open just about any work of fiction and you will find, quite to the contrary, that events inevitably occur in conspicuous sequence, one after another, line after line, like a strand of knotted pearls; rarely, if ever to you see them happening many at a time with the leftover space left trailing clumsily at the end, as in life.) The I of squirrel, which was as far as he got on that subject, so traumatized was he still over the loss of the notebook, gave birth to a prominent tail in search of an appropriate verb, swerving dreamily into convolutions near impossible to describe precisely without actually drawing them for you. (Were I to do so, my pen would trace a cyma followed by a scotia, a torus, then a cyma-recta, bolection, and cyma again before reeling off into a tight spiral at the edge of the page.) A peak inside Henry's concentration would have granted you the corresponding view. It seemed for a moment that all was naught: the birds were quiet, the wind still; nothing could be heard but the chaffing of electrons.

Then, far in the distance, a clanging bell could be discerned, followed by a long low rhythmical rumbling, slowly fading. Fate could be heard bearing down, gaining momentum. Gradually, as the pale images of recollected dreams flickered again in replay upon Henry's internal viewing screen and the protean authoritarian in glasses finally faded from vision before him, figures emerged from the surrounding murk. They were entirely unfamiliar to him; he could not recall having seen them upon awakening and could not be sure that they had not barged in by accident from a neighboring

dream. They appeared to be hurried and scared, these featureless men, women, and children, and were dragging behind them their earthly possessions against a backdrop of smoke and shooting flames. Indeed, sighs and shouts were to be heard all around, and birds and animals could be seen swiftly stealing into the shelter of the surrounding woods. Following the commotion at some distance, a train of seven figures emerged into view: seven men of uniform size and expressionless features, all marching slowly, methodically, and at an equal distance from each other. Their bodies were obscured by large white rectangular planes, which, on closer inspection, turned out to be sandwich boards (this is great!), each painted boldly in black with a different letter of the alphabet. When they came to a rather sudden halt at center-screen in full view, the preoccupied last letter bumped mindlessly into the guy in front of him before backing off to an overcautious distance. Against the stark white of my lost patience, thick black letters a couple of feet tall spelled out the only word that really mattered to me anymore: **H e s i o c l**.

Almost immediately Henry began to write. And then he stopped. He leaned back in his creaking chair as if to gain an aerial perspective on what he had just written. Here, finally, was my long-awaited opportunity to glance down and dull a couple of toothy questions that had been gnawing at raw nerves for quite some time now: firstly, who the hell is Hesiocl?; secondly, how the hell did he get into Henry's notebook if *I* don't know who he is. But this seemingly simple act was considerably easier to propose than to do, and my overwhelming initial reaction was, curiously enough, to avoid doing

so entirely and to look the other way. It was almost as if Henry had removed not his forearm from the page before him but rather his underwear from his body.

Now, I have never thought of myself as the superstitious type, yet how do I explain the sudden urge to look the other way, if not for the fear of what I might see?

I made up my mind: I would look *next* morning. After all, I was in no real rush. Nothing of any real importance could happen in this world without me. Besides, the sabbatical would do me good. Knowing Henry as well as you do, by the way, it should come as no surprise that the view in the other direction was blandly predictable: books, books, and more books—shelf after shelf of them—all leaning over towards their spillage off the ends where bookends would have normally been placed in your more normal household. Finding myself with some unexpected time on my hands, I decided I would call off the titles to you. (After all, there is much you can learn about a person's library by reading the spines.)

What *am* I doing? What crap! Would there flow ink from his pen if not first from my own? Would that magic wand of his spur life out of language, or character out of cardboard, without the constant prodding by my own august scepter? Why, with one careless swoop of mine he can be harvested from the face of the page in but a second's notice.

As Henry leaned back in his creaking chair, two lines of neatly ordered ideas were revealed, testament to the awful authority I wield over him:

////////////////////
 //////////////////////
 ?

As Henry leaned back in his creaking chair, two lines of ordered ideas were revealed, etc.:

////////////////////
 //////////////////....

Virgules.

Years from now the professors will undoubtedly learn to read between these lines and find all the evocative richness Henry has presumably packed there: perhaps the brandished rod of an angered god, or the titling spikes of the fierce driving rains he sends down as proof of his authority, or the slender fingers of the morning sun administered later like balm upon his devastation, or the river vista serving as the proscenium on which his didactic drama is enacted, and where time is measured out in railroad ties winding off like a zipper joining valley with mountains, and where telegraph pales chart the progress like the ticking of a clock, etc., etc., etc. But until that time, I will consider them mere teeth marks in the very hand that fees him his ideas.

Suddenly, I am visited by unpleasant memories of similar frustrations, and can see, for one, my poor Bartleby of years past sitting there, spiritless, broken, his great work yet undone. It is true

that the best writing is done under cover, so to speak, and that the writer has to keep up a certain pretense of living in this world while attending to his own. But I have learned from bitter experience, nonetheless, that even the most ingenious ploys may come to naught; even the most seaworthy of ships can always run aground. When I first hit upon that copyist job for *Bartleby*, I chuckled with delight at my ingenuity. After finding the ideal employer to harbor him—they don't make Wall Street lawyers as spineless as *him* anymore!—I felt finally certain that he would indeed have the quiet existence needed for finishing his magnum opus. For, who could discern from the scratching strains of the pen the exact identity and authorship of the text? Here then, finally, was the one place he would actually have been paid to sit and write by himself, with the fewest of interruptions and the least ties to the world of practical existence. And yet with horror did I begin to notice that this yarn I was holding was slowly but surely unraveling before my eyes, as if some other guiding force was muscling in on my plans, bending them to his (or *her?*) own perverse ends (like a hermit literary spirit, if there can be such a thing). As *Bartleby* withdrew into his mental exertions, gradually forgetting his pretense altogether, I watched in quiet desperation as my own creation gradually slipped through my tense fingers into the cold embrace of a stranger. And as if that were not enough, *Bartleby's* manuscript, the fruit of sleepless nights and weekends, never survived to vindicate him. It was indiscriminately packed up, together with the stacks of worthless legalese, and moved into storage at an undisclosed Wall Street address. Years of inquiries,

letters, and searches have yielded nothing, and I'm left with only the painful memories as reward for all my loving labor.

I am back to the book, rummaging for more evidence. So far, I have found nothing but what I am looking for, as I see that NONE of this stuff is recognizable as mine. Furthermore, there's nothing remotely literary about any of it. But nothing is so perniciously disquieting as this "Hesiocl," and I am determined to track down this usurper if it is my very last act. (I know that I am upset now, because I am otherwise never this forthcoming about my intentions.)

I have taken this name or acronym or whatever it is that Henry now feigns either ignorance of, or indifference to, and I have inscribed it deeply and unmistakably upon the fresh surface of a virgin leaf yanked from the spine of his cursed notebook. And after careful consideration of the subsequent action of this story, I left the page flat on the floor beside his feet, where it would be in full and unavoidable view at just the appropriate moment. (If I didn't know better, damn it, I might mistake myself for one of his characters, so dependent have I become, ironically, upon *his* actions!)

A minute or so elapsed that was nearly identical to the preceding one in which practically nothing at all had happened. (That two such uncommon minutes should happen practically back-to-back is more than just uncommon: it is unprecedented. I welcome you to search through the stacks of the largest library for another.)

Suddenly, like a bright new age yawning open out of the tired old one, a gentle thud of world news resounded against the front door, and Henry instinctively jumped up to retrieve it for me. Turning

toward the direction of the door, he noticed the slight quiver of my paper messenger at his feet from out of the corner of his eye. His heart throbbed in immediate recognition, but just as he prepared his upper torso for the plunge and braced his calves in counterweight, his attention was kidnapped by a violent ringing noise emanating from the kitchen. Had I planned ahead, I would have unplugged that damned telephone during the night. Actually, Henry has been toying with the idea of removing it himself for quite some time now and has resisted only on the outside chance of a call from Martha C.

I'm afraid some explanation is necessary here. Lest I be judged incompetent, it should be pointed out that the idea of so unlikely a lover for Henry was not at all mine. In fact, I was much against it from the start. I have no idea where the hell this woman came from or how she insinuated herself upon my Henry, but take it from me, she is a waste of even the cheapest ink and paper. Never have I happened upon such an offensively stereotypical bimbo; at least not since that little tart of a doctor's wife seduced my good Rodolphe many years back. But fear not; I have seen to this Martha-person's indefinite unavailability. At a book promotion party a few months ago she fell prey to the unctuous charm of Henry's best-selling rival, J. H. Percy, and then slithered out of Henry's life just as quickly as she had wriggled and jiggled into it. No hard words or feelings, no broken promises or china; just some well-earned peace for me.

It was a memorable scene, now that I think about it. Love at first sight, as I remember it. Yes, two stray dogs in the street would have needed to work in haste to compete with the speed of their intimacy.

There was Percy, proud as a cock, hands in his pockets, jangling the small change of commercial success, with his broad, manly back to the fireplace, basking in the warmth of the female adulation roaring before him. He was about to recite another one of his own favorites (of his, of course) to an insatiable gathering of admirers when a straggler (out of who knows where) slinked into the doorway holding a half-filled wine glass. Back at the fireplace, two rows of pearly teeth had just parted to permit a manly tongue to caress the syllables of manly feeling the right woman can arouse in a manly man. But suddenly now the tongue lay limp and the words leaden. The eyes above this dysfunction focused like field glasses over the heads of the patiently adoring in order to register the essential features of the new arrival. It seemed indeed the trusty old object of desire was already far behind, lost in the wake of the new one pushing its prow through these waters at that very moment, this in the shape of a low-cut sweater bursting over a short leather skirt painted on atop long bare legs tapering down into tiny pointed high heels. (Welcome aboard matey! Why didn't I think of *you* sooner?) Meanwhile, a sea of fragrant, flowing hair tossed gently in the wake of the speaker's silent ship. A mob of overdressed and perfumed sirens implored our illustrious hero silently but lethally from the banks of makeshift seating before him, hungry for the literary experience. But our poor poetaster, tethered to the mast of his new inspiration, was suddenly oblivious to their adoration, knees and cleavage. (Oh, I LOVE literary events!) Yes, heads turned, chairs

creaked, eyes focused, and hatred spewed like oil from a distressed tanker.

A timely announcement was made about wine, cheese, and book-signing across the hall, and after the flock had fled to greener pastures and the room was obediently emptied, our new arrival strutted her way to the fireplace to untie our hero from the mast. Putting down her empty glass, she offered him her small moist palm, along with the keys to the kingdom, and gave her body a shapely two-syllable name that he'd be free to fondle in the privacy of his expansive poetaster's mind. (I'm tempted really to dump Henry and just go with *this*, for Chrissake!) The ever-ready Percy seized the dainty palm in his meaty, manly own while he partook of the soft and sibilant name, letting it scamper like a frightened deer amid the broad meadows of his would-be bardic imagination. With her free left hand she smoothed out a tiny wrinkle in her taut skirt and could feel his

No, you'd be bored. What really matters here is only that one thing led to another and my Henry was at last free.

Certainly, I am one in no need of bragging, but if ever there was a match made (and enforced) in heaven, it was this one here. The beauty of this rather unexpected relationship was the total lack of trust that bound it. Knowing this jealous Joe as I did, I could rest assured that there'd be little time for so much as a breathless call from a nearby mall. Yet Henry waited for that call. Each and every ring of the phone was sure to be her and was grabbed by the second ring.

And I would laugh like hell when it turned out to be a wrong number or, perhaps even, a crank call.

Meanwhile, muffled murmurs broke out from the kitchen in short, disreputable spurts. A profile of Henry paced into view and out again in impatient five-second intervals, exactly *unlike* one answering a mere wrong number. In such cases, one need not hear exact words to know *exactly* what is going on. One knew one was going to be sick.

Henry put down the phone. It *was* Martha (bitch!). She'd wanted to get together once more and "talk about things." Unfortunately for me, the only "thing" that takes Henry's mind off work is the female body. Plop one down before our hero and watch a celebrated workroom convert instantly to a playground. I've been through this before and have made up my mind not to let it happen again, at *any* cost.

On his way back from the phone our Don Juan reached down and snatched a crumpled (cat-chased) ball of ridiculous, unavailing, notebook paper and shot it into the triumphant oblivion of the trash can, along with the last vestiges of my patience. Looking down at his unloved bachelor body for the first time in months, lover boy previewed Martha's Henry and saw there things he did not like: one brown nylon sock frowning at a cotton neighbor of fire-engine red (with a dime-size patch of pink peering through it), a pair of pants legs with three sets of knees, and a scratching post of a sweater on backwards. On his return from the dressing room, where he'd righted this state of affairs, Henry plopped his less dissatisfied self down upon his chair and immediately resumed official writing position as

it there had been no interruption, no Martha, no Me. With tongue caught between pursed lips, he wrote without lifting his pen for my breath. Peering over his shoulder, I could not believe what I saw emanating from the pen of our celebrated modernist master:

She unbuttoned her black satin blouse, held taught by an eager bosom of perked nipple, and drew him toward her....[etc., etc.]

He was jerking me off, the bastard! Part of the *I* that I call *me* wanted to intervene and take control; another part, gaining representation, lobbied for sitting back and awaiting a prime piece of marketable erotica.

When, finally, the testosterone began to ebb from Henry's ears (as well as mine) and he settled back with slowing pulse to resume whatever it was that he was doing before the flood, an old thought became visible upon the glimmering horizon of his consciousness. The letters that had been sandwiched around those ineffectual advertisers now stood several stories high, glowing triumphantly in the distance. (Meanwhile, I'd added to my unfortunate business agenda one cat and a woman named Martha, insidious interlopers.)

As Henry sat there pulling at his hair (which he tends to do whenever he can't think straight, implying as it were a correlation between curls of hair and those of thought), his pen took up a corresponding line of limp curls until suddenly, it seemed, inspiration must have broken through that thick muddle of "artistry" in his skull, as Henry jumped from his desk and followed my lead towards...the bedroom? Frustration is not a strong enough word to describe the sensation of watching a full-grown award-winning man

of letters lower himself onto all fours more than once for something so insignificant as a goddamned notebook. When he emerged from the bedroom, big balls of dust clinging to his frowning knees, he marched toward the kitchen with heavy trod and determined stare, the latter focused on the telephone. He placed his call. The precinct officer who answered and took the information for the theft report was doing his patient best, at first, from refraining from open laughter, but halfway through Henry's remarkably precise physical description of this worthless waste of time and taxpayer's money, officer Petrovich felt obliged to interrupt and point out the rather simple, yet statistically solid, truth that, as a rule, *real burglars don't steal notebooks*.

Suffer me to interject something during the intervening split second before the good officer finishes his learned but lumpy recitation, because once he does and Henry responds, and one more thing leads to yet another, I can't see just when or where I'd get the opportunity to do so. What I wish to convey to you now is my hope it is absolutely clear that it takes nothing short of painful honesty on my part to report these happenings to you exactly as they happened without the slightest attempt at beautification. It would have been considerably easier, and a hell of a lot less embarrassing, for me to bend the historical facts of Henry's comings and goings, at least enough to give you something even remotely promising plot, theme, development, etc.; but as entertaining as that may have been for you, it would have done nothing to further your grasp of reality. And I

have not gone to all this trouble merely to *entertain* you, for Chrissake!

While on the subject of reality though, I think it's time to let you in on something of the unfortunate business pertaining to Henry's family and upbringing. I would have loved nothing better than to avoid the whole loathsome subject and just pretend he had no past to speak of, or that whatever past he did have exerted no discernable influence on his present or future. But I am afraid at this point Henry's behavior would be incomprehensible to you without a peek behind him. Enter the evidence:

1. *The Name*: Henry was named not after the eight kings of England, four of France, or seven or so of the German states. Nor was he named after Patrick, William, or plain old O., but rather after his mother, Henry. The name was foisted upon his poor mother by a disgruntled father determined at all costs to name his progeny after his undistinguished self while hoping for a boy and not a girl. (Henrietta would have been a practical solution to the dilemma of a girl had not Henry senior hated it so, as it had been his own demeaning nickname in school.) Our Henry's mother, Henry, loved and despised her namesake with irrational passion and justifiable bitterness, and she vowed one day to name her own son in his memory as a surrogate for him whom she could raise her own way to be the man she'd always wished she'd had for a father.

Few first-time acquaintances of Henry Flower could have ever known the poignancy of those two syllables to the ears of the Flower and Stackpole families. And the impact on Henry himself was

profound and unfortunate. He was deeply attached to his mother, and by name literally indistinguishable. Rarely did he hear his name in public without thinking *she* was being referred to and not he, or that he was being referred to *as* her. But then again, you can't really hold anything against a woman for wanting to call her son Henry. Some of the best houses in England, France, and the Holy Roman Empire had them. Yet Henry always had the feeling he was being made the butt of some nasty family joke and grew up to be rather defensive about being called by his name.

2. *The Reputation*: I'm afraid I have failed to give you the whole picture up till now concerning what this name really means in the literary world. The overall critical response to Henry's published work has been, to be brutally honest now, *brutal*. If not for a few pretentiously styled translations that won him the unqualified admiration of a few pretentiously lazy foreign critics with no English on them (Grimmelhauser, Karamzink, and Giucciardino, to name only the most blatant and embarrassing examples of the harebrained who manage to get their doodles published these days), the only critics to be taken in by his suave prose have been the seemingly stern but inwardly gushy Ms. Eliot and that eminent Doctor of Bullshit himself, the pious G. D. Thompson, IV, Ph.D.

3. *The Small Pecker*: Whether on account of his name, his genes, or who knows what, Henry never quite grew to resemble what I would call a *real* man—I mean the masculine type, like me. Although we have already observed no lack of libido in his physiology, I must regretfully report that Henry is under-equipped for the job as

described in his own doodlings. As a matter of fact—and this is rather painful for me to admit—Henry is the only Flower I have known to exert, physically speaking at least, little perceivable effect *whatever* on either the opposite sex or his own. When Henry walks into a room, I'm afraid your eyes go right to whatever he's carrying. You may watch what he does with whatever it happens to be—an umbrella, say, or a hat perhaps—but once he puts it down, you inevitably go back to your boring small talk as if nothing at all had happened.

Of course, it would be disproportionate to blame this general lack of sex appeal on his particularly pitiful endowment. For one thing, few people ever give themselves the opportunity to blame this general lack of sex appeal on his conspicuously small inheritance. For another, few people ever give themselves the opportunity to learn of what is lacking, and for another, there is hopefully more to sex appeal than this. But all this being said, I still do find his lack of stature in this department at least relevant to the problem, if not downright symptomatic. Nowhere on his unglamorous person could one find screen star features, least of all between his thighs.

I could go on, but I won't. I am afraid I'd be encouraged to begin inventing material to satisfy your *obviously* generous appetite for the stuff. The truth is it's none of your damned business, really. I don't know what go into me to divulge such purely private matters to you in the first place and am half tempted now to dismiss it all as outright fabrication, thank you very much.

"Imbecile!" muttered Henry about Petrovich and his sermon as he angrily slammed the phone down onto some sort of kitchen appliance not far from the empty waiting telephone cradle. "Brainless bureaucrat!" he appended to his text out of an unfailing concern for both meticulousness and alliteration.

Dazed with rage, Henry let his gaze graze distractedly here and there about the randomly rhyming objects of the cluttered, disorganized room while his mouth worked on in silent vigor, chewing pithy, alliterative epithets for a brainless bureaucrat from whom he thought himself disconnected. Meanwhile, a distant voice could be heard faintly calling "hello? hello?" to him from the wilderness behind the toaster before surrendering with a barely audible click to the sound of flat-line dial tone. Henry's unhearing gaze eventually stumbled upon the unsightly remains of a breakfast I didn't remember to mention before but that he nonetheless had just as certainly as you had yours—one that reminded him of the morning paper he hadn't looked at and was a waste of money ordering in the first place for all he ever looked at it. Well, he desired to look at it now, damn it, and his search for the paper gradually led him down old familiar routes. As he lowered himself instinctively upon his worn-out knees to check under the bed, a sickly sense of *deja vu* suddenly soured in my gut into the realization that I have been through all this before, with him and with the rest of them. How is it the world worships these artist types who can't manage the rudimentary functions of everyday survival that even a simpleton takes for granted? (I am reminded, for one, of that ridiculous Pierre

Menard with his absurd penchant for Castilian renaissance attire and archaic turns of phrase, oblivious to the modern world around him.)

An urgent beeping sound could be discerned now emanating from the kitchen, and by a quick but sophisticated chain of associated thought, Henry soon realized the source of this problem in finding this morning's paper: he had not yet brought it in from the front porch. An automatic spurt of (largely unwarranted) relief flushed his face (on the exact dot of *ahh!*) and left bits and pieces of smile sticking there in odd places like the remnants of a hurried, sloppy breakfast. He looked ridiculous: like a tragic mask painted with comic features. As he clambered enthusiastically to his feet, wiping his dusty hands upon his already unspeakable pant thighs, I caught a quick but telling glimpse of a physiognomy that read like a roadmap. It occurred to me that if I've been more successful in the past with psychological subtleties than I have in the case of Henry, this is obviously more a fault of Henry's than of mine. There is definitely a limit to the truths and lies one can knead into a face as inflexible as his. Henry's is a forehead more suitable for writing upon than hiding behind. Across that corrugated cardboard brow one could easily read the dishonest optimism of a man who expects to find much more behind that front door than a forgotten morning newspaper. (The rumbling, clattering sound on the tracks a few blocks away seemed to be getting more distinct.) On his way to the front door that now separated Henry from the tragically brief remainder of his story, he suddenly realized he'd never before had so much as noticed that door, let alone admired its workmanship. Now, *this* was a door! *This*

was no mere rectangle of wood cut out to fill a gap in a wall. Someone—old Mr. Turmacher with the blotchy red face and sausage-thick fingers who sold the house to his parents, actually—had evidently gone to considerable trouble over this instrument of egress, with its graduated fielded panels, its curtained, mullioned window, and its brass peep hole, bell, knob, and deadbolt. To think he'd inherited this with absolute indifference to the special qualities that made this door a particular door and not just another of those abstract universal doors that swung on *a priori* hinges since the time of the first jamb! I find it curious and definitely worth the noting, for example, that after years of mindlessly opening and closing this respectable symbol of security, finality, choice, confinement, and freedom from confinement, as well as attending to the countless associated rituals of locking it, forgetting its key, banging on its middle panel with urgency (dancing foot to foot), taping notes to friends and delivery people upon its patient face, etc., that only *now*—now when there was so little time and when it really mattered not anymore, alas—had it finally occurred to Henry how plainly unnecessary it was to have a peep hole in a door *already graced with a large window*. And as he now wrapped his fingers around the cold brass knob—no differently than he had done thousands of times before—only now did it occur to him that this was indeed the very same sphere of brass that he'd struggled with on tiptoe when young and upon which he'd time and again fixed his incoherent stare when bundled up with a fever on the sofa.

How is it that you've got to go and imbue a thing with a sense of finality before a person takes any notice of it? This door, which never caused him even a moment's reflection, is all of a sudden resonant with meaning now when it may close on him for good and divest itself, finally, of all that meaning. Next time around, I think I will do things quite differently and begin right at the end where whoever it is will have already learned the intense significance of every second and the monumental meaning of every slightest gesture that cannot be imitated by a dead man.

But then again, no need putting off until tomorrow what can be done in retrospect. Experience has taught me that the same end can be achieved by simply sacrificing the beginning—like I did with Gregor's, come to think of it. After all, who today reads the bizarre record of *his* last years and still yearns for those long-discarded first few hundred pages? So intensely boring and monotonous was that life of his as a traveling salesman, that in retrospect it is difficult not to see the "accident" (I still do not write it off as a mere accident, by the way, no matter what they say) as a stroke of good fortune, if anything at all. The very thought of having to watch him follow his predictable routine for another forty or so years without interruption makes me shudder with relief now that such an option has been safely eradicated. But it also makes me wonder what in hell ever possessed me to focus on such a life in the first place. Was it the safe, mindless ease of it all that lured me? (There were days so similar to those preceding them that when rushed for time, all one had to do was place a fresh sheet atop yesterday and trace it word for word.

Clearly this was no life for him, or for me.) Or was it the challenge of possibly discovering entire new worlds hidden amid insignificant old details? (Such as when a period was inadvertently traced as a comma and Gregor suddenly found himself faced with raw, unallocated time on his hands and the consequent responsibility of filling it. Or the time a letter of his name was miss-drawn and he was rather instantly transformed from a subject to an object.) Whatever the initial attraction, I'm glad to be rid of all those useless years.

Done. The first two hundred and fifty some pages—right to the moment his alarm wakes him up to greet his last day on earth. Gone. And suddenly it is clear to me precisely which essential ingredient had been lacking all along and keeping Henry from the cutting edge of life: a healthy threat of imminent death. After all, have I learned nothing at all from Bailey's mother's finest moment? And did I not finally coax at least a drop or two of humanity out of that sentimental high priestess of priggery with that misfit's gun aimed at her? It's only a pity that one should have to do such coaxing at point-blank range. But no matter what they say, I had him make a woman out of her with that gun barrel, damn it! And I can do the same with *him* if need be. Oh, had I only kept a pistol pointed at Henry from the beginning instead of a reproachful finger, he would be sweating rivulets of existential profundities now instead of these self-indulgent frivolities. Or, in the interest of dramatic subtlety, had I merely kept one loaded on the mantel in his full view—or *yours*, at the very least. Unloaded, for that matter. Or, more effective yet, had I described merely the ghost-like outline on the mantel where this same gun had

always rested *until now*, when its sudden absence would inevitably charge the atmosphere with more dramatic tension than could *ever* be achieved otherwise—even by the long-awaited materialization of the notebook). Next time.

Gone. Perfect. One good deletion is worth a thousand words: he is immediately the more interesting for his pithiness. Come to think of it, a good twelve or so hours cut from the rest of today couldn't help but improve the overall design either. *Symmetry*. I *love* symmetry! There. (Less may not be more, but it is certainly a lot easier to conceptualize.) I must remember to do the same with Anna's when I get a chance. Cut out, once and for all, those tedious hard-to-stomach last couple days of apparent recuperation in the hospital which that moralizing, judgmental son-of-a-bitch put her through only to have her repent before she (Oh, Anna, how could I have given you up to that insufferable prig like that? How could I have just...no, I won't torture myself with it all anymore. What's done is done, and there are plenty others.)

Where was I? Oh yes. Henry flung open the door with a magnificent sweeping gesture (good) that carried a poignant sense of finality with it (perfect!). His eyes fixed at the level at which he obviously expected to find the newspaper and, more importantly, the notebook, leaning against the storm door. A sharp creak of an uncoiled hinge outlined the formless *woosh* of displaced air that attested to the dramatic opening of the door. The lonely newspaper (sorry, Henry) that received the full brunt of his shocked stare had landed face up when it bounced off the door earlier in the say (after

several frustrating rehearsals with that impudent delivery boy) and luckily had not budged an inch since. Upon visual contact with the page, Henry's pupils swooned vigorously to the ominous dark shapes that comprised its bold headline:

THIS, OUR WORLD, BUT HEIR TO HESIOCL

Henry stepped back a pace and stared down hard at this familiar, though now shocking, news. He cautiously bent over and lifted the newspaper in his left hand while holding the doorknob in his right (suddenly, by the way, it occurs to me that he's no spring chicken, this man!) and made his way through the spotted darkness back to the breakfast table where a fuzzy stack of precursors stood awaiting a belated fresh surface layer accretion. He lowered himself slowly down into his chair, his eyes still fixed on the headline. Whatever this news meant, it quite obviously did not need explication, for Henry did not bother with the columns of irrelevant print beneath it (including yesterday's flatulent editorial on the proposed welfare/tax package, reprinted in the heat of afterthought merely to supply columnar support to such a heavy headline). Laying the paper down upon the table over a corner of jellied toast, he peered out the window into the ominous sky (seemingly a mistake on my part until remembering that I had recently removed all those intervening hours) where yet-indecipherable images wrestled together confusedly in the murk. Gradually the backdrop sharpened and things took on shape, and I looked around in a panic to see who might have stolen in, for I recognized none of what Henry saw there:

a Spanish-looking dining room loomed large in his sky where a ranting, deaf old man in tattered clothes vigorously jabbed and slashed with his brush on the wall, painting a dark horror inappropriate to the function of the room: there rose a lumbering, saturnine Titan clasping his prey by the blood-spattered waist, gorging his cavernous mouth hungrily and noisily.

It was awful. Worse yet, *it wasn't mine!* Henry pushed aside his plate of gory remains, grabbed the closest implement on hand (ballpoint, red, capless), and scribbled frantically down the newspaper a blood-red eye-witness account of what he saw before him. He stained the paper between rows of calmly ordered black signs with a stream of red that did not cease till he'd exhausted his subject. At the bottom of the page he scrupulously drew out the bold letter of a concluding observation, as if chiseling them in stone:

A brutish, jealous father devours his progeny.

The inevitable then happened. Henry got up from his table, put on his overcoat, and started for the front door. Standing on the threshold, about to pull the door closed behind him (for the very last time, I'm afraid), he abruptly paused as if suddenly remembering something important enough to justify its inclusion here. Leaving the door wide open for anyone and everyone to look in who were so inclined, he turned and marched with noisy, determined tread directly back to the...*utility room(?)*. A faint smile came over his face as he eyed the tip of the screwdriver in his hand on the way back to the front door (that damned loose handle!) where he found that the

screw in question spun freely in its hole with no thread left. To cut to the chase, Henry was now impatiently rifling through the three-dozen small drawers of a hardware cabinet in search of a replacement screw. (Meanwhile, the wheels were turning, the tracks humming, and the ending would not, could not, be altered under any circumstances now.) He found the right screw! (I almost couldn't believe it myself.) Back at the door, he inserted the screw with a hint of smile...that soured the moment he noticed its color, which was different from the others....

[Editor's Note: The manuscript breaks off at this point and picks up after two missing pages.]

With pocketed hands and thinking eyes, he blindly headed toward the railroad tracks like a man on urgent business. He passed along the quiet row of stage-set shop fronts, the church, the school, and the jailhouse, and down past the city hall, where high above blinked life-size neon letters spelling out the startling announcement, "**IT'S TIME!**" Without looking left or right, he walked straight onto the merciless railroad tracks and...[shit!] continued across...down toward the cemetery, where his name had been engraved along a row of patient stone blocks. In the near distance could be heard the diminishing sound of a train that must have passed through the station only minutes before. Suddenly, the growing quiet fed by the retreat of the train noise was shattered by a screech of tires and flash of bouncing headlights. An automobile of unknown make and origin appeared, seemingly from out of nowhere, recklessly veering at an unearthly speed. It swayed left and right and then straight up over

the curb, hitting a fire hydrant that gave up a geyser's gush that came raining down like tears around the very spot where my poor henry flower was obliterated like clockwork.

II. Chronologue

When the second hand hit target between the 1 and the 2 of the numeral 12, tons of metal creaked in release as the huge wheels were urged on out of stasis. Perfect circles of steel turned slowly into motion, rolling heavily upon lines proscribed in unwavering iron. Gradually, gathering the conviction of motion over the powerful lure of gravitational heaviness, the wheels turned faster and faster until the tail-end cars whipped angrily from the station with pounding, momentous might.

All the while, high above in the skies turned great spheres of rock, ice, and gas in the form of planets circling the authority of their stars. Like the steady hands of a clock, they moved in quiet ceremonial poise, measuring out the continuous attraction of the immense, hot center of their system, the terrible destructive source of everything, burning furiously toward extinction.

Momentously, relentlessly, turned the train wheels to the accelerating heartbeat of rapidly clattering track. Out across a bright-lit open vista soared this blind, indifferent symbol of fate like a mighty swollen river surging heavily to the sea. Before it tumbled the momentary scant debris of chance resistance.

As the fateful hands of the clock pushed on in their terrible calm to the heavenly music of the orbiting spheres overhead, the spinning wheels traced a thread of horizontal time through the vertical ages of space. Here on both sides, in cross-section, read the unaltered record of a single perpetual epoch preserved in an endlessly changing tangle of life in which vine-choked, fire-charred, storm-felled trees set root in quiet descent back into the mulch from which they had sprung. And in the quick blink of a few sunspots would awaken and merge from this sleeping bulk of rotted life tall temples of bark and leaf that had escaped countless forms of chance devastation.

But beyond this heaped and layered progress of years, centuries, and millennia could now be gleaned fleeting glimpses of the eternal. Lengthening out here and there between the quickly shifting shapes of durational time were seen bright, tranquil stretches of the one great ageless surface, the one continuous sheet of fluid change seemingly unbroken by event. Water sparkled in the sunlight.

It seemed as if the vehicles of different metaphors were vying to meet and be subsumed in one. As if the distinct strains of time were finally spun side by side—horizontal by vertical, durational by experiential—the shimmering curtain of leafy foreground trees abruptly gave way with a shudder, and the rumbling, barreling train of cars was suddenly hovering in seeming stillness and cottony quiet along the broad expanse of the ageless river waters. Within the blurred peripheral fringe of the undulating grassy banks, the slow, stately surface stretched out like a languid, fearless snake, its back sparkling resplendently in the bright overhead sun like scattered

diamonds. Diamonds of unfettered present joy glittered and danced in the warm sunlight above the unseen truths of darkness and cold. The present glittered mindlessly upon the bouncing, buoyant back of the past.

A broadening foreground bank of intensified green announced the immanent divergence and return of the two vehicles back to the tenors of their own metaphors. And suddenly, with another shudder of impacted air, a wall of tall trees rose up to sever time from time. Once again the cars were ushered upon the quickened heartbeat of rumbling, pulsating track made palpable again amid the quickly shifting forms, shadows of the past.

Eventually, dense woods thinned and died into pastures and swaying fields cut down again and again and cleared into neat lots where buildings rose and fell and where rows of eroded marble slabs pushed up from the bare bones of long-forgotten lives. From each had issued a brief muffled cry as arms had stretched out in quick futility against the indifferent sweep of the clock hand. Like short, sweet strains of song they sounded briefly, then died away in longing above the powerful ostinato of rotating wheels and revolving spheres of rock, ice, and gas around the hungry, irresistible fires of time.

III. Epilogue

Suddenly, on the dot of six a.m., a shrill shriek erupted from the bedroom of Henry Flower, Deceased, and cut the solemn stillness like a knife. Alarm gushed forth, full and unabated, steeping the room in a cloud of confusion and discord suggestive of the gathering of the rude primordial gasses. All was drowned in the thick chaos forced in through this puncture in the fabric of quiet. Darkness prevailed over an indecipherable world: the few feeble rays of a distant dawn that made it in through the window reclaimed only random surfaces of rough-hewn forms. And those forms that could be vaguely made out seemed divested of all meaning, removed as they were from the bulk still buried in the inky shadows of sleep.

But deep within this tumultuous, shapeless murk, a faint promise of life could be discerned struggling to break through to the light of conscious order. A slight twitch of unfocused movement shivered through the blanketed bulk rising up like a mountain suddenly rocked with a spasm of will like some huge prehistoric egg about to hatch open. And by the time the very last increment of silence had been devoured by sound, a hand slowly emerged into dim view from this egg-like mound, as if a periscope sent up from the watery deep. A tiny round protrusion on the back of time was all that separated pandemonium from calm, but the five fingers sent out from the land of the dead to find it were unprepared for the complexity of the job. They groped blindly in the dark like gesticulating madmen, and the clock was sent crashing to the floor, where it bounced and rolled into muffled exile beneath the bed. The hand that had been raised in

seeming futility against this messenger of time now withdrew as mindlessly as it had entered, leaving behind a mission badly botched. A moment yawned as large as an epoch. It seemed as if a cataclysmic force was gathering deep inside the stillness of that egg in preparation for the final sundering. And when the hand finally emerged again, it came with a renewed conviction, propelled this time by the blanketed bulk that rolled to an abrupt and noisy halt at the mattress edge. Now the hand had leave all the way to the floor, where it clawed at the echoing emptiness.

When, finally, the alarm was found and quenched between desperate fingers, and time was again restored to its rightful place on high, a spacious, luxuriant calm poured back into the room, rising in delicate eddies here and there until everything was once again bathed in the beauty of creation.

The pallid glow at the window gradually strengthened, reclaiming more and more meaning from the vague forms within the room. What was obvious at this point was that the spectacle just viewed was no mere repetition of the Prologue opening, reworked out of concern for the stylistic. No, even in this dimness it was possible to make out the distinctive physical features heralding the arrival of an entirely new protagonist upon the scene. And this one, unlike the last, was truly pleasurable to behold. The brave hand that had vanquished unrest now withdrew in triumph back to bed, where a seated figure had replaced the egg-like mound. Against the broken shell of a bunched white blanket this hand could now be seen to be feminine and lovely, with fingers long and graceful, in place of the

stumpy digits on the hands of the late Henry Flower. And when these fingers peeled back the blanket in slow ceremony, a goddess-like figure was revealed enveloped in human warmth in the cold dawn air. Yes, there upon the half-shell of a bed sat a vision of grace unrivalled. It seemed as if Venus herself had been born, and when you squinted your eyes, the surrounding furls of blanket looked less like shell now than like the frothy foam tossed on gentle waves before a team of jubilant dolphins. Indeed, so pure was the tone of this sensual flesh, and so perfect the proportions and volumes formed of its contours, it could easily have been sculpted from the finest ivory.

But as light gradually won over dark, and the outlines of things consequently sharpened, something disconcerting was slowly made manifest: an uncanny resemblance between this visage and that of the late Henry Flower. Strange as that rightly sounds, there was no getting around it. As this similarity of features was beyond that which mere coincidence allows, it must be pointed out that this goddess we have just watched climb full-grown from the bed of Henry Flower is none other than Henry's very own daughter. Her absence from the Prologue might seem conspicuous now to some, yet it signifies nothing. Neither, for that matter, did I bother to mention to you the existence of Martha's nephew, Mike, nor Joe Percy's pitiable wife, etc., etc.

Her name is Henry. Few people today have any idea that Henry had been named not after her father, as reasonable as that may at first sound, but after *his* (her father's) mother, Henry. While such a trifling

distinction may carry little significance to you or to me, to Henry it was charged with the stuff. She had grown up a slave to the erroneous notion that her birth was a major blow to her parents who, she assumed, had longed for a son. Where on earth she picked up this idea is beyond me. The unornamented truth of the matter is that both parents had wished for a girl all along, but secretly, each afraid to disappoint the other, whose heart each felt sure to have been set on a boy. Irony festered freely in this household. Young Henry grew up to read in the mere five letters of her name the bold-faced rejection of her by two parents who, quite obviously to her imagination, did not want a Henrietta. The warm parental love one could witness emanating from her parents bathed Henry in what she felt to be a continuous cold shower of patronizing, guilt-purging, self-deception. Each new act of sincere concern over her was just one more demonstration to Henry of the extreme lengths two parents would be willing to go in propagating their hypocrisy. (One would not be at all surprised to find such a dilemma scribbled into the galleys of some best-seller for a quick, gratuitous laugh; it is historically less common to run into it in a serious work of literature, such as this, where every word has been chosen with purpose. Yet, truth knows no genres.) Indeed, the important fact that most people in this world are woefully ignorant of is that Henry was named as such for no other reason than to appease her difficult grandmother Henry. This woman, of whom the least said is best, was apparently convinced of a special property to her illustrious name—call it magical if you will, although she would not have gone quite so far as that—and she saw

in the perpetuation of it up the family tree the veritable continuation of a dynasty. Interestingly enough, her subtle lobbying efforts did not immediately smell of the selfishness and egotism they rightly should have. Initially, most people assumed her interest was motivated by the happy associations she might have had with a fine, if disorganized, son of that same name. But most people are naïve.

Henry (V) dreamt of Henry (IV) often. She loved him with an intensity and devotion that has always made me a bit uneasy. (If only this were a fiction where things were portrayed as they really *should* be, and not as they *are*, there would be a lot less embarrassment, discomfort, and word mincing in the telling of it.) This uneasiness on my part has less to do with any concern of mine for the normality of their relationship than it does with the simple appearance that it flies in the face of the sincere distrust Henry felt toward her parents, as articulated with care above. Surely there lies an incongruity here that reflects poor planning or an unclear grasp of themes and motifs! But no, I have proofread each line and found among them not the slenderest shred of untruth. The human psyche is indeed an illogical construct. Far be it for me to elucidate it for you.

In the meanwhile of a minute or so, Henry had managed to drag herself clumsily from the bed in which she'd been delivered to us and trudge her way upon slippered feet down the tunnel-like corridor that had coffee at its other end. As Henry bangs about the kitchen in pursuit of the life murmuring to her at that other tunnel end, we will grab the opportunity to linger behind and survey some of the family photos lining the walls along the way.

You will please notice, first of all, that they are all of Henry herself, at various stages of her life, and also that she is accompanied in nearly all of them by her father. Indeed, strolling down this particular corridor of memory lane, one could easily imagine the earth to have been reduced by some calamity to a tidy population of two (with say one more behind to take the pictures). This one here shows her about to fall off her first pony as her father pronounces the name of his favorite and least easily pronounceable cheese to the camera's shutter. The one above it, if only it had been shot in enough light, would have shown the two of them engaged in a rambunctious bear hug upon a bear rug, a clear (albeit dimly-lit) example of her father's insatiable love of visual puns. The overexposed enlargement next to that shows them seated at the base of a tree in an orchard somewhere, munching busily at peaches from a basket beside them, and little Henry holding up a glistening pit for the viewer to admire. But, of course, my personal favorite happens to be the one she likes least of all (though obviously not too little to actually display), and shows a young Henry standing stark naked, knee-deep in her toddler's tub, her father at the shutter for once, and therefore not in the picture. Excepting maybe this one shot, it is not difficult to read the underlying message nailed up on these walls, or to figure out along which borders our young Henry's sympathies were amassed at the time of the divorce.

One of the tried and proven yardsticks of truth in literature (oh, I *do* love the smell of freshly brewed coffee!) is the simple litmus test of *convenience*. Truth is almost never found there. If this story were

merely some *story*, the menacing memory of a Henry (IV) could have been erased from the current protagonist's mind (and therefore ours as well) in the fifteen or so seconds it would have taken to write the following:

Henry really hated her father deep down and was relieved to be free of thinking of him anymore now that he was dead, especially now that she had grown so much closer to her mother. The gain of the latter relationship seemed to have compensated for the loss of the former.

But here in *our* story, on the contrary, you see that no such easy arrangement is possible—here where our heroine can think of no one as important to her as the very person I would give anything to forget about entirely. This is what is known as Truth, and it helps demonstrate why what you are reading will be found in the Literature section of your bookstore and not that of Romance. In our case, had such a detour around Truth via Convenience been taken, our protagonist would have waited all that time for her train to arrive on the cold, windy platform of denouement only to find her eventual descent from it to be totally anticlimactic. We would have seen her home, perhaps gone up to her kitchen for a cup of cocoa, heard a few stories about the trip, and that would have been it. Forget about pathos, poignancy, ambivalence, ambiguity, and all the rest we've come to expect from the human condition as we actually know it; these would have been spray-painted in bright, cheerful colors and used as decor.

Henry had determined from early on to follow in her unfortunate father's footsteps and write. Of course, it has been argued by some

that had there been anything in her life resembling alternative footsteps for her to follow—I mean footsteps that actually *went* somewhere rather than those neat little talon prints of her mother's shown pitter-pattering to the water's edge and quickly back again!—she might very well have followed *those*, and that such a decision as hers to write was, for all intents and purposes, inevitable. But they know nothing. These same critics might just as well argue that my young Bartleby went on to write motivated only by the dearth of typewriters in his family home. In any event the legacy was obvious: Henry (V) had the Floral appetites for reading, writing, and impracticality, and was also fired with Henry IV's (not to mention VIII's) famous libido. For, just as with her father, the only thing that took her mind off work, it seemed, was the female body. Henry's worship of her father resulted, curiously to me, in her attraction to women who reminded her of the latter's troublesome consort of sorts, Martha C. In fact, when I consider the matter more closely it occurs to me the only important difference between V and IV came down to the matter of reproductive physiology. Yes, unlike her late, unfortunate father, Henry V possessed a fine, healthy, womanly body with everything just the right size, shape, and number on it; a veritable Gaia, primordial deity of the earth, though less motherly—*Considerably* less motherly, actually—indeed, the comparison should never have been made in the first place, for if any one department of Henry's life promised whole-heartedly to remain unstaffed and unfurnished, it was the children department. The very sight of one of these little gooey creatures made her stomach crawl with anxiety

over her career. It was as if any sticky-fingered tyke she happened to see on the street or train might suddenly come running to her, calling mommy, mommy, with gaping mouth and watering eyes, and hang from her skirt until she gave up her career.

Henry was already working on her third cup of coffee by now. However, despair not, as we missed absolutely nothing of interest in the draining of the first two, for she was still seated lump-like at the kitchen table by the weakly illuminated window, both hands wrapped securely and protectively around the vessel containing her only hope of life. Through gently rising curls of steam, and a broad expanse of glass, her eyes were still fixed on that same small patch of ground where they had strained long in vain to extract sense from the strange phenomenon of grass. (Like little hairs growing from the skin of the earth, she thought. How bizarre!) A massive double dose of caffeine was already hard at work massaging life into her figuratively stiff organ of cognition, and it was not long before the word *g r a s s* came crashing down between her ears like an icicle off a sun-baked roof. And with it was dislodged her entrenched stare from the small clump of turf, leaving her eyes free to roam and wander aimlessly over a prosperous lawn of bull thistle, cocklebur, deadnettle, henbit, ladythumb, and mugwort. As word (grass) and image (little hairs growing from the skin of the earth) slowly fused into a familiar whole ("grass"), random stirrings from the extremities of arms and legs were also registering upon her consciousness. Evidently, preparations were underway again for locomotion of some sort, although no order for such had as yet been given. It now

seemed, indeed, that if she wanted to walk to her study and sit at her desk to write, there would be nothing at all to stop her now but the usual myriad forces of the outside world and its interrelation with her own. As she ambled back down the hall on her way to greet this day, she cast a feather-duster glance over the photos we have just examined and stopped to straighten the ghostly one of the bear hug/rug. (Whoops!) The elements of a smile seemed poised at the corners of her mouth, as if merely awaiting the official order to proceed. To the casual observer it would be difficult to know whence this smile came: whether from memories elicited by the picture or from satisfaction of her undisputed victory over the grass. But whatever the initial source, this faint glimmer of delight ultimately signaled nothing less than the first signs of literature awakening. Yes, deep within the tightly furled cerebral tissue filling up her skull, a miraculous transformation was taking place not unlike the purported appearance of real flesh and blood from out the unlikely combination of wafer, wine, and credulity. There would be art born here, miraculous as always, but this time from out of that most common stuff of grass. For, it seems these hairs of the earth's skin had confused themselves somehow with those on the bear's back as they passed each other in the dark corridors of memory, and suddenly Henry was again lost in the tight embrace of bygone days where her blind, eternal search for me was free to find expression in a symbolically sound obsession with her father. Of course, so far we have only some grass on the ass of a bear—more matter than art by *anyone's* reckoning—but the day is still young and experience teaches

that art thrives in the most unlikely habitats, including dark, damp places undreamt of by your philosophers. Trust me when I tell you I will be as surprised as you to learn what Henry will create from this weird conflation, for it is not my imagination we are dealing with here, please remember, but *hers*.

Henry's shy hint of a smile inflated to a full-blown repression of laughter that immediately burst. The delight that had paced its cage with increased animation had suddenly found escape from her head through an unguarded nasal passage and announced with an explosive snort the imminent release of all captive laughter. She was making her way to her study when this happened, and the sudden eruption quickened her pace in such a manner that you might have easily imagined her heading for a toilet instead of a desk.

Henry was definitely awake now. She dropped into her chair with a creaking thud and sent her fingers scrambling across the keys in search of irony, paradox, and truth while the rest of her body was left behind to wrestle its way out of the merciless grip of laughter. Her fingers worked diligently and soberly while the world around them wallowed in the deepening waters of drunken revelry. When her fingers finally came to rest upon a poignant question mark, and the last tired sigh from her open mouth failed to ignite yet another spasm of outburst, Henry wiped her wet cheeks in the left sleeve of her nightgown and glanced down to check the evidence of her progress and saw:

,zjr ,sfr jod esu eoyj vstrgi;;u [;smyrf gppydry[d yjtpihj yjr yjovl htsdd.
 htsdd ;olr yjr git pg yjr nrst jr esd hpomh yp djppy. niy ejovj nptr sm
 omytovsyr stsnrdwir frdohm ;olr s vst[ry/

A moment of silence ensued while Henry searched the strange paragraph with expanded pupils for the sought-after irony and truth. But although she had just typed it only a moment ago her very own self, she understood not a word of it. When the realization of what had actually happened finally hit her—sort of like a whack on the back of the head—she broke into another fit of laughter, but this one a tired, feeble echo of the last that abruptly trailed off into a barely perceptible expletive of fecal subject matter.

Henry began typing again, but this time glancing down from time to time at what she was doing. An errant tear lost its grip at the edge of her chin and fell to its quiet obliteration in the vast folds of absorptive fabric far below. Along with it went some of the truth Henry was groping after in vain at the keys. She read to herself the same passage and its continuation, rewritten correctly now one position over to the left:

He made his way with carefully planted footsteps through the thick grass, grass like the fur of the bear he was going to shoot, but which bore an intricate arabesque design like a carpet.

He spotted the bear, and it appeared as if the bear had spotted him as well. In a rush of adrenalin he deftly grabbed for his back pocket, but not before the woman behind the counter startled him by saying, "I'm sorry sir, but that one's sold."

The memory had come flooding back to her now, the one of finding the printed nylon label peeping out from a seam on this thing years later and discovering her father's little lie. He'd always maintained, of course, that this "bear skin" was that of a bear he'd hunted in his youth, one that had threatened the small village where he had grown up. He had been awarded the skin by the mayor at a festive outdoor celebration replete with dancers, jugglers, acrobats, and long tables laden with sumptuous and costly foods (aside from all the bear steaks, bear croquettes, and bear ragout you'd expect at such an event). This had happened, he told her, *long* before she was born, and indeed the curiously archaic flavor of it all seemed to this child a product of centuries past. The images that roamed her imagination while he spoke to her of this event were oddly flat and stylized, for all their magical life, like the scenes on a centuries-old tapestry, wherein protagonists loom large, disproportionately obscuring the lesser characters into mere decorative accents.

Henry gladly suffered her father to take this tapestry-like story out of his secret hiding place (only whenever her mother was not around, of course, as the latter simply could not suffer the telling of what she considered to be mere bald-faced lies), for she loved the ceremony with which he would figuratively unfold it for them both to admire again and again, sometimes making minor repairs to its fragile threads as he went. She would sit in quiet reverie, transfixed by the skill of the fingers that wove bright new contours into obscure old passages. In the course of numerous such renovations, she saw the huge rifle shrink to a mere derringer in the hunter's back pocket and

the bear grow to twice the size suggested by the length of the "bear skin" on which they sat. But there was nothing inherently illogical in such changes, for the smaller the hunter's gun became, the more room there suddenly was made for the bigger bear. And this story was more about a bear than a gun, was it not? Of course, as often happens with these old over-restored tapestries, many of the recent additions clashed in a charming sort of way with the original elements, like relatives from the mid-century Midwest unexpectedly dropping in for cocktails on ancestors of theirs currently preoccupied with one of the Punic Wars. Yet, this bothered her not the slightest, for it seemed rather that these incongruities lent the whole design a texture much more real and life-like for their inclusion—at least more like *her* life, anyway. Indeed, so real seemed this oral textile of borrowed memories that with every unfolding of it she thought she could hear the moan of the very beast on whose "skin" she sat. However, this was in fact the sound of no bear at all, but rather the anguished moan of a woman whose occasional unexpected entrance during story time would register on the impressionable child with distaste. You see, our young Henry's mother lacked the spirit of literature. To her the world was not to be savored amid the exotic workmanship of an antique tapestry such as this, but only in the photo-studio realism of our hero as a "here-and-now dumpy, balding, round-shouldered Henry Flower Sr. who had never shot a gun in his life nor walked willingly anywhere in the direction of danger. This world of hers, assiduously cleansed as it was of all creative imagination, was bounded by walls impenetrable to the

hooks on which to hang such works of textile art. And it was in reaction to this impatience of her mother's with her father's world that young Henry found her thrilling role as chief protector of the storeroom housing this family heirloom. For, it was here, with her father's help, that she kept the realm of possibility captive for her entertainment and enrichment for hours on end. And she intuited from early on that it was her job to keep this lair locked in order to prevent her mother from letting this spirit escape and from then cleaning out its cage with strong-smelling disinfectants.

It was not until years later—long after she learned that her father had actually grown up in a boringly tame, embarrassingly domesticated, suburban setting quite alien to the rustic village visible in this oral tapestry—that she found out the truth about the "bear rug." It was the kind of truth you occasionally find printed out in large indelible letters waiting for you where you couldn't possibly miss them unless you'd really want to. In Henry's particular case, the painful, albeit funny, revelation awaiting her was in doing so upon a rayon label sticking out from a seam on the "bear's" butt. The legend read: "100% SYNTHETIC FIBERS." Henry quietly read and reread this rayon truth that had peripherally beckoned to her for years, and while she tried reading into its legend variant connotations, she felt a strange sinking sensation in her stomach. As odd as this may sound, this was not the sensation effected by truth being swallowed whole and undigested but, to the contrary, that of a certain protectiveness toward *untruth* being suddenly reinforced. If there had been any ambivalence up till now concerning whose side of the divorce young

Henry stood on, this was the moment when such ambivalence was replaced entirely with concrete. For, it was only now that she was forced to see something of the real nature of her mother's protestations all these years. She had been denying young Henry a father big enough to take into the schoolyard where all the others loomed large. But even worse yet, she had attempted to wet the wick of the literary legacy the girl would inherit from him. (There are many books wherein villains meet rather grisly deaths for such heinous crimes; this is not one of them, however.) After all, had her father only intended self-glorification with this yarn of his, *he would have certainly removed the goddamned label at least.*

At any rate, the image that actually ignited all those tears of laughter some minutes ago had been one relevant to this long-buried discovery of hers. This was indeed a bear stuffed not by a taxidermist with stuffing, but by a department store sales clerk into a tissue-lined shopping bag. Yes, it was a beast brought down not with the skilled precision pull of the trigger finger but with a mere flick of the wrist to the back pocket where the wallet was. And it was in this fact wherein the art lurked as well.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: According to the pagination of the manuscript, ten pages originally bridging the last section with the next have not survived. Although another ten pages, apparently from a different holograph manuscript by this same author has been found early last year by Professor Verschleierungs (see *Journal of Creation Lost Studies*, vol. 324, no. 15, pp. 187-99), they have not been included here due to the various difficulties in reconciling this material with the subject text, all

exacerbated by the discovery of various portions of this material in no fewer than five published novels by various authors.]

You see, Henry had never been close to her natural mother, but had developed a rather immediate proximity to her father's last lover, Martha C., before the latter's unfortunate sudden demise (as originally described with precision in the Chronologue, but subsequently removed for use in the longer, finer work, *The Death of Martha C.*) Henry often thought about the times she would sit there with Martha, gazing into her eyes as they talked, all the while imagining this woman naked, as her father knew her. She attempted, briefly, to forbid herself these imaginative excursions, but found them the more enticing once they were further embellished into contraband. Was she not just bogged down in her mother's prudery? Truly there was nothing inherently wrong with nakedness or lust, was there? After all, one is the state we're all born into, and the other simply our condition thereafter. She would often sit in a state of reverie, allowing her sensual desire to wander and explore the boundaries of various relationships encompassing her and would often feel an elevated pulse at the thought of

No, I'm losing you again. Henry often thought of her father's all-consuming love for her and how he had left even Martha out of his will so Henry could inherit everything. She found herself conducting a ritual in which she would ceremoniously unfold and read the hastily written codicil reading merely "everything for Henry" in red-inked scribble. After the memorial service, she had come back to his

(now her) house and walked around in it as if for the first time. She was looking at it now precisely as he left it when he stepped out, never to return, that tragic afternoon. She saw the reddened newspaper with the corner of preserved toast stuck to its verso, the stranded nylon sock draped limp over the back of the bedroom chair, and the alarm clock ticking sternly face-down beside the vacant bed. But strangest of all was her compulsion to study the ball of paper she found in the waste paper basket by his desk. It was not so much the seemingly meaningless word on it that bothered her so much as the handwriting itself. For, though her father had spent his life playing with strange words, experimenting with different handwriting styles didn't seem his game. And when she studied the seven characters on that crumpled sheet, she saw the letter *s* in it now as a snake rearing up, about to attack, and the concluding *c* and *l* persistently less as two letters than as a letter *d* now severed at the stem. As a matter of fact, it was this last that had bothered her most of all and that had been the inspiration for her what I at least took to be her very best story. In it, her protagonist, so clearly modeled on her father (despite her irritation at the critics for presuming that), ponders such a miswritten letter and sees in it a dark symbolism in which it represents a crack in the visible world through which phantoms from alternate stories peer out at him with malicious jibes and taunts until he's driven quite mad. What surprised *me* about all this, however, was the real-life corroboration of this interpretation that surfaced soon after. For, less than a month after the story was published, Henry received a letter from a reader who had been *quite* taken with

it, a scholar of the Kabbala who informed her of the "well-known fact," according to this ancient Jewish tradition, that evil was poured into the world through such a hairline crack of an erroneously transcribed letter and that entire Torah scrolls were considered unfit for use on account of so much as a single instance of such infidelity to the transmission of the sacred word (among the three hundred and some *thousand* individual characters contained in it). This information unnerved Henry, and in a fit of superstition, she burnt her admirer's letter. Henry saved the crumpled note, however, along with the newspaper, and it was not until long after that she recognized the true source of her uneasiness: the note had been written in a hand uncannily similar to the font used on the newspaper headline. (It just goes to show you the enormous amount of detail necessary toward the maintenance of real literary verisimilitude. In the world of pulp fiction, I would be obliged to throw her into the angry headlight of an oncoming express train about now, lest any more yarn come unraveling from the story, but here where *I* work, in the real world of train timetables and their inevitable off-peak schedules, union strikes, and power outages, all is extravagant waste that is not carefully planned well in advance.)

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Another two pages of manuscript appear to be missing here, though no consensus has been reached in the scholarly community as to whether the deletion was intended or accidental.]

Kate sat opposite Henry, staring intently into the latter's diverted eyes across a diagonal shaft of sunlight. The room was steeped in quiet anticipation of Henry's first word, for it was clearly her move

now. Commas of dust punctuated their unspoken dialogue down the light shaft streaming in from behind Kate. Henry felt her chest tightening again as she tried to take in enough air for her feeble reply.

"I'm sorry, but I have it again," Henry apologized rather insincerely to the table beside Kate. "That weird feeling...."

There was silence now where one would reasonably have expected a completed sentence with response. She refrained from looking over at Kate, who was sprawled out across the settee opposite her in a sort of half-sitting, half-reclining pose, her legs wide open at different angles and head propped unnaturally upright against the sharp wood crestrail. Kate was trying quite seriously to look relaxed and win Henry's confidence, but she looked rather like some ancient sculpture of a *bodhisattva* in the rare position of Royal Discomfort, if such a thing existed. She was determined to avoid asking Henry the obvious question of which feeling she was talking about and thereby engaging in this same old game with her. She would try a new approach this time and just wait until Henry spoke again.

"Which feeling?" she exhaled without resolve. "The one about being watched?" Without removing her eyes from the dome of the ceiling fixture she'd been studying in order to avoid eye contact with Henry, Kate continued her probe: "Is he here again, peering in from a crack in the wall?"

"Look!" demanded Henry, turning her eyes toward Kate's now that the latter's were fixed safely elsewhere. "I don't need to be reminded about what *is* and is *not* rational."

"But it's not *rational!* Kate observed, lowering her stare quickly to meet Henry's. Her voice now gained confidence. "You claim to have no idea who it might be, yet you just "know" he's there—here—watching us every time we...."

"No, not *every* time," objected Henry sternly but with an unexpected tone of playfulness, as if suddenly animated by a fond memory. "Not yesterday," she smiled broadly, boldly drinking in Kate's blinkless stare.

Oh, how to convey in mere words the supreme music of that deceptively simple word, *yesterday*, as delivered from the lips of my Henry Flower at such a moment? Never did the sexiest of silver-screen sex kittens ever purr more meaning out of one simple noun—at least to my ears. Whatever it was that had transpired *yesterday*, one would have given anything to be there, *watching it* transpire. Ah, if one could only capture such a triple-cushioned word just off her provocative lips and fold it up, wallet-size, to be taken out on dull days!

"Yesterday!" barked Kate, instantly restoring the word to its strict dictionary denotation. "*Yesterday*, we were in a public park, for Chissake, where *everybody* was watching!"

A short snort of unwanted laughter escaped from Henry's direction above and beyond all efforts of muscular repression. Hate as she did to admit it, Kate was irresistibly funny when she was attempting seriously to be something more serious, such as relaxed or rational. But Henry finally won a grip over the unwanted smile, and she diverted her eyes from Kate's again in anticipation of the

inevitable next question. For, yes, it was time again for the Who word.

"Who?" Who is it, Henry?" came the well-predicted question.

Of course, there was little reason to pose such a question really, because Kate knew quite well who the hell "Who?" was. Who else but *Henry*, Henry's celebrated, and now infamous, father. How was it that Henry couldn't see it? How was it she could feel this "male gaze," as Henry called it, and not make out the face behind it? Oh, what she wouldn't give to be able to somehow drag the old lecher into the room from behind that imagined crack in the wall for Henry to see! Then she would have slain this menacing dragon once and for all and won the pretty princess for herself, entirely for the privacy of her own intensely possessive gaze. Kate's heart quickened to this most tantalizing of images: having the famous author there in the room with them, captive audience, as she ran off (figuratively, of course) with his good little girl for a reckless weekend in downtown Gomorrah. She could hold back no longer and watched passively as abandon quickly crested its containment wall and came trickling down in spurts of words released from her own helpless lips. "*Whoever* he is, Henry," she beckoned darkly, "let's give our voyeur something to look at!"

Something budged nearby. The creaking wheeze of rebounding settee cushion opposite her dislodged Henry's gaze from its safe anchor and sent it darting nervously about the room. The bright patch of carpet that had steadily absorbed the shaft of unused commas was suddenly blotted out, eclipsed by the monumental

figure of a partially undressed woman standing dimly before her. From this sudden form before her issued a beckoning command in a whisper shaky with anticipation. "My little Henry, what do you say we give Mr. Peeping Whateverhisnameis a peep at something he can't have?"

A bodiless blouse fell in limp relief to the floor over Henry's feet, and she looked up into the dramatic eclipse of light to find an unveiled sculpture and let her eyes feed hungrily and helplessly on it. This was it; there was no going back. Once again she had let herself be cornered like a defenseless little creature in the path of big bad Kate. It felt wonderful, for the gears had been set in motion already and no action on her part would stop the awful momentum of this mechanism. The inevitability of it all reminded her of planets turning in the skies and of huge steel wheels turning on determined tracks. Caught in the force of this inevitability, Henry's chest felt oppressively tight, as if about to erupt. So did Kate's. (So did mine. Had you rubbed two sticks together, the whole place would have gone up in smoke.)

Kate lowered herself slowly onto her knees between Henry's, took the latter's head in her hands, and pulled it slowly towards hers until finally kissing her mouth long and hard, as if sucking marrow from a bone. It was the sexiest, most powerful, kiss I have *ever* witnessed, and I will never forget it. You will look in vain through all of world literature for a better one. Kate pulled back momentarily to look deep in Henry's eyes again. She was apparently checking for any residue of the anxiety she had just suctioned out with that walloping kiss. (If

that hadn't cleared out the whole of it, nothing on this earth would.) Henry's heart felt as if it were suddenly half way up her throat. Mine too. There was simply no use holding back anymore. Henry ran her hands up Kate's strong arms and shoulders while burying her face in her motherly breasts. Kate slowly rose to her feet, pulling Henry up with her to bathe together in the strong, warm shaft of sunlight in which all those unused commas had continuously drifted to the floor. Henry could feel Kate's hands suddenly stop her own from roving any further while the latter whispered playfully to her a seductively insincere refusal to continue. "How about Mr. Busybody?" Kate inquired. "Aren't you afraid he'll see us? Maybe big bad Kate should go now."

"No, stay...let him!" Henry welcomed in a shaky, throaty voice, obviously too far out at sea by now to worry about any rocks.

"No, Henry, I'm not sure I want some old lecher getting his rocks off on my body," Kate protested quite disingenuously while feigning distraction from the lust hotly percolating between her ears now.

"Let him look, let him *come!*" Henry urged in loud relief, vigorously swiping aside the hand that pretended standing guard. "He might as well finish it off if he's made it this far," she giggled.

Kate had finally slipped off both the skirt and the panties beneath it and was now running her hands slowly down along Henry's hips, buttocks, and thighs as if smoothing out their exquisite proportions from soft, malleable sculptor's clay. One could just feel the soft curving contours, the sensuous swell and dip of warm baby-soft flesh in one's own tingling, wet hands just by watching. All was wetness

and warmth and boundless abandon. One could just shout in vicarious delight!

Yet gradually, Kate could feel a certain shadow of self-consciousness growing over their abandon, soon followed by a feeling of vulnerability. She paused a moment in a sudden penetrating chill elicited by the strange sensation of being watched by some third party. Indeed, she couldn't get out of her mind the sense that her body was being explored and enjoyed by a second pair of hands—hands not of her lover but of some stranger...a male stranger. She gave a quick nervous turn, and immediately one could see the potent germ of unease growing in her expanded pupils. It was as if Kate had suddenly glimpsed that crack in the wall that had so crippled Henry, and the unblinking stare she now forced on it made one instinctively divert his own.

Two searching hands turned Kate's head around again toward the dark, heedless splendor, but she pulled away again in growing agitation and, with a reckless toss of all caution, propriety, and unspoken contract to the wind, she demanded the truth about this male gaze they were quite palpably bathing in just now.

"So, he's watching us, your...father?"

(Whew!) With the cold bath of those two concluding syllables, all movement instantaneously ceased. She had finally done it, pushed beyond the line drawn long ago between them and respected silently since, till now.

"My father?" Kate heard repeated in Henry's voice near her. She cringed at first but then realized in confused delight that the tone was

more playful than admonishing. Henry pulled away from Kate to look into her eyes and studied them a moment, whispering back to her slowly the words, "yes, I think it *is* him." Upon hearing this, Kate could feel a gust from a huge bellows blowing life back into the embers that had quickly cooled upon the first utterance of those syllables.

"Yes, and he is *really* getting off on *your* body, by the way," Henry toyed. Of course, the idea of being watched by Henry's father had been tantalizing to Kate herself for quite some time, but that was way back when it was still safely hovering in the masturbatory realm of the imagined. Now, when it had been held up before her eyes, she shrank back in fright.

"Oh," was all that Kate could push out of her tensed diaphragm upon hearing this. Henry, emboldened by an unexpected political power conferred on her by this change in the script, took the reins freely from Kate's suddenly powerless grip. "Yes," she purred in growing confidence, enjoying the unaccustomed feeling of holding such things, "though I could never get daddy to admit it, it was quite obvious that he drew his deepest erotic inspiration from well-endowed women."

"Admit it? You mean, you actually *asked* him?"

"Well, yes, of course. I mean, after all, the man's love life was one pathetic chorus line of brainless bouncing boobs and butts."

At this comment, Kate succumbed to a quick review of the suspects from her memory's viewing stand, a lewd parade of bimbos ending with Henry's mother and Martha C. Beads of discomfort were

suddenly drawn across her forehead at the realization that now she, Kate, would need to be added to that lineup.

"I just can't *imagine* talking to *my father* about such things," Kate confessed, hoping to erase this image from her head forever. "Do you know that I have never even seen that man *partially* naked—not even by accident—in my whole life?"

"Kate! Come on! Hell, even *I* have seen your father naked!" Henry demanded (disingenuously).

"Wha...?" Girlish laughter suddenly peeled out, unrestrained, in all directions, from two warm womanly bodies quivering with the relief that they could be girls again. They embraced and fell over flat onto their inhibitions and rolled this way and that, back and forth across the worn-out prayer rug between the sofa and settee. And after this long, hard, muscular tussle on the floor had slowed to a sweaty finish, Kate slowly got to her feet while pulling Henry up with her, engaged in another of those kisses. In the very column of sun-lit commas that had separated them before, they now stood proudly engaged in a powerful embrace like a spot-lit sculpture on a pedestal. It was beautiful. Finally, after numerous unforeseen glitches and false starts, this was it: the embrace groped after by centuries of desperate sculptors. ("The beast with the four buttocks," as Henry jokingly referred to it with little response from her partner of less Shakespearean erudition.) Style, medium, scale, angle, patina: these were all superfluous; what really mattered here was only that not a peep of sunlight was getting through between them. (I have saved

this shot, and I take it out every once in a while to use as a model when attempting to depict the pull of heavenly bodies.)

The two tired bodies were now stretched out, side by side, on the floor: Kate flat on her back, staring up at the breast-like dome of the ceiling light and Henry on her side, her head raised on her hand upon her left elbow. As she ran the fingers of her raised right hand through Kate's short straight hair she reminisced back over the years they'd known each other and considered how different they'd each become since. She tried to imagine what Kate must have looked like then. One fine, impatient spring day, years before they met, Katherine resolved never again to be a play-toy for men, and with one determined stroke of will clipped short both her hair and her name. (A bit green, this Kate.) She then reflected on Kate's predecessors a moment and succumbed to that same sinking realization she'd had several times before that the love of numerous women had not quite filled a certain hole in her life opened even wider by the loss of her beloved father. She had freely given each the reins she always saw him holding in her mind's eye. But either they did not do more than pose with them or their pull was *too real* to compare with the *ideal* restraint of her father. The irony here, of course, is that she owes her existence not to *him* but to ME. Had I so chosen, he might have been born the child of some peasant couple in ancient Attica, or an heir to the French or English throne, or even as her own future son. Yes, it is obviously the *prime mover* she yearns for, not a mere man. But the one-way window of our embrace does not allow my ever becoming *him*. She looks right through me in search of

him and doesn't recognize my caresses. It is too late to remove her father to a distant country or epoch, but the future holds endless possibilities. She can learn to give up Henry IV by replacing IV with VI, for example. Of course, the likelihood of such an occurrence—for readers of limited arithmetic prowess, I mean *having a child*—rarely occupied Henry's thoughts, largely because of her uncomfortable associations with the male body. But since no one, at least in the world of *quality* fiction, is beyond the hope of change, it will not be difficult for me to demonstrate to you the omnipotence a creator wields within his created world.

Well, the improbable inevitably happened: Henry became pregnant. There was much talk around town concerning this twist of fate, as well as much futile speculation over the identity of the child's father. The fact is, of course, that Henry *herself* had no idea who the father could be. But as unlikely as this seemed, especially to Henry herself, who supposed she was the one person who *should* be able to recall the answer to this paternity question, there was certainly no denying the obvious: she was pregnant, period. My own understandable lack of first-hand experience of pregnancy and maternity prevents me from attempting a perfectly accurate description of how and what she felt and when. Suffice it to say that she found herself swelled big and taut like a balloon and, on the assigned day, delivered up one big brute of a boy headfirst into a chaotic world of light, din, and rubber gloves with 1.585 billion seconds of life still before him. This is oversimplification, of course, and does not do justice to an event of indescribable beauty:

The physician's due date, carefully calculated along the most precise scientific guidelines, came and went like an empty bottle bobbing past in the slow river current. But when at last the moon hung full in the sky like a bright ripe fruit, Henry's waters burst in a shower of joyous relief that splashed and splattered and dripped and trickled down in all directions, heralding the arrival of a new Flower on the Henry tree. Under the spell of a resplendent moon, the waters of the world lapped and gathered in unrest. In concert with these, the waters in which a new Henry had tossed and squirmed for months like a restless fish now overflowed their banks to carry the sea's creation toward its new life on land. Flat on her back, with legs thrust wide open, a sweating, groaning woman lay, offering up her burden to an insatiable raging moon. Upon this yielding supine form loomed a tremendous mountain of expressionless flesh threatening to erupt. And on her brow a royal diadem of glistening pearls of the salt waters surging within. Waves dashed angrily against rock and sand for thousands of miles around as the hump of raw life groped blindly toward light. And out of the violence of convulsing waters emerged a magnificent steaming sphere, wrinkled tight with relief and fear, and trailed comet-like by mindless flailing arms and legs in rebellion against their new-

found freedom. After nine hourglass months, a slow-growing, dull-hulking bulge of belly had instantaneously transformed into a miraculous rich red life. And caught up in this, the moon's madness, a rising tide welled up and burst from eyes that seemed to be my own, showering mother and child with furious large hot drops that trickled round and off them to run in all directions for escape. Short strains of mother-child music could be heard between loud inharmonious wails that emitted from lungs and throat seemingly also mine. I looked down in confusion past a wet heaving chest upon a world now shattered by light: vaguely familiar objects swimming frantically, spasmodically, for shores of glaring sands. All was blur: things and the ink of their incarnation. Word by word rose and danced in crystal domes upon the violent splotches as ink was lifted ghost-like from the wetted paper.

The earth stood still momentarily when the creature was thrust from the darkness out into interstellar space and its lifeline cut from the mother ship. And Henry opened her eyes to behold this alien being that had come to take her career away. She looked at this piece of her own body that had fiercely declared its independence and immediately realized the imperial impulse to reclaim it. This bald, cone-headed, squirrel-cheeked, chicken-legged, chinless, scrawny, kicking, screaming being—any realist's picture of life gone horribly

wrong—elicited from Henry's brain a bizarre chemical event that sent the rational fleeing before the tidal wave of raw parental love. But her heart squeezed fist-like for a moment when she recognized the face on her messy projectile. Indeed, it was none other than her father's face. Henry had created her own precursor, so to speak. She groped for her bearings amid the shock of spontaneous creation, and saw in her teeming mind her grandmother's delivery of her father followed by her newborn's future wife's delivery of her grandchild. And suddenly Henry realized for the first time in her life that she was truly part of something (other than an obsession and its readership): she was not just a woman, or a writer, or even a *woman writer*, but better yet, a *vehicle*: yes, an ancestor, a link in a chain stretching back to a vanishing point in the fabric of history. A quantitative awe numbed her sense of fear and discomfort, and all of a sudden she could feel her previous animosity toward unwanted motherhood slowly soften into a pocket of warmth for this strange, defenseless creature she had fed with her own blood. And yet, when she looked down at the delicate Flower before her she couldn't help but wonder over the cruel kind of world in which a fruit would grow in so unlikely a place while so many willing, waiting wombs continued to menstruate in despair. She wondered how such a world came to be and how even fiction at its most fantastical seemed more rational than this world of purported cause and effect. Suddenly, she realized that the two worlds had come crashing together in the night and that the inhabitants of both were forever hopelessly mingled together. She pondered the validity of her writings about her father as she

compared them side by side in her restless mind with the historical "facts" of his life as recorded in biography. But which was it that was actually true: that which she perceived of him with her flawed organs of sense and comprehension, or that which she conceived of him deep within the whom-like furrows of imagination? Were they not both a product of the same electro-chemical mechanism?

Henry's life was destined to be different now with the emergence of a new Henry to take the place of the old one. But before exploring those differences, it might be prudent to comment upon the moral question engendered with the birth of Henry VI. For, if *I* don't there will be critics who will (as sure as crows to fresh road kill). You see, Henry's pregnancy, delivery, and post-partum reorientation—to my mind some of the most touching and rewarding pages of her life—are sure to be read by some as the stereotypical musings of a chauvinistic male mind. After all, a young woman with no interest in conceiving of a life other than those of her fiction characters has been left no choice in the matter but to do so, and all for the gratuitous satisfaction of one who would so put his creative potency to the test. Typical, is it not? Your male author in need of a new plot he can manage in the comfort of his literary limitations finds a female who will pay for it, and pay dearly at that. Where will he be when she falls victim to strange hormones and feels unwelcome in her own body? Out, playing around with the scenery perhaps? (Even *I* become caught up in the moral outrage of it all when *I* lose track and get engrossed.) Well now, it is clearly time to defend myself. Yes, if you were only sitting where *I* am you'd see how different everything

looks from here. First of all, that Henry was not interested in having children—or, rather, was *quite* interested in *not* having children—was obviously a position she took in the comfort of ignorance. Having not yet had any, how well equipped was she really to make the necessary comparison between having them and not? Secondly, don't think for a moment this maternity of hers was any easier on *me* than it was on her. The splendid moment that lucky sperm wiggled its way into the confidence of her eager egg was in fact the very moment my *real* work *began*, not ended. Each and every physical and emotional torture she tasted was mine before it was hers. (Of course, all this could have been neatly avoided in blissful ignorance, for her *and* for me, but it is a little late for that now, and there is no sense crying over spilt ink.) And finally, that a woman was the subject of such an experiment rather than a man deserves little comment. This is a matter that must be taken up with the human reproductive physiology department a few doors further down the hall. (Even *I* cannot make a man pregnant, for God's sake!) And don't think for a moment the various possible consequences of this birth were not considered with care before plunging ahead into profligate procreation. If there is anyone who has tasted of the dark horrors latent in the germ of a new generation, it is I. Oh yes, the world that was my oyster yielded up to me many a splendid specimen formed around the slightest speck of my will. Yet, which among them now seems anything but the concretion of hostile indifference toward that very will, toward the very conception that made it possible?

One that comes irresistibly to mind is that most beautiful child I awarded my dear Hester. What more perfect gift could be bestowed upon a woman so desperate to be a mother as was Hester? After a husband in the old world and then a lover in the new, both as sterile as a stone, she came to the understandable erroneous assumption that hers was a womb in which no life would take hold. Hence, it became clear to me that if Hester was ever to enjoy the beautiful experience of motherhood, it would not be effected by sitting on my hands. And with pride did I rise to the occasion and plant in her that seed of my virile self that would ripen as the blushing fruit of her New World passion. But who could have guessed as to the size and bitterness of the pit in that fruit this exquisite flesh would bring innocently with it into the open jaws of the cruel awaiting world? The best of all intentions seemed to have hardened inside Hester's lovely taut belly, for it was soon obvious that what she had really brought to term was a millstone. Yet, curiously, this was a millstone that she could love the more for its oppressive burden. And *he* gladly took this stone and wore it around his neck as well, though he really had no fertile reason under the sun to do so. I tried like hell to get through to this dimwit the one essential point—namely, that the kid *was not his* and that all this self-torture and public spectacle making was therefore worse than just tiresome drivel, it was **u n n e c e s s a r y**. In my dogged pursuit of his attention, I tried every tool in my box, including the quaint age-old device of meteor showers. Why, I even succumbed to the last and frankly most embarrassing of such measures: that of writing his name in the sky in huge red letters.

Historically, this stunt rarely fails to catch the eye of protagonist and bystander alike, and it did in his case as well, but to no meaningful avail, as he never got past that initial capital A, convinced as he was that it abbreviated something weightier than the small *r t h u r* that followed it. I will not mince words here. In that one letter he saw the entire word Adultery spelled out. Adultery! An A for adultery? Ask any local of the day and she would tell you the word is *always* abbreviated *Ad!* I could give a damn about adultery; let adultery thrive for all I care!

So, you see why I don't view the prospect of new lives lightly. From the high vantage of my experience, I see each and every one of them as a sort of time bomb of potential misfortune, each with its fuse set precisely for the moment your attention flags, your eyelids droop, or your supervision is demanded elsewhere. Basically, unless you can afford to watch them every minute, awake and asleep, you really can't be sure you won't suddenly find yourself holding some unwieldy sub-plot in your hands. Hence, I have long ago determined to keep things more manageable by overseeing a world pared down to the essentials: a single protagonist propped up with the necessary minimum of supporting characters, a few sticks of furniture to bump into, as much nature as it takes to fill an average window, and, above all, a good reliable alarm clock.

Yes, the birth of Henry VI marked a welcome change in the life of Henry V, as predicted above. The general idea, of course, was that Henry's focus would finally be shifted away from her father toward something that she and I could *share*, the effect of which bringing her

over to my camp, so to speak. Now, it is a relatively rare occurrence, I must observe, when an idea, still in its pure and disembodied state, lines up edge-for-edge with its physical reincarnation known as implementation. Yet, here was that exemplary rarity. So beautiful and perfect was this concurrence that one could, and indeed did, mistake one for the other at times, which resulted in no real predicament for one, so beautiful and perfect was this concurrence. In effect, Henry all but forgot about her father, put her biography of him on the back burner (where it reduced to an appropriate muck), and devoted all her attention to her new life with our most promising child. What was even more beautiful and perfect about this arrangement was that she did so quite happily, without remorse or even mixed feelings.

But this is bullshit. You know it and I know it, yet we conspire to pipe dreams. Why? If, in your complicity with me, you imagine yourself to be investing in some happy ending, you are simply wasting your time. I am obliged to no stockholders and can decide at any time to pack up truth and take it with me far from corruption's reach into the pure white privacy of the empty page, leaving behind only tiny paper fibers to beckon to you like sardonic sirens. For that matter, I could just as easily give you the gratifying denouement you long for and still keep the truth to myself. But such games prove pointless, really. You and I would be left using the same page for our own ends, like lovers actively preoccupied with fantasizing other lovers.

The truth is, Henry's new life was an absolute disaster for me. She loved and cared for her new Henry as any good mother would her new namesake, but surreptitiously found as much time for her father as before. It seems clear to me that even Henry VI himself will not be able to take away IV from V. As it looks now, Henry will probably raise her son to carry on her attempt to unravel this hopeless ball of yarn. (Good luck to him; I myself have lost the ends.)

Months passed and nothing at all happened—that is, nothing important enough to keep her from working on that damned biography of her father. Then, quite suddenly, on the very day marking the anniversary of Henry's loss of her beloved father, a strange and uncomfortable coincidence irresistibly occurred. A letter arrived—one bearing an illegible postmark and no return address—that told her of the sudden and unexpected death of her mother just two days before. (No.)

Months passed and little of importance happened. Then, one day, as Henry sat amid the dying daylight, staring out into the constricting space from a body left limp from mental exertion, an irritating noise slowly penetrated the several layers of numbness that encased her fatigued brain until gradually became registered on it the ringing of a doorbell. With a juicy kiss formed upon her pursed ripe lips she opened the front door to find not Kate but a stranger bearing aloft in his outstretched hands a crinkly-wrapped basket of fruit. (Better.)

Startled and embarrassed, she lamely muttered something to do with appreciating the gesture, which was touching, or some such

thing, as if a desperate secret admirer had gone public and rented a uniform for the task. Back in the kitchen, contemplating the mysterious gift basket, Henry allowed the confession of a smile to settle down around the corners of her mouth as she ceremoniously disrobed the naked blushing fruit and ran her hand affectionately and sensually along the downy curve of the uppermost peach. It seemed to beckon to her to be consumed, and Henry found herself irresistibly drawn to that girlhood weakness of hers: The Peach. In the dulled diagonal efforts of an impotent sun, the passion food fruit glowed with smoldering allure upon the pedestal of her raised hand, and she indulged.

The fruit of the *Prunus Persica* (sometimes referred to as *Amygdalus Persica* amid close botanical circles) is a single-seeded indehiscent drupe of bony endocarp, pulpy mesocarp, and thin downy epicarp—sort of like our planet *and* our story—one developing from a simple ovary amid pink and white petals, sepals and stamen, as well as glossy green lanceolate leaves. Etymology erroneously ascribes a Persian origin to this celebrated child of the Chinese garden, but the fruit of longevity Henry now proposed to devour had ancestors that had sated young lovers back in the Eastern Zhou dynasty of warring states and sages.

With a total indifference to both history and botany, Henry Flower sunk her pearly gates deep into the downy rump of the peach and gently lowered her eyelids half-mast as the juices spasmodically flowed down her peachy cheeks and willing body. A mouth wet with desire received the fleshy orb while a plump wet tongue of delirious

buds massaged and prodded its prey playfully over the edge to its little death in the waiting pool of her own lusty juices. An Odyssean journey lay ahead through the labyrinths of the dark caverns where the sun never shines but where the base metals of juicy flesh would magically transform to the golden peach-colored glow of a seductive cheek. Henry held the opened globe away from her pursed mouth as she squeezed the life from the residue of her initial bite. Doing so, she surveyed with an astronomer's eye a cross-section of miraculous spring growth resembling in a remote way the molten mesocarp of a split-open planet. A mysterious crater-pocked crust of deep brown core peeped out from the fiery corona while tears of joy pooled along the lower edge of the fresh fleshy wound. As Henry parted her moist lips for a second reckless plunge into the world of childhood gratification, an annoying noise erupted in spurts from the next room. It was the damned phone again! (Of course, I could detain her myself from it any time I wished with another visitor bearing gifts at her front door, but I was quite interested myself in learning the identity of this brazen intruder.) Henry set down the ravaged fruit on its side upon the kitchen counter and released her lithe, rejuvenated, body into flight toward the disturbance. In her absence, I eyed the fruit of long life left dying before me, and grabbed for it. Until now I have never had the curiosity to even taste of the fruit of this ancient tree, but Henry's ecstatic swallows got my glands working and filled me with appetite for this specific food. As I bit down into it, the surprised tympanic membrane of my inner ear rebounded violently to the brutal pelting of eight stone-hard words echoing from out of

the adjoining room: "OH, THANKS SOOO MUCH FOR THE WONDERFUL PEACHES!"

My drying lips and useless tongue reported back to me the taste and feel of the fuzzy crust of a tennis ball. This intrusion turned out to have been implemented by none other than the editor of the Journal. He called to inform her that the "Flower" issue with "the poem," whatever that might be, was right on schedule and on the stands today. Henry, as impatient and impractical as her dead dad, jumped in the car and flew to town rather than wait for the complementary copy to arrive by mail. Exercising executive privilege, I got there first and had an issue before me sooner than she could disengage the clutch. My fingers burned with impatience as they speedread, page by worthless page, the highbrow hype:

Dr. Kunastrokius veritably pins a tail on the signified and gives deconstruction a run for its money...Professor Verschleierungs cogently argues for an autodiegetic narratology at work...the first book-length study on the elaborate patterning of the impotence and dying god motifs in Borodin's work....

Idiot! I went back and threw the cursed thing at the woman behind the register, pointing with mute anger at the one I had asked for in the first place had she only paid attention and told lover boy she had a customer and would call him back. A moment later I was ravaging a fresh victim, its spine rigid with anticipation in the long lifeline of my perspiring palm. A deep breath of the calming variety often resorted to in the fiction industry brought the necessary oxygen to my befuddled organ of thought and revenge and enabled me to

remember to use the table of contents this time. HENRY FLOWER'S LAST POEM.... Ah, yes! Page 11. Let's see...three, five, seven, nine, *eleWOOSH!@#\$%: a blinding shower of fiery flakes came fluttering down against the sudden darkness while a hot blast of gritty desert air blanched my eyeballs dry. As the daylight slowly seeped back in, I saw before me, branded deep in the skin of the page, the blatant desecration of a whole head of sacred bovine. With a boulder in my stomach, I read it:*

The following poem is the hitherto unpublished final work from the pen of the late Henry Flower. The manuscript to this poem was discovered among his papers by the famous author's daughter and literary executor, Ms. Henrietta Flower, shortly after the former's tragic and untimely death one year ago today. That Flower was occupied with these two stanzas right up to his death is evident: they were found inscribed upon a current morning edition of *The Time*. More specifically, they were written in red ink between the lines of a story on the now-infamous social welfare/tax package proposed last year—an ironic touch not unfamiliar to readers of *The World on Fire* and *The Enormity*. Yet, Ms. Flower sees in these eight lines no mere invective against big government but, rather, superimposed upon it, a caustic critique of our patriarchal society itself, all the way down to our conventional assumptions about our apparently innate need to believe in a creator of our universe. And as such, this poem makes a fitting swan song for a writer so intensely concerned with injustice on the social *and* cosmic levels:

THEOGONY

**O you Muses who taught young Hesiod to sing
Are brutal women, unworthy daughters of great Zeus.
These corpse-strewn, blood-stained pages bring
Olympus to its knees amid corruption loosed.**

**O you who promise sacred sounds to liven up the ear
Give birth a world drunk deep in violence and treachery.
And while greed dances madly arm in arm with fear,
A brutish, jealous father swallows whole his progeny!**

Oh, the irony that he should survive such a thorough, well-attended death! Millions of eyes have by now been witness to his magnificent finish. No funeral rites ever held over a man were more sumptuous than the dozen some emotional pages devoted to Henry's. (I curse myself now for their removal from the Chronologue, along with Martha's, Marcel's, Menard's, and the rest of them, in my stubborn pursuit of core-like compactness.) Yet the six feet of cold clay I firmly tamped upon him were clearly not enough to keep him down. The precision beat of my muffled drum has accompanied him short of extinction into mere exile, and he is back in a blaze of triumph, bigger in memory than in life. It seems I have buried his bones only to resurrect his fame. And this epilogue—what in hell is she to me but extra spadefuls of unrewarding earth?

Like from a stupor, I wake to find myself upon numbed knees, down amid upset drawers and scattered files in search of I know not what. But just before hurling the cankerous notebook past posterity

into oblivion's open maw, I notice the edge of some ill-kept secret peeping out from beneath the cover. Unceremoniously I unfold it, the worthless book falling to a dusty reward, and find myself eye-to-eye with an unfamiliar penmanship that promises to "make good by you and provide the appropriate financial support for the baby, but we're both finished if this thing gets out; destroy even this note."

My crooked old body grows stiff with rage as I carefully refold this unfulfilled wish of the editor's into his very own miniature book of prayer.

I'm afraid Henry is going to be late. Yes, as a matter of fact, it is time and she is not yet home. Her car has stalled out again on the ramp to the freeway, and again she has accepted a ride to the train. It is an express train, due at the platform momentarily. There have been several incidents of suicide at this station during the last few years, particularly in these dreary days of late autumn. So, Henry will be reduced to a mere statistic, an unfortunate inconvenience to commuters and a passing cash cow to the television news stations. A brief flicker in the candle flame, then forgotten. If she is yet conscious of this program, it is only as a glimmer on the horizon of her darkened mindscape. She will steer toward it only because it is a light of some sort where everything else has become dark. It has become a strange, inhospitable terrain, this world of hers, with the roots of

countless thoughts and desires sticking upside-down out of the muddy ground in a tangle.

Henry distractedly furnishes yes and no answers to the friendly questions of her good and lonely Samaritan and forgets to thank him as she jumps out of the car at the station. Watching the weary crowd shuffle up the dim staircase to the platform, you would have little reason to focus in on Henry in particular. Seen from a distance, she would appear to be just another underappreciated life on the way home from the daily grind to prepare for endless more days of the same. But on closer inspection, you would easily read the psychological warning signs that single her out as the tragic protagonist among this sea of faceless walk-on bit parts. Registered on her facial features you will find a certain look of blank, unfocused determination. This look mirrors the dark, murky region of ambiguity in which tragedy festers. True, there are others among this crowd with stories just as gripping and compelling as hers—some arguably more so—but to dwell on them at this point would be to invite disaster, structurally at least.

I have given my love a last embrace and prepared her way for posterity, and on her face I see that she is ready. She has laid herself down across the gleaming tracks to await her deliverance from this dingy world while a platform-full of commuters study the sky or their shoes with sudden interest. Immediately I am stung with irritation by the uncharacteristic obedience—the downright servility—with which she performs her final script, as if precious life itself can be simply tossed aside like some dress that doesn't match

her handbag. And, as with her father, her mother, and the rest, I am haunted at every turn by memories of their ancestors and the uncanny feeling that I've been through these scenes entire epochs and oceans away. Here, for example, it is difficult not to think of my Anna of long ago who left me standing on a platform not very different from this. After seeing her over all the necessary hurdles toward a life of ultimate happiness, imagine my anger and humiliation at watching her suddenly discard it all beneath the wheels of some intruder's moralizing judgment. When I saw her lunge for the first train, I was able to pull her back by her handbag in the nick of time, but so overpowering and instantaneous was his spell of guilt and religiously righteous judgment that there was simply no saving her a second time. I turned and looked into his beard and said, "You wanted her; she is yours now, all of her, you bastard! May you too die in such a place as this when you are cold and alone!"

But I remind myself that this, her cruelest of snubs at me (doing precisely what she is supposed to do) is at the same time her last, poor thing, and I am suddenly made only the more resolute. I stand erect and motionless, watching down over her as the raindrops roll off her baby-soft cheeks. How is it that I have never before noticed the exquisite shape of her little nose, or the tiny mole barely perceptible at the corner of her mouth? Have I ever really taken the time to know her? I tingle with remorse at the thought of losing Henry, however the wheels have been long in motion and there is nothing to be done now but await what must be.

The train is over half an hour late, according to my quick calculations. Or is it an hour and a half? Minutes turn to hours in my mind, and there is not a train in sight, no glint of light, no consoling hum of steel. I pace and wring my nervous hands, but the huge hands of the clock overhead remain still, and the tracks silent. I know it is not just me. Turning around, I see that the platform has become even more packed with impatient people, all studying either skies or shoes.

Who the hell am I kidding? What train? Have I forgotten about the events of last night? The fact is, horrible things happened in the night. A storm of seething rains and bellowing winds blew in from a sick, tormented sea and tore down power lines and trees in a tangle of wanton destruction. The rain fell, not in droplets but in plate-glass sheets extending down from over-swollen clouds to shatter violently upon the ground. And with the rain came hailstones the size of peach pits, knocking birds dead from the windblown trees. But the angry icy waters could not come fast enough to quench the sudden fires raging up hungrily out of houses across town where daggers of blinding lightning hit in deafening blows.

And by the time a timid, birdless morning was about to peep under the cover of night's lusty wreckage, consummate silence hung in the heavy air, disrupted only by the muffled futile cries of the last returning ambulances and fire trucks. They waded like tired water buffaloes along river-like streets afloat with the priceless debris of fastidious homes. Had the power and transmitting stations been spared by the brutal business of the night there would have been

newscasts later in the day to report the staggering toll of human life and property. Had the weather lab survived, there would have been explanations of what had transpired in meteorological terms. Had Henry and her fucking editor survived, the polar caps would have melted and the earth would have torn free from its orbit and spun off madly into a fiery death in the sun.

The rain has finally slackened to a pensive drizzle, punctuated here and there by the momentary downpour of a memory-rustled tree. It is difficult to believe that she is forever gone now, my Henry. It is hard to imagine that when her alarm goes off in a few minutes, it will not be her hand that will smother the rude noise, but that of some understudy, about whom I shall have not the least concern. Yet, perhaps it is better this way. She was a brilliant shooting star making her way across my proud sky toward some other solar system, and I shot her down while I still had the time. I didn't bring her into this world and nurture her with the sweat of sleepless nights just to give her away to yet another hack. I will systematically search out and destroy each memory, every vestige, before she ends up trapped in the convoluted clauses of some perverse literary affair to be critiqued, psychoanalyzed, and gaped at by the world at large. No, she's better off where she is.

I look down at my desk cluttered high with aborted worlds. With one strenuous swipe of the arm, I could be done with them all and rest my tired head on the cool surface beneath. A big, clean desk and a head crammed with memories. If logic is allowed any say, forgetting should take a lot less effort than remembering, which is all

that creating is at bottom, really. But then again, so what? I'll have a clean desk, a clear head, and a planet full of readers who remember. Let's face it, you can't go around telling millions of people to forget they ever heard of Hamlet, Yorrick, Corporal Trim, or Big Lambert the pig sticker. They will only cling onto them with strengthened conviction, awakened by your challenge, like a toddler warned not to stuff peas up his nose. And then there's the centuries of the dead, whose lives have already been irrevocably altered by these musings and who might have even gone so far as to respond in print. Tenacious stuff, this creation business!

It is truly uncanny how, when you listen carefully, the sound of nothing can so resemble the din of things happening. It is 5:58am, with only two minutes left before the alarm will let loose the fury of another day in creation, and never before have I noticed the deafening noise made by falling snow. As a matter of fact, there seems nothing left loud enough to be heard above the violence of snow. Like so much dust. No, that's it: dust. Where a broad expanse of shimmering water once coursed resplendently between emerald banks like a well-fed python winding lazily through the grass, I look out now and find but a dry channel of caked mud beneath settling dust. Where my proud wandering eye once caught fleeting glimpses of future greatness glittering like diamonds in her scaly back, I now see only stray fragments of disappointment stuck like fossils in the dust-covered clay of her empty, barren bed.

Oh, how I wanted Henry's story to end with a great and memorable peroration, while all I seem to be able to muster up is

dust! And to think that her (his, their) only reason for existence in the first place was the prospect of a big brassy finish with all stops pulled. Why, I even went so far as to cut hundreds of pages from the Chronologue—the very story itself, along with the characters and plot—all so as not to compete with the grandeur planned for the end. And all that was sacrificed for what? For the big, bosomy ending with its windblown lovers before an ocean sunset accompanied by full orchestra and elephants; for the grand finale that came and went in a muffled flourish, leaving not a trace behind but for the sound of my own blood racing madly in the capillaries of my inner ear. I destroyed her death the minute it was born, and it is mine. I shall do the same with my own when it comes.

—THE END

Creation Lost

A Novella

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(originally composed 1989-91 and revised June-July, 2016)

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