



Stroke

July 26, 2017

I'm beginning to feel a numbing on the right side of my face along my jawline as if I have just received a gentle injection of Novocain. I am quite overwrought. My friend Elizabeth is driving me up Van Ness Avenue. I am going to have an angiogram. I was supposed to have it in the afternoon, but the doctor says I can have it two hours earlier if I get there by 10 a.m.

The driving in San Francisco has gotten nuttier since the Trump takeover, and the hysteria of tail-end-rush-hour dawdlers is cramming Van Ness Avenue like plaque. The car will take a left on California Street in two blocks, then up the hill and we will be there. I can decide then if I will tell them about my stroke.

By the time we enter the garage, the numbness in my right jaw has turned into paralysis. I can't smile. I had something like this ten years ago but I don't remember the results of the test. I was taking boxing at the time and out of nowhere my left arm became paralyzed and I couldn't speak for about ten minutes. I had an ultrasound taken. It was expensive because I had no insurance. I paid for it out of pocket and put it out of my mind. After my silent heart attack, the cardiologist found that old ultrasound in my file and it revealed that I had had a great deal of plaque even then and that I had probably had a TIA, a transient ischemic attack, a mini stroke. But that was then and this is now, and in this now, I am entering the garage of the California Pacific Medical Center on Clay and Webster.

Insanely, I am thinking that the twilight anesthesia they will give me for the angiogram might not only calm me but reverse the stroke and I will be able to go home. Elizabeth has found a parking space. It's a tight squeeze, so I get out. There is a cracking of automotive glass. A protruding unmarked ledge above the parking space has knocked the back window out.

Elizabeth is calm. She says she will take care of it while I am having the procedure. I am feeling quite terrible about it all, and the numbness is continuing to drive itself into my bones. I hesitate and steady myself. I try to talk, but my voice is slurring so I stop. Elizabeth drops me off at the door. She is going to seek the garage attendant. She will catch up with me as soon as she reports the damage.

I try to find the waiting room for the angiogram. The hospital is large, and as I tend to I get lost easily, and I do get lost. There is a room called “Cardiology,” but it isn’t the lab waiting room. I am getting a bit shaky. The right side of my face is sagging. Running beneath my consciousness like a highway at great speed are the words “I’m having a stroke!” I don’t want to draw undue attention for I don’t want to stay in the hospital.

I am asking one of the receptionists where the angiogram waiting room is. She can’t understand me; she is conferring with another receptionist. A big hot tear the size of a bluebottle fly has dropped from my right eye and splashed on a new patient form. The first receptionist is coming toward me. She is looking concerned. I’m thinking that she won’t turn me in. This is the cardio unit: people with paralyzed faces must come here all the time. She is saying words, but I don’t understand them. I don’t want to think about not being able to understand them; might mean that yet another part of my brain is shutting down. Am I going to scream? I watch the direction of her index finger. It points to a place down the hall. I am nodding my head instead of speaking because my mouth is falling off. I don’t want people in the white suits to get me. Somehow, I am in the hall under a sign that says “Laboratory.” There is another word with it, but I can’t make it out. What is that word? I need to find someplace to sit down.

Things are skipping now. I am in a waiting room. Someone is calling my name. A nurse in blue scrubs appears in a doorway. I am following her. My face is falling. I’m trying to hold it up.

I'm going to go to one of those rooms with the gurneys and the thin clothes with the open back. The nurse is asking me to change. Act normal. Think of my body, the same one I have had for all these years. It has come from familiar places, like Iowa and maple trees. A teenager has kissed it, and someone has said hello to it. Its name is John. Yes, slip the pants off even though it is icy in here. I can hear a man through the curtains. He is going to have an angiogram through his groin, so he has to stay overnight because he might bleed out. If mine goes through my arm it will not be as bloody. Is it dangerous? It is dangerous. Bleed to death. Stroke. I have a stroke right now, but do not to tell anyone, no.

She is asking me to lie back. She is shaving my groin. She is shaving all the pubic hair from my groin! I wanna make a joke about it but I don't feel very jokey. My curtained-off room is getting crowded. There is a nurse and the electric shaver. Half an inch away on the other side of the curtain is a family of four: two mothers and a brother and a man lying on a silver platter. He's getting shaved too. He'll get a wire in his heart, one way or another. He'll get the radioactive dye. Both of us are going to the cold room and the x-ray machine ...

I have watched the angiogram procedure for hours and know what they are going to do. Now some men in white coats are in the little curtained-off room. They are hoisting my body onto a gurney. Now we are going. When am I going to get the drug, the Versed?

They are rolling me into the room—the room of the operation—and it is cold. There are people in shower caps. They are wearing heavy aprons. That's because of the x-ray machine. There are computers overhead. They are wheeling me beneath them. I Googled the angiographic surgeon. She is quite attractive and speaks Russian. Her name is Lauran Ryder, which isn't a Russian name. She's married, no doubt. I am waiting to see when she enters. It is all quite theatrical, this medical hegemony.

There she is! She is wrapped up tightly in a number of garments and seems to have goggles over her eyes. There is a certain swagger about her movements as if her very actions spell life and death. She reminds me of a pirate. She glances toward me but I am supine and can't quite get a good look at her. I must resemble something in a butcher shop rather than a coffee bar. And now it is beginning. The twilight anesthesia is being injected. I am waiting for the discontinuity of consciousness. I am feeling it; I am also feeling the numbness on the right side of my face. Carelessness is saturating my anxiety. I will worry about the "oh-my-gods" of my stroke after the "procedure." Right now, there is this slithering hiss of blood moving through my heart.

I am trying to see the screen. I want to see the dye squirt into my heart like I saw in the YouTube videos. I am warned not to move. Oh yes, they are putting this into my body, "my" body. I guess the anesthesia is working. The operating room creates its own intoxication. It is an operating room, but it could be a butcher shop with a slight shift in thinking. I also know that they have put an IV in my wrist, but I forget when they do it. That is a part of the shock. I am wondering what it is like to have a lethal injection ... if it is like this, distant, abstract. The X-ray monitor is moving over me like a square white cat. It is "purring" and it is nosey. It wants to look inside of me. It is staying near my heart, sniffing it, rolling over it a few inches away, then moving again. I like it. It reminds me of an alien. I take comfort that an alien and not a human has such access to my vital parts.

Yes, the anesthesia is working. The procedure is almost done. I understand why they call the anesthesia "twilight." It smudges consciousness. I can feel myself "forgetting." I am forgetting that the operation is closing down. I can feel the coolness of oxygen in my nostrils. They have put some oxygen apparatus on my face. The possibility of a stroke is dawning on me as they wheel me out of the operating room. The doctor is nodding. She's like a kind of sports creature. She looks like a weird football player in her lead garments and her big goggles and her bundled hair.

Am I thinking that she would flirt with me? That we would make medical love?

Now I'm in the dressing room again and Elizabeth is waiting for me. It seems they fixed her car. There's a wheelchair. They are discharging me. If I'm going to say anything about my stroke, I had better do it now. In fact, right now a doctor is running tests on me for stroke. He is holding fingers at the edge of my peripheral vision and asking me how many I can see. Now he's asking me to touch his finger then touch my nose. I am wondering what will happen if I say something. I can feel my fate on the tip of my tongue. I can taste it. My breath is gathering in my lungs, enough to utter the words, "The right side of my face is numb."

Am I saying it? No, not yet, but I am looking into the young nurse's eyes. I am afraid that he's seeing the look of my incipient inquiry. He reminds me of a priest seeking out a lie. One more moment, one more, and I am done.

The doctor has left. The male nurse is starting to wheel me out. I am in the DMZ between hospitalization and freedom. Is it freedom? If I have a stroke, is it freedom?

"I feel a numbness on the right side of my face."

It is that simple. I don't say it that loud, more like an inconsequential footnote.

He leans over and asks, "What?"

"The right side of my face feels numb."

He steps in front of me. He looks me over. He touches the right side of my face.

"Right here?" he is asking, and he's touching me on my right cheek.

"Yes," I'm saying.

He rubs his finger across my cheek. "Can you feel that?"

And I can't, so I say, "No."

He looks like a frog about to croak. I am definitely out of balance. The balance of power is shifting toward hospitalization. Without taking his eyes from me, I'm hearing him shout, "STROKE!"

Things are happening like a comedy routine. Four doctors in white smocks prance from four separate doors. I am not in the wheelchair any longer. Yes, the wheelchair is out of the question: I am on a gurney that seems to have popped out of the floor. They are doctors for they have that doctor look, a certain routine seriousness, something plastered on, police-like, officious, certain. Yes, trained, especially trained. One of them is pulling my T-shirt off, the black one I put on this morning. They are sticking—what are they? —stamps on my chest. They are EKG stickers. Yes, like expert philatelists, *stick-stick-stick*, ribs, breasts, thorax, top of the chest, arms, *stick-stick-stick*, and then the little monitor with its spider legs scratching graphs on a roller like a player piano.

"Can you feel this?"

"Compared to this, can you feel this?"

"And now, this, can you feel this?"

They are swirling about me like mermaids, one dealing with my chest, the other my legs, and two more milling about my general anatomy. I can only imagine the size of their paychecks! How much will it cost to have four doctors be so close to my body? But I am insured! I am sure I am insured. The question is not even coming up, only harried devotion. Three Asian doctors and one I can't see. One of them is asking me what kind of blood thinner I would like. He says one is more effective but poses certain dangers like death, and the other is not quite as effective but not as dangerous. The lips on the right side of my face are sagging and my eyes are dropping tears, but I am not crying. I decide to go with the less dangerous and less effective blood thinner, and the doctor seems not pleased with my choice.

Now they are rolling me down a short hall into a room. There is a large cream-colored vertical donut. A narrow gurney runs through it. Am I going to fall on the floor and rupture my stroke-bloated face? There is the prick of a needle. The gurney begins to slide me through the donut. Is it spinning around me? There is a strange smell coming from it as if it were running too hot. I wish I had not uttered those words, “I feel a numbness on the right side of my face.”

The technician is there. I am asking him about the “smell.” And he is saying, “The dye.” I am asking him what this doughnut is and he is answering, “A CT scanner.” And I am thinking that it is foul, that it reminds me of hot World War Two fighter-plane engines that have never had time to cool off.

Let me see now, I’m being transported through a deep corridor of the California Pacific Medical Center—I guess that would be, in these days of acronyms, the CPMC.

How deep inside of it am I? How far down does it go? What building am I in? There are four large buildings sitting atop picturesque Pacific Heights. Right now, I am seeing chins and Adam’s apples. People are talking to me. I am angry. Yes, I am quite angry. I am angry at my situation and I’m angry at everyone engaged in my situation. I have a pronounced scowl. A middle-aged woman in a blue smock and a civilian sweater is imitating my scowl as best she can. She must be the chief nurse.

I am hearing that the angiogram revealed three blocked arteries. This is the cardiology ward. Already, they have an IV in the back of my left hand. When did I pick that up? Shit, they can dump anything they want into me. I am a vanilla cake, and my red meat is beneath the frosting. They are wheeling me into a room.

Let me see, it is around noon, Monday. That is when I was to have my first appointment for the angiogram. I guess I made it on time. Somehow Elizabeth is here and she is waiting for me at the nurses’ station. She is remarkably composed considering that she has been tending an injured

car as well as an injured friend. She follows me into the room. There is a drawn curtain. I must have a roommate. They are sliding the curtains closed on the door side, and now I am contained. Two people, I'm not sure of the gender, are busily hooking me up to a monitor and a bag of clear fluid.

The next that follows is a guess. What I do know is that I am as electronically connected as a battery is to a flashlight. When I twist my head up, I can see the graph of my heart and the number of beats per minute. A number of small cables are growing out of my pocket and they are going to the monitor. And now the nurse is taking my blood pressure. There is a kind of breathless quality to the atmosphere, which is not entirely pleasant. I am no good at names, so I will not even attempt to make some up, but there are a number of nurses who come to mind. There is a particularly angelic young woman with a white wide innocent Irish face, the kind of black Irish with delicate features and youth. She is standing to my left near my shoulder. Elizabeth is saying something to me.

"Gosh, I was driving around to the front to pick you up, but you didn't appear so I parked the car again, and they told me that you were in the cardiology ward."

Already I am remembering those innocent days when I could walk into a parking lot and get in a car and go home. Yes, yes, I am institutionalized now. I am in the hospital.

"It seems I've had a stroke."

"Yes," she says.

I don't want them to think I am stupid and helpless, even though it is obvious that I am stupid and helpless. Things are being forgotten. My mind is crumbling. I'm hanging from a cliff. Things, people are emerging out of nowhere and so quickly.

Doctor Kumar appears with a trinity of doctors. I can tell they are doctors because they have nifty white lab coats. They are all Asian. Doctor Kumar is the cardiologist I saw when I first

found out that I had had a silent heart attack. He is quite handsome. I don't know if he is Indian or Pakistani, but again, I say, he is handsome. He has impressive diplomas on his walls. His office looks out on the Presidio and the ocean beyond. It is obvious he is a heavy hitter. He laid out a course of treatment, namely a stress test, a nuclear stress test, and a CT scan of my heart. I've already had a sonogram. In the early days, everyone was thinking that my EKG was a false positive.

Those were the days when I was a healthy specimen of a seventy-plus-year-old who had given up his car for a bike and who lifted weights, who was a performer and a writer, who flaunted the healthcare system and lived without health insurance, just by the luck of the Irish. But here he is, lying down on a gurney, being scanned by high-frequency waves, terrified out of his skin. Yes, I am caught. I am caught in a lie I have been telling myself for years now, that I am healthy, that I can defy the odds of age and the misuse of tobacco and alcohol. God, I hate it, this sense of morality and guilt for past deeds, even if they are pretty far in the past. I stopped drinking alcohol sixteen years ago and I stopped cigarettes shortly thereafter, although in this last year I have taken up the pipe. I remember being so grateful that the technician operating the sonogram was wearing a hijab. That meant she believed in God, and I so needed God at that moment. I remember her saying, "You can see your heart, isn't that neat?" And I remember answering that I was too scared to be enthusiastic. She didn't answer. I failed that test too. And then the stress tests the following week. Oh, how humiliating! This was supposed to be a cinch for a guy like me. I would walk the treadmill, I would kill the treadmill, I would overcome my heart by my will and my threadbare trailer-trash heritage. How strange it seems now.

A surprise is a surprise, or perhaps isn't a surprise—but unexpected, like an accident or a reality, simply there, bare-assed and awkward and inconvenient, that fifteenth of May when I first learned that I had been silently attacked by my heart. My intention that morning was to get a

referral for an optometrist. The optometrist sent me to the ophthalmologist, and the ophthalmologist told me that I had cataracts and that they were “just ripe for pickin’.” I went to my general practitioner, Dr. Reed, to get an EKG for the cataract surgery. That was the morning I was fifteen minutes late for my appointment at the Monteagle Center.

I didn’t intend to be late. I took off slightly later than I had expected and then when I was in the parking lot, no, even further down the street, I realized that I had left my billfold back in my room with my insurance card and the cash for the copay. I didn’t have a cell phone then, so I had to go back into the building and up the elevator to get the billfold, ID, and cash. I called the doctor’s office. I was out of breath but I was polite. The receptionist fairly hissed at me that I had only fifteen minutes to get there. I said that I was on my bike and that I was seventy-six years old and that I would endeavor to get there as fast as I could.

Hadn’t she still hissed the same information again, even though I had been nice? Hadn’t I rushed as fast as I could to get to the elevator and then through the gate and down the street? Hadn’t I pumped that Janus bike as hard as my old body could, and hadn’t I arrived twenty minutes later? The snarly receptionist had glared at me, and an assistant in a blue smock ushered me into Dr. Reed’s office. I was sweating under my shirt and helmet. And it was then, it was then that I got that fateful EKG!

Hadn’t I flung myself out of the waiting room while glaring at the receptionist? Oh, yes, I was very dramatic then! Did I accuse her out loud of giving me a silent heart attack? Hadn’t I remembered her grinning maliciously? There were a lot of people in the waiting room. I realized then that it was a central reception area for launching patients into the various departments of the Sutter Health System. It was obviously her job to keep the line moving. Hadn’t I called her when I got back to my room and told her off? Did I mention that she is Hispanic and that I suspected that she is racist? Especially to old white gringos who ride bikes and sweat and flounce into big

waiting rooms full of people? I was off to the races. Hadn't I called my insurance provider and reported the receptionist? Hadn't she taken my side?! "No one should treat a patient that way," she had said.

To this day, I don't know what action was taken against the receptionist. I did get a letter saying something about it but I didn't understand it. She didn't give me a silent heart attack but she did treat me shittily. There is the nagging sense of guilt, of having justice dealt me, of having this happen to me, of being afraid that there is more to come.

This is all jumbled up, isn't it? I am confused because I am drugged and scared. A surprise is a surprise, especially when reality is the last thing you want to encounter. Let me go back just a little to Dr. Kumar after the silent heart attack, after the attack on the nasty receptionist, after the sonogram, the CT scan, after the stress test, after the angiogram.

Imagine me sitting in Dr. Kumar's fancy office. I don't know how to put it, I don't want to ask it but I have to. My god, it has come to this. I am going to have to ask how long I'm going to live. So, I ask it with the same soft sotto voce I would use when saying a prayer.

"Do you think I could live a long natural life?"

Now, isn't that funny, like am I almost pregnant?

He is answering almost wryly, "Well, you are seventy-six, isn't that enough?"

Holy shit, he is saying it. He is saying that I am going to die and no, it is not enough. I am thinking more along the lines of eighty-six. I would live ten more years and I would write many things, new things. After all, I have done so well taming my nastiness. I have finally learned to accept the affection of other people. I am in that bright tanning salon of post-hormonal life where I do not lust after females on the street. I have actually begun to live inside my brain, and my brain seems so much friendlier now. Surely, I can have another ten years ...

The motherfucker is, at most, forty. Fuck his medical training, he doesn't know the first thing about personal dying, up close and uncomfortable. Oh, those hard-on middle-agers and the trivia that is their lives. These fucking phallic shits. Career, sex, legacy.

Now to untie the knot I have tied. I am in the hospital. I am in the coronary-care unit, and Dr. Kumar and two other doctors in their nifty white lab coats are standing over me, and Dr. Kumar with his fine dark chiseled face and his perfect hair is looking down at me with that "I told you so" look. There are two baby doctors with him—perhaps they call them interns. And there are three grown-up doctors. Dr. Kumar seems to be the leader.

I have had a stroke, I am seventy-six. The right side of my face is paralyzed. When I try to pronounce my words, I sound like an old drunken cowboy with too many days in the Kansas sun, or maybe Gabby Hayes. Yeah, him. It makes me angry; oh yes, it is making me angry. One of them has cuffed me with a sphygmomanometer (blood-pressure cuff), and it is now crushing my arm until my blood is cut off. They are choking my arm, stabbing my skin, diluting my blood. What does Dr. Kumar know of delivering musical speeches and singing and bringing people to tears? All he sees is an old man who wants to live a long normal life and who has, in fact, already lived it. Oh yes, I am angry, and the nurse standing among the posse of doctors is noticing my rising blood pressure. I feel like I'm in some kind of science-fiction movie or something that Stephen King might conceive, and I am burning up the coronary-care unit with my rage. I am being monitored; my rage is being measured, and it is rising.

"I'm no' stupid!" I slur at Kumar, the man who said that I had enough life, and I note with gratification that he is slightly taken aback by my aggressive attitude and the wondrous timing of it all. I am aflame with rage and fear, and the sphygmomanometer is measuring it all. What perfect timing for an actor! The nurse is looking pointedly at the monitor and the soaring blood pressure.

Fuck it! Fuck it. I will pop my heart rather than crumble in docile senescence. I don't want to think about how I might actually look, like an old man barking at his fate, a pitiful, stupid old man.

"I don't wanna stay here! I don't ha' t' stay here! You c'n't kee' me here! If there's nothin' you c'n do for me, why shour I undergo these pr'ceedings?" I am saying, not shouting, and not sotto voce, but in a slurring Sprechstimme.

They are saying something, but I can't hear for the blood pounding in my ears. They are saying that I can leave but that I probably should stay, that I have a better chance of surviving if I do. My heart is beating faster and my blood pressure is rising, and I am close to popping every vein in my brain and body. It is the last-ditch action of a helpless old man, but I will take it.

Then I am suddenly exhausted. There is a soupy feeling as if I and the rest of the world were in separate canoes. I want to go to bed but I'm already in bed. I want to have morphine to make it okay. All the while, I am saying to myself, "I have had a stroke! I have had a stroke!" Not believing it, but knowing it for the plastic feeling, the Styrofoam in the right side of my face. One of the doctors says that the extent of my neurological distortion might be due to my choice of blood thinners. If I had taken that other more dangerous one, the nerve damage might have been averted. Of course, of course, that is true—how stupid of me. Then he thinks better of it and says, that perhaps it wouldn't have made that great a difference, that I shouldn't worry about it at this point. He punctuates his statement by pointing an iPhone light in my eyes. Then they all bow together, the grown-up doctors and the baby doctors too. One of them says that they will come later in the day.

All of the civilians are gone. I am alone with the nurses.

Bedtime in the middle of the day! I am wide-awake and lying in bed. There is some drip going into my IV, this blood thinner. I could clot at any second and all I have to do is wait for it. I

have my iPad and my Audible books. There is a Wi-Fi connection. There is everything I would have gotten at home had I been at home, where I usually sit hours a day gawking at a big screen.

I'm wondering who is behind that curtain. I have a roommate. When I had my knee operation I had a solo room. There is a television above me, shiny and black and empty. I don't want to turn it on. There will be all of these news channels talking about that crazy president. I want to be home, hermetically sealed in my environment. Someone is entering. She is passing behind the drawn curtain to my neighbor's side of the room.

"How are you doing, Cody?"

I'm remembering a nurse mentioning something about having a nice neighbor whose name is Cody. I wonder if Cody is as old as I am. I wonder if I'm going to be bothering him or he is going to be bothering me. I wish I was alone. I wish I was on morphine or at least some kind of mellow drug. As it is, there is this drip-drip-drip of blood thinner making my blood slippery so that I won't have a blood clot. I am trying not to think of a blood clot. I am mincing around the thinning barrier that separates me from hysteria. I am trying not to think about what it is going to be like to die. I am almost ready to think about how, in death, my eyelids will probably stick to my eyeballs. I am also trying not to feel guilty about shouting at that Hispanic receptionist.

"Hello, Mr. O'Keefe?"

Someone is speaking to me from behind the curtain.

"Yes," I am saying.

"I'm Doctor Gao, may I enter?"

"Yes," I am saying.

He steps through the curtain.

"Shall I open the curtain a bit?" he is asking.

"Yes, that would be fine."

He has come back again. He is the doctor who asked me which blood thinner I would like.

“I am a neurologist. I’m here about your stroke.”

He spits the light from his iPhone into my eyes, first one, then the other. He is tilting his head with cat-like curiosity.

He sticks an index finger in front of my face.

“Follow my finger with your eyes, but don’t move your head.”

I can do that. I can do that in a snap.

“Touch your finger to your nose. Now touch it to my finger.”

I can do that too.

“Look at my eyes. How many fingers am I holding out?”

It’s hard not to sneak a glance at his fingers for I can see them in my peripheral vision. He’s holding his fingers above and below, to the right, to the right again, and then to the left, three fingers, two, two, one. I am wondering how he decides how many digits to use, how I might be able to anticipate his choices through game theory. Perhaps if I were a genius, I might outwit his choices and guess what fingers he is holding without looking. I could get away with a stroke then.

“How bad is my stroke, Doctor Gao?”

“Your face is distorted.”

I wonder if that is the proper adjective to use, but it seems appropriate for it feels distorted, like my skin has grown into a lump and is hanging there.

“Am I endanger of getting blood clots?”

“That’s always a possibility with strokes, but the heparin will help.”

The nurse and “Cody” are laughing about something on the other side of the curtain.

“Will my face get worse?”

“I don’t know. If you had taken the other blood thinner, it might not have.”

I must be looking at him anxiously for he says, “The heparin is fine. We are going to be checking your blood constitution every few hours.”

I guess that means they are going to be sticking me with a needle every few hours.

The nurse is leaving Cody. She is laughing and it is in mocking contrast to my solemn tone with Dr. Gao.

Dr. Gao is pulling my curtain closed. No, no, leave it open. But he’s already gone. I don’t want to raise a ruckus so I don’t say anything.

Where can I plug in my iPad? I need it, but it has been having problems connecting and when the thing runs out, I will have nothing to take up my time. I am uncertain about “Cody.” If I connect with him too soon we might run out of conversation. He might be a Republican.

He did make the nurse laugh. I think he might be young. I am glad I brought my earbuds. I can watch Netflix. I can eat the time up. What am I eating? The time I have left before a heart attack. My death will come from the heart and not from cancer. “Seventy-six is enough time,” according to Dr. Kumar. Dr. Kumar has seen many people die.

I have only seen one. He died just after my first marriage. He drowned. I’m not sure if I saw him die. I saw him let go of the inner tube and disappear down the river. I heard that his body was found a day or so later and that it was all blue, but when he let go of the inner tube, he wasn’t gasping and flailing, he was peaceful, he was calm. Dr. Kumar had obviously talked to people who thought they should live longer, who aggressively stated that they should live longer and then died, had simply died. Had they drifted off like the boy who drowns? Is this my time? Seventy-six years old? That is the national average for a male. Then why am I in this hospital if I am going to die now? Why not just let me go home and smoke my pipe and ride my bike and go on with my life? Perhaps it is a hygienic thing; perhaps I might die in this hospital and they can collect me and burn my body or process it like SPAM. Where do they put the corpses? In the basement, no doubt, with

the junk and the procedures that went awry. All those cuts and nicks and scrapes, all of those hours of gas and drugs and sterilization wasted. Model airplanes with too much glue or broken nibs and misplaced wings and tails. I wonder if they take them down in an elevator or a hole in the floor.

“It’s okay that you went with heparin. That warfarin is rat poison, literally.”

He is talking to me. This is Cody.

“How do you know?”

“Believe me, I know.”

Then he is on the telephone. “Hi, this is Cody in room 336 A. I’d like a veggie burger with bacon. Yes, and a diet Coke,” then to me, “Did you order lunch yet? If you want lunch, you better do it now cuz the time’s up.”

“You can order lunch?”

“Yep, just like room service.”

“How can they let you eat bacon?”

He laughs, “You mean with a veggie burger?”

“You know, I mean ...”

“I know what you mean: I’m in the cardiology ward so I must have heart problems.”

“Yes.”

“Because my heart is shot, there’s nothing much more that can happen to it. You better order now because they’re closing in the next five minutes. The number is on the menu.”

There is a menu! It is a real menu with pictures of food on it, beautiful food. There is a phone number.

The woman on the other end is saying, “You can’t have food yet, sir.”

“When can I?”

“The doctor will tell you.”

“That sucks,” says Cody. “It’s because of your stroke. They’re worried about your swallow reflex.”

“I swallow fine,” I say.

“Just hang in there, they’ll catch up.”

I think maybe I’ll like this guy. He is obviously young. I can tell from his voice.

“You seem to know a lot about medicine.”

“Not really, but let’s say I’ve had some practice being a patient. I’m here for a heart transplant. Ah, here they are now,” Cody is saying before I can react to this stunning information.

Just then, I hear people entering my side of the room.

“Hello, Mr. O’Keefe,” they are saying on the other side of the curtain.

“Come in,” I say. “You can pull the curtain open.”

A woman in her forties and a man in his twenties pull the curtains away. There is a sudden breath of light. They are wearing light-brown uniforms. They introduce themselves. I can’t remember their names.

“We’re the stroke team,” says the woman. “May we sit?”

“Of course, pull up a chair,” I say.

Now, this is funny, but I feel good. Is the word “good” right? I’m reading a book about economics, specifically about “How much is enough?” You know, about greed and the materialistic culture, especially the infamous one-percent oligarchy. One of the chapters is about the mirage of happiness. It fundamentally goes on, page after page, chasing the tail of happiness but comes up empty-handed. It is an unhappy chapter precisely because it dissects happiness from the flow of life itself. It seems to me that seeking happiness is like seeking death; for happiness without the other elements of life, such as tragedy and sorrow, is like seeking nothing. I’m saying this because I am suddenly happy! I don’t know why. It certainly isn’t the “stroke team.” I know

who it is. It is Cody! There is something about Cody, a tone in his voice, a radiation almost. Yes, even through the hospital curtain, even though I haven't set eyes on him. Actually, I can feel him smiling. I think that he is laughing at the timing and the way the woman said, "stroke team." All at once, I realize that I am here in the hospital and possibly at the end of my tether. I think that I can hear Cody chuckling on the other side. Yes, I can and so can they.

"That's Cody," I'm saying and I'm laughing.

They tilt their heads his way with such perfect timing that I have to laugh.

"Hi, Cody," they are saying.

Now Cody is laughing out loud, but nicely and infectiously for the Stroke Team is laughing too.

"It's a small world," he says.

"Yes, it certainly is," says the woman.

"I wasn't aware that strokes had teams." Cody is laughing.

"There are teams, actually." And now they're not laughing.

I wait a moment, then, "How bad is my stroke?"

They look at my face and the woman says that it is probably a moderate stroke, that I have a certain amount of facial droop.

"A physical therapist will be visiting you soon. You are scheduled for a barium swallow test. We can't give you solid food until we know if you can swallow."

"I can swallow." I demonstrate.

"Food can enter the airway and a stroke might inhibit the reaction and you might choke. The voice box might not have time to raise or the tongue to move."

I swallow again. "See, I can swallow."

"Try this."

She hands me a carton and a pull tab like a pudding or a Jell-O box.

I “drink” it. It is thickened like a cube of mucus. I expect it to be sweet. I don’t see how it can quench my thirst. “What is it?”

“It’s water.”

“So this is the way I am going to drink everything from now on. Can I have coffee?”

“Gelatinized coffee, if you like—Peet’s coffee,” says the young man.

“It’s not so bad. We’ll talk to you after your barium swallow test,” says the woman.

And just like that, they are gone, and yes, they close the curtain.

I hear a tintinnabulation, a *tinkle-tinkle* like a tiny milk truck.

“Mr. O’Keefe?” a voice with a Chinese accent behind the curtain.

“Yes?” I am saying.

“I’ve come to take some blood.”

What can I say? No, you can’t come in? After all, there is only a curtain separating us.

“Come in. You can leave the curtain open.” At least I’m going to get something I want out of this.

I realize why the association with the milk truck for when the woman pulls the curtains away, I see a cart with vials of blood clinking against each other like so many bottles of milk. She is like something out of Ray Bradbury, tiny, in her late seventies, a loose moo-moo with flowers on it. I know this is my hallucination, I am sure she is wearing the blue scrubs of a nurse and that she is much younger but at this point everything is possible. She is the Needle Lady.

She takes my right arm.

“This will only pinch,” she incants over the fresh flesh.

But it doesn’t *pinch*, it hurts way up into my artery. I don’t want to look, but the pain draws my eyes to the sting, like the sting of a blue hornet, and I see the needle moving around in my

artery. Then dark blood fills the barrel. She looks up at me and smiles, then withdraws the needle. I don't cry out. I won't. My red milk joins the others in the blue phlebotomist's tray. She trundles through the curtains, stops, closes them, and tinkle-tinkles away. A black and blue spot is already appearing on my arm.

All this has happened little over an hour ago but already the woozy hospital time is seeping in.

A nurse comes and goes. She is nice. They are all nice. I am not nice, but I am yielding like a seventy-six-year-old virgin. I have just noticed that my pubic hair has been shaved for that angiogram in case they wanted to slide the camera up my crotch but they used my arm instead. Christ, was that just this morning?

I hear pinging. Yeah, *ping-ping-ping*. I can't quite locate where it is, perhaps somewhere just outside of my stall. *Ping-ping-ping*. Why don't they take care of that fucking alarm?

A nurse pulls the curtains away. She hurries to a monitor above my bed, then helps turn me over. The alarm stops.

"Here you go. You'll get used to it," she says.

It's me! I was lying on the IV tubing. She exits but leaves part of the curtain open so that I can see the wall.

A food server rolls a tray in. "Is this room 326 B? Mr. O'Keefe?"

The server puts the tray on the bedside table. She leaves. She doesn't close the curtain. My stroke food is under a lid: smooth soup, meat mush, potato puree, carrot goo, applesauce, and a box of thickened water.

It is dark. I am here. The bed. The railing. I hear laughter and this kid's voice full of swagger. He is talking about food. There are a number of visitors. They are Filipino because they are talking about being Filipino. They're talking about good Filipino food ... Or how good Filipino

food is. They are laughing like people who visit sick people laugh to make them happy. But it is not forced, they genuinely like my roommate. Now he is talking about PlayStation. I like PlayStation. I only have a PlayStation 3, and he is talking about a PlayStation 4. He is talking about Grand Theft Auto V. I have Grand Theft Auto IV. Now the laughter comes out in gushes, two or three people at a time. There must be at least four people behind that plastic curtain.

“He broke my heart, he literally broke my heart. I gained so much weight, I got so fat. I lost forty pounds, but I’m still fat,” laughs Cody.

I try to imagine him as a Filipino. I imagine that he is quite fat. I see this fat Buddha baby with round cheeks sitting in a lotus posture on the hospital bed.

“If I don’t get a heart, I will guilt him to death!”

He laughs loudly and everyone laughs with him. It is not a strained laughter. It is the laughter of good friends warming his bedside.

“No, that wouldn’t give me any pleasure,” he says with disarming sincerity.

A girl is saying that he should get a new heart and move on.

“Oh, I’m moving on, all the way to New Jersey.”

He laughs. I’m realizing that I love his laugh.

Someone else is saying, “Well, you don’t have to go that far.”

“I do if I’m gonna get a new heart.”

“But why do you have to move there?” a young woman is saying.

“My family is there, my dad and my stepmom. I have to have family support.”

“We can take care of you,” a young man is saying but he knows that he is joking.

“I wish it was that simple,” Cody is saying. “I have to have family support.”

“You’re twenty-three.”

“Yeah, but I need to have constant care. It’s cool. I’m gonna miss you guys.”

And then he starts joking again, and they start joking and there is a dip in the conversation, the kind that says it is time to go. I hear the whispering of their coats as they put them on. I wait to see what they look like. They appear, five of them, one after the other with that sincere well-intentioned manner of millennials. They glance and nod at me on their way out and it makes me feel like a corpse-in-waiting.

God, what do I have to complain about? He's having a heart transplant and he's only twenty-three, while I'm almost seventy-seven!

I hear a tintinnabulation. The Chinese Needle Lady! I hear the blood tray and the vials clinking, but this time, they remind me of summer in Iowa and glasses on a lemonade stand. The Needle Woman is coming. But she isn't Chinese and she isn't wearing a moo moo, but a nurse's blue scrubs. She is exotic, however, perhaps Indian, maybe in her fifties and beautiful. She has long, brightly colored fingernails. I'm surprised that the hospital would allow that. She smiles at me with her beautiful almond-shaped eyes. Not flinching, the readiness, the expectation, then the stab.

Just then, I hear a woman laughing on Cody's side of the room.

There is no sting. It is done almost before it begins. She puts my little vial of red lemonade among the others. My name is written on it and a number. She is going, oh, she is gone, and I will have a few more hours before the next stab.

Cody is asking the woman, Kimberley, if he can take a stroll. She's asking him if he needs help; he is saying he doesn't. Kimberley emerges from Cody's side.

"How are you doing, John?" Her voice is lovely. Golly, she makes me feel like a boy again. And then I think of Cody, who is a boy, a boy waiting for a new heart. A person so full of heart who needs a heart. I can't help thinking of the Tin Man in the Wizard of Oz. I am stunned for a moment between thoughts of nostalgia and sorrow, how kind and horrific life is, so I don't say

anything when Kimberly inadvertently closes my curtain. Shit, I won't be able to see what he looks like. I am still imagining a huge bubble-cheek fat baby. He is getting up. He is walking past. I still don't see him.

I have remote gadgets and whatnots in the breast pocket of my Johnny gown. Every beat of my heart is measured. The bathroom is on the other side of that curtain. Are those fish on that curtain, jellyfish? No, neither animal nor vegetable—nothing with blood. Horrid. I don't like thinking about a bowel movement. I am afraid that getting to my feet will loosen the blood clots hiding in my plaque. I imagine that the plaque is dirty yellow like the pipe stem of a meerschaum or some dried old snot hidden in an ancient nasal cavity.

Time, oh my god, time runs thick and thin in a hospital bed. At first like spit and then like pus. Finally, Cody comes back to the room. I want to talk to him. I need to talk to him. There is this ache in my heart like a grenade and my hand is holding the pin. I don't know which hand, maybe both.

"I have a PlayStation 3 and I play Grand Theft Auto 4. I bet the graphics are great on GTA 5 with a PS 4," I say after a pause to the curtain.

"They are."

"I don't like San Andreas," I say.

"Yeah, the graphics are for shit."

It is so funny: me, a seventy-six-year-old with arteriosclerosis talking about video games. "I've read that playing video games is as good for the brain as reading Shakespeare."

"I've read that too. If that's the case, I've done a lot of reading."

He is laughing that infectious laugh. He is childish, he is a kid; he hasn't said anything and yet he is making me laugh! I've had a stroke, my face is paralyzed, I am in the hospital, in the cardio ward, and I am laughing. It is an edge-of-the-world laugh, it is the laugh of the no-where-

else-to-go laugh, and I am laughing it with him. It feels so good! It makes me want to die, burst the guts out of my chest, and just puke my heart up. Fuck you! Fuck you people and your fear of death! Fuck you and your monitors, and shriveled socks, your blue scrubs, your white coats, your stethoscopes, and your needles, your fucking needles and your nasty bare-assed hospital gowns!

Jesus, I sound like a bitter old porn star. I know Cody's secret. He is angry and hopeless and at the end of his tether and he is dangling on a rope from a cliff, or he has just unbuckled the harness of his parachute and now is free and enraged and full of the amour of the final liberation.

It is evening now, and the night will happen and the narrow bed will shrink as it gets darker, and as the deep hospital gloom sets in, the needles will come out and the lights from iPhones will shine in my eyes like guard dogs.

"We're going to take a little blood to see if the heparin is working. It will only be a pinch."

Pinch, my ass!

"Touch your nose, now touch my finger. Touch your nose now touch my finger. How many fingers am I holding up? Two? Three? One? What is your name? What country are we in?"

The first night in the hospital I am spending with Kimberley. She has to be too young to be a full-fledged nurse. I don't ask her age but I ask where she is from.

"I'm from Louisiana."

"I have a friend from New Orleans, her name is Elizabeth; she brought me here."

"I remember her. Well, I'm not from a place as exciting as that. I'm from Northern Louisiana, just a small town."

"Are you of Irish descent?"

"Oh, gosh, no, I'm a mixture of everything."

She is so beautiful, tall, as delicate as a figurine, face so clean and open and lightly sprinkled with freckles. Her hair is black and runs down her neck like a silken veil. If I were a young man I would be in love with her but I am not ... a young man. I'm luckily beyond sexual desire, but not beyond the appreciation of the flowering of young pretty women.

She will be here the whole night if I need her, she is saying. Others will be here too, people pushing carts from the deep interior of the building, carts with syringes and vials, carts with blood pressure cuffs, carts with whole computers on them. Aliens from other floors.

"God, I'm in the coronary-care unit!" I am murmuring to myself through my half-paralyzed face.

The night is forever, a hospital night, somewhere south of purgatory. There are no opiates. There should always be opiates or something to dull the pain of the narrow bed and the stiff back and the heavy smother of sterilized sheets. Deep in the night, the needles come out and the lights shine and the questions get tougher even though they are exactly the same. Three hours of fractured sleep, living nightmares in blue scrubs and the beeps, the beeps, the metronome of my heartbeat and the alarms when I turn on my side for a brief dip into the soma.

"Mr. O'Keefe, you're blocking your IV."

"Mr. O'Keefe," "Mr. O'Keefe," like I was some old man on his deathbed.

One a.m., three a.m., five a.m., seven a.m. and only the fluorescent lights of the ward. I can't see the dawn. The dawn is an anesthetic pressed on the ceiling above my plastic wall. Only the cluttered sound of people waking people tells me that night has skulked off.

An energized nurse with a white sweater over her blue scrubs sweeps one of my plastic walls away.

Then Kimberley comes. "My shift is over, John."

She looks tired and I tell her that.

“Twelve hours—I’m pooped. I won’t be here for a week, so I hope you don’t see me because you will be out of here. You’ve been a pleasure.”

Cody calls to her. She disappears behind the curtain and says goodbye.

“I hope I don’t see you either because you will be on your way to a new heart, buster.”

He laughs and that makes me feel happy for some reason. Kimberly reemerges, waves at me and disappears into the abstraction of out there.

“Breakfast time, time to call in your order,” Cody chimes.

“I can’t call in my order, I have to have Jell-O food.”

“Oh, that’s right, shit, I’m sorry. Food is the only happy thing in this place.”

He is dialing.

An old Filipino woman is pushing a cart. There is a gray plastic food cover. A new nurse is coming in.

“This is Mr. O’Keefe’s,” she is saying.

I don’t like her because she doesn’t know me. I am just a name on a list. I am edgy; I don’t want to be edgy because I am relatively helpless and dependent on the kindness of strangers.

It is breakfast. I didn’t have to order. The server smiles at me, and her smile makes me smile. She pulls the lid off. Everything is in neat containers. There is milk, and something yellow, and something brown, and something cream colored. There are several little boxes that say “water.” Then she leaves.

The new nurse, I wish I could remember her, but I am so shocked by the stuff under the plastic food cover I can’t remember her.

“I know this doesn’t look too tasty, but we have to make sure you can swallow.”

“Because of my stroke?”

“Today you’re going to get a barium swallow test to see how well you can swallow.”

I swallow. It doesn't seem difficult, but I am a bit dehydrated.

"It's that Jell-O water. I had it last night. Is this real water?"

"Yes, try it."

I swallow it.

"I'm fine, I can swallow fine."

I can tell she senses the defensiveness in my voice. She smiles that medicinal smile that I am learning to recognize. My feelings are always on trial.

"You will have your barium swallowing test today, and maybe we can get some more interesting food."

"The food is interesting," I answer in my best placating tone.

"No, it's weird." Then she is grinning, and at last, I find myself grinning.

I am in the process of consuming or sucking this jelly down when a quartet of doctors enter.

Dr. Gao, Dr. Hong, Dr. Kumar, Dr. Chen. They are looking at me like I am a Thanksgiving Turkey. I am strangely shy like a turkey, like a baked fucking naked turkey. I don't want to look at them for fear they might put their tongues on my eyeballs.

"Mr. O'Keefe?"

Oh, how I want to say something bad to them! Now a nurse comes in, now another one. Mass is about to begin.

Dr. Gao steps forward. "Mr. O'Keefe, touch your nose, now touch my finger. Touch your nose, now touch my finger. How many fingers am I showing?"

And he hides his fingers again in that cagey way. Why doesn't he do a different version? Maybe that is the one that passed all of the scientific trials. It is so completely stupid and supercilious in its assumption that I don't notice that he is repeating the same sequence. But he is

the doctor of strokes, so I'm touching his fingers after I touch my nose and I'm telling him how many fingers, how many stupid pudgy fingers, he is holding under my chin.

"Mr. O'Keefe, what country are we living in?"

"The United States."

"What is the date?"

I sneak a glance at the chalkboard on the wall and see the date.

"June 27." I'm wondering if *he* fucking knows.

"Who is the president of the United States?"

"Obama."

He does a double take.

"Donald Trump is the president of the United States," he says.

"He's not my president," I say and I hear Cody's laughter coming from the other side of the plastic curtain.

They don't respond. Oh, doctors and monkeys and all of the little soldiers and citizens, you disgust me. May you be barren, may all of humankind be still as the dust on the fucking moon. God, how I hate people in suits and uniforms!

They are looking at the right side of my face, the one that is hanging down like the heavy end of a testicle bag. Now he is asking me to smile. I can't. Now he is asking me to stick my tongue out. All of my bad teeth are showing, the black incisors and the four weird capped ones in the front that look like plastic phony Halloween teeth and the big fleshy gum on the left side of my jaw. I am an old man with an old man's mouth, a good-for-nothing old man who didn't take care of his teeth and didn't have enough money to go to the dentist. Shit, I could barely afford to get the rotting ones pulled out. Oh, the labor force and their dental insurance. I was always healthy enough

to get by, but my teeth weren't. I never thought I'd have to show my teeth. Now, in old age, I am averaged out because my old body has finally caught up with me. They are looking at a bum.

Fuck you, fuck you all! You are the bums. You are the collaborators in Vichy Liberal America. Yes, I am embarrassed, I am humiliated. It is so easy how I kiss their asses, how I stick my tongue out, how they gawk, each one in turn, into my seventy-six-year-old mouth, the mouth of a failure. Tears are dropping from my right eye, fat tears. My right eye is dry and the tears are milking from it, not because I'm crying but because the right side of my face is paralyzed. Now I look like my life.

I can't fight them. I am so tired. I have had no sleep. I have had to jack raw-nerve-time right out of my life, the kind of time one lives when trapped under rubble waiting for voices to come. But the rubble is my body, my beating heart.

They are leaving! I want to ask them something. Can't they touch me again and make me better? It is as if some part of me thinks that their eyes have magic powers. I don't want to be left alone. My eyes are dry, especially the right side of my face. I am realizing that I can't close my right eye.

I wish I could remember names. I have always had trouble with names. I hope that my old age is partly responsible but I think that it is my natural narcissism that is the culprit. Anyway, right now, I am calling a nurse. I'll call her Carla.

"How can I help you, Mr. O'Keefe?"

"Please call me John."

"I'm Carla, John. How can I help you?"

"My right eye is irritated."

"I'll get some eye drops."

I keep wanting to call them nuns. I lived in orphanages for a number of years, and I can honestly say that nuns were not as pleasant as these nurses, but there is a devotion to duty about them that reminds me of the Sisters of Charity in Saint Vincent's, where I lived in the outback of Nebraska. Nurses are sexier, and Carla is sexy.

Carla is back in the room.

"Here you go, John," Carla is saying. "Tilt your head up a bit."

And she is depositing precisely one drop of artificial tears in my right eye and then in my left. She gives me the little bottle.

"Can I do anything more for you?"

Perhaps they are a cross between nuns and airline stewardesses but with a more personal touch.

"No, thanks."

"Just let me know. Cody, are you behaving yourself?"

"No, I've been a bad boy, Miss Carla," carols Cody behind the curtain.

Miss Carla darts behind my plastic wall into Cody's "room."

"I want to bring my PlayStation and play on the TV."

"I don't know if we can do that, Cody."

"You can, you can, Miss Carla; just think positive."

"You are a charmer, but I'm not sure if I can get that through."

"Positive, think positively, remember," he says and laughs.

She reappears on my side and is about to close my curtain, then stops.

"Do you want me to leave this open?"

"Yes, please."

The light of our shared room brightens the wall. I want to see what Cody looks like. I want to introduce myself, but the very thinness of our wall seems to make it more impenetrable and the intimacy of the situation more awkward. The medical environment is gelatinous. Speech is for crying out, breath is for dying, skin is for pricking. The nurses are the tongues and throats, the air of the hospital. They are the human interface.

“Hey, I didn’t introduce myself. I’m John.”

“I’m Cody.”

“Where are you from?”

“Blow Hole, New Jersey, near Philadelphia in the land of Trump.”

“Where?”

“Easton, New Jersey.”

“I take it that you don’t like it.”

“Like having scurvy.”

“You are having a heart transplant?”

“Yes, when I get a heart. I just have to wait for somebody to die.”

“Yikes.”

He laughs. “My sentiments exactly.”

“How long have you been living in the Bay Area?”

“Five years. I moved out of my house as soon as I was eighteen. New Jersey is the armpit of America. But I have to go back because my “family” is there, where they can provide “intensive care.” My stepmother is okay, my father is okay, but that’s just about it. We don’t have anything in common except a mutual disgust for my mother, but thankfully she’s left the premises, and my stepmother is fine. But I don’t want to go back. I worked at Taco Bell.” He laughs. “Friends are temporary, Taco Bell is forever.” Then I became an assistant manager at Brookstone, started a BA

in psychology at San Francisco State. Now I have to go back like some sniveling kid who didn't leave home."

Back in my stall waiting, yet another test. One that would free me from the Jell-O water. And here he comes, the gurney lad. Once again supine, on the narrow boat beneath the smooth waters of the ceiling, waves of doors and pipes and glowing lights like jellyfish, the boys of Charon swim the skies, cart boys pushing meat to their appointments, medical lads young enough to haul the load of sick, injured, and dying beasts. So go I, spooled by yet another, dark-skinned lad, handsome and strong.

Same kind of conversation I might have with a taxicab driver, "You must know your way around this place pretty well." And he, "Oh yes, but I still have to keep alert—this place is pretty big." "This place is pretty big," like something out of Kafka.

I can't remember if we go down the elevator or we go up. There is something that the body loses when always on one's back, like some kind of death prostitute. I can't remember for how many hours Johns have pinned me and had their way with me. I want to say "God protect me!" But I don't say it, yes, I do say it, but in these halls, I think I have lost track of God, and there is no Ariadne thread. I know that God will find me after the medical staff has given me up to nature. Yes, even in great monoliths like this, nature finds its children; death's cartographer knows where we are in the end. Death is bigger than the universe.

The bell rings and the door slides open, and we arrive at a sign that says "Radiology." I'm going to get a swallow test. I feel drugged. I think it is a stage of hospitalization. I am ready to let them do anything to me now. Surely, they are used to that. I am an old man on a gurney, an old hermaphrodite in a sheet.

Someone is opening a door. He is a technician for he is wearing gray technician's scrubs and he's talking like a technician, but whose data is skin and body fluids. There are two of them, both young men. They all help me to a seat by the scanner. My gurney lad leaves me with them but says goodbye.

"How much radiation have I already gotten? Three CT scans and an angiogram," I'm thinking.

A middle aged woman in blue scrubs enters. She is obviously the boss.

"Mr. O'Keefe we're going find out about you swallowing," she is saying.

I think I hear a Russian accent.

"Are you Russian?"

"Yes," she says with the Russian accent, "I am Russian."

"Oh my god," I say. "What is this stuff about Russians and nukes! The doctor who did my angiogram was Russian."

"Watch out, Comrade," she quips, as she hands me a paper cup half full of thick white liquid. She describes the procedure. I find myself standing by an x-ray screen the size of a telephone booth, swallowing this chalky radioactive stuff from a little paper cup. There is a whine of machinery toggling around my throat, then lifting to my face, closing in on my mouth like a girl about to give me a kiss, a French kiss; she is inside of me, this machine, she sees my throat and my tongue.

"Swallow a bit more of it," says one of the boy technicians.

I swallow and Ms. X-ray sees me do it, licks me up in gray and black. The black is the meat of me swallowing the radioactive milkshake. "I can do this," I am saying to myself.

"Swallow a bit more," says the boy technician.

“I can do this,” I say, this time aloud, and I feel naked about my words for I can see them being formed in my mouth. Is there anything inside of me they cannot find? Is there anything left of me they do not have or cannot have?

“Yes, you’re doing quite well.”

And I am thinking, of course I’m doing quite well, I have been swallowing for over seventy-six years. And that is when I begin suspecting that there’s something wrong with their diagnosis. Why, if I can swallow so well, are they saying I’ve had a stroke? And that makes me just a little angry, but I laugh instead.

We joke more, the Russian woman and me, something about the Cuban Missile Crisis. The test is over and I don’t know if I’ve passed it. The technicians will tell me nothing. That is left to the priests and the Cardinals in their white lab coats when they do the rounds. It seems, though that I have “passed.”

Another gurney lad rolls me through the intestines of Sutter Health. I think my brain has turned to vomit. They are making me helpless with every cheery laugh, with every joke, with every test. I am an unwrapped chicken breast burrito, grease cooled, congealed, and filmy between the bones, yes, the bones. I want to wave the rags of my old man limbs. I want to bestow blessings to the other ones like me in the corridors with their own gurney lads and lasses.

“Here we are,” the cheery lad says, standing by my head, looking down. “Here we are, home.”

I see the pretty nurses smiling at me as if I had been gone a long time. They are my nurses. They are my family now. I am home, once again in the coronary-care unit. I love their blue scrubs and their familiar faces. I love them all; I love them for what they are doing for me. What is it called? Stockholm syndrome? Is it? Is it really? Then, again, isn’t everything, isn’t it life itself, especially old age where each day seems like something stolen from another’s mouth?

Have I fallen asleep? I can't tell. I'm so tired. I'm dizzy. I've only had three hours of sleep at most. I am marinated, I am eating Jell-O water, my face is paralyzed, and it is all natural in this place. Is this what it feels like to have one's life saved just in the nick of time?

"John?" spoken right on time, just on the other side of my eyelids.

"Do the clouds still move?" Am I saying this? If there are clouds, they always move, even in old movies. I haven't seen the sky for, what is it, three days? Maybe two, but really, it doesn't matter. It is probably just two days. Now they are here and I don't want to open my eyes.

"John?"

It is a woman. Let me see, is she young? Does she have blond hair? Maybe she has red hair. I am partial to red hair. Is that because my mother had red hair? But I don't like my mother. Maybe I actually love her. Yes, I love her. I am opening my eyes.

"John?"

Avery is her name. She has the perfect look for a nurse. She could be a nurse action figure, five feet six inches, straight silken black hair to her shoulders, kind of Italian. I mean she has that sweet tasting complexion, burnished smooth skin, and rosy cheeks, early thirties, heart-shaped lips, all of those clichés about how a pretty woman should look. And she is funny. It is obvious that she has brothers. She has the quality of being able to rough house with guys, you feel you don't have to adjust your conversation to "girl."

Cody and I both talk about who we think are the best-looking people on the medical staff. Cody thinks that Dr. Kumar is tall dark and handsome, direct from Central Casting. I think that, well, any number of the nursing staff is adorable.

Avery laughs and says that when a certain anesthesiologist passes by, she thrusts her chest out and stands a little taller and then collapses when he passes without noticing her. She accompanies it with a hilarious pantomime. Now she is standing over me.

“John, you are scheduled for an MRI this evening. We’re going to find out about that stroke. Are you claustrophobic?”

“I am, Avery.”

I am claustrophobic and I’m also getting nerve worn with the needles and intravenous fluids and Jell-O water.

“Well, then I have a concoction that will make all of it go away,” she says.

“Does that mean yummy drugs?” Cody asks.

“Yes, it does,” says Avery.

“Do you mean it?”

I can’t believe it, they are going to give me neat drugs. “Will it help?” I ask.

She crosses to my bedside and strokes my hair. “No doubt, my dear.”

I have to see Cody. I have to see what he looks like. You really don’t need to see him to get him. He radiates through the plastic curtain and is reflected on the faces of the people who interact with him, the nurses, the techs, the therapists, even the doctors. In this somewhat dour ward where people are dying all the time, Cody is a bright light, and he lights me up. If I had been my own roommate, and I tell him this, if I had been my own roommate, it would have been a depressing situation. When I look at my life, I realize that I have been a very lucky person. I came out of the worst white trash scenario and I wound up getting two college degrees and a bit of recognition. All that aside, Cody is one of the lucky things that happened to me at this scary juncture of my life. He set the bar higher. I think sometimes you get giddy at the brink of death. He knows how to laugh, he knows how not to give a shit. It is a way of not giving up. It is a way of courage. I think I want to just get up and look at him and I think that’s what I’ll do.

“Hey, I want to meet you,” I say.

“Come on over,” he carols.

Getting out of bed is a big deal. I know I must have gotten out of bed before but just I can't remember. How long have I been here? Two days, right? You get so disoriented and pickled by the hospital atmos-fear, the damp, pervading sense of slow alarm, the intensity of it like a clock with sluggish slippery hands. I didn't feel this way when I had my knee operation, but this is the cardiology ward. This is the ward for broken hearts. I think people die here a lot. In any case, it's easy to forget how to walk. I'm imagining myself rolling out of bed, grabbing the IV stand and pushing it to the end of the curtain. Here I go.

Cody is not Filipino. If anything he looks like a pale Italian. In a way, he looks like a guy from New Jersey—maybe that's why I think of him as Italian. I've heard that there were many Italians in New Jersey. Maybe too much *Sopranos*. Long ago, I spent a summer in Teaneck, New Jersey with a girl named Nibsy. I worked at Kinney's shoes so I saw a lot of New Jerseyites, and Cody seems like them. I was only twenty-three and from Iowa, so what did I know?

Cody has beautiful feminine eyes in an otherwise masculine face. His hair is brown and not remarkable, not as remarkable as his soul. He is not fat and his pallor is a hospital pallor. His eyebrows are dark, but not thick, and gently follow the curve of his eye socket. There is a generous gap between them, no doubt denoting his intelligence. His lips are full and finely shaped. He is gay but not effeminate. I wouldn't know it if he hadn't talked about it to his friends—about that boy who broke his heart.

I hadn't believed that a heart could actually be broken until a certain Japanese stripper broke mine. I had a silent heart attack so I don't know when it happened, but for two months straight, I was in a stupor of savage pain, unable to move and tears just about to brim in my static eyes. Could this have been a slow, very slow silent heart attack? I can't help thinking of my heart as a horse, a lead-footed horse lying on its side on my pericardium kicking at the air. A ventricle gives out. Could this have happened to Cody? Could someone have actually broken his heart?

I'm going to get some drugs; finally, I'm going to get some drugs. It is the first time I've looked forward to anything since I got put in this place. I eat my stroke supper, various bowls of mush and two cups of gelatinized Peet's coffee. Ugh! And finally, near evening, Avery enters with the syringe. Again, I don't want it to seem like I can see the evening fall. In the hospital, evening is created in spite of the fluorescent lights by a kind of fatigue. Life in the hospital is like tasteless taffy, warm or cold, elastic or brittle, and usually at the border of testing your patience. Just as in jail, one must compose oneself, or utter hysteria could ensue and one could feel as if being buried alive and scream and scream until one is locked away in solitary confinement so that the screams cannot be heard; so too, the terror of dying in a hospital, transplanted in the hospital bed like an unhealthy bulb. It is the same with everybody, in or out of a hospital. Sometimes one must not think too closely lest the insanity of being trapped in a body and stuck on the ground in three dimensions and subject to time drive one mad. That is why I am so enamored of Cody and his magnificent laughter while he awaits a dead person's heart.

Instead of mashed potatoes and gravy, my Betty Crocker, Avery, comes in with a syringe of joy. Drugs are the only way you can escape the inescapable world of hospitalization.

"I would've come sooner but I had to wait for the people in the MRI," she is saying with a smile that makes me love her all over again. "I've given you a pretty good dose so just relax and go for the ride."

The gurney lad is at the door. It is such a strange situation. Inside this building, drugs that would be deemed illegal are normal. I will never understand human beings and sometimes, I think if it weren't for fear, I would simply die just to escape them, but that doesn't matter for I'm going to get a respite. "Ativan," perhaps that is what it is. I think I got a lot of it for I immediately feel relaxed. It is like I might feel after a long crying binge, relieved, disposed of remorse and cleansed. I didn't want to cry for the drug was crying for me, crying and scrubbing my fears away. Avery is

smiling at me. She is the most beautiful drug dealer I have ever seen. She is an airline stewardess in her blue scrubs and the carefully inscribed letters RN.

Before I know it, I am watching the ceiling pass in a dimension where the sky is made of pipes and fluorescent lights. I am hearing Cody bidding me farewell. Avery's hand is on my foot. She is accompanying me to the door of the ward.

Now strange things are happening. Hallucinations. I think they are hallucinations. What are hallucinations? Are they fictions created by the mind or are they dimensions we have tuned out? Perhaps meaning comes in varying tubes like oil paint and sometimes they mix together, and drugs, death, or sleep supply the linseed oil. The man pushing my gurney has a furtive look and he is hairy. I have never liked body hair, pubic hair, and facial hair. Actually, pubic hair and facial hair are the same. Maybe the pubic hair that got shaved from my crotch for the angiogram is forcing its way into my hallucination for everyone I run into—or better yet, roll past—has facial hair. They're all dudes, though. Thank god, for they all have beards and mustaches. I too have facial hair. I have not shaved since June 26 when I came into this hospital. There is no access to water, and I have not asked for my electric shaver. There is no reason for I am a patient. They can shave me when I'm dead. I am talking to this young man but I don't remember what he looks like. He reminds me of someone in a story by Kafka. So much about hospitals is Kafkaesque. Sickness implies guilt. Sickness implies helplessness. Strangely enough, although I feel this helpless Kafka feeling, I am not afraid. I think the drug helps me not to be afraid. I think, however, it is stimulating my mind. Really, I have been here three days and three nights, but somehow I have lost one day. I have not had more than three hours of sleep per night. I have been punctured and probed and questioned, and all I am getting from it is a half-dead face. I have been frightened to death, but Cody has kept me above water and the nurses have been kind. I feel good about myself because I

have not ranted and raved. Oh yes, when I first came in, I was pretty upset. But you know, why not? Why should I simply submit to incarceration when all I am guilty of is having a stroke?

We are rolling through the halls, and I think that I am going to a place deeper in the building where I have never been. I know that I have been on several trips that have slipped my mind. “Oh, dear God,” is what I want to say. I want to say it and I want to have God be there and make everything whole, make it “all right.” I am sure these halls have many prayers rolling around in them, countless prayers of cancer patients and kidney-failure patients and brain-failure patients, patients for every organ, patients for every fear and for every pain. The world of science makes no room for this. In the world of science, there is no self and it is perfect. The world of science is only computation. Computation means nothing. Nothing is perfect for things. Things are dead. In the end, nothing is the place we go to.

I am in the elevator and the elevator is going down. The young man above me is saying something but I feel only a slight pressure as his voice replaces the air in that little moving box. “Help me,” I am saying. This is far beneath my consciousness. Consciousness is the smoke blowing through the hallways, lingering on the ceiling of the elevator.

There is a dinging. The door opens. Now we are moving, and I think his hair has gotten longer. He has very black hair. He has a very black beard. He has scrubs and they are khaki colored. There is hair on his arms. Did I say I don’t like hair? I don’t like hair, vellus or androgenic.

Now we are rolling toward another elevator! Yes, a deeper probing elevator! The electricity is denser down here. It is like molasses or the color of that old-fashioned flypaper amber. It is slow and it makes the lights jump. Whatever the juice I have in my veins, it too is getting thicker. It is stronger. It is the pharmaceutical stuff. This ain’t no bathtub gin I got in my veins! If it wasn’t such a tranquilizer I would be totally screaming by now! The elevator is going down. It is going down to the very bottom. Stops. The door opens, one door, opening, sliding open like a guillotine blade,

but sideways. I think there is grease on the edge and the smell of oil, yes, and the hall dark with thick light. I'm feeling gooey, I am sticking to the air, and the oxygen is floating just above me in layers between nitrogen and helium. I can hear the sound of water running through the walls. The walls are dark like the color of mitochondria. I can see the chin of the gurney lad sticking out above me like the tip of a surfboard but covered with hair, dense black pubic hair. He is talking to somebody at the end of the hall. I am tilting my eyeballs up, but my eye ridges are in the way and all I can see is the dark blood in my head.

"Who are you talking to?" I am going to ask, but I can't say it because my face is too stoned and all the skin in my body has turned into stroke skin. "Yum," I am saying, "Yum, yum, yum," I am saying, and it feels yummy like the inside of a jellybean. Now my eyes are going back and forth like I'm in an avant-garde movie and there is a soundtrack that sounds like chewy music, yummy-yummy-yummy-yummy. I think that my brain is throwing up. It's just so rich in the soup and so sweet, and if my eyeballs were not there (like corks), I would spit up my spirit chow. "Oh, dear God, save me!" But I don't say this for it is against the atheist law and there are scientists afoot. The gurney lad, he is talking to them, the scientists. "Here he is." I am tilting my head up, but my neck bone is too much like licorice to do it. It doesn't matter because here they are, the scientists!

"Hello Mr. Scientists," I am saying and even though I sound like Gabby Hayes and my head is full of stroke, they are understanding me.

"Hi, Mr. O'Keefe, I'm Oxlamqzamber Ldrmp." And then, to the gurney lad, "You can leave him here. We have him now."

The scientist is extremely pleasant and heavily bearded. The back of his white lab coat is thrown over his shoulders. It looks strangely fashionable. His eyebrows are bushy and black for he is young. He is no older than thirty and his companion is the same age and he too has thrown

the back of his smock over his shoulders. They are both wearing 501 Levi jeans, Alaskan lumberjack shirts, and thick leather shoes. Oxlamqzamber Ldrmp is introducing his partner, but I can't remember his name. He is equally friendly.

The room is made of concrete. It is a concrete vault. It is the essence of a basement. It may be an archetype basement. It is gray and there are swaths of a lighter concrete. As the archetype of being a basement, there is a tossed-about sense to it. Being the archetypal basement, there is an undisturbed yet non-directional illumination to it. There are also a number of machines. There is a cement mixer, a large compressor, a tall cardboard box of burned-out light bulbs, a number of hammers and wrenches, some smooth racing tires, and a long tube. They are scattered about. There is plenty of room, however.

The man whose name I can't remember is pushing me toward the long tube.

"Are you claustrophobic?"

I am nodding my head, "Yes."

They are rolling the gurney to the long tube which I presume is the MRI. They are transferring me to the long narrow bed of the MRI. They are so good at it I hardly feel it at all. They have motherly hands.

"Don't worry. Here are some earplugs."

He is putting them in my right hand.

"And here is an eye mask."

He is slipping it over my head and covering my eyes. It feels good, and I am immediately comfortable as if it was meant to go with the medicine now coursing through my veins.

"If you get scared, just squeeze the carrot."

I feel the conical shape of a plastic carrot.

Oxlamqzamber Ldrmp is saying, "Go ahead, squeeze it."

I do, and it squeaks.

Oxlamqzamber Ldrmp says, “Go ahead, squeeze it again.”

I give it several squeezes, and it squeaks each time.

Oxlamqzamber Lidrmp says, “If you get scared, squeeze the carrot and we will pull you out.”

I am thinking, I don’t want to squeeze the carrot unless I am really afraid. I don’t want to squeeze the carrot unless I am really afraid.

The other technician has taken his place behind the glass. I can’t see this for my eyes are covered by the fixed sleeping mask, but I can sense it. Oh yes, I know why. I can hear his voice over a loudspeaker and it is echoing slightly in the concrete vault.

“Okay, Lidrmp, I’m all set.”

Oxlamqzamber Ldrmp is saying, “Okay, stay completely still. This will take about fifteen minutes. Now put your earplugs in. Remember, if you get scared, just squeeze the carrot.”

He is patting my hands, my hands holding the carrot and I am thinking, I don’t want to squeeze the carrot unless I am really afraid. I don’t want to squeeze the carrot unless I am really afraid.

Now I know that this is going to happen, I am going to be moved into the interior of this tube. It is thick, and I will not be able to get out unless they drag me out on that long narrow bed. Everything is about bed. The lingua franca in a hospital is bed. Everything is in bed because bed is almost dead. The hospital pajamas are for corpses. Perhaps this tube is to cook the corpse and make it more easily disposable. My question is why: Why do they bother? I have to watch my thinking. Just a little shift, a little thought would make me scratch at my coffin until my fingers bleed. These things I cannot think, I dare not think. And although I am thinking them, the medicine in my veins makes me okay with it. I am okay with it. I am thickly stuffed in my ears with plugs.

These are the thickest earplugs I have ever encountered. These earplugs are like mushrooms which not only penetrate the ear channel but also spread around the external acoustic meatus, the mouth of the ear, the earwax bowl. These earplugs sprout and enfold the auricle. Now, these eye masks, or should I say, this eye mask is thick and ventilated so that air comes in but not light. It is not heavy and does not compress the eyeballs but ensures an $a \rightarrow b$ and $b \rightarrow c$, then $a \rightarrow c$ transitivity so that no event can happen before itself, and thus without a logical clock, it is mesmerized and inculcated into the strumpet sphere.

Here I am, giggling. I am wondering what a giggle is and from whence it comes, but I infer that it is of a haloed essence and should not be tiresome nor distolated. It means that I am not afraid and that I am on the edge of the cerebri crust. At this, I also laugh for I am reminded (once again) of mycological phenomena, viz., the *Amanita pantherina* with its brownish cap and white warts, the cuticle at the edge, blood-rich pulp so full of bracing images and tongues. At this, I laugh. I am grasping the carrot. I feel so comfortable with my eye mask and my earplugs and my rubber carrot. I hear the man behind the glass speaking in a laser voice with thin harmonics but clear enough to understand.

“Now, John, we will begin.”

There is this noise. I’ve heard it before. I remember it. I was thirteen years old and I thought often of flying saucers. Way back in 1953, there were so many flying saucers and movies about flying saucers. The sound that I’m hearing right now is that of a flying saucer! I know now, for sure, that I am in good hands. I don’t know if I am being tilted around in the MRI tube, but it doesn’t matter. There is this *click-click-click*, then a slight shudder as when a horse moves its skin as a child touches it. Then there is this whine and then the most wonderful *chug-chug-chug*. I am waiting for the *bang-bang-bang*, but it doesn’t come, only the glamorous sound of the internal workings of an alien vessel.

“Do you wash the carrot after each use?” I ask.

“Of course, this is a hospital,” says William.

Oh, I think to myself, oh, that’s right, I’m in a hospital.

“But you can keep the eye mask,” says Andrew.

I see the eye mask in my hands, now only fabric and not thick nor porous, just an eye mask.

“You did very well,” the other one says.

Says the one that is the other, “Did you feel okay?”

“I enjoyed it.”

They are glad.

I’m on the gurney again, propelled by the gurney lad, a different one but I don’t remember what he looks like ... yes I do, I think he is Filipino. What is it with all the Filipinos and hospitals? Is it like Indians and motels? Or Chinese and laundries? Or nerds and private jets? Am I stereotyping? Don’t blame me, I’m a seventy-six-year-old white guy with a stroke. I don’t have to worry about PC for right now my brain is frolicking on this narrow gurney, floating through the innumerable hallways of a Borgesian hospital, stoned out of my mind on some really good pharmaceutical shit. I keep thinking of the word “squamulose” for the squirming transparent worms invading the walls.

Everywhere, on the floors, the ceiling and the walls are these roiling cells. Everything is squirming with them, and in a strange way, they are tickling me, or I am tickled by them. The young Filipino man is pushing me into my ward, and everyone is there—everyone I have ever known in the world is there. All of the other people I knew in my life outside of the hospital are not important. The curtain that separates me from Cody is gone, and I can see him, sitting up in his bed, smiling at me and all the pretty nurses; and they are all pretty, are greeting me. They are reminding me of the nice black-habited nuns back in St. Vincent’s when I was a little orphan boy.

I wish I could express to you the joy I am feeling just now as I am being transferred from the gurney to my bed. Avery is at my side. How beautiful her hands are! Hands are beautiful and strange! Her hands are the hands of the statue, but full of color, that color of life; but all hands are beautiful: the hands of corpses, the hands of skeletons even thousands of years old. They are sparkling. Avery's face is sparkling. The sparkling is coming from the motion. Motion is the source of sparkling. I hadn't noticed this before. The sparkles are from the propelling agents that cannot be seen but do exist. The walls are squamulose with living thriving larva. Of course, they are! The world is a living mosaic of fractals, and the intersections are sparked by motion and the radiation of the brain. The brain is the machine which operates the ray guns of the eyes. Even the dead are absorbed into the living and the living absorbed into the dead, and here in the hospital are the interstices. Everything is passing in and out of this place. The hospital is a graveyard, a bus station, an airport. All of the people are angels. I can see how porous it is.

"Everyone is sparkling!" I cry out.

And all my aunts and uncles, my family; patients and nurses; attendants and phlebotomists are smiling at me in wonder and approval.

"You are really tripping," laughs Cody.

I am laughing. "At last!" I cry.

In the morning, they are gone—the squamulose walls. And so are the sparkles and all of the fairies. Only my sagging face remains. Another morning's light, the same light except in a hospital room. The curtain is drawn and splits the room in two. I think Cody is awake and I hear the after-sleep rattling of things. Is the light tired? Is the light tired of me? Or am I tired of the light? I want to talk to Cody because Cody knows how to face it all. He is the source of my joy: without him, I am just an old man with a stroke and a bad heart who, only a month before, looked

forward to ten more years where he could master something, at least find something to master even if it is of his own invention. Is he afraid of dying? Or is his fear merely the tiredness necessary to reduce his life force? Oh, how melodramatic!

In any case, he does not want to wake Cody. He wants the full weight of his own psyche—at least to find something, even if it is of his own invention. He wants the truth, he wants to feel what it is really like to be himself on his own. It takes that much to get out of bed when you are in a hospital. He is getting up. He is struggling with the wires connected to the machines that measure his oxygen and his pulse and the blood thinner in the bag. He does not want to raise the nurse. However, he just can't help getting tangled, he just can't help setting off the alarm.

The nurse is coming. He doesn't want to call her "the nurse" because she is more than that, he just can't remember her name. Let him call her "Eileen." She is twenty-seven and blonde and pretty and very helpful and very nice. He wants to go to the bathroom, he says to her. She helps him untangle his wires so that the alarm shuts off, and thankfully, Cody does not answer.

Now he sees his face in the mirror. He has grown whiskers. His hair, which had just been cut at the Vietnamese beauty school on Mission Street, is still short. There isn't that much hair and it isn't very interesting, doesn't have that phallic darkness of youth but an aged old shabby gray. It is the color of tired light. The yellow bathroom light is bright enough for him to see his sagging face. He tries to smile and although he can feel the impulse, his face remains dead; his eye bags are bulging as if full of tiny potatoes in his white-trash Scotch/Irish meat. His right eyeball, coarsely veined, protrudes just behind the rind of his lower lid. His purple spotted lips hang like old meat left to out dry on a rack of teeth, and his little ugly brown incisors and his pallid gums are there for all to see, for he doesn't seem to be able to completely close his mouth. He has not looked at his face since the stroke. Hot tears are coming to his eyes, and the sweet wash of life brims over his torment and he cries. He is crying. He wants to sob. He could sob, and it would feel

so good, but it would take far too much time to recover and everyone on the ward would see him. What shame is there in that? Babies and old men cry. He has had a stroke. He has had a stroke.

This is what it really means to be old. He used to think that old was simply an inconvenience, perhaps a certain arthritic inability to get about, a forgetfulness, or even depression but it is far more than inconvenient. It is a means of dying. Everyone has to die of something.

Why is life always surprising? Why does it always catch him unawares? He just wants to barge through it all and forget that his old age ever happened. He sits down and takes a shit. He pees and shits. Hey, he's lucky to be able to do that. Oh, fuck! He is supposed to pee in the urinal so it can be measured. Oh, fuck it!

I'm feeling Cody's vibes through the door. How I feel free with him, how I can change around him without feeling guilty. I am lucky. I am in a hospital, not on the street, not drunk (not drunk for seventeen years), and a stroke can be overcome, and when you die, even though your eyes might dry in your head, you will not feel it. It is okay.

Is the nurse waiting for me by the bathroom door?

She is.

I'm wondering if she sees that I have been crying. They see everything. I know she knows. I know it in the way she gently helps me into the sheets and the way she lays her hand briefly on mine.

I lay back and turn on my iPod and begin listening to an audiobook to cheer me up.

"Ragnarok, the Twilight of the Gods, will be accompanied by catastrophic upheavals. As the entire universe is plunged into flames, the earth sinks into the oceans and time itself stops. Scientists must now confront similar themes. Hard data, rather than mythology whispered around campfires, dictates how scientists view the final end of the universe, the grim tale of the end of the world, the dismal end of everything with no rebirth."

Listening to Michio Kaku's "Parallel Universe." What a douchebag!

"Kaku sees only meat." This is the era of meat. I am meat with a meatloaf heart and a blown ventricle. I was hoping to die in an age of spirituality where there were ghosts and synchronicity and psi phenomena, but there is only neuroscience and Daniel Dennett and politics. All of my childhood teachers are out of date. No William James, no Carl Jung. All balderdash! Humbug! There is no afterlife—fuck, there is no such thing as consciousness. Scientists are the new priests. Perhaps scientists are merely monkeys typing on those infinite random keys. You have to have as much faith to be a skeptic as you do to be a believer. I am a skeptic because I have more faith in my fears than I do in my hopes and right now, I am having faith in the tough-minded monkeys who stab me with needles and cut me with medical stilettos. And here they are, four scientists in lab coats: Dr. Gao, Dr. Hong, Dr. Kumar, Dr. Chen.

Doctor Gao, the stroke-man steps forward. "Have you had breakfast yet?" he is asking.

"No," I am answering while Marc Vietor, the narrator, is yammering in my ear. I pull the earbuds out. "I haven't."

"Well, we looked at your MRI and it shows that you haven't had a stroke. This is not happening in your brain, but in the seventh cranial nerve, which controls the muscles in the face. It is a result of the inflammation of the facial nerves. You have Bell's palsy. It can be caused by environmental factors or stress. So, we can take you off of the blood thinner and you can have a solid breakfast."

I can't believe it! I simply can't believe it! No more needles?

"You mean you're not going to be checking my blood anymore?"

Dr. Hong steps out of the cadre of physicians.

"Mr. O'Keefe, your left carotid artery is ninety percent blocked by plaque. It is true that you didn't have a stroke but there is a great possibility that you could have one. It would be

advisable for you to get the plaque removed. There are two procedures: a carotid artery stenting or endarterectomy. With carotid artery stenting, a guidewire crosses the narrowing in the internal carotid artery, a stent is deployed and a balloon inflates to expand the stent. With the carotid endarterectomy, there is a dissection of the carotid artery, removal of the plaque and closure of the carotid artery with a patch. Considering your age, I would recommend an endarterectomy. It is more invasive because it requires surgery, but I believe it to be more permanent.”

More permanent, I’m thinking to myself. What does that mean? Either it is permanent or it’s not. More invasive: what he’s saying is that he’s going to slit my throat vertically, expose the snot in my artery and scrape it out.

“What are the dangers?”

Dr. Hong looks no more than twenty-two.

“There is a possibility that it might affect your voice. You will not be put under complete anesthesia because of your arterial sclerosis; instead, we will perform it under twilight anesthesia.”

“Twilight anesthesia?” I think I am asking this of myself and of him at the same moment.

“You will be sedated and relaxed and you will not remember the operation.”

“How is that? Why won’t I remember the operation?”

“We will use mild doses of drugs to block pain, reduce anxiety, and provide temporary memory loss. You will feel comfortable.”

I’m thinking, so theoretically I could have a horrifying experience but I’ll be pharmaceutically induced to forget it. Is that a question? It is definitely a salient interrogative but I don’t force it upon him, instead, I ask, “What do you mean, “affect my voice?”

“There might be a possibility that your voice would be hoarse.”

“Permanently?”

“Perhaps.”

“But I use my voice, I am a performer.”

“There is only a slight possibility.”

“What if I said that you would lose your hands? You are a surgeon, I’m a performer.”

To be honest, I really don’t like to perform. I have done it so long that I have PTSD. But perhaps I might change my mind. It’s one of the major ways I’ve made money, and I’m pretty broke right now. Then I add—and I always do this, where I either go crazy angry or I try to placate— “You have a nice voice, Dr. Hong.”

“I studied literature as an undergraduate,” he says, not without a touch of pride. “I wouldn’t worry about it, Mr. O’Keefe, I’m sure it will be fine. I’ll let you think about it and I’ll come by later today.”

They leave. They just leave like a string of white dogs.

“You can order a real breakfast now,” says Cody.

“You mean, I can order it?”

“Yeah, grab the menu ... At the bottom of the page, you see the number?”

Yes, there it is, the menu—just like the menu in a restaurant. There are all kinds of things. The very first thing I’m going to order is coffee: two cups. And I’m going to order eggs. I’ll keep my ketosis diet going, so I won’t order any carbohydrates. I don’t remember what else I order; I am quite surprised to find that they have already adjusted my diet to solid food.

I should be grateful but I’m pissed off. I just spent four days in terror and despair. Now I have to face an operation with “twilight anesthesia.” If it wasn’t for Cody, I think I might become hysterical. Perhaps Cody’s laughter is hysteria.

“I’d do the endarterectomy,” says Cody from behind the curtain. “With an atherectomy, you might have to have those stents replaced. Just get it done.”

“You’re really smart, Cody. What are you going to do when you get your new heart?”

“I want to be a 911 operator.”

“You’re good with people, you could help them. Why don’t you become a psychologist?”

“Naw, I wouldn’t want to help people for money.”

“God, everything is happening so fast. I just came in for an angiogram.”

“Tell me about it,” Cody says. “I thought I only had diabetes, but then I started putting on water weight, like ten pounds a day. Suddenly, I was in an ambulance heading to the ER. They checked my heart: dilated cardiomyopathy—the heart wall has thickened and is pumping less blood so it overcompensates by beating fast. I started wearing a twenty-four/seven heart monitor. Two days later I was back in the ER: arrhythmia, hyperventilation, extreme tachycardia, dry vomit, cold sweat, passing out. That’s how fast it went. Am I ruining your appetite? That was a little more than four months ago. Now I’m in for a heart transplant. I’m going to have to move back to New Jersey because there’s no one out here to take care of me. New Jersey, pot bellies, and Trump. Listen, it’s almost July 4, there is sure to be some kind of accident, maybe a beneficent Hells Angel donor will give me his heart!”

“Do you believe in God?”

It is an awful question, I don’t want him to answer it. I want him to tell me that God is watching over us all the time, that God will guide Dr. Gao’s hand as he lacerates my carotid artery. But I don’t think that I would admire Cody if he went for the Disney version.

“The closest thing to God,” he says, “is the human brain. It’s amazing what it can do, how it can adjust to the craziest things, how it can come up with inventions. I don’t believe in life after death. Where do all the dead go? All the pirates who drown, all of the first soldiers to die in a charge, all the babies who suffocated in their beds. It just happens. I don’t know what I did to get this—maybe my diet, maybe my genes—but it all adds up to the same in the end. There is no bargain, there is no loss.”

He laughs. What is that laugh? It is an end-of-the-line laugh, it's I've a finally-got-nothing-to-lose laugh.

I laugh too. "I think what I dislike most about dying is that people will see my dead body."

Cody laughs and he pulls the curtain away so that I can see him.

"You mean like ..." He makes a dead face, jaw sagging, tongue lolling out of his mouth, eyes in his head. I lay my head over the edge of the bed so that my mouth is agape. My Bell's Palsied face must look especially ghoulish for Cody bursts out laughing. I start laughing too.

Two of the nurses, Adrian and Eileen come in.

"What's up with you guys now?" Eileen asks.

They see our faces.

Adrian says, "Okay, that's not funny!"

They begin laughing.

"I'll get the endarterectomy," I say.

I tell that to Dr. Hong later that day. It is set for 7 a.m. I am looking at Flipboard, an e-zine. There is a picture of a Falcon Booster rocket being towed by a truck through a little Louisiana town. It is more than a block long and as thick as three SUVs. It dwarfs those North Korean nukes. Its sheer size frightens me for it renders more than anything the size of death against my little frame and the pilot light in my head. I always thought of the hospital as one of those houses you shoot up in, a shooting gallery. I'm finally beginning to understand that a hospital is not a hostel or a hotel. You're not supposed to be in the hospital very long. If you're in the hospital, something is wrong. There is only so much time you can be in a hospital, something has to happen for you to gain your release.

A woman, a pretty thirty-something Eurasian comes into the room and goes to Cody's side. She reminds me of a New York agent, energetic like she's bringing something full of possibilities

from the outside world. Inside the hospital, there is no concept of the outside world. In the outside world, you take it for granted that you will live another day. But in the cardiology ward, there are no such assurances. The woman doesn't even look at me but heads toward Cody's side of the room. Yes, she fucking does remind me of an agent. I knew those motherfuckers in New York and LA and feared and hated them. They are purveyors of the soul; they'd sell the pubic hair from off your balls. They have a price for everything, for every little dream your twelve-year-old paperboy soul ever had. Nothing is sacred to them: they've seen it all and they know its price. And brother, they can pimp you out. They know every cheap trick, can pry open your treasure boxes, even the ones you hide in the back of the closet. In Cody's case, it is a heart. It is his life.

"Cody, I'm Janet Woo, are you ready to fly to New Jersey tomorrow morning?"

"I certainly am," Cody is saying with surprising composure.

I wish I could remember all of the details, what part of the hospital administration she represents or which insurance company. She is wearing a white physician's coat over her dark business dress and pantyhose and closed toe pumps and has the tight body of a gym rat. She is saying something about being ready to go. Seven a.m. is mentioned, I think, with a possible departure time of ten, about the time of my operation.

"I'm excited for you, Cody," she is yipping.

And she is excited in that perfectly freaky way people on a career path get excited. Why do I hate her so instinctively? Yes, because she doesn't know who she is speaking to: to Cody, to my Dalai Lama. I don't know why I don't trust her. I just don't want her to disappoint him. She leaves and although she crosses through my room, she doesn't even glance at me. All of this, of course, is me making me miserable. I'm sure she is fine. Of course, she is fine. She is going to help him. Maybe that's why she bothers me, that she is a purveyor of opportunity. How the milk of my old disappointments curdles. I'm beginning to get acquainted with the nature of hospital

terror. The sudden anger, the syrupy nostalgia of your mortal history, the end-of-it-all routine like a merry-go-round or a drill tearing at your nerves, the exhaustion of keeping your spirit up for fear that it may fall around your feet and leave you naked and dead. Goddamn me! Goddamn my fucking nasty nature!

“Jason.” Cody is on the phone. “I’m leaving tomorrow. Looks like I’m going to a hospital in New Jersey. Come on over, let’s party! Hey, can you stop by my place and get my PlayStation? Yeah, and my Grand Theft Auto 5. Oh, and Battlefield. I’m going to play it on the TV in my room. Cool! And hey, get some KFC for us. Fuck my heart—my heart is already fucked!” He hangs up.

“You’re leaving tomorrow?”

“Looks like it!”

The light on the walls is graying. The nurses of the night shift come on. Time is told by the change of staff. The hour hand of the old-age clock I carry with me still sneaks by, even here where the hospital replaces so many bodily functions. My old farm grows in the big clean halls. Now someone comes to prep me for the showers in a concentration camp. No food after nine, no water after midnight. Oh, and the terrible bag of blood thinner is removed and yes—oh blessed yes—no more extractions of blood. I will have nightmares forever about the various phlebotomists, The Needle Woman, and the one in a sari who sneaks under a tray and stabs me in the arm. There is a constant terror as the time goes on. You have to do something to gain your release. For me, it is an operation. I’m being prepped. An astronaut goes into space, I go to the edge of consciousness, into twilight anesthesia.

Meanwhile, Cody is getting ready for Jason and the PlayStation. He has already convinced the head nurse, Marlene, to let him use the TV in our room. He is trying to stack books to get the game console to sit next to the television. I don’t think there is another hospital that would let him do this. The nurses play at the edges of suffering and death. Only yesterday, there was a code blue

three rooms down. Cody and I have created a little pocket of relief from the grim work of the cardio ward. William, one of the taller male nurses is fiddling around with the TV stand so that the PlayStation will fit on it. The staff stops and watches the precarious endeavors of chair climbing, tiptoeing, and tottering as the PlayStation finally finds a secure place.

Jason is right on time. Shots are fired, cars are crashed, people scream and the music blasts as Grand Theft Auto V blares into existence. As darkness envelops the hospital, Jason and Cody become children. All the nurses on the ward stop by, even the attending physicians.

I struggle out of bed and go to their side of the curtain. Jason has climbed into Cody's bed. I'm not sure if he's naked but he has his shirt off. They are young and lovely. Cody's cheeks are pink. He introduces me. Jason is Chinese and looks perhaps a year or two younger than Cody. It is hard to believe such sweetness and innocence; such happiness can flourish in this place.

A nurse comes by and gives me my Xanax. Perhaps I will sleep. There will be no more needles, no more pin lights in my eyes.

There is a trick I'm beginning to learn, and it bothers me. I can imagine a time in the future and after a lag, I find myself there. It's just a thought, but that's all it takes and then I find myself minutes, sometimes hours down the road of time into the future. I don't try to do it; it's more like a slip, something I don't want to do for time is too precious now. Sometimes, however, it comes in handy and on this night before the operation I employ it. It is not without some problems. Sometimes there is a stuttering and time seems to move in the opposite direction; reminiscences and fears distract me and pin me to the hospital mattress. I realize that I'm going to be cut, that I have at least a two percent chance of dying and that my voice might be permanently injured. A nurse is moving in the darkness. She sees that I am awake. She asks me if I am okay. I want to ask her for a narcotic but I know that she can't give me one for I am to have an operation. She vanishes and I think that I might sleep for a moment. Then it happens, I have made the trick work.

Several people are in my room. In any other situation, this might be construed as a home invasion. The lights are turned on. I'm not sure what happens next for they might have already given me a drug. Perhaps I am experiencing the time warp of twilight anesthesia. This is where it's tricky: time is a subjective experience. If I am given a drug that suppresses my memory, then I don't know when something actually happens. Am I now in the future, remembering that morning they came and took me to the operating room? I don't remember going. Perhaps I do. Perhaps I'm seeing those Easter-egg-blue shower caps and Dr. Hong's little boy's face behind his glasses and perhaps some murmuring, but it's all like a movie. It's all like the blackouts I used to have in my drinking days. It's as if someone had stirred my brains just a bit, just enough to confuse me out of my experiences. It is truly invasive. Hardly anything so exotic happens to a guy like me, like one of those Cold War spy movies with injections, flashbacks, and montages, nonetheless, hospitals can happen to anyone if they have insurance. But I do not forget. It is a cloud, even now, but I remember an unimaginable pain and my voice murmuring "It hurts! It hurts!" It is the same feeling I have about the molesting I went through when I was a kid. I know it happened, but I can't—or I won't—remember it. Its edge disintegrates as it nears the source, but it is there because it happened, it has left its mark.

I'm in the ICU. THE INTENSIVE CARE UNIT. WTF!

There are no rooms. What are they? They are compartments built for easy observation, stalls with partitions and glassed in walls with doors in a long hall, like a dumpy French street with shops and the only items are people who can't breathe on their own or are fresh from an operation or near death. I really can't comprehend it, I mean all of the death around me, and I don't remember much and I'm getting very tired. There is this sense that if I don't leave soon, I will never leave at all. I should be afraid and right now, I am, but there is nothing I can do but go to my sweet spot

and breathe. It is hellish, a perfect setting for a Dante masque—dingy, messy, ugly like an annex of the parking garage.

The nurses are wearing the same dark-blue scrubs. They are the same age as the nurses on the cardiology ward, but this place bleaches the compassion out of them and makes them seem edgy. There is a certain listlessness about them as if they have been waiting in line for a long time. Maybe they're waiting for someone to die or get better, but this in-between stuff is a no-go. I remember needing to urinate and being given a plastic bottle. I am embarrassed so they close the curtain. I remember a beautiful black-haired nurse named Julie. When I ask her about defecating, she says I have to use a bedpan. I do not take a shit the whole time. Luckily, I only spend a day and a night there. I can't sleep and I can't remember any decent drugs, and the Xanax they give me doesn't put a dent in my anxiety-fueled insomnia.

Cody isn't there to mediate my desperation and rage. I am finding myself arguing with Julie about college degrees. She has three, so I tell her I have three. I don't have three. I only have two. Why am I arguing? If she's so goddamned educated, why doesn't she realize that I am scared and confused, that I'm a fucking seventy-six-year-old man who has been under anesthesia, that I have a five-inch incision in my throat and that I felt every fucking cut, and the drugs keep trying to make me forget it but I don't. She reminds me of a dark-haired lover in my youth, and perhaps I remind her of her father. I remember her apologizing in the morning. Yes, we were arguing like lovers. I never want to go there again.

Things are not in order. The doctors come in. I think they hold their noses when they come down here like diving into deep water. Dr. Gao is gone since I don't have a stroke. Dr. Hong checks my incision. I try my voice. It isn't hoarse, but I sound like a hillbilly, like an Alabama shape-note singer.

"It's due to the swelling," he says. "Everything will be okay."

More nurses come. They're always looking at me, checking me. It's got to end soon. A young man, Justin, is a travel nurse. So is his wife. They travel together. They go to many hospitals. I am trying not to be grouchy. I am really trying. I want to be nice. I want to be like I was when I was around Cody. I ask Justin how he rates the hospitals. He says that the one in Santa Barbara is the most beautiful. This one, in San Francisco, has the nicest staff. Kaiser has the worst. I want to go to my old ward. I will use my time trick. I will think time away.

I am moving on a gurney on the way back to my old cardio-ward. There are the nurses who met me five days ago. It could have been five months ago, it could have been forever. They are happy to see me. Some are waving. There are others I don't know and there is a room I have not really seen, viz., the nurses' station. Why is that? I had only seen it from a partially open curtain. I may still be hallucinating but it seems like there is no counter, only a lot of mobile units with computers they roll into the patients' rooms. It unsettles me. It looks like a collection of bugs directed by some hive mind, some Nurse Mother, some Termite Queen. They are all so unified and in concert with each other. They seem to be dreaming, the nurses sitting on these high-rolling chairs, or standing, standing there typing on the keyboards and looking into the computers. It's then that I realize how good they are at their work. They are kind and compassionate but they have many faces, many hands.

I think I am dizzy. I haven't had sleep for five days. I am so tired and soaked through with pharmacy. I don't want to think anymore. I don't even want to move my eyeballs, I'm too tired to close my eyelids.

"Has Cody gone?" I am asking a specifically pleasant nurse.

"No, he's here."

"What happened to his trip to New Jersey?"

“The insurance didn’t cover it.”

“That agent,” I almost shout.

“What agent?” she is asking.

I am shutting up because I know there is a padded cell somewhere in this facility.

A nurse I know is approaching. What is her name? She smiles like candied sex, and I am glad some nurses are like that. Memories are falling out of me like children’s wooden blocks. I can hear them bouncing on the floor. The floor is harder than I imagined. I thought the floor was kind like skin, but it is not that friendly. The floors are covered with rubber and linoleum for infection control, for life-cycle cost, sustainability, and comfort underfoot. I am supposing that they planned all that, and the acoustics too, so that screams and cries are muted and echoes curtailed by the flame retardant cubical curtains. That is why I heard that old woman cry three days ago—but not much, not much. The hospital is muted and consequently less fearsome. Blood and flora don’t adhere to floor and walls so the janitorial staff can clean the infection quickly.

“John, you’re going to get a new room,” says the nurse who knows me but whose name I can’t remember.

She is rolling me toward a big room. It has a window!

There is a man in there. He is scruffy and tousled looking. He is pale with that yellow tint hospitals bestow by their artificial lights and the germs that cling to the air like the glue on flypaper strips, giving it that permanent 1935 cast of amber.

I can finally see that everything is moving, crawling, expanding, shrinking, according to each’s separate moisture. Look at the window! Look at the great cast of San Francisco fog shining through the glass. There is a balcony but it is too narrow for humans. More than likely it is for the skinny ghosts of the most immediately dead, that dietetic of decomposition, the way boards are when facing Tiki gods, like the black unearthed mortuary sun. If hospitals were built more like

temples, the ghosts of the dead could find a way out, but hospitals aren't built that way. They are designed to avoid death so the dead have no way to escape. They are often lost in pleated and re-emergent hallways, especially doorways and so accumulate quickly. There are so many ghosts in hospitals they have become as thin as plywood. Many who die in hospitals have no room so they yield themselves up as ghost-boards. They are often trapped in the springs under the mattresses of hospital beds.

Todd, the scruffy man, has been here for three months, he is saying through mucous laden breaths and I, just as comically hospitalized, return in my oboed elocution, that I hadn't realized one could live so long in a hospital. He is waiting for a heart, it seems, and I am wondering if that might not happen to Cody, but I am not sure for the scruffy man is old (not as old as me) and so he is probably covered by Medicare while Cody is not so cost efficient.

A nurse named Mariah is entering the room. I have already talked with her enough to know her name and to have sung that song, "And They Call the Wind Mariah," to which she has replied, "Please, please, don't sing that song, those words will start running through my head, "Mariah, Mariah, Mariah, M-a-r-eye-yaaaaaa."

So I have been here on the ward probably thirty minutes but I am not yet cleared of ICU shock and pharmafog.

"We're moving you, Todd," Mariah is saying to the scruffy old guy, and he lies down like an obedient body in a Johnny suit.

"If you are good, we won't have to put you in a coma."

He is sighing, and Mariah is pulling the sheet up over his chest

"I'll bring you some magazines from the waiting room on the first floor near the entrance."

She is joking, she assures me, and Todd puts up his hands in order to stop her from covering his face with the sheet.

“He doesn’t care about the words or the pictures; he likes the smell of the outside left between its pages,” she says and assures me that again she is joking.

“You are going to have this room to yourself, John. Do you want to be near the window?” she is asking as she strokes Todd’s head.

I am nodding.

“I’m going to fetch an attendant,” she says and leaves.

“Where are they moving you?” I am asking.

Todd is addressing me; his teeth are as bad as mine. “They move me from room to room so that it don’t get like a motel. The government money can come in at six figures a week. So that they feed me rather than keep me on ice. That’s a coma, in hospital talk.”

Todd is clearing his throat, but he has no place to spit so he swallows.

“This is a fancy neighborhood. The houses are fancy except that big thing that runs up the right side of the window, a 1970s apartment building,” Todd is saying.

Look at the window! There really is an outside! Look at the sky! It is filled with fog. Oh, look! Oh, look! The houses are Parisian, except for the long building sticking up on the right side of the window.

There are two visitors sitting with me. One is Elizabeth and the other is Frank. They have been here almost every day. I can’t quite see them for my skin has been bleached and pickled even on the first day, even in the room where the Russian ran a wire through my wrist and shot nuclear dye into my heart. They have locked me in through my veins and arteries; even the fingers of my nose are holding me still so I can’t see them in their dimension, Frank, and Elizabeth. They will tend my body. They will see my face when I look as stupid as a stool. I’m beginning to accept that people who see my dead body will respect it and will treat it well, will allow it to be burned or

(and this is the newest convenience) dissolved (alkaline hydrolysis). They will take care of it because they will want someone to take care of theirs. I don't want to think this way; I mustn't for I might bring the cookie monster into my room. How horrible the cookie monster is for the cookie monster is made out of poop. They bring familiarity with them. I am like the reliquary they visit—medieval carbonized bones covered in pharmacalized skin. They won't run from my corpse for it will be presented to them. The Death Police in white coats will have a showing. The surgeons like murderers will not be in attendance. They will be able to take my remains home with them in a coffee can marked "Sutter Health." I know they have imagined it just as I have when visiting a hospitalized friend. A hospital is like a bus station without a bus.

I am seeing this funny-shaped thing. I don't know what it is at first. It is now turned down, now turned up. It is expressive. It signifies quite quickly. Head meat like a kebab, issuing expressions as quickly as a hand. Oh, there they are. Look at them! They toot, they quack, break wind, detonate involvement. Ah, it is a face. It is Face. Faces. How quickly I read them, their sign language. They are Elizabeth, they are Frank, they are my ex-wife, Celeste.

"Goodbye," they are saying to Todd.

Todd, the scruffy man, isn't answering. He slips through the fingers of memory like ectoplasm. Todd's head is still. His eyes, faded and quietly startled, are being moved toward the nurses' station. Nurse Mariah is stroking his hair. I'm wondering if he is thinking that he might be replacing that woman with the heart attack newly coded for the morgue. I can tell that he's trying not to think about it, about that bed.

I am not there yet. I'm. Not. Quite. Him. I will be—everyone will be—but gladness is catching when the troop is not in the loop. Ha-ha. I don't mean to make fun, but there is an inescapable relief that the ball set loose on the roulette wheel is not in our slot, a pattern of response, Darwinian superiority, that glance of curiosity at the one who is going to be dead meat, the

“chosen” one, and then the turning away, the avoidance of eye contact or the meeting of eyes lest they reveal that psychopathic glimpse of gladness. He is the one who is IT, not ME, not yet, not YOU either.

I am exhausted by it all. I don’t want visitors. Visitors are witnesses. They are not IT. I am in the hospital. I am in the cardiac ward, perhaps I will be IT.

The doctors are making their rounds. There are only three left: Dr. Kumar and Dr. Hong, my Camus and my Sartre, and who is this?

“Hi, Mr. O’Keefe, I’m Dr. Ryan.”

Dr. Kumar is my Camus. His myth of Sisyphus is my myth. “You’ve lived long enough.” Hong is Being and Nothingness: I can’t say why—perhaps it is the vacuous way he looks at me. He has “had” me. He’s done me and now he’s through. And this guy, Ryan, who is this guy? He looks like he came right out of central casting, the prematurely gray wavy hair, late forties, handsome. Fuck, I don’t want to describe how he is handsome. I don’t care if these monkeys are good looking, these survivors of evolution, these killed or be killed, these duck and covers.

“May I call you John?”

“Sure.” Why not?.

“I looked over your angiogram, and three arteries of your heart are blocked by plaque: two are ninety percent blocked and one is seventy percent. I would recommend a triple bypass.”

Ah, now I know who he is: he is my Heidegger, Being and Time.

I am now IT. I am going to be the one they watch roll into the room on my back with my eyes looking at the ceiling. I wish my visitors were not here. Dying is just too naked. I don’t want to see that look in their eyes, that guilty relief that they have escaped the bullet. I can smell fear coming from my armpits. I’m sure they can too. Oh, yes—look! I can see them glancing away, each one in turn. Maybe they are afraid for me. It’s happening all so fast. There are different layers

in the flow of time where things move at different speeds. The brain can see where consciousness can't or where fear or emergency allows it in. Things slow down to the speed of trees, contradiction opens its arms and pulls you in just at the moment of collision. It is before and after civilization so there are no words for it. I think if I could enter that world, I would see the land of dreams, the next stop before the void. That's where my dear friends are looking, but they don't know it. It is that place they talk about when they say "gone." It will change soon, that look in their eyes, as soon as the impact congeals and the terror of being so close to someone who is IT has emigrated to relief and then to compassion.

Dr. Kumar says, "Dr. Ryan is a heart surgeon."

"Oh, I see," I say without seeing.

"I would like to perform a triple bypass," Dr. Ryan is saying.

Would you really? Would you like to do that?

There is an awful silence in the room. I wish Cody were here.

"Is it dangerous?" I ask.

Dr. Ryan is a calm man. His eyes are steady. I mean by that they don't dart around. I'm saying this because I think my eyes are darting around. I think that when a room looks like fragments of a jigsaw puzzle that my eyes are darting around.

"It's routine, John."

Routine? Let me see: standard, regular, customary, normal, usual, ordinary. I mean, it's standard, regular, it's customary. It is normal. It is usual. It is fucking ordinary. It is not rare. It's like ... something you might do every day.

"Of course, there is always a certain amount of risk with any procedure, but it is small, like in the one-to-two percentile."

Risk? That means death, of course. There was a risk with this endarterectomy. I wonder how much risk there actually was. That's beside the point ... I think. I've heard of people having triple bypass operations. I remember someone saying, "Yes, he's had a triple bypass operation." I wonder if that is open-heart surgery. Yes, it is.

"You will probably stay in the hospital for six days. We'll have you walking on the second day. Recovery time is about a month, and in two months you'll be able to start doing your regular activities."

I spent my childhood through age eighteen in foster homes and institutions so I have tend to think institutionally. I always see people as part of an institution, something bigger than me and that I don't need to understand. "It doesn't matter who you're doing it for, just do what you're told, and do it well. If you do what you're told, things will work out. Be good. Be good. Do what you're told. These are the rules. If follow the rules, life will inevitably be meaningful until you go to heaven, and then you will follow the rules there forever and that would be that. Don't think about things too much, it's over your head."

"So then I'll live longer?"

"Yes," the handsome wavy gray-haired cardiothoracic surgeon is saying.

He seems very calm. He seems very present. He seems to be actually looking at me. I wonder if it smells funny when they pry open my chest? Does it smell like fresh meat? Or does it smell like a hot stuffy room? If I die on the operating table, do they sew me up? Or do they just leave me open? I mean, they don't need to. They don't need a surgeon to do that. They could pawn it off on a seamstress. I think Dr. Ryan is asking me a question.

"... October?"

I don't want to ask him what he's saying. I don't want to understand it. I don't know if I want to talk to him. It feels like he is asking me out on a date, like a date with my own murderer.

“It’s June 30 right now, isn’t it?” he is asking.

I answer, “Yes,” and I know that I am right because I have been asked the date by a neurologist at least once a day for four consecutive days.

“Yes,” the cardiothoracic surgeon is answering.

“So, October ... the operation?” I am asking, but I don’t know if it is a question because I don’t really want to know.

“Yes,” he is saying, “that should be enough time for the Bell’s palsy to clear up.”

“My birthday is in October,” I am saying.

“What a great birthday present,” he is saying. “A new heart.”

He’s saying it without cracking a smile. He is a cardiothoracic surgeon and a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons. I saw that right on his card. He also does transplants. He is actually serious. It’s like a seduction. Am I demurring to him?

“Okay.” I am saying. Am I blushing? Or am I blanching? Are my eyes wide and my pupils dilated? I suddenly feel so naked in my Johnny gown. He is taking my hand. He is leaning toward me. His eyes are clear and very blue. I am not breathing for I don’t want to smell him.

“You’re probably going to be discharged in the next day or two. We’ll set up an appointment,” Dr. Ryan is saying. At last, he’s stepping back.

Dr. Hong steps forward. “May I examine your neck?”

I tilt my head and expose the side of my neck like a girl awaiting a hickey. He gently pulls away the dressing.

“The stitches are healing nicely.” he is murmuring.

I feel his breath on my neck. I have stopped breathing. I don’t want to smell him either. It is not sexual; it’s just the idea that their meat is breathing. I have been in the hospital too long. At last, he steps away.

“May I take a look?” says Dr. Kumar.

He is addressing me and not Hong, thank God; otherwise, I would feel as if I were in a gangbang. Again, I look away and hold my breath. God, it is a gangbang. He steps back.

Look at them, three grown-up doctors and three baby doctors. I didn’t mention the three interns who trooped in with Dr. Ryan, Dr. Hong, and Dr. Kumar. They are so young and pretty, two males and one female. They were introduced but I can’t remember their names. Look at them. They are bobbing on the surface of life. I envy them and their youth-fattened faces.

I’m going to have a triple bypass.

I’m going to have a triple bypass.

I’m not saying this out loud. It is going on inside. Am I freaking out? I’m not sure if “freaking” is the right word. I like to keep things even. I don’t want things to change. I want to be a child forever. I have been quite content in my studio. Life is so much more outlandish than I imagined. And it’s real. Time is real, I mean *my* time is real. I can feel time now. It is a strange and not entirely pleasant sensation. It not only moves through you, it becomes you. There must be some neurocircuitry for that. Sensing time is like smelling outer space. Astronauts say that after an EVA, they can smell space. It smells like gunpowder. Time seems to be in the background, it also seems to be inside. It is in both places at once. Actually, it is everywhere. It is like the water fish swim in. And yes, I carry it with me and it also carries me with it. It seems to be ever present and continually forgotten. It holds existence together. In times of mortal terror, time becomes all there is. Now here I am in the middle of the present tense. I can feel the time shimmering from the mortals around me like heat from a desert blacktop. How frightened they are, how cognizant of their middling situation, that standoff between life and death, even the ones in hospital uniforms. I know I’m going to die pretty soon, sooner than later for I am old. I have put it off so many times, but now the years have painted me into a corner. The terror of eternal oblivion is like a giant

suddenly grabbing you by the hair and yanking you into outer space. It is the reality of death and with that, the reality of other living beings. “Living!” Living means dying. WTF! I know that, everybody does, but I forget, I forget. It is much larger than I think. I can’t exclude anyone from my life any longer. When you experience time, there is only the incipient. After that, there is nothing. At least, that is what I think. It is the Awakening though I don’t want to wake up, I don’t. All I originally wanted was a prescription for glasses.

“Let’s wait a few weeks and let the endarterectomy heal,” Dr. Ryan is saying.

They are trooping out, the five of them. The pretty Asian baby doctor stops, turns to me and smiles. That smile touches me. It feels as if she sent it directly into my heart.

I am exhausted. I haven’t had sleep in days. Am I in pain? “Roughhoused,” that’s the word that comes to mind. There is so much pain. I am afraid of wasps, but wasps are nothing compared to the needles buried in my hands and arms and the dangling IVs. Did I mention that my pubic hair has been shaved to the nub like a porn star? My arms are black and blue and so is my mind. This place will kill you even as it tries to heal you. Nature is an evil bitch and the wilds of raw evolution still exist within these walls and these sterilized units. If it weren’t for Cody, this would truly be hell. It is all about the spirit. Once the spirit is broken everything else doesn’t matter. I want to die. I simply want to die and I am terribly afraid that I will die. “Rest in Peace,” means that at last you are dead and you don’t have to worry about it anymore. There is death all around me.

The horrific thing is that I am going to have to come back here in a few months and then I will be really sick and I will have to go back to the ICU. Oh, yes, I will be so fucked. And there will be no Cody.

Mariah comes in with a big grin.

“Good news, John. You’re due to be released tomorrow,” she is saying.

It amazes me that someone can have such genuine pleasure at another person’s good news.

“Oh my god, that’s great.”

“You look tired. You should sleep. I’ll get you a Xanax,” she says.

“I only get one Xanax a day and that is at night. I’m going to need it at night.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll give you one now.”

I sleep.

The first thing I see when I open my eyes is the dusky light and the reality that there is a world outside of the hospital walls. I’m going home tomorrow. I am going out there into the world where people are not in the hospital. I grab the hospital bed remote and push the button. I use it to lift me up. I have now truly become hospitalized. I can run the machinery. I am used to IVs dangling my body. I can turn on my side without triggering the alarm. Darkness is replacing the shadows. The lights from the nurses’ station are cozy. I know the routine and the language. I recognize the nature of the sounds and the voices of the nurses conferring with each other. I hear footsteps approaching. A new nurse enters my room. She is pretty, dark-haired, in her late twenties. She has that “nursey” size, trim, between five foot four and five foot six. I know this is a gross generalization, but it seems as if the very act of being a nurse has created her size and shape. She moves with the characteristic and informal deftness of a person who has mastered her skills. I am beginning to have an old man’s love for them. It is peculiar. They are like my daughters: I am proud of them.

We introduce ourselves. Her name is Laura. She is a travel nurse. I ask her if she is married. She says yes. I ask her if her husband is named Justin. She says yes. I tell her that I was with him in the ICU. She laughs. People become close in such a short time. I am sure that they have talked to people like me only to return and find them dead. They have watched us die time and time again. It is like talking with the ancestors, the ones who are disappearing into that place called gone, and

the ones emerging from it, the babies coming out and the dying going in. It is happening all the time on the street and the marketplace, everywhere, you actually focus on it in a hospital, the process, stopping it, changing it, having it slip down the drain. The medical staff is the intermediary between life and death. Last words are spoken here, first cries are uttered. There is a gentle love between us.

“I’d like to visit Cody. Do you think I might? Is he asleep?”

She grins. “Not asleep. He’s excited about what he’s going to have for supper. You want to go to his room?”

I slip out of bed and take hold of the IV pole with its dangling bag. I’m getting too good at this. She leads me down the hall to my old room. I’m pretty sure on my feet, considering that someone lacerated my carotid artery just yesterday. I think they’re giving me pills for pain, but, unfortunately, I don’t feel high. I can feel a light surging into my head. I am imagining that fresh hemoglobin is flushing new existence and intelligence into what has been the dusty attic of my old blood-starved brain.

Cody has the room alone so the curtain has been pulled back. I remember when I envied the size and scope of his side of the room. Now it seems small compared to the room I have, and so does his window, but the size of Cody’s spirit has not shrunk. He is sitting up in bed. His cheeks and lips are red, and his skin has that paper-white hospital hue. He greets me with his big grin, and I grin back. It is just a natural thing with Cody: you smile and laugh with that crazy giddiness that comes with being on the edge of life. I don’t know what it would be like to talk with him outside of the hospital. He would probably be just a neat kid; but in this world, he is a soldier and a hero, a saint. I realize how brave people are, how significant their battles, how commonplace their behavior in the face of God knows what. I don’t think I will take anyone for granted anymore.

“Looking good, John.”

“You mean my incision?”

“Should make a nice scar.”

“Maybe a tattoo of a snake.”

“Or Frankenstein’s stitches.”

“What happened to your Air Jet?”

“My insurance wouldn’t cover it.”

“No shit, that sucks.”

“I know.”

“Then you get to stay in the Bay Area, right?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t have a support system.”

“But you do, don’t you?”

“No, I have to have my family.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“My dad and my brother are going to fly out. They’ll be here tomorrow morning and then we’re going to drive me back in my car.”

“But isn’t that dangerous?”

“Yep.”

“That’s crazy.”

“What’s new?”

“Fuck.”

“I’ve charted out the rest stops and the motels along Highway 80. It will take us around four days.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“I don’t know, but the sooner I get to the Frank Wood Johnson Transplant Center in New Brunswick, the sooner I’m gonna get my lucky heart.”

“I’m leaving tomorrow too. I’m going to have a triple bypass.”

“Right away?”

“No, they’re going to let this endarterectomy heal.”

“It will be okay, John. It’s really been fun hanging with you.”

“Yeah, ‘hanging.’”

I don’t get choked up. I lean over and hug him. It is done. Thank god for Facebook. I can check him out from afar and if I lose him, it will come to me on a screen. It is more important for both of us to get out of this place. And that is it. I just leave the room dragging my IV pole with me.

I go back to my room. It is so spacious. It feels like the culmination of something. How does that work? How do things that just happen make shapes in time? “Everything happens for a reason,” they say, but I’m not so sure if I believe in teleology. How do things make sense? How many accidents does it take to make a life? After all, everything is happening at once and somehow things unfold as if written in a play. People are surprised when life doesn’t make sense, but I am more surprised that it makes sense at all. In any case, life is ridiculous and yet it seems to work itself out in these vignettes. Perhaps we make it that way through our socialization. Everything seems to work in three acts. We meet each other and say hello. That’s the first act. We talk about what has happened since we last met. That is the second act. And in the third act, we find a way to say goodbye. There is morning, noon, night. There is childhood, adulthood, and old age. There is a departure, the farthest point reached, and the return. Other animals seem to know it too; as do

plants and trees—coniferous and deciduous—leaves grow, pinecones form, palm trees make dates and coconuts. Volcanoes, mountains, deserts, rivers, and streams write their scenarios in the earth, and it's usually in three acts so why wouldn't the world make sense? There really isn't anything that is so far away and nothing that is so close: stars are far away but galaxies are farther, an eye mite crawls over an eyelash, an electron jumps into a higher orbital and makes a baby photon. Everything that could be has already happened; death is the shell that holds the egg. Don't worry, old man, we have been here forever.

Laura, my nurse, is beginning my laicization (my return to the laity, to the "healthy"). She is removing the oxygen clip from my left index finger. She is pulling out the needles in my right forearm and the dorsal side of my left hand. She is disconnecting the wires of my patient leads from the pocket of my Johnny gown. It's almost over now. I tell her how pretty I think the IVs are, the colors of the flash chamber, the blue, pink, and yellow combined with the red of the blood.

"I think they would make very nice earrings for vampire makeup," I say admiringly.

She laughs. "Well, I can't let you use these because they aren't sterilized. Maybe I'll get a couple, but don't tell anyone or I'll get in trouble."

She opens a closet and pulls out a white plastic bag. It's my clothes, the ones I wore to the hospital that fateful morning, June 26, the day I went in for my angiogram.

The sight of my blue shirt and black sweatpants feels like a crumpled piece of fate rescued from a trash can. How can I wear these anymore? The world has changed so much. I slip out of my hospital gown and dress in my civilian clothes. It is done. Laura comes back and puts a plastic package with two IV cannula in my hands.

Frank, my dear friend, is here. I give Laura a hug for all of the remarkable nurses who have laughed and played and taken care of me.

I am walking out of my room for the first time unencumbered—nothing is attached to my skin or stuck in my shirt pocket. At first, the nurses hardly look up at me as I pass through the nurses' station. It is remarkable how busy they actually are for when they come into a room they are calm, focused, and easy going, although this is a cardio ward and there is nothing easy about this place. Many of the nurses here I haven't met before, but there are several who look up, smile, and wave. I feel a bit like a defrocked nun leaving by the back door, but it is good because I am leaving alive. And the expressions on the nurses' faces reflect that fact by their direct and objective approval. They are here to heal, and that is what they have done.

Here are the elevators. I have often walked past them but I had forgotten that I could take them down by myself. Well, I couldn't until now. It is the first time in almost a week that I have gone down one standing on my feet. There are several people in the elevator. They are also standing upright. Perhaps the elevators I had been taking were exclusively for the patients. How long have I been hallucinating? I mean, have I been hallucinating all this time? Am I hallucinating now?

My friend, Frank, is by my side. I smile at him. He is the intermediary between me and the people who live down below on the street, the un-hospitalized. So are the people in the elevator. I am a member of the discharged. Perhaps some of them are visitors. They don't look like it though. They look like they belong here somehow. What is it about them? They look like pages in a book. This woman is page one hundred and five, this man is page sixty-two, and this one is the end of a preface. I am still somewhat between dimensions. Oh yes, I am. I am of the vertiginous, half-ready to fall on the floor, not sure of my feet, nor of gravity, forgetting that the right side of my face is sagging and when I talk I sound like Gabby Hays with a broken nose.

Frank is my Virgil. He is leading me out through the gates. I wonder if he is conscious of this. Perhaps he is still in the world of the un-hospitalized and is wearing his skin like a space suit.

Everyone has briefly glanced at each other and ticked the necessary smiles to endure our silence until we reach the world below.

The elevator doors open to the large bright foyer surrounded by glass. It looks like an architect's drawing, with its couches and decorative palms and slim people figures that, even now, are swelling into fluid and flesh. "Ah, this is the world," the lobby is saying. Movement stutters into life, and the good ole everyday walks out of the light and into my head. Here I am again, speaking English.

"Frank, I'm back among the living."

The Lyft is here. We're getting in. The right side of my face is obviously still sagging. The driver is looking at me in the rearview mirror. He isn't saying anything. After all, a hospital is like a freak show at a carnival. Almost anything could come out of that place. I am looking around at all of the people in their San Francisco getup: gilets, hoodies, jeans, and haversacks. I think I am talking. I'm not used to it. I'm used to visitor chat, that kind of semi-hushed reverence one reserves for talking with angels. I'm loud, I think. I'm effulgent; I'm quacking with gratitude and relief. I'm actually honking. The swelling from my endarterectomy has driven my voice into my sinuses and turned me into a Hillbilly. I'm saying that to Frank. I'm saying that I could be from Tennessee where my bad genes came from, from the Calhoun plaque that's clogging my arteries. Then I think I'm singing, "On the wings of a snow white dove." I'm singing so that I can feel the cool unfiltered air go into my lungs. It's like laughing gas. I'm laughing. I'm laughing. I'm making a fool out of myself but I'm not from here, don't you see? The Lyft driver is grinning but not the way the nurses grin. My arms are black and blue, and on my craped skin I have tracts of tape.

Bypass

Monday, October 2, 2017

A jet of salty air is flying from my blowhole

“Cough! Cough!”

Up it comes again, the hot air arching out of me,

“Cough! Cough!”

There’s something in my throat! It’s a hook. There’s a hook in my throat. I’m caught! I can’t breathe! I can’t breathe!

“Cough! Cough!”

I hear hissing. Is that me?

“Breathe! Breathe!”

It’s breathing. It’s me. I’m breathing. And then it’s hitting me. I’m alive!

Light. Light is invented. It was never there before but here it is now. It is smeared on my face. I have a face for I can hear gurgling.

“Breathe,” but this time less demanding.

And now I know it is breathing for I can feel it in my throat, way down where it’s not supposed to be. Raw. Comes now as pain. Pain, light, breath. I am alive! There is me who has been hit by being alive.

“Say your name.”

Oh, yes, oh, yes, I will say it. I will shout it out!

“Eeeee.” I hear this tiny, “eeeeee,” I guess that’s me because it’s coming from the raw, and the raw is my throat, and the sea-spume is the saliva flying after the endotracheal tube, and the light is someplace after I got killed in that operating room!

“Eeeee.” Then breath becomes and so does thinking, for I am thinking ... I am trying to say my name. I know my name for it is suddenly born.

“Eeeee.” But then breath has to become, and it does, and so I breathe in order to say my name.

“Breathe,” she’s saying that. It is a woman. She is a god. I can tell for she is all goodness and strength and she is bringing me to life. Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.

“Say your name. Come on, say your name.”

Name? I have a name. My name is “Thank You, I Am Alive!”

Wait! And the light comes in. It really comes in. And the noise too, a bustling anguish like knives and forks scraping in a cafeteria full of plates. The light is there too and it hurts for it is supposed to be through the eyes but the eyes are not there, only the breathing.

“John,” I’m shouting, but it is only a wheeze and a breath full of slivers. I must say my name. If I don’t, it will pass away from me and I will be no more. I could be afraid if there was enough of me—but there isn’t yet.

The “where” is coming and then my sight is being closed around a room. There is room. Room is now. And light is becoming things. There is ceiling. There is motion, my motion of gagging. I am pitching back, and there is a behind me that is catching me. I can feel the thrust of the lungs waking up with blood and the thing behind me holding me up. I am banging against it, and she is holding me so I don’t fall.

“John, that’s right, John. Say your name.”

The room is bright. There is yellow in it, and there is motion like ghosts with white rubber over their heads. They are on me! Two on the side and one, the god, the goddess near my ear. She is telling me the truth. I know, because every time she speaks, something comes alive. I know the room. That is the where. And because I know the where, I know the when. I have just had an

operation. I have had a triple bypass, and I am alive. I know the where: ICU. And the noises are the gushing of blood and blubber. Ghosts speaking in tongues. That's pain! That's all pain! A room full of pain and drugs! I'm in pain now! I'm in delirious pain. I think I might be screaming. She is next to me whispering in my ear.

"Relax now. We're going to help you with the pain. Can you feel that?"

And it feels like a water hose has shot cool water in the wet pain like a sprinkler on a hot summer.

"I'm alive! I'm alive!" I am telling her this, no I am babbling it.

Her face is touching my face. I can feel her warm cheek against my flaming skin. It is pure love. It is skin love. The pure canvas of her cheek against mine staunches the fire. And I know that love is life and mortality. Oh yes! And she is helping me back!

"Oh my god, thank you!" It's louder now. I can hear it. Can she?

I'm saying it again.

"You're welcome, John. Now we're going to move you."

They have broken the white rubber air with their heads, the two male nurses at the foot of my bed. I am in a bed. I swoon. Oh, it is motion. There is motion. How wonderful!

I'm not dead, I want to tell them. That it's all over, all the worry is over, all of the months of fear.

All of these feelings are crawling around in me. I can see the ceiling and the lights there like bright stars in a white room.

Oh my god! I want to cry out.

They are moving me. I am being dumped out of an operation chute into the ICU and onto a hospital bed in a room full of ghostlings. Some are voting for mortality, some are losing the election. I think I am winning. She is not there right now to remind me. She is at the head of the

bed. I am tilting my head up to her. She is looking down at me. She is wearing scrubs, the blue ones like a flight attendant. She is a nurse! I want to gush with love and admiration but I think I am squirming around in the bed instead. I think I am convulsing. Then the spray of soothing water shoots up through my feet into my riven body. I remember that I have been cut in half!

I am in a place now. Like a parking lot. My bed is there perfectly, and I am being tilted up. It is all quite quick. They have been working very fast on me as if I had been flung out of the operation chute into their gloves like a hot old baby. They have snatched me like a bat thrown from a closet and they won't let go of me until I am quiet and full of white hospitalness.

I'm wondering where SHE is. She is my birth mother. She is the one who pulled me from the dark. There she is! I can see her. I can see people. They are nurses. They are wonderful. They are pure goodness. They love the life in me. There she is. Her hand is resting on my shoulder, and she is talking to the man nurse at the foot of my bed.

"Fentanyl," he is answering.

"I'm going to leave you with Dave. You are in good hands. Welcome back."

Leave, what is leave?

Dave is weaving around at the bottom of the bed. It is a bed. I think it is a bed. I am sneaking peeks at him from my perch in the covers which are white and yellow like the urine colored walls. And then I know where I am: ICU. That fills me with dread.

"Oh my god!" I can hear them screaming. No, it is me screaming but it is without sound. It is PAIN. Is it distant? No, it is close. It is ME. I am all PAIN. But it does not translate because of the dope. I am full of dope. I am a dope corpse.

There is this gush. It's in my feet. It's cool.

"That's the good stuff," Dave is saying. "Can you feel it?"

"Aagg ..." I say.

He understands and I can feel more coolness. I thought I'd get stoned on all these narcotics, but they are for pain. That is what I'm feeling, pain, but it is not quite inside my body yet for at this point I have no body.

"Aagg ..." I say. But it doesn't mean quite the same, it has a slightly different declension. It means that either I am crying out or moaning with pain. It is saying "more! more!"

The coolness comes again. Dave is not playing with my feet; the IV is closer to the end of the bed and he is injecting the "good stuff" from there. I was thinking he's at the end of my body, which is about twelve feet.

He has a face! His eyes are brown and so is his hair, and he has the blue scrubs. I know he is there just for me. He's looking at me, then at something above me and to the left. And "left" happens and so does "above." It is a monitor he is looking at. And "monitor" comes out of the void. How do I know these things? I must have known them from "before."

But it's breaking down now, the coolness, and something hot is coming, so hot I don't understand it, but it is mine. I realize the good stuff is going away again. I want to reach out and tell him that. Dave knows what I am thinking even though I don't have an arm yet to reach out with.

"John!" he shouts.

That brings me back to the time when I had first said my name. Like a miracle, "time" is born. It was the time before when she pulled me out of IT.

"John, I'm going to use something less strong."

But he has cheated, hasn't he? He has already used something less strong and that is the source of the heat.

"Aagg ..." I say.

"If you want to get out of the ICU, you need to get off the strong stuff."

Did he say that or did I think it? In either case, I know what he means. If I can go on something less strong, I can move closer to getting out of the ICU. Meaning is born. I have a goal. Just brace yourself and go through the pain. Then I feel the pain. It is real pain, a bit too profound for my taste.

“I’m going to put in something less strong.”

I wait and I wait and it seems like years.

“Aagg ...” I say.

“Good,” Dave says, “That’s good. Okay, I’m going to give you the strong stuff, but not as much. You’ll get through it.”

“Aagg ...” But he doesn’t relent. He is smiling up at me and glancing at the monitor. He isn’t at the foot of the bed, he’s sitting right next to me. He is like the woman who pulled me out, he is pulling me out of the land of dope into the land of pain where my body is. I know I must talk. They aren’t just watching me, they are testing me. It is so much work to live. I am astonished by how much work it is to simply live. The brightness of being alive does not come without cost.

I hear barking between the walls. The walls are made out of cloth. They are curtains. I remember. I’ve been here before. It’s the place that looks like a block of open shops on the Rive Gauche. Each shop has a single corpse and it flashes its life at the Gone (as in “He’s gone, he died in the ICU”), and others emerge into the Am (as in I am, I am alive). The place is like a Greyhound Bus terminal. Everybody’s either leaving, waiting, or coming back. It is such work. Life is such work! In order to get into it, you have to get on the merry-go-round. It is a memory two hundred thousand years old. I have to climb on its back. But first, I have to let go of the dark hand that has hold of me. I have to divide the darkness from the light. The darkness is a stain and I have to rub more light on it. The light is the pain and the darkness is the coolness of the “good stuff.” Dave is

encouraging me to bear the pain. To have pain is to live. He is forcing me to be alive by depriving me of the “good stuff.”

“Bear the pain” is hospitalese for “will.”

I must have will. I have to speak. I have to say something out loud and I think, “In the beginning was the Word,” and it makes me laugh.

“Yes, John?”

He can hear me! He is magic like the woman.

“It hurts.” I’m louder this time.

You are doing good, John, really good—you’re almost off the Fentanyl.”

The pain is there. I can recognize it. I don’t want to jiggle around, I want to look into his eyes. I want to be in this body, but it hurts.

“Breathe,” he is saying. “Take nice, slow breaths.”

There is another nurse at my side. A woman ... She is stroking my head, murmuring.

“That’s good, John. You’re doing great.”

Then the pain comes in stronger. It is a reward. I am doing something right. The nurse sounds sweet as a southern belle. She has that accent and a femininity that is frowned on in Northern California. I am laughing because I know this. But it’s not out loud, although it seems out loud. She is smiling at me. She is chubby and sweet and her hair is blond. She is wearing the blue scrubs. She is fine. She is good. She must be an important nurse, although she isn’t the one who pulled me out.

“We’ve got you off the Fentanyl already. If you keep this up, you’re going to get out of here in a day,” she says, as if I actually had a hand in it.

“I’m Cathy, John.”

“Hi, Cathy,” I whisper.

She is pleased by that, by my saying her name.

“You keep this up, you’ll be on the ward tomorrow.”

Tomorrow. Yet a day. The future.

She is raising the head of the bed.

“Thirsty ...” I realize my lips are dry and my throat hurts.

There is a wet cloth on my mouth. She is wiping the caked scum from my lips.

“I can’t give you water yet. I can moisten your lips. Suck on the cloth.”

Suck on the cloth? It is moist ... it is like putting a spray of water on a hot coal.

Her eyes are huge and blue and her eyelids are as fat as a pair of potbellies. I can see eyeballs floating kindly toward my mouth. She is good.

“We’re just gonna do a little cough now,” she says, and she’s really sweet like a Coca-Cola girl back in the forties. Cherry Coke! So I try to cough for her even though I’m not quite sure what that means.

“Not yet,” she is saying, and I’m glad because I have found the place where the cough is supposed to start and I don’t want to go there.

She is walking around to the front now, to the front of me, “me” with the pickled chest full of bandages. She’s not going to touch me there is she? Yes, she is. She’s putting a hand on each side of my chest. Will it cave in? I’m hallucinating now, I think.

“I want you to cough, just a little cough.”

She has a round face and blue eyes. She could be a moon platter. She is! She is a moon platter in a white sky. I am in another world. It’s just on the other side of sleep. It is the Land of Hypnagogia. No, honestly I’m in another world. It smells of cool vanilla. My lower lip is sticking to my teeth.

“Look at me, John.”

The moon platter breaks. I don't like this place. I want the other one. I'm thinking that perhaps the other one is a place I go to when I am dead and that perhaps I am dead sometimes and that's where I can go then, to Hypnagogia. But this place, the ICU, this is a crazier place than any hallucination. In this place, I have to make sure I breathe. First, I have to pull air into my chest. It isn't bad at all. In fact, my chest is quite dead.

"Good," she says. She knows everything!

I'm blinking. I have pulled the lower lip from my upper teeth but now it is sticking to my upper lip.

"Are you dehydrated, darlin'? Let me put a little moisture on your lips."

Moisture? My lips unstick and for a moment are slick as eels, but the skin is near cracking. Now here it comes, the coolness and I am sucking.

"You'll be getting water pretty soon, you just got to hang in there with me, honey."

The cloth is dry. Now she's taking the cloth away. I can't see her, my eyes are too dry to move. Now moisture on my lips, only moisture, and light, like coating a hot stove with lipstick. She's running a sponge on a Q-tip over my lips. She's taking it away. Now she's leaning close to me. I can feel her breath.

"Just a little cough, honey."

My eyes are getting wide like a Mickey Mouse head, pitch black with the white square in each one to make them look shiny.

"Don't hold your breath, John. Just give me a little cough."

I think she's getting concerned. Her face is getting warm.

"Come on, a little cough. Okay, let's try it again. Let your breath go."

I know where the blood is. This whole room should be full of blood. I don't know why blood should be bad, probably because it's sticky.

“Exhale, John.”

It’s meat! It’s liquid meat! That’s why it’s bad!

I find that spot where I think they cut me open. It is itchy. There’s a feather floating on a deep bottom pool and a big brown carp is going to come up and suck it down. I’m just waiting. The big brown carp comes up. It’s a beauty. It opens its big mouth and deftly sucks the feather under and makes me cough. I’m not coughing—that big brown carp is coughing me. It wants to cough me more like giggles, like little carp minnows tickling the bottom of my lungs. I’m starting to cough more, and every time I cough it hurts but I can’t stop.

“Take this pillow and hold it on your chest.”

I am putting my arms around it, remembering now that it is supposed to be a coughing pillow. It is supposed to be red and in the shape of a heart. This thing is nothing but a hospital pillow bent in half with tape running around it. It’s firm, like an arch support but for my chest.

“We need to get those secretions in your lungs out of there. Do you understand?”

I don’t understand but I nod.

“Okay, I want you to cough.”

But that is impossible! I know this. If I cough, my chest will split open and my heart will shoot out.

“Squeeze the pillow against your chest.”

I know what it is: it’s a bumper, like a car bumper for a car crash.

“Cough, just a little cough.”

No, no, no, no, a little cough will make a lot of coughs. The carp comes up again. How does she do that, how did she make the carp come up that way? Oh, I’m coughing. It hurts. It hurts horribly.

“Breeeeeethe deeply now,” she drawls.

I don't know how to do it.

"Just let the breath come in, honey. It'll come in all by itself if you relax."

It comes in but it feels like pulling up a scab.

My lips are dry. She can see that they are. She is putting water from the sponge on my lips so that they won't stick.

"That's good, John. When you cough, squeeze the pillow. It won't hurt nearly as much as you think."

I squeeze the pillow. I cough. It hurts as much as I think.

"Cough."

I don't want to cough but I cough.

"Let go, darlin'."

A thick glop is coming up. It makes her happy!

"Good! Good!"

A warm towel is wiping off my face. Now she is running the little sponge around my lips. She is standing over me, smiling, steadfast.

I can't remember something.

Then ...

Cathy is gone.

Others are with me. They have thrown back the curtain and are surrounding me. They're gobbling and clucking. Their shadows are popping in and out of the light. They are touching me all over, some pecking, some probing, some wiggling tubes into tubes that are stuck in me with needles and taped to my left arm. There's a needle in my neck and a plastic tube. It's coming from my right artery. It's been there all the while. I don't like these people. One's pulling away the top of my gown. My god, he's exposing my chest!

“OTA, John, ‘Open to Air.’ It’s all good, beautiful sutures.”

I want to cry out at that.

One is tracing his finger down the long cut in my right leg. It starts at my crotch and goes to my knee. It is a red gravel road down a black and blue landscape.

“Scabbing’s good. “

“Mmm-hmm.”

She is smelling my incision!

“PT.”

“PTT.

“Clotting good.”

“EBL is nominal.”

“GI tract motility is good.”

They are gone. Then ...

Cathy is back. She is pulling my walls back in place. Dave is gone.

“Where’s Dave?”

I whimper. I am ashamed.

“It’s all fine, pumpkin. You’re off the anesthesia.”

“Water, please.”

“Not yet, sweetheart.” She’s wiping my lips with the sponge. My lips are swollen and parched.

A pretty woman in blue scrubs throws back a corner of one of my walls.

“Hi,” she says.

There are two of them.

“Hi,” the other says.

Both are young and pretty.

I am being raised like a relic. They are cranking up the bed. A woman in her thirties enters. She's wearing a black Hugo Boss blazer. She is beautiful: black hair, stormy gray eyes, full lips, olive complexion—an Athena. The two pretty girls in blue scrubs are her assistants. It is frightening to be so vertical, that's why they are holding me.

The beauty in the black sports coat approaches. She points at the three tubes coming out of my gut.

"I'm going to pull those out. Are you gonna act like a weenie or a woman? Women can take pain. Men don't do as well. I'm gonna come back in fifteen minutes. Prove me wrong."

She steps back and grins at me. Then she and her assistants are gone.

Cathy is there, moistening my lips.

I didn't know that there were so many ways of waking up! Electrified out of oblivion. Taunted back to life. How did she do that? Brilliant! They are all brilliant! A brilliantly manicured script. How many thousands of hours did it take to refine it?

I'm tired! It takes work to be alive.

Dave's back! Dave's got the "good stuff." Maybe he can give me a little "touch-up" to help with the pain? I look at Dave. He knows what I want.

"I don't think you'll need any more medicine, it'll be over in a flash."

"Where's Cathy?"

"She's with another patient. You've been moved up a grade, John, you don't need such close attention. That's good, that's a good thing."

"I'm thirsty."

"I can only wet your lips, but pretty soon you can begin to suck some ice."

Then he puts the sponge on my lips but it's nothing—rain on a hot sidewalk. Ice cubes ...
when?

I can feel time sticking to me. It's slow and I can't get it off.

"I'm really thirsty, please."

David isn't answering me. He calls out, "Cathy, he says he's really thirsty."

Cathy might get mad at me. I wouldn't want to see that. When she smiles, she is like the sun. And she has water. She has ice!

Then she's by me and I feel her warm presence and the cloth full of water and I am sucking and sucking, sucking it dry!

"I think we can get you some ice after those stomach tubes get pulled."

Incentive. Torture and incentive. I think I know what this is like, it's like life.

"Good, good," I'm nodding.

Cathy isn't mad. It's okay: the sun is in the sky, even though I can't see it. Still that woman is coming to pull those tubes out. She is coming to pull those tubes out. What did that man say in the video on that Facebook group about what it would feel like: "like a punch in the gut." In my case, that would be three punches.

I don't want that bully to pull out the tubes in my abdomen. She is mean. They are all mean. It is mean to be alive. Survive! That's what they call it. You survive. That's it. That is all of it. Survive. Do not go to the place that is no place. Do not go to Nowhere. "No! No!" the lizard cries. It wants to survive. That's why I am a lizard. If I wasn't a lizard, I wouldn't want to come back. I wouldn't be afraid of Nowhere. I see the lizard now. Yes, one of them is bending its snout toward me. I can smell corn on its breath. I can smell dead matter rotting between its teeth.

"Hello, Mr. O'Keefe, I'm Doctor Walker Sullen, I'm the intensivist for the critical-care unit here."

He is saying this while shining a light in my eye.

“I’m thirsty,” I’m calling out to this alien behind the light.

He’s turning his head. I can tell because his voice is being cast that way, but he’s still holding the light in my eyes.

“Cathy, what are we doing with Mr. O’Keefe here?”

Now he’s turning back to me, I can smell the corn.

“We’ll get you some ice after the drainage tubes are pulled.”

I can tell he is smiling because I can hear the saliva crinkling in the corners of his mouth.

“I think we’re going to move you out of critical care pretty soon. You won’t have to spend the night.”

He clicks the light off but still I can’t see his face because I’m blind.

“Lookin’ good, Mr. O’Keefe,” he is saying behind a hovering bad special-effects blackout. I close my eyes on it. It’s still there.

My lips are stuck to each other.

A sweet summer’s breeze, Cathy is once more by my side.

A wet cloth on my lips, smoothing them apart. It is so cool, but I can’t get enough to go down my throat. I am sucking.

So this is the doorway to life? I don’t know if I want to go through. I’m floating on my back like a corpse in the water. I can hear a hiss in my nose. It feels like buggers. It’s oxygen. Two prongs are sticking up my nose. Are they keeping me afloat?

“Hey John, how is it going up there?”

Someone is checking my blood pressure. My heart must be beating faster. I am sitting up. I didn’t know that, I thought I was lying down. Oh, I’m still waiting for the woman in the Hugo Boss. Hugo Boss, I had a suit made out of cashmere. It was Hugo Boss. I wore it twice and then

stored it away. One day, I unzipped the garment bag, and it fell down on the floor in cashmere dust.

“Hey, John, how are you doing? I’m Sylvia. I’m your new nurse.”

“Where’s Cathy?” I croak.

“She was required elsewhere,” Sylvia responds in hospitalese. And then, more warmly, “You’re dehydrated.”

A soft, wet, cool, thick, white cloth covers my mouth. Sylvia leaves her hand on my face; I suck at it until I feel her fingers.

A nurse is at my other side. She is wrapping my arm with a cuff. Why is she taking my blood pressure? There is a machine that takes my blood pressure every fifteen minutes. I can feel a busyness approaching like the low-pressure area of an oncoming storm.

Sylvia is gone, her cloth drained. I have yet another nurse. I didn’t get a chance to say goodbye to Dave. Nor Cathy, nor the woman who pulled the nozzle out of me when I was hot off the stove.

“Who was the nurse who woke me up? Please?”

Oh, but she’s going to do that difficult thing: she’s going to ask me a question. “What do you mean?” she is asking.

How do you answer a question?

“The nurse who woke me up after the operation?”

“Oh, that’s probably Barbara.”

“Barbara? I want to thank her.”

I can hear that woman! She has a brassy voice. Everywhere she goes things wake up. She’s quacking at somebody behind the drapes.

“You’re doin’ great, Lena!”

The assistants are bothering around me. They are raising the bed higher. Now I am wobbly. Brain jelly is slowly sloshing the sides of my brainpan. There is that lull in the storm when the vacuum smooths the land flat for a tornado.

“Mr. O’Keefe, here we are!”

There she is. And it strikes me again, in spite of my fear and loathing, the beauty of her. The lizard in me loves her most. He would do anything for her. He starches my back up so I will sit straight. The blue-eyed orphan altar boy lets go of my face and simply worships. My old man, who has dumped love on the side of the road, hurriedly picks it up again and stuffs it in the back of his pants along with his shirttails.

“Mr. O’Keefe,” she announces after glancing at her iPad. “I’m going to pull those things out and then you’ll be free.”

She immediately picks up the fear in my face. Is she going to taunt me?

Her assistant is touching me there. It feels wrong.

“No, no,” the beautiful woman says, “the yellow one always goes over the pink one. That’s a Ryan job. You got to get it perfect, Darleen, or he’ll throw a hissy fit.”

That’s my surgeon! That’s Dr. Ryan. He’d throw a hissy fit.

And so Darleen checks the suture over. Everything is raw there. I can see the whiskers of the other sutures on the left side of my chest sticking up. I want to put my hands up to protect myself but they are tied down! I didn’t know that. Now I’m afraid, I’m really afraid. Why did I trust? What could I do? My mouth is open. I can hear the oxygen barreling up my nose. I am ugly. I am old ugly. I am patient ugly. Who would not want to kill me? I am not supposed to survive. I close my mouth but not so fast that it pops. My lips are dry and uncomfortable like a bare heel being shoved into a shoe. She sees it, she sees the fear in my face.

“Remember what I told you, don’t be a weenie.”

She is leaning over me. She has surgical scissors. She is clipping the black threads that are holding the drainage tubes in. They are red and festering and the ends of the thread look like the thick black whiskers that grow out of a mole. She is clipping those threads and it hurts on top of all of the pain. It is worrisome pain, a harbinger.

“You’re doing well, Mr. O’Keefe.”

“Call me John.”

I am so polite that she laughs as she clips. “Okay, John, we’re almost there.”

I am wincing. I don’t want to wince. I will not be a weenie. A weenie winces. But I am wincing. It’s not me, I swear, it’s my body. How tough women must be. Oh, I can’t compete with them. No wonder they make so much noise when they’re having sex. They’re wincing at the childbirth to come. And now she’s done, the tubes are just sticking in there, in the part of the skin that is exposed, the part that isn’t covered by bandages where the chest is split open and held together by superglue.

She fixes me with her warrior eyes. She is Athena. She is calling my soldier forth.

“I want you to take a breath when I tell you and I want you to hold it.”

Her long fingers are closing around the drainage tubes.

“Ready.”

I am opening my eyes wide, I will not wince.

“Take a deep breath in and hold.”

She is pulling on the tubes but they are stuck.

“Oh!” I gasp. It *is* like being hit in the stomach.

“Remember the weenie.” And she pulls again.

This time, they come loose but they are not all the way out. The pain is all I had imagined it would be. I am not a woman. I am gasping aloud and my face is one old wince. How ugly I am before a goddess. How embarrassing!

“Cough,” she is saying.

I cough. I cough. I’ll do anything to get them out of my body.

“Brilliant, John!” she is exclaiming.

The tubes come out. They slap on my stomach and are whisked away. The pain is horrific, but just as quickly gone.

“All done now, all done,” she is saying and her voice is like velvet. She leans over me and unbinds my wrists.

“You handled it like a woman, John. You did good.”

She puts my hands together and lays a hand gently on them.

“You’re doing so well, it looks like you’re getting out of here and up on the floor. You want to lie back?”

I don’t know but I nod. They crank me back a bit and she is gone.

The people around here are covered by bandages and gowns. Blue scrubs and sutures linger on the eye. It *is* like the Rive Gauche and I am the item in one of the shops. It would be ghastly but for the tedium: waiting for the body to heal or the unknown to reveal itself, the minutiae keeping me alive.

“So what do we have here? Mr. John O’Keefe.”

I’m being cranked up to a sitting position by a young man in green scrubs. There’s a young woman in green scrubs standing beside me. A guy with a baseball cap steps up and pulls the oxygen

tubes from my nose. He's wearing green too but he's covered it with a plaid shirt. His baseball cap is at a cocky angle. He quacks at his assistants from the side of his mouth.

"Here we got a CABGx3 fresh off the table. Isn't that right, Mr. O'Keefe? May I call you John?" He looks me up and down.

The young woman in green scrubs moistens my lips with the sponge and then steps back while the guy with the baseball cap looks through some pages on a clipboard. It's my file. He finds something near the end.

"It says here that you're a "writer/performer." Is that right?"

I try to answer but I don't know where my voice is.

He cocks his ear. "Did not hear that, John," and he grins at his assistants, who obediently grin back. "You're an actor. You must know all about breathing exercises."

God, did I actually write that down as my occupation?! Why do I always have to be special? I should have written "teacher." Next comes, "Then why haven't I heard of you?" He doesn't say it though, but he suggests it by the way he is pausing. It's almost like a wink. I hate him. He terrifies me. My lips are getting dry. I don't want them to know it.

"I'm Paul. I'm the physical therapist. These are my assistants."

I think he might call them Ernie and Sandra, but I don't know. I am too afraid and too ashamed. He has caught me at the inception of my self-worth, before my self-defenses have been built. His timing is perfect. Self-defense, self-worth, self-confidence, self-hate—those hyphenated words you would say to a toddler taking its first steps. Ole Paul knows he's tipping those hyphens like teeter-totters.

He glances over at the woman in the blue scrubs and she puts a wet cloth over my mouth. I don't want to suck in front of Paul but I am so thirsty. When the cloth is dry and my mouth moisturized, she steps back and Paul sticks a toy with a blue hose and a mouthpiece in my face.

“Now, Mr. Actor, do you know how to use this incentive spirometer?”

I’ve used it before. It has to do with breathing. I’ve got to do it right for him. I dare not do it wrong. I am going to prove that I am not what he thinks I am. What does he think I am? Remember? I remember now; this too comes with life. This is a part of the crap. Paul is a jerk.

“Let’s see how good you are, Mister Actor.”

I take the thing and stick the mouthpiece at the end of the hose into my mouth and blow.

“No, don’t blow, suck! You know how to do that.” He grins maliciously.

“I’m just joshing you. Inhale as deeply as you can but slowly. Suck into the tube and make the little yellow piston float.”

I have to inhale!

“I thought maybe that you knew all about this.”

Did I talk about that? Did I say that out loud?

“You’re a really strong guy; I’m gonna move the slider up to 1000. You can do that, can’t you?”

He moves a yellow indicator up a plastic column that has numbers on it. On the other side, in a smaller column, is a yellow piston and there are markers with the words Best–Better–Good.

I have to inhale! I don’t want to inhale, especially not in front of him.

“Let’s go, Mister Actor.”

I do it! Where are those muscles? I didn’t know I had those muscles. The pain of the muscles moving the raw flesh is only surpassed by the delight in Paul’s eyes, that horrible twinkle. The piston hasn’t reached five hundred.

And then I cough! I cough without the brown carp. Lungers come up. Ernie catches them in a metal bowl. Sandra wipes my mouth.

“You can do better than that, Mister Actor.”

The coughing stops and I am breathing somehow. The space inside is wider and the pain is less densely packed.

“There you go, one thousand.”

Am I yelping or is that coughing? My perception is going Morse code. It is coming and going in flashes. My body isn’t sure whether it wants to keep going. It is like a car that refuses to start. But I want it to start. The lungers fly out, and the breath comes in. And so does the light and the face of the jerk in the baseball cap.

“Suck on it, Maestro!” he cries.

I must not stop—if I stop I won’t start. It’s people who keep you alive. If enough people tell you to die, you probably will.

“Come on, Mister O’Keefe, don’t be a wuss.”

Don’t be a wuss, don’t be a weenie if you want to survive. Survival of the fittest, remember? I cough in the rhythm of sobbing. Less stuff comes up and the air comes in and the piston tops a thousand. He moves the indicator up to fifteen hundred.

He doesn’t have to say anything, I know what it’s about. When I inhale, air comes in, not the bottled stuff. This is the real air. It comes with the planet. What a remarkable gift! It is blue and it reaches right up into space. I am coughing up stuff at the bottom of my lungs, not much, a spattering. Not quite fifteen hundred. It’s that thing that’s waking up, that thing that has caked doorknobs with countless turnings. That’s what’s fighting for its life; it is me.

“Eleven hundred, that’s okay. If you don’t have what it takes, you gotta practice, practice, practice. I’m giving this to you. I’m coming back later and I expect that you will get it up to two thousand.”

Then they are gone.

I feel eviscerated. He has done his job. He has intimidated me to try harder. He has mocked me into blowing a yellow thing up a tube. After all, it is not called an incentive spirometer for nothing. In a hospital, there is a reason for everything. There is a reason for Paul. Paul, like brassy Athena, has hassled me to life: she, by making me focus on her challenge rather than my pain; he, by belittling me so that I took seriously the blowing of a yellow piston up a tube, and that helped me avoid pneumonia. It's exhausting to be alive when I could just sink beneath the water and I could, I could let go and not do anything.

People trickle through; they check my body, moisten my lips. I receive them like a Grande Dame. It's true, there is this privileged passivity in exchange for allowing them to do horrendous things to my body. A nurse puts my index finger in a clip and measures my oxygen. She often cuffs me and takes my blood pressure, while every fifteen minutes a machine does the same. There is a bag above me, and a young man replaces it and checks the IV. The same young man removes and replaces my urine bag. Temperature too is taken, and the results provoke pleasurable outbursts: "Your numbers are great," "You're doing well."

I feel like a roast. But it's okay, I am in a way. I feel pudgy and succulent with the swelling and the drugs. I am medically ripe. They come in and out like specters. I assume they have my best interests in mind. There is the law; I have to trust in the law. There's the insurance company, but I'm allowed not to trust them. There are all these professional organizations they belong to. It tests my faith though. I never thought I had faith. I didn't believe in God or politics or society. I didn't believe in alternative medicine or mind over matter. And although I accepted science, there was something about it that was boring. I considered myself an optimistic nihilist. A run-of-the-mill pre-hippy existentialist. But I found out like everybody who winds up in my situation that I let faith lead in just about everything I do: faith that I will have an accident or get mugged or have

a heart attack. The truth is that everybody's hallucinating, they edit it out and go on with the show. I'm realizing that now we're all insane, but somehow we get it together to operate on each other. They're doing all of this stuff right now while other people are eating breakfast.

What time is it? I have no idea. Why do I assume that it's morning? It feels like morning but that's probably because I just "woke up." Then I remember Elizabeth. That was this morning; 5:30 a.m. at the side entrance of the California Pacific Medical Center way over in Pacific Heights. Elizabeth is driving me there in the darkness. I'm saying "I don't have to go through with this. They can't force me. I can still walk away." And then a moment, and Elizabeth nods her pretty head. She is one of those people who steps out of the dark and just helps you. She's not a relative; she's not my girlfriend—she's lesbian. I'm family. And that's just the way it is. She's a Sicilian from New Orleans.

And then I'm going on with the usual canticle, "But then I'll probably die in two years." And then I'm looking at her, and she's nodding and driving to the appointed meeting.

The streets are dark: no one is walking around and there are few cars. It's up in Pacific Heights. We're still in the flatlands but we're climbing, we're getting closer. If I am going to have a heart attack I should probably have it now. The last time I went to an appointment in this car my face became paralyzed. I wound up in the hospital for seven days and got a carotid endarterectomy. That's when the surgeon cuts your throat lengthwise and scrapes the plaque out of your carotid artery. They also found that three major arteries in my heart were blocked and that I needed a triple bypass. In my case, I had to wait three months. And now Elizabeth is in the driver seat again, in the same blue car, and in a few minutes, I am finally going to have this horrendous procedure. I'm not freaking out though. It isn't courage—it's drugs. The expectation of getting pharmaceutical-grade drugs, namely Versed, the drug that makes you forget. Like those days I used to get drunk and wake up with a condom in my shoe and wonder what had happened. It creates amnesia. It gets

right to it without the drinking. But before it does, it gives you this devil-may-care attitude. “Everything is just fine, why worry about it? Chop my fucking hand off if it gets in the way, I don’t mind.”

When I get to the hospital, I will get drugs. My courage was pinned on it. I figure I’d just have to get up and go there, and then as soon as they checked me in, they would give me the Versed. The Versed was all I could hope for, but still it wasn’t enough; my dread was like ice water caught in my throat and it went all the way down to my asshole. It had been stuck there for quite a while but in the last week it began to get deeper. It parked in my stomach like an ice berg, and dried my eyes, fixed them in their sockets, gave me that look of terror. I think that’s what old people feel a lot, I think that’s why they look so startled. The Versed would chill me out until I got to the anesthesia, you know, just long enough to close my eyes and jump.

There’s the synagogue with the big dome! We’re getting close. Icicles are forming in my chest and the ice in my throat is getting thicker. Still, I quell it. I can’t believe I do that; I’m not a brave person by nature. I have hidden my life away in a fairly gentle room. I have been quite mad all of my life. Luck and tolerance have permitted me to live to this old age.

Wait, my god! We’re here at the California Pacific Medical Center! It is much bigger than it seems, much bigger, for half of it is underground. And here we are, driving past the side entrance to the hospital. Are we going to park in the parking garage? That’s something people do when they expect to go home. I would rather park on the street because I don’t want to assume that I will be going home—that might bring bad luck. But we park in the parking garage, on the third floor. There are a few cars and no attendant. There are a number of cars in private parking spaces.

“That’s probably the doctors,” I say, figuring the whole world had gathered for my operation.

“It could be the night shift,” says Elizabeth sensibly. But she is not hallucinating. Well, not in my dream; in my dream, hallucination is closer to reality.

“I better get my things,” I say under my breath to the darkness in the back seat, but Elizabeth hears me and says, “You don’t need to bring very much, I’ll bring them afterward.”

I didn’t want to hear those words. I brought things anyway for *afterward*: iPad, plug to recharge it, a T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants, two pairs of reading glasses, my billfold and keys, and a bottle of Xanax. They’ll put them in a plastic bag and into a locker until *afterward*. It’s the loneliest feeling in the world, pulling my pack out of Elizabeth’s backseat. The smell of my room is coming from it, the smell of an old man who needs to change his sheets. I remember the *before*; I wonder what will happen *after* ...

But now I’m past it, it is over with. I’m hungry. That’s it, it’s a part of it, isn’t it, even in this lacerated condition: underneath it all, the hunger continues. It’s like a radio that keeps playing after the car has crashed. The beat goes on. My heart. They stopped it and sewed my leg-veins into it. It’s right here in my chest just an inch or so from the air, and I’m hungry!

Dave is long gone.

A pretty Asian woman is sitting at my monitor. I must have zoned out. I can feel the hubbub but I can’t quite see it for the curtains and the drugs. I look up at the drugs. There are a number of bags hanging up there on an IV stand. I haven’t yet noticed the top of my bed. I’ve sat up. I’ve sat down. I’ve been at various angles—acute, right, obtuse, and straight—but I’ve never looked around. I’ve held still; I didn’t know that. I think I adopted it as a formality, a you-can-do-what-you-need-to-do-I-won’t-stop-you kind of thing. But no, maybe not, and just now, it’s scary to even think about. The anesthesia is wearing off. I’m coming down. I’m thirsty, my mouth is so dry.

“Hello?” I croak to the nurse.

“Yes, Mr. O’Keefe.”

“Thirsty,” I manage to get out.

“Oh, you’re dehydrated. I’ve been moistening your lips. You’ve been sleeping. That’s good. But now you can have some ice.”

“Ice?”

She grins. She has an oval face, and the pretty smile with dimples fits it.

“You know what ice is, don’t you?” she teases, then disappears.

Now she’s near. I like the weight of her, the way she displaces the air.

“Are you ready?”

I can feel its coldness even before I see it. It is an ice chip.

She spoons it into my mouth.

“Spit it out if it’s too cold.”

It is too cold; it is from another dimension.

“Keep it on the tip of your tongue for a little while.”

It is melting. It is like drinking diamonds, the wet plastering the canopy of my soft palate.

I am cradling the precious substance in the middle of my tongue.

“Not too fast,” she says with gentle admonishment.

I am trying to swallow but I’m too dry. I let the liquid slip over my tongue. It gathers in my throat before my voice box. For a moment, it won’t give way and then it happens: swallowing, but just enough to get a bit of moisture down. My mouth is happy, my tongue dances around, balancing the quickly melting diamond. She wipes the drops from my chin. I am trying to swallow the residue, but there’s not enough. When it is gone she wipes off my mouth.

She puts the cloth away in a place beyond the foot of my bed.

“What time is it?” I ask.

She looks at me as if she didn't know what I was talking about. I was worried about that. Once they come into the ICU, time as most people know it ceases to exist. Time is a huge ice cube surrounding this box. Inside this box, time is what it takes for blood to clot, an analgesic to take effect, a heart to beat, the temperature to rise, oxygen saturation to fall.

"It's 4:30," she says.

I am surprised that she doesn't shout, but I see she is nearer than I thought.

"4:30 what?"

"4:30 a.m."

I came there at 5:30 a.m. How could it be ...? No, no, no, that's not right. That's another whole day. It should be, at most, 4:30 in the afternoon. The operation must have taken about four hours, and if they started at six, they should be finished by ten, and it would be the same day. What day is that? Monday, October 2. I guess it could be evening—but not the entire night. It was just a few minutes ago, at most an hour that they pulled me from the void. That must have been around noon. Where had all the time gone?

I murmur, "4:30 in the morning."

I must look troubled for she is at my side.

"It's the anesthesia," she says. "It does crazy things with time."

She knows! They know everything.

"I'm John."

"I'm Laurie."

She actually reaches over and shakes my hand. How geeky and sweet, especially for a person who knows a reality far beyond my comprehension.

She's checking my monitor.

"Things are looking good, John, we should be releasing you later today."

“In the morning or the afternoon?”

She laughs. “You’re doing really well; most people don’t get out this soon.”

“Will I be going to the cardiology ward?”

“Yes, to the CCU.”

“The one on the fourth floor?”

“Yes, there’s only one.”

I’ll be going home! I remember, so long ago, over the slow-burn terror, those three months between the time I was released, July 1, and the time I came back, October 2. I didn’t imagine coming back to the cardio ward, I didn’t dare. I would have to undergo the triple bypass first. I couldn’t imagine surviving it. But here I am, safe and sound—well, in any case, alive. A thrill sweeps over me. It comes up out of my newly moistened throat and spreads into my chest and lights up my face.

Laurie notices. And her face lights up too.

“I was in the cardio ward in June.”

She sits at her computer.

“Yes, June 28 an endarterectomy.”

She knows everything.

“If you keep going like this, you should be back home in a week.”

I stop short. My heart sinks. That’s so funny, isn’t it? My “heart” sinks. I don’t want to think that far ahead. It just isn’t right anymore. It isn’t the same. I didn’t know that. Suddenly, I don’t want to think much farther than the next second or two.

I don’t want to go back home. I don’t like memories: they are squishy and full of worry, whole days recorded, fermented in my brain, bad stuff, can make you go blind. My god, I can remember all of the preparations I made in my room: fixing the door so it wouldn’t be so heavy

because I wouldn't be able to lift more than fifteen pounds and I might get trapped in my room; a special lock with a code so that people can come in and I won't have to get out of bed; a list of people who will shop for me; moving my bed out of the loft on to the first floor and a step so that I can gain easier access to it. I remember going to a special cripple's furniture store and checking out electrical recliners so that it could raise me up and down. My insurance would cover eighty percent of a hospital bed, but I wouldn't be able to get it through the door. A neighbor suggested that I go to a special nursing facility, an SNF.

Dr. Ryan sneered when I mentioned it. "A SNIFF? You won't need a SNIFF."

Dr. Ryan, my hero! He said that I would be able to lift forty pounds, that I would be mobile, and that I didn't need all of that stuff. I would not be an invalid.

"Did I have any visitors?" I ask.

This is coming out of my mouth. But did I? I remember them vaguely.

"Visiting hours are from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. That was before my shift."

She is looking at her monitor.

"Doctor Ryan came."

My surgeon, the man who stopped my heart and started it again.

"I must have been 'out' when he came."

"He came at 2:30 yesterday afternoon."

I'm shaking my head. "Yesterday?"

"He said you looked great."

"Did he actually say that?"

"He did ... in a manner."

"What does that mean?"

"He said you were nominal."

“Nominal?”

“That means good.”

“You mean if I wasn’t nominal, I’d be terminal?”

She laughs and waves me off as if she knew my “kidder” side.

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

Is it possible that Elizabeth, Elaine, and Frank came to visit me yesterday afternoon? I feel them. Not quite images but presences, pre-senses. They come up by themselves like corpses floating from the depths. How does it work? How do I summon my memories? I have to work at it like using a crayon in a coloring book. I mean, it takes effort. Everything takes effort. Especially if you are doing it all yourself. When others lend their energy it’s easier. Like Laurie giving me the concept of “yesterday.” It was the outline, and now my crayons are beginning to color it in. It takes effort to summon specifics.

I am living here now in the ICU and it’s in the early morning, approximately twenty-four hours after my operation, but tucked inside my head is the experience of something I did yesterday. They are fading. I have to bring them up. How do I do that? I have to focus. Focusing is like pushing a tiny ball forward with my mind. Now it’s like breathing. Now it’s blocked. I can’t see past it. It’s like death. It’s death! No, it just hasn’t connected. Just wait, the air will come in and I’ll remember. Now it’s coming like coughing fits, so many pictures with feelings embedded in them. They release their acid and their red honey into consciousness and I am blinded by confusion.

I can almost see yesterday but I can’t get through to it, like a fly bumping against a window. And then it clears, gives way to specifics. I see Elizabeth’s face. An idea of her face, actually, for it is as vaporous as smoke and I could blow it away with a thought. I see Elaine. I see Frank. Both separately and combined. I don’t know if I’m thinking them up. Are these memories of actual events or hallucinations? It’s like the blackouts I had in my drunk days. Wait, it’s true, Elizabeth,

Elaine, Frank, memories of them ... memories of them visiting me in the afternoon yesterday, laughing and chatting, me drugged, jigged-out like an Irish dancer at a contest, but not as coordinated. I am all aflurry with the excitement of being on the other side of the operation. Maybe I'm overdoing it, but no one looks scared or startled or disapproving. Inside, I know I am quite stoned on pure pharmaceuticals. But maybe it's good old natural adrenaline. Every time I look at them, I feel like I am opening up another present. I hope I didn't gush. Did I gush? I probably gushed and shared too much. At least I didn't get angry. I'm sure I didn't get angry or tell someone's secret.

"I think I did have visitors. I think I was talking to them but I don't remember. Is that possible?"

Laurie looks at me. I don't mind it when she looks at me. She was never in my past. I don't have a history with her. She came with the hospital. She came with the ICU. She is an ICU nurse. I know I must love my friends but I don't know who they are yet. I am not sure if I want to be that guy I was before; that's probably why I am having trouble keeping them in my memories. Laurie comes with the drugs—they don't. I will never see her again—at least, I hope I won't—but she is the most real human in my life. She is with me in the in-between.

"It's more than likely possible," she says.

She brightens. She is pretty. Her teeth are perfect, unlike my teeth, many of which are missing, mostly the molars so that carrots get jammed between them. I'm thinking about my teeth to remind myself that I'm not young anymore. I grin at it all, all the turmoil I underwent when "faced" by an attractive woman. What is it? Why is it so holy? It's because she holds the future in her womb. It's about survival. It's about as basic as it gets, and that feels holy. Here we go, let's pop some Darwin capsules. It isn't me, it's my body talking.

My chest feels like a wide-open mouth with scabby puckered lips. It's trumpeting its welcome like a barbecued elephant, but she can't hear it and neither can I, for it is blasting from the netherworld; I can see waves of it coming from my chest cavity, can feel the pings of sand hitting the edges of my wounds.

"Can I have more ice?" I utter.

She looks at her white nurse's watch and winks at me, then goes to that mysterious hoard where the diamonds are kept.

I feel the weight of her body against my mattress. She stands over me, her head blocking the bright light shining on my bed, her face darkened like the sun in total eclipse, but I can see her smile reflected from my chest. It is a moment between moments, a moment on its edge. She slides a diamond into my mouth.

I wrestle with it for a moment. Of the intensities, this is among the strangest. It bores into the senses with a serrated crystal edge and before it splits the tongue, it bleeds. The blood is life itself.

Laurie is wiping my mouth. I feel splendid. I had forgotten that came with being alive.

"I don't want to bore you but I'm really into anesthesia. No one knows how it works. I find it almost mysterious," she is saying mysteriously and slips another chip of ice into my mouth. I listen as the diamond bleeds.

"You descend through the planes of anesthesia: the plane of disorientation, the plane of delirium, to the plane of the surgical." She wipes my lips most gently. "People think that being anesthetized is like falling asleep but it's more like having your mind disassembled and put back together again. Everything is going on but there's nobody running the show. Pain impulses go to the brain but they get scrambled on the way there and they don't sync up. The message is reaching the mailbox but no one is there to it up." She stops. "Am I freaking you out?"

I suck at the ice and gaze at her. I am in love with her. Patient love. It must happen all the time. Of course, I'm freaked out but I don't want to say it, probably because I don't want to appear a weenie, but mostly because I don't want the water to spill out.

Laurie seems encouraged and deliciously wipes my face with a cool damp cloth.

"Anesthesiologists mix up cocktails. Each has a favorite recipe. First, you need a 'hypnotic' to render you unconscious. Second, you need an 'analgesic' to control pain. Third, you need a muscle relaxant to block the nerve impulses to the muscles so you lie still while they're performing the operation."

"Then I'm ready to rock 'n' roll," I say playfully because I just swallowed some water and it feels good.

She laughs and briefly puts her hand on mine, then walks to the foot of the bed. She grows grave.

"The more hypnotic, the longer you take to recover and the more likely it is that something will go wrong. The less, the more likely that you will wake. It's a balancing act."

"You wake up during the operation?"

"Yes."

"My god! How many?"

"Not many, one in 19,600, or roughly 0.005 percent of the time."

"You shouldn't be telling me this," I quip.

She puts her hand over her mouth, just as I hoped she would.

"The last time I was in the ICU, I had an endarterectomy. I didn't remember it at first, but a few days later, I did. It was vague, elusive, actually. I remembered moaning, 'It hurts ... it hurts,' and then I felt an unimaginable pain but I had forgotten it because my brain had been, like you say, 'scrambled.'"

She sits at the monitor.

“You had the endarterectomy on June 28 and you were here for a night and then you went back up to the cardio ward. You had atherosclerosis and were awaiting a triple bypass; you couldn’t have general anesthesia so you had procedural sedation instead. They used midazolam.

“What’s that?”

“Versed.”

I laugh, “Of course.”

“I’m sorry,” she says.

“It is better than biting on a stick.”

She laughs and approaches. She checks the monitor above me. She looks at me over her shoulder and says under her breath, “It’s a mystery because no one understands why we are conscious. No one even knows what it is.”

She smiles with such glee that I fall in love again. She busies about, checking my lines and my IV.

Life wakes up as the body wakes up. It collects phenomena. It makes a choice and all of the probabilities find you, hopefully, in the same place you were the moment before. There is a little romance in there, as if romance were a cloud or a perfume, a pheromone, yes, and as natural as fragrance is to a flower.

I’m watching time pass and I can’t stop it. I don’t want it to go so fast. Soon Laurie is going to be done working near me and she will move to the monitor at the far end of my bed. Now she’s doing it. She smiles at me like a buddy, my big sister. She is ready to protect me from all bullies no matter how big they are, no matter in what shape they come. She goes to the monitor at the end of the bed and pulls away part of the curtain. I see the medical staff moving about. Laurie and I

have gone back to our separate lives. There's no way I can get her back. It wouldn't be the same. Things happen, then disappear through that one-way sphincter.

And then I see it, the clock. Fuck! The Real World! 6:00 a.m. No, wait, it can't be true. But Laurie is here, look.

"Is that clock right?" I shout. I don't know why the foot of the bed seems so far away.

Laurie grins. She approaches. She's coming back. Time travel is possible, the past can be restored. She looks into my eyes. I don't think it's because she's in love with me, I think she's checking my pupils. She's looking at my IV. She's changing a bag. No, someone else, a young man nurse is pushing by her and he, not she, is putting up the bag. She is checking my blood pressure.

"BP is a little high, John. Yes, the clock is right, it's a.m., 0600. We're still on the same day. Things are going to get busy."

Time is passing so quickly! It got that way when I got old. When was that? A long time ago. It's passing the same way even in the ICU; it's come along with my body. I don't want to go back to the way it was, I just don't. Am I going to be ruined for life by this operation? Am I going to be frail?

So many articles I've read, so many YouTubes, so many notifications on my bypass group on Facebook; they all talk about depression after the operation. I fear that. I don't feel depressed, but I am just a newborn.

People are clumping. Isn't it strange the way they clump together? Why do they do that? Schedule. They all sync their devices, or there is a big device like the one across the hall that says 6:15. (I forgot that I had to learn to tell time at one time, clock time. There was a great deal of pressure around learning it.) They accumulate, "gather" at the appointed "time." Right now, people are "starting their day," even here in the ICU. They also accumulate because they move at the same

approximate speed. Except for the runners, and runners accumulate, depending on how fast they can run. In fact, they have events to see if there's a person who can run so fast no one can accumulate with her/him/ze.

And there are only people. It doesn't matter how big the machine, or how far away it is, there will always be a person connected with it. No matter where you look, if it wasn't made by nature, it was built by people. Whatever sexy party, how far away or exotic, you will only see people. Every single thing that you want to buy is mostly made by people. And they're all just little fucking naked motherfuckers on the inside. Way back in the middle of the twentieth century, people thought that there was God. Now anyone who has a lick of education knows that there are only people. When you have a near-death experience only people greet you. Even Jesus is a person. What the fuck! How claustrophobic is that? I remember Fantasia by Walt Disney. There's no Fantasia now, no ghosts, no wood nymphs, no nymphs of water, trees, meadows, no flying saucers, no intelligent life except people. There are only people and that's why they are clumping up right now, because there are so many and they like to clump. But people are not what they look like. You know that. We're all dreaming. I think perhaps that once you connect with one of them, they open worlds that don't look like people. It's just that from the outside there is a problem, those big heads and all of the skin. They look, well, kind of stupid.

"Hey, Mr. O'Keefe, how are we doin' today?"

Now a guy in a white suit. He's a doctor, he's a nurse—I don't care. I don't want anyone to bother me. I want to stay where I am. They won't let me. They make me move forward with the arrow of time. You can't move backward. That direction is to the morgue. It is better to have ambition than to be frightened. They soon will be making their rounds. I will see Doctor Ryan, that man who did this to me, and I will show him how good I'm doing.

“Hi, John.” Another nurse is addressing me by my first name. Laurie has gone! And without saying goodbye.

“I’m Barbara.” She looks at her monitor. “It looks like you could use some ice.”

Now the ice comes again. Maybe I will get to drink.

A cluster of scrubs is in my curtain-room, I think three of them. I can’t quite tell for there is a yellow stain on everything. It may be in my eyes. It must be the light. I’ve been living in this light. I’ve been coming to life in the light of this room. I must be more alive than dead. I’m taking possession of my own body, but I am not so grateful. I am assuming that sense of privilege. I want things to happen. I want to have a goal. Why are these nurses bothering me?

I’m tired of my eyes. I’m tired of all the time on my back. I’m tired of not being as afraid. My eyelids are drooping. I can feel them sliding over my huge eyeballs like squeegees, the tears rolling like dirty water under the lids. Oh, sonorous sleep. I can feel the warm breath escape my nose. And I junkie-nod. Oh yes, so much dope in me that my consciousness skips like a stone across a lake.

It’s later, and I’m in the same place, in the same bed, but Barbara, not Laurie, is at the foot of my bed. I’m nodding out, way nodding out.

They are drawing the curtains away. To them, they are curtains, to me they are walls. Barbara, the larger woman—maybe she’s not larger, but she has a larger presence—is standing at the foot of my bed with a clipboard. The two other nurses ... wait, one is sitting and the other is leaning over her. They are checking my monitor. They are talking with each other. There is that clucking people make when they are together. It’s like a nail salon. They’re talking to me! I’m not used to so many people talking to me at once—three of them, including Barbara and the other two, Jean and Susan. They remind me of the Andrew Sisters. They are talking to me as if I didn’t have a hole in my chest, as if I was just a normal guy except for the wires coming out of me, the tubes

going into me, and the monitors above me. They are talking about Doctor Ryan, how talented he is and how he works harder than anyone else, that he is the best in the business, that I'm lucky to have gotten him. I only just now realize that they are talking about my surgeon: Doctor Ryan, Doctor Jeffrey Ryan, cardiothoracic surgeon.

Jeffrey Ryan, M.D., F.A.C.S., Surgical Director of Heart Transplantation and Mechanical Circulatory Support. Developing new approaches to the surgical treatment of high-risk, advanced heart-failure patients.

I studied him, oh yes, you bet. If there was anything about him that made me blink I was out, meaning I wouldn't go through with it. I had to go through it, of course, but I had to have someplace out even if it was a false exit. I googled him: "How do I check a surgeon's success rate?"

SurgeonsRatings.org rated him three stars out of five. Having fewer deaths. What did that mean? That means how many have died. Is that during the operation or just after?

Three stars indicates that, using our analysis methods, (1) the surgeons' rates were not among the best 1/5th of all surgeons studied and (2) neither can we be 90 percent confident that the surgeon had better-than-average outcomes that were not just the result of good luck, nor can we be 95 percent confident that the surgeon had worse-than-average outcomes that were not just the result of bad luck. Out of 101 cases, his was 5.2 percent while the average death rate was 5.6 percent.

I didn't understand it. I remember I couldn't focus on what I was reading. My breath got shallow. My heart started pounding. I was afraid I would have a heart attack but I read on.

SurgeonsRatings.org rated him four stars out of five, in, what was that ... "Rates of Deaths, Prolonged Lengths of Stay, or Readmissions." What the hell did that mean? Are they averaging the deaths with the prolonged stay and readmission? I mean it's pretty high: 21.5%. But the average

was 25.1%. One surgeon had five stars on fewer deaths, but three on this last one, the prolonged one, the readmissions one. Perhaps he delayed their deaths until they got out of the hospital. Doctor Ryan got four stars on that.

Four stars indicates that, using our analysis methods, while the surgeon did not meet our criteria to qualify for a 5-star rating, the surgeon performed better than average and based on the surgeon's outcomes and number of cases, we can be at least 90 percent confident that his/her better-than-average outcomes were not just the result of good luck.

I remember when Doctor Jeffrey Ryan first visited me during my stay in the hospital last June after having the endarterectomy. He was probably in his late forties. He was handsome with thick wavy hair. He was of medium height and carried himself well. But more than anything, he was positive. I had become acquainted with a number of surgeons since that June. Many of them seemed just too cool for school. One surgeon, when categorizing groups of animals, called them a pride of surgeons, for pride was certainly what they didn't lack. Doctor Kumar, the head of cardiology was handsome too. He was perhaps ten years younger than Doctor Ryan, but he was rigid and aloof, meaning that he was not generous with his spirit.

Doctor Ryan was the opposite. For a surgeon, he was downright hippyish. His most striking feature was his presence. He was thoroughly in the present with me. His concentration did not deviate. He was with me. He was calm and real, rather than cocky. He had a way of making me feel okay about frightening things. It was uncanny. He actually laid his hand on mine when I was lying in that hospital bed. That hand had probably been holding a person's heart earlier that very morning. He told me that he didn't want to perform the procedure until the Bell's palsy had cleared up. He didn't want to put an extra strain on my body. He would wait for three months and see how the Bell's palsy went.

That's when I wrote *Stroke*. Three months of terror, slow-burn terror. I can safely say that Doctor Ryan was the reason I had the courage. Now I know surgeon love. His hands have known me intimately. But it's over. It doesn't matter now because it is over. He does have four stars on Prolonged Lengths of Stay or Readmissions, and four stars are better than three. Then the reality of it is hitting me again, I'm alive! I'm alive!

My face must be alight for they smile at me brightly. The Andrews Sisters! I beam! I can't say anything, I just beam. They grow concerned, and so I close my eyes.

The light comes back for I am opening my eyes. It is difficult because I want to stay in the darkness, enfolded by relief but I have to come out if I'm going to stay alive. The Andrews Sisters are still there, grinning at me; it seems I have not been out too long, no longer than a pause in the conversation.

"I'm just happy I'm alive." I tear up, that's what old men do.

They smile. Barbara digs into the treasure chest that holds the icy diamonds. I see them steaming. I feel the coolness, then they fill my hot mouth with pleasure.

The doctors are making their rounds! I see a "pride" of four. Is Dr. Ryan among them? They look like models on location. They confer with nurses but mostly speak among themselves. They disappear beyond my curtains. I wish Barbara would pull my curtain away, then I could see him better. Then he could see me.

Here he comes. One of three, behind the first two. He's talking to a nurse. He's looking around. Surely he sees me. Am I smiling? Are my eyes sparkling? Yes. I'm embarrassing myself to myself but I can't help it. I'm a groupie. Does he see me? No. Wait. No. Yes, there he is, he sees me. Is that all—a nod? Shit. I feel so stupid.

I remember how kind he was when Elizabeth and I visited him. I think he actually devoted an entire hour to our conference. The nurse had shown us to an examination room. When Dr. Ryan

came in, he said that this wasn't the right place to talk and he brought us into his spacious office. It was even bigger than Dr. Kumar's but less ostentatious. He had lots of diplomas on his walls but he also had a picture of his family. I felt like I could say anything to him. I had to be able to do that. I wanted to get out of it so badly. It was worse than signing up for cell-phone service. How many unspoken possibilities were there? He told me that I didn't have to have the operation on October 2, that I could wait. I told him that I couldn't stand waiting any longer. He understood. He reconfirmed that the operation was routine, that he had performed hundreds of them, and that he thought that in my case, the sooner the better. I told him that it felt like I was making a date with my murderer. He laughed and said that he certainly wouldn't be in business if that were the case. I still felt I was making a deal with the cell-phone provider: they wanted to get my signature before I left. And they did. I was officially signed up for the operation on October 2. That was still nearly two months away. I told him that I would be having my birthday while in the hospital after my procedure. He said, "perfect! What a great birthday present, a new heart!"

I thought he was my special friend. It seems, however, that he is a philanderer for there are a number of other patients and he's talking to them as if I didn't exist. And now he's disappearing.

I'm dry as a saddle—unburnished leather dry: my face feels like its flaking and if I were to rub it, I fear that it would come off in my hands. Everything seems suddenly symbolic and hypnagogic like hieroglyphs: everything has a meaning, every object—diameters and angles, the clinking and clanking of medical metal, the slopping and dripping of liquids, the rustle of sterilized sheets and the slap of plastic—all working at a meaning just beyond my grasp.

Barbara is here, and she has ice for my mouth and a cool cloth for my head.

"You are tired, John. You should lie back and close your eyes."

It's hard to imagine that only a night ago, Christine came to my studio to help wash me. Christine, an ex of mine. I hate that "ex" stuff. As if love can be put away and made light of. Yes, Christine, my ex, came all the way from Sonoma County to San Francisco to help bathe me. I needed someone to apply the preoperative skin sterilizer, chlorhexidine gluconate on the parts of my body that I couldn't reach. I asked her. I never imagined sharing such intimacy with anyone, I don't mean my nakedness, but my naked fear. In times like these, the truth comes out. What does that mean? Does that mean I love her? I don't know what "love" means. I've lost my sexual imp. Besides Christine is a lesbian. I know I love her for coming over that night. How archetypal: the sterilization of the old hermaphrodite. I hadn't been naked in front of her in more than twenty years. It wasn't easy dropping trou. I pulled them off and dumped them on a chair. I felt exposed, like something pulled out of its shell. I cut open the package that contained the sterilizing towels. She took a towel and I took one. I cleaned my groin and my armpits while she wiped my back and buttocks and legs. We washed my body like one washes a corpse, like those who perform the last offices. It was difficult and disconcerting, not because of the nudity but because of the depth of the bond. It was profound. Taking care of each other even as we die, that is the shift from childhood to guardianship. That is the ultimate act of love. Christine was confident that I would survive, so confident, in fact, she gave me a used coral-green KitchenAid blender. The last thing she did was tie a yellow Buddhist thread around my wrist. They allowed me to keep it during the operation. I'm looking at it right now.

I don't know what I expected when I entered the ward where they were to perform the open heart surgery, perhaps something with the atmosphere of a field hospital, but the receptionist had been like any other receptionist. All of the nurses had been cheery and the technicians too, even the guy who shaved off my body hair. But when I put on that heavy monochrome Johnny gown, the one without those pink amorphous critters, I knew that I was getting ready for the full ride.

There's gonna be blood on that sucker, you bet. That was why it was so heavy duty. Me, waiting with Elizabeth, waiting for the physician's assistant to come in with her shower cap. I was trying to put my own shower cap on but I was clumsy with fear so Elizabeth straightened it for me. I lay down on the gurney. Why couldn't I just walk into the operating room and lie down on the operating table? They rolled me out of the pre-op room, and I waved at Elizabeth. Then that chill-tickle curiosity of shock began to set in as she vanished from sight.

Two men in shower caps rolled me down that hall, Nurse Nancy talking to me. I don't remember what she was saying. The twin doors swung open, and I tried to see over the top of my head but my eyebrows were in the way. The room was full of metal and masked people in scrubs and shower caps. Dr. Ryan was standing in their midst like a Marvel comic-book hero, with his thumbs-up and his mask just moved enough for me to see a big grin. They asked me to help them get my body onto the table. I thought that was weird but I climbed onto the table, noticing, coincidentally, that it looked just like the ones they use for lethal injection. A cloud of four godheads pushed into my space, and I almost rubbed cheeks with them. One of them had glasses or were they goggles? She was saying that she was the anesthesiologist. Ever the friendly sort, I made a comment about the similarity of the operating table to the one in which they administer lethal injection, and she answered that it was exactly the same. I asked, "When am I going to get the medicine that will make me happy?" And she said it was coming. But it should have come in the pre-op room. I saw Barbara Walters waving at a TV camera on the way to her open-heart surgery and she was completely stoned. I was getting the happy juice just before they put me out. WTF!

"You have a visitor," Barbara is saying.

"I don't want to see visitors, I'm not alive enough yet."

"You can't keep life out, John."

"I'm all undressed. Everything is hanging out."

She fixes my sheets.

“Why don’t we crank you up a bit so you can see him.”

“Hi, John.”

It’s Frank.

Barbara cranks up my bed. I am being presented. It’s all planned. Everything in the ICU is predicated on forcing you to live. The staff members are the ambassadors of the living. Now they are letting the civilians into the show. I’m not sure if I want to see people but I have no choice, it seems. I’m here for display: it’s part of my obligation as a member of society. It is for the benefit of the people outside too, for them to secure family bonds, to enact the ancient rituals, to be in the reality show, to stimulate a stint of ennui, to be there with you in your most vulnerable moments, to even wait with you while you die, to bear witness, and to rubberneck.

Frank is a different story. If I were to see anyone voluntarily, it would be Frank. There is an aura of soft blue quietude about him, a sweet melancholy. He is always on the edge of a room, even here in a room full of curtains. He is one of my closest friends. A friend with no previous history, not a member of my California extended family, not a part of a clique. He is a one-time playwriting student of mine. Our friendship happened naturally. How do people become friends? I don’t know. It is beyond me. I think we’re more than friends. I think we’re boyfriends. I come from the 1950s and from Iowa, the state that enacted the “sexual psychopath law” against homosexuals.

“Frank?”

“John.”

Barbara appears and puts a chair at the foot of my bed, and Frank sits.

I’m not exactly a homophobe, but I lived in juvenile homes in the fifties where men were men, by god. I was always a little afraid of being alone with a gay guy for fear of suddenly going

queer. Age has freed me from homophobia. I would be a homosexual if I had the sexual inclination because I never was macho and I do so love pretty things. I remember what pleasure I had simpering over handmade paper in the Castro with a gay salesperson. What is considered feminine is interior in me. I think perhaps men are as “feminine” as women. I used to be obsessed with women, like every hetero, until I was in my early seventies but now it is gone. It didn’t immediately disappear; it started in my late sixties when I discovered that I could pass an evening without feeling lonely or abandoned. It was one of those mercies sometimes allotted to the old and unattractive—not to everyone, of course. I saw how horrible it was for old duffers who haunt strip clubs and throw away their social security money on private shows. I was one of them, oh yes. I thought I was saving poor females from unwanted attention by spending my time with professionals at the Crazy Horse Gentleman’s Club. I thought I would be safe because I knew what the strippers thought of old guys like me. I had always been a lover of women. I even had an altar to the beauty of women. Aphrodite, in a beneficent gesture, delivered the coup de grace to my libido in the person of Origami, a Japanese stripper who broke my heart and humiliated me. After that, my body shed whatever chemicals are responsible for sexual attraction. Now in my late seventies, I can honestly say that I do not desire women, so my inner fag is free to express herself. It’s not that I don’t have a sex life but it is private and well, frankly it’s pretty good. That is why I can say Frank is my boyfriend. Frank is not effeminate, not a show queen, except when he dons his holy habit and his divine face and becomes Mary Media, then watch out! Sister Flora Goodthyme, Sister Boom Boom, Sister Rose Mary Chicken, these are members of Mary Media’s order, The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a group of gay and straight people who dress in high-camp nunnery, replete with fourteenth-century Flemish wimples and makeup that would rival Fellini. They are delightful. They make up for all of the bad nuns in my childhood. Who would guess that this quiet Canadian sitting in the corner was a founding member of this vivacious and

celebratory lot? I can honestly say I love this man. So I know I love two people, Christine and Frank and both are gay. Hmm.

I am thirsty. I am so thirsty. Barbara is gone.

“Frank?”

I’m surprised by how dry my voice is. Frank gets up and leans toward me.

“John?”

“I’m thirsty.”

Mercifully, Barbara comes in.

“Hi, I’m Barbara, John’s nurse. He can have ice, but not yet. You can wet his lips.”

She takes Frank to the magic place where the water is. Frank wets my lips with a sponge at the end of a stick like the Roman soldier did for Jesus, except that the Savior’s was vinegar and mine is water.

It is only when Frank dots my lips with moisture that I realize how injured I am. Yes, I am injured. I am raw. I’m not experiencing pain as much as a profound exhaustion. I can see the blue of Frank’s eyes and his deep concern. My mind has been so active. It has babbled along as if nothing has happened, but now, invigorated by the reality of my friend, I feel the weight of my flesh and the light of my consciousness, a light fainter than I had previously thought. It has been so much easier to dream. I realize, yes, that I’ve been dreaming and that I must somehow manifest my existence in this riven pulp. My god, how will I ever be able to do it!

This is the first time I have consciously been with a civilian.

Frank is wiping the crud from the corners of my mouth with a cool damp cloth. I can feel my eyeballs moving in my skull, can feel the teeth growing out of my gums, the thickness of my tongue, the dense slop of my saliva and the tangle of my thoughts.

“Thanks,” I murmur like some civil-war soldier at an amputation; arms and legs stacked up like lumber just outside my tent. I blink the insane image out of my head and momentarily my eyelashes stick together. I can feel the weight of my breath. And then the big brown carp comes up from the pool, there’s a lunger hanging from its lips. The carp is going to hack that lunger into my face. I point at the pillow but Frank has no idea what I want. Barbara is there like a miracle, shoving the pillow between my arms and putting a hand on my back for support. The lunger dislodges itself from my chest and sticks in my windpipe and for a moment I can’t get any air.

“Come on, John!” Barbara urges like a midwife.

Frank steps back alarmed. I can see him through my bulging eyes.

“Cough!” she cries. “Hug the pillow. You can do it.”

But I don’t want to do it. I can feel the pain coiled like a snake ready to strike. I am clutching the pillow. Barbara is pressing on my back.

“Come on, John, it won’t be bad.”

But it is bad. Perhaps my chest will break apart. I would be embarrassed but I’m blacking out. She is taking the cloth away and the lung snot with it. She is wiping my face as if I were a baby. I see Frank’s hands, how long his fingers. I am thinking fingers and the dead, how the dead are all fingers. Oh, fingers, I want to cry when I see you. Look! Barbara is curling her fingers over her thumb. Why do I want to stroke her head and comfort her? Because I see her fingers. I don’t want her to die. I don’t want Frank to die. I want to run into the hall when I see her fingers, his fingers, the whorls of their fingerprints like Japanese sand gardens. Look at my hands. My fingers on them.

“Oh, look, you have another visitor,” Barbara is saying.

“Hi,” I’m hearing in Elizabeth’s voice.

Of course she and Frank are here. No more, though, I don't want any more. Somebody pulled the sheets off the universe. I'm naked, geez.

Look! See how Elizabeth tucks her chin while Frank tilts his head. I wonder what their collective breath is like. What kinds of pheromones are being emitted? It is kindness. They have come down into the trenches among the bloody wounded. The flesh around their eyes looks tired, concerned, taut, baggy, but most sincere. I see their eyes, devoid of color, shifting in their sockets and among them, their sweet mouths moving with their chins. Look, see their spirits winking at me between the picket fences of their fingers, the moray patterns of personality, how they met the earth and how the air made them.

Now I will make this noise. Watch what happens: "Elizabeth." My voice is still rusty.

"How are you?" Elizabeth is saying.

She has a chuckle voice with cherries, very red ones and sweet, but with pickles so you can make her out clearly, distinctly and strong. She is strong. She has the color of deep purple and deep green. The country of her soul has a polka-dot flag.

"Fine." And then I laugh and start coughing.

They're laughing too.

I remember October 1, the day before I was to have my operation. I was riding with Elizabeth in her blue car, the car that was going to take me to the operation in less than twelve hours. I had that icy feeling of slow-burn terror. That is what I felt that day when I went to the US Post Office with Elizabeth in her blue car. I felt I was walking on legs made of ice and that they might break. But still, I got out of the car and looked around the parking lot. It was a post office beyond my neighborhood.

I looked up at the deep-blue sky. There was the shape of a heart appearing in it. Someone was skywriting a heart. When Elizabeth came out of the post office, I pointed it out to her.

“Look at that, Elizabeth,” I said.

“It’s just for you, John,” she said, her hand shading her eyes.

“I wonder if it’s for somebody’s sweetheart.”

Then a second heart began to appear. I couldn’t see the airplane. It seemed to be quite high up. The first heart was already beginning to disintegrate when another one began to appear, then another and another all in a row, a ribbon made of vanishing hearts written in the sky.

I think there is a pause. No one says anything. I can’t think or talk, so I look at them. Elizabeth’s wrists are delicate, her palms are wide, and her fingers are small like mine. They are the fingers of a strong soul who can live through the fear of sleep. Me too, but I’m not as strong. I take Xanax. Her knuckles are wrinkled, like wrinkles on a neck, they have double chins. She cracks a smile. Her teeth are perfect, and like beautiful women, her lips tuck neatly into the corners of her mouth. And she has apple cheeks like a child. But remember, although she is sixty, the devastating shadows of her beauty still linger around her eyes.

“Who came earliest?” I ask when my throat gets clear.

“He did,” says Elizabeth, pointing the index finger of her right hand at Frank.

“I guess so,” says Frank. “Don’t you remember?”

“You mean when I had a tube down my throat?”

Frank chuckles. “No,” he says, “you weren’t that far gone, but you were dopey.”

“Thanks,” I quip.

Then they watch me. How do I respond?

Elizabeth, who knows the nature of flow, interjects, “We were here only fifteen minutes or so.”

“I didn’t remember. Thank you, guys,” I am saying with a sincerity slightly out of tune. I want to say, “I don’t know how to talk to you. I am not completely here.”

It is remarkable how embarrassing getting along can be. One needs agility. Right now I don't know how to talk. All my thoughts are like essays in a book I don't want to open. I'm laughing. That's a good thing to do. See, they are smiling. Barbara is too. People like to smile. I think I like that. Smiling is good. "See, my teeth are not biting." And that makes me laugh, and that makes them laugh, and now we are laughing together and then we stop, and then we start again and noticing that, we laugh some more. What is that? No one really knows. Maybe it's magic or a magic cloak in a closet or a closet with a cloak in it. It's getting slippery for me. Are they looking at me strangely? I don't know if I can go back to this, I don't know if I can make it normal anymore. Yet they look at me with eyes full of white lies and love.

Barbara is smiling at me. What kind of a smile is that? She's going to get some ice! She's a mind reader. She's coming to me with a tray and the silver bowl of water and ice. I feel the coolness near my lips. Now the ice is in my mouth. It's not coolness that I need, it is water, so I suck at the ice and drain it like a sponge. She's giving me more ice, much more. Is she bending the rules? I'm looking at her eyes, searching them. I feel lucid. Well, relatively so, enough to feel the joy in my body. It is clear that my body wants to live. It has no doubts. It doesn't care if anybody likes it. It just knows that light and air are good. My eyes too, they like to scratch sight out of the light. I feel my eyelashes tickling my eyes as they open and close. Are they dancing with my thoughts? I'm thinking that my eyes know my thoughts before I do. I am like a hat on top of my thoughts. Is my breathing that way too? Does it know what I'm thinking before I do? And my heart?

I have emptied the ice bowl.

"Doctor Ryan is making his rounds. I think he's going to release you to the ward," Barbara is saying.

Frank and Elizabeth lightly applaud.

And here he comes, Doctor Ryan. I introduce him to Frank and Elizabeth. He greets them cordially, then looks at me. I don't want my eyes to appear too hungry but my body doesn't care, it fixes its eyes on him, even dilates them. I can tell because the room is suddenly glaring.

"Hey, John, how's it going?"

He is smiling at me with his characteristic attentiveness. It isn't enough for me. He has "had" me. I want to feel special. My first real kiss was with Karen Minner at the front door of a place she was babysitting in 1956, Marshalltown, Iowa. It was the first time I got an erection with a girl. I know she could feel it through my jeans. I remember being confused and embarrassed. She zipped my jacket up and that's when we kissed. It's like that with Dr. Ryan, except it isn't sex, it's awe.

"I'm great," I say.

He is crossing to the monitor.

"Thank you," I blurt out.

He is studying the monitor. Now he's talking to Barbara. She is nodding. Now he is coming to my end of the bed, the left side.

"The operation went as planned and you are cleared to go up to the ward. Good job, John."

He is grinning. I'm grimming back—that's somewhere between a grin and a grimace. He puts his right hand on my right hand. I think about his fingers, what they have done.

"I didn't do anything," I say, and I want to say more.

"Oh, no, that's not true, you did well," he answers, then goes to the end of the bed.

I want to say how much I appreciate him. How can I say it?

"I heard that you are the hardest working doctor on the staff," I blurt out.

Doctor Ryan looks at me, displeased. “I don’t work any harder than anyone else, we’re a team,” he says almost crossly, and then attenuates it with a smile. “You heal fast. I’ll see you on the ward.”

He nods to Frank and Elizabeth and leaves. Barbara comes with a glass of water and a straw. Dr. Ryan has moved to another patient.

I want to call him back and tell him I didn’t mean it, that I was expressing my gratitude. Frank and Elizabeth are gone. I don’t remember when they left. The light is weird as if a dark gravity were tugging at the photons. It feels bandaged on. I need to get out. I am done, as in the oven. I need to move on.

And then I do. But first I forget. I can’t believe I am still stoned enough to black out. Maybe it’s a whiteout.

I am on a gurney, emerging from the steam and blood, out of the burial coffers of the ICU. I didn’t dare imagine it. It was too scary. I had to take it one step one at a time. But secretly I hoped I would find myself here on to the way the coronary-care unit. There is something about gratitude that betrays an underlying terror, and I am terribly grateful. Two gurney lads are pushing me along, one at my head, the other at my feet. Their throats arch up like columns and their arms swing like soldiers on parade, their brave heads turn, navigate me through the shoals of wheelchairs, carts, trays, instruments, staff, and visitors. I feel the soft revolve of the wheels on the smooth floors. The lights on the ceiling buried in the acoustical tiles are floating over me like a message on a ribbon. Is that whistling or is that the squeaking of a wheel? It can’t be squeaking, this is a modern hospital hallway. I don’t think it’s whistling. Nurses aren’t allowed to whistle, and no doubt that applies to gurney lads. Ha-ha, oh yes, gurney lads can whistle but not until they get you into the

elevator and the doors close. Then they can whistle to their heart's content. They can be crazy when the elevator doors are closed.

They push me into the elevator like something in a shopping cart. Do they converse with me? Like, "Boy, I hear you got out of there fast," and "You're smart, you don't want to linger." I don't know. It's not that I can't see their faces clearly, it's that the idea of a face keeps slipping from my mind. I don't think they have mustaches but perhaps they shaved with stubble trimmers that leave a five o'clock shadow the color of their pubic hair. I can feel the elevator rising. I think it's rising. I always think of the ICU as being down in a basement, but that might be my psychological geography, so I'll think of it as rising up from Purgatory 1 to Purgatory 2, my old cardio ward, the one I shared with Cody, and the wonderful nurses.

I hear the elevator the the "ting" and the elevator doors slide open.

My gurney stops. A nurse bubble reaches out for me with midwife tenderness.

"And who is this?"

She's taking something from one of the gurney jockeys. Is it a clipboard?

"He's fresh from ICU."

"Oh, Mr. O'Keefe. Let me see where he goes," she's saying to an iPad. "Oh, here we are, room 407."

Now I am being moved again. Dim. Bright. Through a doorway and into a room. Now I remember June, the room with Cody. Cody had a window. I so longed for a window. I remember in those days that I could only see the doorway and a rectangle. Do I have a window?

"Lucky you, Mr. O'Keefe, you have a window."

I can see the light. They are moving me into a room. It is the same kind of room I had when I roomed with Cody. Yes, I have made it. The operation is over. I can't believe it, it is over, it is over, it is over. What is that feeling? It feels like an overtone blown aloft above the timberline.

That sweet, fresh note above human hearing that opens the soul and sweeps through the feathers of the spirit. It's the *future*. I'm thinking about the *future*. I ceased thinking about the future last June when I was told that I would have to have a triple bypass if I wanted to live. But now it's OVER! Let's see, it's October. I had the bypass surgery in the early morning of October 3. I got out of the ICU in less than twenty-four hours. This is daylight, not the pasted-on stuff down in the ICU, so it must be the afternoon of October 4. I can feel the room. I didn't know that, that I could actually feel the size of a room. I can't see clearly. It's not my eyes, I think it's my brain. My brain is not ready to be exposed to naked reality. Good god, how many kinds of reality are there? I can hear sounds bouncing off walls, harmonics strummed in corners of the ceiling. I can see the buggy carapaces of hospital lights. Window! I have a window. I see the stellar radiation.

"Okay, Mr. O'Keefe, we're going to put you on the bed," she is saying.

There are two orderlies and the nurse. They are shadows but they have mass. Are bogeymen shadows made out of meat? They are bogeymen men. They are hunky and big. They are reaching down to get me. I can feel their hands under me. I have not been touched like this, like I was a hot weenie being rotisserie'd. It's as if I am so hot that the orderlies have difficulty touching me, but it is because I am fragile and fresh from the butcher shop. It's becoming a wrestling match. The nurse is the referee.

Now they are lifting me. I am leaving the gurney. This is the second time I have been lifted in the air. I can't remember the first time. Why is that? I was put on the gurney when I left the ICU, but I don't remember it. Did I black out? I can't remember the pain I am feeling now. This is the birth of my body unleavened of anesthesia. This is the birth of pain. The cloth between me and the surface of life is ripping away.

"Ugh!" I cry in fear and agony.

It is an ugly sound for an ugly sensation. My body feels as if it has been wired shut and could break in half. The distance between gurney and bed is a continent apart. I am an ICBM crossing the immensity in a slumping arc.

“Here we go, Mr. O’Keefe, here we go. Just a second more,” the nurse is saying.

“Shit!” I want to scream. “Shit, shit, shit!” But I don’t. I groan and grunt as if I were shooting cum all over the room. And it’s still not over for the burly boogiemens can’t quite land me gently over the fucking railing of the hospital bed.

“Fuck! Fuck you, motherfuck!” I want to say but it’s too difficult to articulate. This is the birth of pain. I am feeling pain for the first time, the pain of someone who is closer to life than death, this is secular pain.

I am out of breath and sweating. So are the boogiemens who have turned into young beardless orderlies in light-gray scrubs.

So here I am on this side of life. I can feel the steam coming up I am so new. Do I have legs? I can’t remember my legs. The right one, I’ve forgotten about it. The mutilated one. The one they fished the veins out of. I feel like a lump, only head and chest. Oh, yes, arms—but they are mostly to hold needles. I thought about this before the operation. Maybe I read it. My sternum is cut in half and it’s being held together by wire and superglue. My chest might come apart. It might just be there wedged inside of my trunk and broken in half. Maybe one side might rub against the other. I want to scoot up but I don’t want anyone to shift me around. My right leg is sore. I want to say swollen, but everything is swollen. Inside my chest, my heart must be swollen. My heart meat must be sore. I can see it: a little fucking animal and it’s yipping.

Am I sitting up? I want to sit up more but I don’t want to use my arms. I don’t want to see my right leg either.

“It’s time to remove that catheter,” a nurse says breezily.

Catheter! Yikes! I once carried a urinary drainage bag strapped to my leg for six weeks. I can't forget the length of the shiny metal rod Dr. Recktor was holding in his hand accompanied by his statement, "Now I'm going to insert this ...". And the mixture of pain and suppressed hysteria as he inserted it, all nine-inches into my bladder.

"Don't worry, it won't hurt."

And with that, she pulls the catheter out. There is a slight marble of pain and then relief, and I realize that I am being unplugged like a spaceman who has come back from an EVA.

"Do you want to sit up more?"

"I do," I say but I don't want to move.

She is looking at my chart. "I'm Harriett," she says. "May I call you John?"

She has red hair and is about forty. She is lowering the bed flat. She is giving me my "heart pillow."

"Hug your pillow. Bend your knees up toward your chest, roll toward me, keep your knees bent."

She places a half sheet under my back, then rolls me to the other side and fixes the half sheet under me, then rolls me flat again.

"Now on the count of three, I want you to push with your feet while I pull. Okay? One ... two ... three, push."

Again, the pain. Every move is accompanied by it. It is like a ghost, an extra person in the room.

"Push," she says.

I push and cry out. I haven't moved.

"Go ahead, push just a bit, go ahead, do it," she urges.

I am digging my heels into the meat of the mattress. I am surprised that I have this much strength. I move. Don't flinch at the pain, scare it, scare the pain. The pain scares back, and knifes me. My face compresses and I cry out.

"That's good. It isn't so bad if you keep at it," she urges.

I push and squeeze the pillow hard against my chest, my body moves a few inches but I don't cry out.

"Good," she cheers. "Good!"

I do it again and I do it again as if I were stabbing someone. Who? That little sneering Paul! The people who put me down. I can't remember their names, nor their faces, but I feel them and the need to stab them through my anguish. I will stab them until they are not recognizable, until they are rubbish!

"That's enough, John. See, you can do it. Now let me raise the bed. You will need some nutrition," she says like a nun I knew when I was a little kid.

I am vertical. I am out of breath but I know the pain now. I could call it by name, if it had a name. It is Sharp Aching. It knifes then disperses in throbbing diminuendos the way thunder rolls out of lightning. It isn't razor sharp, it's blade sharp. It is understandable, almost reasonable. It states its name, then goes to sleep. It breaks the skin but can be endured with repetition.

"Do you have your water? Oh, there it is, good. I'll be back with some food. You can't have solids yet."

"Thanks, Harriet.

"You need anything more?"

I shake my head.

"Good. If you need anything, press the call button and someone will come."

As a final gesture, she pushes the hospital tray table closer.

The world is coming into focus as I sit here atop my patched and reconstructed torso.

I have a window!

They have gone and left me with a window. It's not a single room. A curtain is half open and there is a bed on the other side of it. I will probably be having roommates. But I have the window.

Between me and the outside world is a pane of glass, and on the other side is Pacific Heights, the most expensive neighborhood in San Francisco. Now, that's saying something in this town. Only New York is more expensive than this seven-by-seven-mile city.

Here I am among the living, thinking mundane thoughts.

Look at that! Look at that sky! I am alive!

I remember him now, Brad, the last nurse to attend me in the ICU. When he found that I was leaving at the beginning of his shift, he said that he was sorry that we didn't get to know each other, that he was a really nice guy. I told him how I appreciated the nursing staff in the Sutter Health Intensive Care Unit.

"Well then, when you get out of the hospital, come on by and give us a visit. No one ever does," and he laughed.

Now I get to drink water from a plastic cup. Time is still not quite right with me. Soon someone is coming. I expect them. I won't know them, him, her. They will be members of the hospital staff. What time is it? It's 2:35 p.m. The clock is on the wall just above the chalkboard. *Harriet Muller* is written on it in pink with a blue rectangle around it.

"Hey, Mr. Actor, how ya doin'?"

It's Paul. He has a baseball cap. Not the same baseball cap. This is a gray one. The one in the ICU was blue. He has an assistant. A male. Twenties. But not a smirker—Paul is a smirker. He is smirking right now. He knows where my soft parts are and he is pushing on them.

“Where is your toy?”

I know what he’s talking about but I don’t know where it is. I’m looking for it. I hate that.

He does that to me.

“There it is.”

He’s pointing. I can’t see it.

“It’s right there. Can’t you see it?”

He’s pointing.

“You can’t use it if you don’t know where it is.”

He’s smirking and looking at his assistant. The assistant is looking back at him but he isn’t showing any expression. Smart kid. I wish I was that smart.

“I don’t know where it is. I just got here!” I’m saying defensively to this guy with the baseball cap about a fucking toy with a blue hose.

“Hey, don’t bite my head off. I’m just trying to keep you from getting pneumonia.”

He’s walking to the table by the window near the foot of my bed. The incentive spirometer is under the menu.

“That’s a nasty place to leave it,” he says cautiously. “Did the nurse leave it there?”

He looks at the pink name on the blackboard. “Nurse Harriet?”

He is coming to me. His assistant is remaining on the other side of my bed.

“Come over here, Derrick. We got to see how good this guy has gotten on the little spirometer.”

Derrick is coming over to Paul’s side of the room. Derrick is sandy haired with dark eyebrows. They disfigure his face. Paul is pointing the blue nozzle at my mouth. I don’t want him so near.

“Go on, Mr. Actor, suck on this.”

He is chuckling. The bright afternoon light is glaring at him and so am I.

“Don’t get defensive.” He looks over his shoulder at Derrick, as if acquiring a witness. “Look at him. He doesn’t want to do it. None of them want to do it.”

I take the spirometer and suck. I want to get him out of my room. He is a bat that followed me out of hell. He still wears jeans. He looked better in the pasty light of the ICU. In the bright light of day, his face has the color of pancake batter. His hands are chubby and calloused. There are callouses even on the back of his hands. Perhaps there is something wrong with his skin. The lad behind him, for a lad he is, doesn’t want to look while I suck the nozzle of the spirometer. I suck too hard and the yellow piston goes past the “best” marker. Why is the lad turning away?

“Fifteen hundred, Sir Lawrence, not bad. Let’s do it again, but don’t suck so hard, have more control.”

I am suddenly thirsty. I think of water. Oh, no, that’s the wrong water. A brown carp nosing up, its thick orange lips protruding out of the muddy river. A gob of tawny sludge is pooling around its mouth, thick as hot taffy. There are splinters snapping in the middle of my chest. The lad isn’t looking away he has been holding a pillow which he is now shoving into my chest. I am putting down the spirometer so I can grab it. Now there is pain-fear and fear-pain and pain and pain and fear and fear. Grab the pillow. Hold it tight. Get ready. The carp is swelling. It’s full of something and it’s going to come out. It is ready. It is ready. It is ready to come out. I am coughing. The carp is spewing skin-warm bottom mud, and it is coming out of my lungs in gobs. Ole Paul is holding a towel over my face to catch it. He is laughing like he has hit the jackpot.

“There it is,” he cries, “I knew you were hiding something.”

I’m clutching the pillow. It’s a tossup between fear of the pain of coughing and drowning in my own mucous. The carp leaps from the water with the grace of a marlin and snaps at the air and I convulse. It smacks the muddy water with its golden tail and I hack out tasteless mustard

colored blobs. Some fly out, others stick to the corners of my mouth, one is hanging off my chin. That ugly carp, the one that lives in the bottom of my lungs, is now sticking its mouth out of the stagnant water. Now it is turning into a pickle and constricting the muscles of my throat, closing my airway. There is a pause in the universe as the air tells my brain that it isn't on its way. Now the black is coming. I remember it. It was the universe between the versed and the intubation tube. It is a big eraser.

“Cough! Come on, Mr. Actor, cough!”

I'm gasping for air and light is coming in, light and wet eyes as if my eyes were distilling the muddy water. Paul is rubbing his hand in circles on my back. Derrick is depositing the contents of the metal bowl and the cloth in a chute in the cart. He's getting another cloth. I'm clutching the pillow. I need to make it like steel.

“Okay, let's try it again,” Paul is saying while looking away as if he were bored of the routine.

I don't want to say anything to him. I will inevitably try to placate him. I don't want to be nice. Derrick isn't nice either, he's a tool. And Paul? Paul is looking away as I breathe in and the little yellow piston rises. The air is cool and my lungs are spacious. I am dizzy and high, the room is suddenly bright.

“That's oxygen, Maestro. Doesn't it feel good? Oops!” He says as I cough up stringers of lung-gob and Derrick catches them in the fresh cloth.

I can feel snot coming out of my nose and my eyes are tearing. Derrick is wiping my face. I can see Paul's pancake batter skin. He has leaky blue eyes and his lips are purple. He doesn't look cool anymore, not like the athlete of the Sutter Health Cardio Care Unit Pacific Heights Campus, but I don't bother telling him that because he wouldn't get it. He is as cocky as ever.

He is patting my arm. It is a surprisingly compassionate gesture.

“See, it’s not so bad to cough. Grab the pillow and cough. It will get better. You keep using the incentive spirometer and you will get your walking papers. I’ll see you tomorrow. Oh, yeah, you ain’t gonna get rid of me that quick. Come on, Derrick.”

Derrick comes on behind Paul, who I mercifully can’t see because I’m wiping my eyes.

I am exhausted.

Perhaps no one will come for a while. This is a hospital. I am here to rest. No, to heal, I am not here to rest. I will have little rest. Someone will come, and my eyes will feel like varmint wanting a dark place in a closet and there will be no closet. It is wide open, the door. Besides, there is the other half of the room and an empty bed that will want to be filled.

My lungs feel good. My chest is sore but not like it is in danger of cracking open. It is sore like a sore. I have to keep it clean. Oh, yes, I’ve looked at it. I’ve examined it. I’ve shown it to visitors, to Frank and Elizabeth. They admired it. Cachet. ICU cachet. I’ve been through the cleaners; they dumped my body right out of the pressing machine. Here I am, all trussed up. Now I’m alone with it, my scar. It is a prize.

I thought about getting a tattoo. I saw a picture of a woman with a pair of dolphins around her scar and a guy with a Celtic weave over his, and another guy with a zipper. It doesn’t matter how beautiful tattoos look I just can’t get Popeye out of my mind. This scar is as good a tattoo as anything fashioned with mere ink. Doctor Ryan says it will be barely visible in a few months.

It is uncanny how fast the pain goes. I get used to grabbing the pillow and coughing. I get used to being in pain. But with every improvement a new challenge replaces it. Learning to roll out of the bed without using my arms. The miracle of standing. The rediscovery of walking. And it happens so fast. Wednesday, October 4, the morning after I am admitted to the CCU, they have me walking. Kim and Jerry, both athletic, in their twenties, guide me down the hall, then back. We

do laps that way, down the hall and back. That they don't make fun of me makes a difference. I feel encouraged. They take me to the physical-therapy room and have me walk up and down a mock stairway. They have me stand on one foot and then the other. The whole room is full of light. I feel like I'm standing on a mountaintop. Oh, and I get to drink broth. The next day, October 5, I order from the menu. I know I can't have bacon and I have to watch my starch, so I don't get potatoes and toast. But just to make sure, I ask the lady on the phone. It turns out that she is a dietitian and that I can't have dairy products either: that means yogurt, cheese, and milk. So I order three scrambled eggs and two cups of coffee. Oh, and Paul doesn't return.

I am doing well. The hallways are lit but the rooms are full of natural light because there are so many windows and we are on a prominence—we're in fucking Pacific Heights. I have to keep walking and walking. I walk the halls, rolling my IV stand along. A few ghostly figures in Johnny gowns with IV stands dot the halls, then disappear. I pass the elevators, those gates to the universe. If I go too far, I set off alarms. They chase me down. A nurse takes me to a doorway and opens it. I feel the chilly plasma of San Francisco fog. I can see a part of the Bay. At first, I have to sit up for fifteen minutes a day, but in two days, I am taking my meals sitting at my private little window that looks out on the classy houses. Do they look like something out of Paris? Yes.

And this: I'm experiencing a remarkable sensation. At first, I didn't notice it. It has been in the background. When I got my endarterectomy, I experienced a brightness not unlike the first few days off of cigarettes. It is an increase in oxygen. Now, after the triple bypass I'm seeing the brightness, but something else too. I'm fucking high! It's not an opiate high. It's a steady high that throngs better than coke or ecstasy. I swear that I can feel the blood going into my brain and my brain is loving it. It's like brain candy. I'm high on blood! It is gratitude sung in blood. The light is pouring in. It feels good. I can't believe it. I can't believe it. I feel like a newly turned vampire.

Roommates come. Three of them: October 4, 5, and 7.

1. A man for a day and a night, wife with him, they don't speak to me. I never see their faces. I feel like there should be a wall instead of a curtain between us. They carry on like families do. Tribe up. Collect. Dominate reality. Still, I don't begrudge them their intimacy. They *are* a family and the husband is in the *hospital*. I forget that being in the hospital is a big deal because I'm in the hospital. But for me, being in the hospital means I have survived. For some people at the end of a siren, it's not so good. A hospital is a last-ditch place. I suppose I could compare it to being a soldier on a battlefield, but with visitors. Not quite, but hard, hard for them who visit. The husband and wife are younger than me but not much. I can see the wife's back when she leaves the room if I stretch my neck. Slim, gray hair, gray dress. I could see her face if I knew when she was coming back in. I anticipate her, but she always gets by me. Occasionally, I see him through an inch of space when the curtain between us separates. Otherwise, he is shadow and air. It is hard to believe that he is only a few inches from me. His wife is there, managing the comings and goings of food and people. She doesn't simper but sometimes she whispers. She is composed and efficient. She isn't fawning but she is dependable. Him? He's calm and doesn't want to alarm her. I think she gets in bed with him. I'm not sure. It's probably something I'm cooking up, but I think she cuddles with him. I am glad when they release him. I have my room back. Besides, it's unpleasant being disactualized. They could have said "hello" but that's how it is with families and friends. God knows, they may have thought that I was on my deathbed.

2. A guy who is here for a couple of hours. Hispanic. Gay. He is cordial. I mean, he isn't as friendly as he is intimately civil. It is easier to be with him than with the man and the wife because he and his boyfriend acknowledge me. Sharing a hospital room is sometimes like sharing a bathroom. It actually is—there is only one bathroom. His boyfriend is chubby and neat and has the loveliest snow-white beard. They had been at a café just before a show and Carlos got sick at

the table. There is always someone at the end of a siren. The siren is the rainbow. It's like that elusive pot of gold at the end. The end of the rainbow is a hospital room. I shared that room. A nurse comes in and says that he's fine to go. They both say goodbye.

3. A guy from Modesto for a day and a night. He talks about his car. I talk about mine. He has a red one and mine was red too. His is a 1968 Shelby GT (Mustang). Mine was a 1969 VW camper without a pop top. He bought his a year ago and restored it. I bought mine in 1969 and used it until 2008. Put in four engines, lived in it, raised a kid in it part time, up in Humboldt County, drove it across the country a dozen times, bought it with my first wife in Cedar Rapids. He calls his "Murphy," I called mine, "Siegfried." I cried when I sold it. "Yes, you can get attached to cars," he says.

October 4 and 5, I search for Cody's spirit. He has long since gone back east. There is no Cody in this ward. Mine is the north side, his was in the south. I go back to our old place. A couple of the nurses I used to know are there, but they don't recognize me and don't remember Cody. I tell them that I wrote a story about it. "Stroke." I don't go on for there is nowhere to go in their eyes.

Cody was my twenty-three-year-old roommate in June when I wound up in the hospital after my face became paralyzed. He was also my guru. He showed me how to face adversity. I could have fallen into being a grumpy, whiny old man. I had sufficient cause but Cody did me one better—he needed a heart transplant. He joked and laughed and flirted with the nurses. He was uncommonly smart and knowledgeable. Shit, I sound like I'm giving a recommendation, but in situations where you are so helpless—by that, I mean that if the hospital staff left, you would probably die—you don't have a high horse to sit on. He set an example. He left the day I left. I've tried to keep up with him. Friended him on Facebook. As of October 9, he's in Hahnemann

University Hospital in Philadelphia. He has a new transplant doctor. The last thing he wrote on his Facebook page was: “It’s the little things that nurses do, like telling a funny story or bringing you your favorite juice at the end of their shift, that separates good nurses from great ones. Thank you to all of the great nurses I’ve had at the past seven hospitalizations, I look forward to many more 😁.”

I wander the halls. I have to walk anyway. There are railings attached to the walls just for that. This place is relatively quiet and empty. Nurses go through. Not a lot, but steady. Most of the action is in the specific units on computers. A few visit patients. A few cluster and laugh. There are posses of physical and occupational therapists, as well as a chaplain. It’s like the Old West. I always scoffed at spiritual advisors on a payroll. I didn’t know if I could take them seriously. How far were they into non-doctrinal numinosity? But they always seemed to help me in spite of my Bay Area atheism. Just stopping by and leaving their cards. Then I realize that they are chaplains in a hospital and this is the cardio ward. They’ve seen it all.

This place could just as well have been a funhouse or a freak show, a palace of grotesque wonders if it had a different interior decorator. As it is, every room is sterilized, everything spare and pragmatic. There are freaks in these rooms though. Two elderly Asian women fast asleep and a nurse in blue scrubs sitting at a computer at the foot of their beds. There are a number of these rooms with mummies bound in white sheets with nurses in blue scrubs between them. Hieroglyphs. There are empty beds along the walls awaiting new customers. There are alien machines. Maybe 24 Hour Fitness for BEMS (bug-eyed monsters). There is one room with a shriveled woman in a bed, like a white hand in bridal lace, and one blue nurse. And yet there are pictures with pretty watercolor flowers. The horror is subdued by bourgeois comfort. There are outlines of procedures framed on the walls, little oval pictures of nurses who work on the ward, a door that says “chapel,”

a conference room, a dark silent room with couches, and a sealed room to the outside. This is the quiet wing.

It's Friday, October 6, the morning of my birthday. Dr. Ryan would release me but for some reason, he doesn't want to release me on a weekend. I will probably be released on Monday, October 9th. Dr. Ryan's chief nurse, Nancy, comes to pull the last plug in my chest. It is lodged somewhere in the back of my heart. I'm not being facetious. This particular one bothers me because it looks more electrical than the others. But Nancy is confident; after all, she is Dr. Ryan's PA-C, physician assistant for cardiothoracic and transplant surgery. She is young, pleasant, efficient, I feel comfortable around her. She sat with Elizabeth and me during our interview with Doctor Ryan. Anything to do with Dr. Ryan gives me confidence. It is like a radio wave and my body is the receiver. My brain can't take it in. It is in moments like this that the size of the situation takes hold and drops me like a ball. I gasp at the idea.

"This is the last one, John. It won't hurt," she says and by way of demonstration, she wraps the fingers of her left hand around the index finger of her right and pulls it free.

"It will be just like that, like pulling a finger. Okay?"

She takes a pair of tweezers and tugs at the wire sticking out of the left side of my chest.

Mother of God, I don't like this! I am thinking. It's that scary. I don't know why; maybe because it is the last one. In any case, I must be exuding a certain flinch reflex for she stops what she is doing. I'm not flinching, I don't think I am, but she is stopping. She is taking a pair of surgical scissors from a tray and trimming a few threads so that the "thing" will be even. She reaches down confidently and tugs on it. It doesn't give. She looks perplexed. It's for a microsecond. She turns slightly away and takes out her phone. She turns her back.

"Dr. Ryan, this is Nancy. I'm having trouble getting the pacemaker lead out."

She turns to me. “Dr. Ryan will be up in five minutes. No big deal.”

Dr. Ryan is here in less than five minutes. She is about to say something, but he looks at my chest, pulls the thing out, and leaves without looking at me. She composes herself, smiles, then puts the tweezers back in the silver tray.

“Well, that’s it, John. You’re done. You will be released on Monday. Dr. Ryan will visit you on Monday in the morning.”

She leaves.

It’s so weird, the awkward dispossession of goodbyes. I am done. It’s not possible. I keep saying it but I can’t imagine being on the other side of this operation.

Visitors. That’s because life isn’t just the hospital. I was born in a hospital. I was born again in this hospital. I will probably die in a hospital. Visitors are not in hospitals, they visit them. They are not in the same dimension. They do not wear scrubs. They are coming from “out there.” It’s hard to focus on them. They seem to be on a different screen, as if beamed in. I know what it’s like to visit people in the hospital. They always seem to be “in there” as if they were in a slightly different dimension. If I had no visitors, I would probably feel bad.

Elaine brings flowers. They smell like gasoline and so I have to have them removed. The anesthesia has affected my sense of smell. It’s called “tube head.” It will get better later. She also gives me two polished white healing stones. She is four foot nine inches tall with luminous eyes. She got a kidney transplant a year ago. She is Jewish, Catholic, and Ashram’ees. She loves Emily Dickenson. Frank gives me a graphic novel, *Aleister & Adolf* (as in Crowley and Hitler) and *Fairy Tales* by Oscar Wilde. There is this brightness and unfounded joy—my god, it’s new blood. That’s my present from Dr. Ryan, it’s a refurbished heart.

Here they are sitting around the foot of my bed, crammed into the little part of the room that is my own. I don't have a roommate today. Brave, kind, good people to come and visit me in hospital (that's how the English say it).

I'm getting back this personality. God, I'm irritating. Why all of this energy? It's like I'm trying out for a part. I'm having social anxiety. Everyone has social anxiety. They should. It is difficult to house all of these egos. A person-to-person situation can be quite difficult. If there is prolonged contact, such as being in a room, physical aggression can take place. That is why enemies tend to avoid each other. There is a kind of armistice by not speaking to each other. Interpersonal conflict can go on for years. Some people have to have enemies in order to create meaning out of otherwise ambiguous experiences.

I've become a citizen. I will suffer the citizen's fate. I will fade into the forgotten with the rest of them. Right now they are taking care of me like a loved one. Kindness abounds. But the sheets are rough and the bed is small. And I can feel myself torn apart by who I am and what I have done, that my life has been torn apart, that I have been invaded. Seventy-seven, I'm seventy-seven. Who did I plan to grow up to be? I definitely got there. I know it. Isn't that remarkable? Maybe I have low standards. Everybody compromises to get the best reality day by day, and they have done a pretty good job. And right in front of me are people whose lives could fill libraries; beings I met by chance who I made compromises with for a large part of my life. But more, they are willing to be with me during my deathwatch when I am compromised. Of course, I will have to do the same for them, which is an inconvenience—more than that, a promise of terrible suffering.

It's over ten years we've been divorced, but she's my neighbor, Celeste. We can't take back, yet we must live in the building. She is too pale and thin. We used to go camping. I remember when she discovered the spirit of a redwood tree on her way back from the bathroom. She had her

arms wrapped around it. Her beautiful face was radiant. “I can feel it! It’s alive, John!” Now it’s all changed. We’re old—we’ve ended up somewhere after the “ever after.”

David Lane, and Noola Abby, old punk and old hippie. Laura Seabolt, a neighbor from Minnes-oh-ta, who gave me an Eastern Orthodox holy medal. Jim O’Conner, an American/Irish actor. A brother in the blood. He took me to a Giant’s baseball game just before my operation. We met two women friends of his. God, I laughed. It makes me tear up to remember how much fun people can create with one another. Jim has the habit of bringing life in on his shirttails. And of course, Elizabeth. She is always there for me. She is a professional stage manager. She is efficiency itself. Her birthday gift is a medicine schedule and procedure list. She has become my guardian angel.

Right now there are neighbors in my studio, cleaning and fixing things. It’s a building-wide endeavor. The office emailed everybody. They worked out people to shop for me or take me places. I got a lock on my door with a code so that people can have access if I am unable to get out of my room. It’s hard to handle this much caring. I can’t stand it, I have a family. I have been playing a plywood violin. But I am grateful. I’d as much for them, I hope. It is a part of being in a community. It’s not easy, but I’m thinking maybe it’s as hard for them as it is for me.

Now it is Saturday, October 7, the day after my birthday and I’m experiencing one of those “kind of” days, the ones that fly through invisibly and surprise you by making you older without knowing it. It is proof that I have a good chance of surviving. The true treasure of life is being able to take it for granted, and Saturday is such a day until the evening. The guy with the Mustang from Modesto gets picked up by his wife. She’s funny and smart and caring. I can see that he has more than cars in his life. I envy him. I feel a vacuum when he leaves, not just for him, but for what I don’t have anymore. I’m usually not that way. I don’t look to the past for sustenance.

The hospital is rejecting me. It buzzed the night nurse three times. I didn't do it. The nurse call button is on the remote. Occasionally, I roll on it and it buzzes the nurse. The bed is not big. There is a railing on either side. I am in it for hours a day. The sheets get wrinkled. I'm not touching it but I can hear the buzzing in the nurses' station. The night nurse is coming and he is impatient. He wasn't in a good mood when he first came in. But this is the third time. I can hear his footsteps. I am frantically searching in the bed for the remote. I can't find it. I tell him I can't find it. Then I see it. It's on the table next to the bed. I am mortified. It isn't my fault I tell him. He looks at me skeptically. I can't stand it, the helpless humiliation. I'm tired in that hospital way. I am becoming a parasite and the hospital is rejecting me. I'm ready to leave. When I get home I'm going to hide in my room. I'm going to be nice and I'm going to be grateful, but fucking boy oh boy, I'm tired. I don't mind it during the day. Like this afternoon when I gazed out my window at the beautiful houses and I sipped my Pete's coffee and I am alive and this fucking operation is over! But tired, aggressively so. I can only sit up for so long. I have to rest. Three hours this day is more than expected. I had to lie down in that bed. The sheets don't like me. And now I'm in trouble with the nurse and it's not my fault. I am beginning to get cranky and I don't want to get cranky, this is not the place to do it. Now the thing is ringing again. I can hear it out there in the nurses' station. And here he comes, the angry nurse and he can see that I am not touching the call button because in a crank of fury I flung the fucking thing as far as I could. Unfortunately, it is tethered to a cable and wound up dangling at the end of the bed.

It is in the middle of the night, and he is having me sit on a chair in the nurses' station while an engineer fixes the bed. It isn't my fault. I'm back in the juvenile home being shamed. I'm sitting there for an hour. It feels like a stabbing. Johnny-coated, squiggly white-bearded old fart. Although I'm curious, I can't look at the nurses for fear of them looking at me and so I feel them looking at

me. The red stripe running down my chest like a brand. It is then that I know I will weed my companions. The nurse says the alarm is fixed. But it still goes on. He unplugs it and it stops.

She is close to me. We are leaning against a wall. It's a hallway. There are others moving through. It's a party. She is looking away. My face is near her head. I can almost feel the tickle of her hair. It has been so long since I had this desire. I can sense her sensing me. It's like we are pausing together. If she turns her face toward mine I don't know what I will do—I am far too old for her. She'll find out when she looks at me. She is turning her face to mine. I feel a blossom of heat. Her eyes have found mine and are looking in. Mortal eyes with searchlights. I am just beginning to slide through her eyes and she through mine. I am troubled that I can't get closer to her although we are almost touching. She is troubled by it too. She is lifting her face to mine. I had forgotten that other side of the human face. "Will this happen?" ask our skins. "Yes." Then, the dampness of her. Her mouth. The incense of her nostrils. The warmth of her blood. That melting and biting. I want her so much! I want to climb inside of her. I want to give her my bones so she can wear me like a kachina doll. I am cradling her head while I kiss her. "Oh, sweet dear one, oh sweet ..."

She is gone. She has drifted away, the way people drift away, leaving you yearning and anxious, lonely and empty. They will drift away even though you cannot help but love them. They always drift away, leaving you with memories. I don't want that anymore! I'm past all of that! And then I wake up. My god, it was only a nightmare.

"I was an ICU nurse for three years. It was too much, especially the young people who die in accidents. Motorcycles. You get callous. I didn't want to become callous. I love the heart. So now I specialize in nursing heart patients. It's Sunday, John and the doctors are all out. Let's go

and watch the Blue Angels. You know where the southeast door is? Come on, the sunshine will do you good. I'll tell the others. When the cats are away, the mice will play."

Matt takes off with his bounding ostrich-gait, his accustomed speed as a ward nurse. It tickles me the way he says "out." Like Frank, he's Canadian. He's a good guy. Slightly tall. thirty-five. Tousled brown hair and brown eyes. He's open. I think that comes with loving your work.

It is Sunday, October 8.

Tomorrow I'm going to get out, I'm sure. I can feel it. And right now I'm going to get out of this goddamned bed and get some sunlight and San Francisco air.

Vietnam vets in hospital gowns—eggshell blue, eggshell yellow, eggshell white with green specks and a gray jacket—drag their IV stands onto the roof under the naked sky. About eight of them. All my age or slightly younger. Most with old-man-white-beards like me. All with that the hospital blighted skin. I have not been outside since that 5:30 a.m. entrance to the pre-op room, ancient now and terrifying and mitigated by gratitude—that it is over, that I survived it. Do these heart guys feel like I do? I can't tell. The sky is so bright and the air sometimes feels like a razor-blade grazing my sensitive skin.

Two F-16s burrow tunnels in the air, then twine overtones through a mile-long straw. It is a slow-motion explosion. Edge-knife Vietnam veterans persevere: they blink their old soldier eyes. One mutters, "That sounds familiar." Another nods and pulls on the bill of a U.S. Navy baseball cap. There are middle-aged children with grandchildren. This is a hospital, and they are visitors. I keep forgetting that. This is the place I woke up in. Is there another place? Shit, tomorrow, tomorrow Frank will come and pick me up and I will go "home." I will be with my chair, my table, my monitor, my computer, my keyboard. I will have curtains on my windows so I can close the world out and be by myself. My studio will be clean. I am not nearly as frail as I thought I would be. Again, an explosion as a Blue Angel stabs a hole in the sky.

A man in his sixties approaches me. He looks at my incision and asks “Bypass?” I answer, “Yes.” “Ryan?” he asks. “Yes,” I answer. “He is the best,” he says. “Has he operated on you?” I ask. “Yes,” he answers, “he replaced my heart last week.”

For a moment, I am speechless. He has a healthy coloring in his face, even out here in the bleaching sunlight. There is a glow about him that I understand. It is fresh blood in abundance and the joy of survival. I used to think that survival was simply bland endurance. But it is more than that: it is the thrill that comes with escaping a predator. That is what I can see on his face.

“I had a heart transplant.” Of course, I can’t help but think of Cody. “Did you have to wait a long time?” “Five years. I got it by luck. They were running a trial of some kind and asked potential recipients to write an essay about their situations. It wasn’t that I was a great writer or had anything special to say, it was just that my case was of special interest to several of the surgeons, and so a month ago they told me to put aside six months of my life. I said I had been putting aside years and six months more would be no problem. I could choose Stanford or Sutter Health. The cardiology department at Sutter Health was one of the best in the country and especially Dr. Ryan. I got the surgery here a week ago and I’m being released tomorrow.” Just then an X16 flies by and splits the sky open. The man with the new heart doesn’t blink. He looks at me, his eyes full of life and says, “It’s great to be alive.” Wham! A configuration of jets crack through a wall of air, and I shout in exultation. I shake his hand and he shakes mine. “Congratulations!” I yell. “The same to you!” he yells back.

It is the night before I’m leaving. The dark is closing down the windows. Little lights are there beyond the glass. The interior of the ward is taking over. I can see my bearded face reflected in the window and that quirky scar beneath my hospital gown. It’s not swollen, but the pain perseveres, not as intensely, for it has become a part of the scenery. A false move can bring it back

with the ferocity of a rat trapped in a bathroom. That happens approximately every sixty seconds, but that too I quickly recover from. There is no general aching and I have gotten off most of the opioids, which is both surprising and disappointing, for pharmaceutical-grade drugs are the usual compensation for being in the hospital. I do love drugs, but the constipation is intolerable. I have been blocked up for a number of days now. A nurse offered to give me a suppository. No, I don't think so. The nurses are probably as charming as the ones I wrote about in *Stroke*, but time and acclimatization create a certain pernicious entropy that can subvert memory. I am not as convinced of the truth of my subjective perceptions as I was when I was younger, say, in my sixties. There is that tipping point as each year nears the expiration date. Perhaps as the "end" approaches, the sonar echoes through the mind with, as de Chirico says, a certain nostalgia of the infinite. One becomes more transparent.

I'm going to walk the evening halls one more time. It is wonderful to get up. It hurts, but it is honestly *wonder-ful* to have come supine from the carving board to standing upright and walking, yes, walking like any other person. How quickly the body heals. How impressive medical science. How splendid the staff! I hope they can see my gratitude. I have thanked everyone I encountered. Now, as I walk the halls, I can see the blue-smocked angels going about the business of keeping people alive. There is a warmth about the halls that I haven't experienced before. Perhaps it is because I'm leaving in the morning. It feels like those times when I went camping with Celeste in those National Forest campgrounds. The sterile walls frame the warmly lighted rooms like nativity scenes.

There is a large family crowded into a single room. I can barely see the patient for the family. Two children are sitting next to his head and a little girl is resting a hand on his arm. The man is in his fifties, and I think his wife is sitting on the other side of the bed. She is watching the others with a collective gaze. Two young men are standing just outside the door. One is glancing

at me. I can hear other people inside the room. They are speaking Spanish. They are laughing. The man is laughing. The children are smiling, taking in the warmth and affection. I think that's how they learn to be a family. Usually, I don't like families but I like this one, probably because I don't understand what they're saying; but more than that, they seem to be working as a single organism. I think about my old-man image dragging the IV stand and the humble status of elderly patienthood. Inadvertently, I see my reflection in a window: how pathetic I look, and I move on. There is a large Asian family on the other side of the nurses' station. They are not spilling out of the room although there are as many. They are more subdued but quickly notice me and close the door of their eyes. Still, I linger longer than I am allotted and they look away, attending to the matriarch in the bed. I keep forgetting that this place is a cardio ward, that is, for hospitalized hearts so nothing is lightweight. But everyone seems fine. In a cozy corner of the room, the husband with the new heart and his wife are sitting close to each other examining a roadmap. They are smiling as if they had a new child. They look up at me and wave. I wave back. I remember that he said they are leaving tomorrow. I can't help but smile. We are "blood" brothers. I wonder if I look as high as he does. I am walking now with an ease I would have found impossible to conceive of only two days ago.

I feel high. I can't wait to be alone with it in my room. Right now things are too busy to savor the full extent of the pleasure. Is it the fact that I am getting more blood? Or is it a renewed experience of the life force? Sometimes it feels like a subtle slow continuous orgasm. I feel like I do when I'm in the mountains just below the timberline.

There are rooms in other halls, ones with sleeping people and vigilant nurses keeping watch over the ancestors. It is an ice-cold place, a forever darkness that I don't want to think about. It clouds the blood and tasks me out of freedom with fearsome interrogatives. I will go there someday

but not today, not today. I want to get back to my little room at the end of the corridor. Perhaps I won't have any unexpected roommates on this, my last night.

Although the pain has exponentially subsided it is not possible to sleep any way else than on my back. Sometimes, if I doze off with the bed tilted, I find that I have slid down and can't push myself up because the pain is too much so I have to ask someone to flatten the bed and help pull me up. I don't want to bother the nurses' station, especially after the alarm fiasco the night before. I'm thinking this because a light has been turned on in my room. Someone with men's aftershave is preparing the bed next to me. I think it might be Old Spice but I can't smell the nutmeg, cinnamon, and musk that I loved so when I was a kid. Since the operation, anything flowery smells like gasoline. It doesn't "smell," it reeks. I thought people who were sensitive to perfume were entitled whiny finicky fuckers, but now I understand what it is like for them. He has poured the aftershave on. I can tell that he's a male by the way he is huffing as he fixes the sheets. Actually, there is someone else with him and they are moving quickly like they are preparing for something. Now I'm smelling something else. Burning. It smells like someone has brought some burnt muffins onto the ward. Perhaps they are going to give them out to the patients as treats. I am doing hospital sleep, which is always half hallucination because you never really go to sleep in a hospital, except via coma, it seems. Maybe it's burnt toast with an undertone of campfire, but it's not as bad as the aftershave.

Fuck, I have slid down the bed and I'm scrunched up. I push my feet against the railing at the foot of the bed but my trunk is stuck. I try to push harder but the pain is pushing back and I am no match for it. I am going to have to ask the perfumed man for help. I know he is busy and I don't want to bother him. I can't seem to breathe. Maybe it's all in my head. I'm sure my blood pressure

is rising. Perhaps if I make my blood pressure high enough an alarm will ring and the man will come over and check me.

“Are you okay?” he asks in a drawl.

It’s not a drawl, it’s sharper and quicker than the Deep South.

“I’m kinda scrunched down here, could you help me up?”

“Sure ’nuff,” he says and as he comes to my side of the room, the fumes come with him.

“Okay, pull yer legs up,” he is saying and as he bends close to me, my eyes begin to sting.

I gulp a breath down and hold it because I’m tearing up and I don’t want to tell him that I am choking on his aftershave. He puts his arm beneath my head and on the side of my left shoulder, then slips his arm around my left arm. He’s kissing distance.

“Okay, lift up yer buttocks,” he whispers in my ear.

I lift them up. I’m almost out of breath.

“Now push yer heels in the mattress, and ah’m gonna count ta three and then we’re gonna scooch. Okay?”

I nod my head but that isn’t enough for him.

“You understand?”

I can’t hold my breath any longer. “Yes!” I gasp through my mouth.

It is a crazy sound something like a kazoo.

“One, two, three, scooch!”

I scooch through the searing pain an inch up the bed. It’s not enough. I gasp again and grab at the air and hold my breath.

“Okay, let’s scooch again. One, two, three.”

He yanks me up like a sack of potatoes and drops me on the bed like a cartel captive in a car trunk. He doesn’t act like the other nurses in the CCU. I would cry out for the pain, but his

fumes overcome me. Mercifully he moves his body from my vicinity. The fumes have turned sour due to his exertion. They are fetid and noxious. I don't want to offend him, I dare not offend him. I pull the edge of the sheet over my nose and mouth.

"Ah'm Ted. Ah'm a temporary nurse. This place is gonna get packed, that's a big fahr up north."

"You say there's a what?"

"Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino, wald-fahrs."

"Wildfires?" I ask through the sheet.

"Ya'll okay?" he asks. He's kind of chubby and he's sweating.

"Oh, yeah, just a little allergic," I say.

"Oh, yeah, let me get a mask."

A wind is blowing fire down from the northeast. Hospitals are closing and sending patients to the Bay Area, to this very hospital. Outside in the nurses' station, masks are breaking out. Ted has given me one. There is a hustling of preparation. Several new blue smocks appear. It is impressive. Then, just as abruptly, things slow down as the ward waits for the hordes of evacuated patients.

I turn on the TV.

"... More than fourteen major fires are burning across eight counties, forcing at least twenty thousand people to evacuate. The biggest fires are burning in the Napa wine country. Hot and dry weather, high winds, and low resources are complicating firefighting efforts ..."

The Atlas Fire, the Nuns Fire, the Tubbs and the River Valley Complex, ten thousand firefighters, one thousand engines. It's already mythical. What caused the simultaneous fires is unknown, according to Napa County Fire Chief Barry Biermann "This fire is moving extremely

quickly. It is very dynamic,” he adds. “This is a once-in-a-lifetime fire. No containment.” A young reporter half shrieks, “I can hear higher explosions, the gun shop is burning ... it is leaping the road right now and creeping into a trailer park.” She’s covering her face. Behind her, a banner of fire fastens itself to houses and cars amid the roar and tinkle of ash. “Can hear the gas lines spewing gas ... horses caught in the fire ...”

The hospital is filling up with staff.

Sleep. I snatch a little sleep. I wake up. Maybe it is a couple of hours later. I’m not sure. Everyone is busy. But there is no sense to it. There is a certain collective meander about their movements. Everything the medical staff does should follow a basic choreography. Every movement should, in the end, have a purpose and be a part of the ultimate design. Each cause and effect should have a designated number of actions for the right statistical effect. I am in the “in-between.” Situations where bridges are being constructed right under my feet. It happens all the time. Reality is constantly repairing its roads. The subject of the conversation shifts. A party builds and falls. An unexpected event occurs. Cause and effect grow like mycelia, and countless bridges are built to accommodate the shifting perceptions. Things have to have time to happen.

Sutter Hospital in Santa Rosa has to evacuate its patients and hospital workers; the same with the 130 patients from Kaiser Permanente and Queen of the Valley Medical Center in Napa. There must be highways full of ambulances with their red flashing lights and their sirens cutting across the vineyards and grasslands of Sonoma County. But they haven’t yet arrived. The size of the catastrophe belies the drawn-out quality of the atmosphere. The in-between is when effects have not yet caught up with their causes. Actually, they have, as exhibited by the meander of staff members waiting for hours into the night in their surgical masks. I have a surgical mask but I put it on and take it off. My face gets sweaty. I can smell the smoke: dogwood, black oak, sumac,

manzanita, sage, and sugar bush, as well as the flammable non-native grasses that paint the hills golden. There is the sweet smell of campfire and the plastic smell of burning towns. But maybe that's in my mind and colored by the frantic television coverage. I think, with a satisfied smirk, that people who encroach on nature have to suffer the consequences. Houses and people crying, the ravaged look of the dispossessed temper my smug petty mother-fucking self, my heart-patient, hospitalized self.

But honestly, honestly, I don't want to share my room. I want to rest and be alone. How terrible is that? Perhaps it isn't so bad and unnatural. It's not that I'm selfish, yada yada. I am tribulated, that's the bare fact of it. The fact is that I have slipped down in my bed and I am scrunched up and will have to have someone pull me up. I'm trying to do it with my feet, but I'm just stopped. The chest hurts now like a sore, like something made out of meat. I have been coughing and pillow squeezing and have subsequently developed a certain amount of pain tolerance, but not enough yet to overcome the hospital-bed body stop. I can't push past it alone.

He is coming. He doesn't have anything else to do except wait, but still he seems a bit miffed at me for bothering him in an emergency situation. People drag moods with them. There is a lag between the "now" and the bridge that connects my situation to his. They seem to be socializing more than anything. I have a distinct feeling that I am yesterday's news. He has another nurse or staff member in a green robe. This incision is making me giddy. I am tired. Now I am on the other side of life, I am healing. Now I can go home.

"We're going to have to git him out, we need room. They're coming any time soon now," Ted is saying to the guy in the green robe.

Old Spice and BO asphyxiant and the tossing and the handling of me, my old-man-lessness, my frailty and tossed-up high on the mattress agony and shame and the smell of fire. I yelp but they don't notice, being as they are otherwise involved in shoptalk.

“Hey!” I shout.

They stop and look at me as if they had just discovered I was in the room.

“Does that mean I’ll be released tomorrow?” I ask because I want them to tell me. I know it will happen but I want to make sure. I want to get out of here.

“For sure,” Ted says brightly, “this place is going to be a circus.”

He and the green-robed companion leave and resume their places at the nurses’ station.

Bric-a-brac time. Shit. This is the ugly side of the experience, the bottom side under the shiny side. The Pooper. Hospital-in-the-middle-of-the-night time. I don’t want to wake up but I need sleep. I don’t want to look at the clock: 2:43 a.m. Too many hours to wait for the light. Don’t move lest you slip down. You don’t want to bother Ted. Soon enough, there will be a glow and it will be irrevocable and although I won’t be able to hear them, there will be birds singing just the other side of these windows, and then Frank will come and we’ll go home like we did last June, but this time I won’t be waiting for an operation.

My wall is ripped away and two lumbering green-gowned men wrestle with the bed next to me. One bumps into me. There must be some kind of emergency! Now he bumps me again. I’m considering voicing a complaint when they turn off the light and leave the room. The bed is freshly made. It is ready for a friend.

I’m going back ... not tomorrow, today, for I can see the light groaning awake behind the window. I have a future. It’s painful to feel it. I had given up on the future. Later today, I am leaving this hospital. This is the other end of that 5:30 a.m. entry to Sutter Health.

Monday, October 9

Orange dawn fills the window of my last day. Fire sky, smoke sky, fine cinders mixing with passing clouds, warm and still as if the weather had caught its breath. Still no hordes of evacuees.

Frank is here with his blue eyes and his blue baseball cap. It's just after breakfast. I'm sitting up in my bed, and the amber light is shining cheerily on me like a stage light. It is just too eerie. He notices the light.

"Does it smell smoky?"

He sticks a hand in it. It looks thick as honey.

"Oh yes."

There is the flurry of nurses and assistants that precedes the entry of the doctors as they make their rounds. There is something avian about the spectacle, the energy they exude as they pass through the ward in their white coats. Are they hatched from eggs? Everything is happening at once. Reality unpacks itself. It has come to the "at last."

Frank sits at the table next to the window.

Dr. Ryan is at the door. The orange sky has yellowed, and his face looks gilded.

He steps into my side of the room and reintroduces himself to Frank. Nancy, Dr. Ryan's physician's assistant is standing behind him. What a peculiar graduation ceremony.

"Well, here we are John," says Dr. Ryan.

I can feel this coming to an end. We people like to see reality that way, with beginnings, arcs, and endings, because we are mortal and come to an end.

Nancy hands Dr. Ryan an iPad with my statistics on it.

"Everything's looking good, couldn't look better. You got out of the ICU in record time. May I?"

I open my gown and let him look at my, or should I say, *his* incision.

"Healing's going perfectly," he says as he sits back and I close my gown.

I feel like a mother. Isn't that funny? I want to giggle.

“You have a great attitude and you’re in good physical condition. Eat right, sleep enough, and exercise. That’s all you need to do.”

Things end. They run out of whatever it is that makes them what they were in the first place. What is that? What is the substance of “me”? And here I am, I’m going to be released.

“What do I do now?” I ask.

Doctor Ryan spreads his arms. “Live!” he exclaims.

I look at his face and I think this man held my heart in his hands. Obviously, I’m still in surgeon love.

And indeed, this is an ending. Dr. Ryan is shaking my hand. It was just a week ago, merely a week ago that my heart was full of clogged arteries. What do they do with the old arteries after they’ve been replaced by the saphenous veins of my leg? Do they leave them there to shrink up or do they tear them out and dump them in a bowl and to be later incinerated?

Dr. Ryan’s grip is firm and gentle, a perfect Tai Chi hand. Yes, even though there are only people and people are nothing special, still I can mystify some.

“Thank you, Doctor Ryan.”

“You’re more than welcome, John. Nancy will set up our next meeting. You are now officially released.”

Here is the plastic bag the hospital gave me for my possessions when I first came. I remember putting them in that bag as if I were consigning them to a trustee. They’d probably give the bag to Elizabeth if I had gone down for the count. Weird but not for a Northern California resident, for we leave our families and adopt new ones (or are supposed to), but I am getting dated. This city has been a good place for me because it is somewhere and nowhere at once. It’s pretty and I think it is filled with blowing pockets of God. I found that the first days I lived here back in

1974 when I was thirty-four. It was an echo and a lash, it burned through the blue air like a song, it tasted of Pouilly-Fuissé and fog rolling down the hills.

The plastic bag smells of stale clothing, heart-attack man's sweat, of a sad old air. It feels depressed, and I want to scrub it. I am going home. I never thought of it, ever; no way I was going to declare a place on this planet my home. Home is where I would allow myself to die. And not by accident, by choice. Here it is, San Francisco. I have to defer to my body for this information, my body knows. I don't need to leave anymore. Freaky? Yes, and with every freaky I make familiar, I lose a bit of who I think I am. Porous. What lies in the future? The dead remain silent. Have they forgotten? I have gone there and come back, I will go back again to a forgetfulness profound as forever. For now, I'm leaving. I'm leaving the hospital after triple bypass surgery. I swear I can feel sweet new blood coursing through me. I'm going to get in a Lyft with Frank just as I did last June and I'll carry on. I'm realizing with pleasure that Frank and I are somewhat conservative that way. We always eat at the same table in the same Vietnamese restaurant on a Monday of every month.

AFTERLIFE

Saturday, July 14, 2019

"You only go around once in life, but if you do it right, once is enough."

Dagwood Bumstead

1*

I am on my way to Trader Joe's when my iPhone makes a noise inside the right pocket of my coat. I'm afraid of putting the phone in an outside pocket because I don't want it to fall on the street. I wrangle my e-bike to a stop just beyond the bus zone. By the time I get the iPhone from my pocket to my ear I hear, "... reschedule an appointment..." the phone almost slips from my

hands, I catch it and when I get it to my ear again the voice is saying, "... seventy-five dollars for a missed appointment." Then it hangs up.

Traffic is in a mean mood. I feel frail maneuvering my big electric bike and a Muni bus huffing and hissing not two yards from my back tire.

Seventy-five dollars? That's a lot of money. Who left me that message? The iPhone is too small and my magnifiers are in my pack and the Muni bus is pulling around me gruffly. I'll have to wait until I get to Trader Joe's. I do, and I check for a record of the call but there isn't any. That is impossible, isn't it? I'll have to wait to get home to my computer to ferret it out. I'll shop and get back to my studio safe and sane and sound. I'm sure that Bay West Family Healthcare is the source of the call and the seventy-five bucks is a little steep. It irritates me. It's like Bay West had intentionally stuck a thorn in my phone.

It turns out that it is Bay West. The operator makes it clear, that yes, I will have to pay seventy-five dollars if I miss an appointment and that, in fact, the nurse practitioner has canceled my appointment, so I need to make a new appointment. She notes that I can get an appointment this very afternoon at 4 p.m. But if I miss it, I will be charged the seventy-five dollars. I take the appointment.

I don't like going to Bay West Family Health Care. A year and a half ago I was late for an appointment at Bay West Family Health Care. I hate being late. A year and a half ago I called that receptionist and told her that I was going to be a little late and instead of saying that perhaps I should get another appointment, she said, "You'd better hurry up then." "I'm seventy-seven years old!" I told her. "I don't have a car. I only have a bike." Then she spat these words at me, "Well, you better peddle fast," then she hung up. By the time I got to Bay West, I was soaked with sweat. I must have looked like a pasty old hysterical white guy in a bicycle helmet. I told that receptionist that she should be ashamed, that she should not treat people like that, especially people who are in

distress. She undressed my rage with a look that said, *raise your voice just a little bit more and see what happens*. Instead, she said, “You’re late. Take a seat.” All of the people in the room watched me. A woman in blue scrubs called my name. It hurt to hear it said out loud. When I got to the examination room, I apologized for being late. The woman said, “Were you? Don’t worry, we’re running late too.” That is the appointment that started everything, that is when I learned that I had had a silent heart attack.

So here I am on time, certainly on time, fifteen minutes early, and there she is, a year and a half later, the same receptionist gazing up at me beneath half-hooded eyes. Me, I’m saying in a voice that betrays no ill will, “John O’Keefe, for a 10 a.m. appointment.”

She, somehow making sure I know she remembers me, says, “Take a seat.”

And that is that.

I take a place in a corner. Soon an attendant in a blue smock calls my name and directs me to an examination room.

After a twenty-five-minute wait, Lolly Cohen enters wearing a very round pair of white glasses. Although she is not tall, there is nothing diminutive about her.

“Where is your particulate respirator?” she asks as if I had forgotten to put my pants on.

I don’t know what that is. I figure it might be my mask. There is a huge forest fire going on. One thousand people missing. The smoke is parked in the Bay Area by a low-pressure zone and the air is considered dangerous and yes, I have forgotten my mask in the rush to be on time. Now this “Lolly,” who is big into her persona as the “people’s doctor,” is doing her act. I am going to have to go through her routine. I tell her that I forgot my mask. I ask her if she has such a mask so that I can ride home with one on. She says no as if I should know that hospitals don’t have particulate respirators. I ask her if she has any kind of mask, she says yes but that they won’t help.

With a dismissive wave of the hand, she says, “Never mind. Let’s get on with it. How are you?”

Then begins the process of buttering her up. This kind of healer demands that. The way to receive treatment in a civil manner is to accede to her in every way possible, especially if you want a prescription of alprazolam. I offer obsequies in the form of interrogatives intended to enable her to reveal her knowledge and for me to show my admiration.

“When I bump or scratch myself, blood pools under my skin.”

She says that as we get older the cellulite gets thinner and the blood can be seen beneath the skin. No, there is nothing you can do about it. I know that. I can see it. My skin, thin, mummy skin with blood running just beneath it. I can see it pool when I bump something.

“Yes,” I nod and smile and look her in the eyes. Perhaps I can win her over and make her nice. I want that alprazolam.

“You won’t need a colonoscopy,” she says, looking at my file.

I’m greatly relieved. I read the same thing in an article, but when I mentioned it to the other nurse practitioner last checkup she chided me, “Yes, my mother thought that too, and she died last year of colon cancer.”

I like Nurse Cohen’s prognosis better.

She asks me where I live. When I tell her, she asks me what I do. When I tell her I do theater, she asks me if I know Barry Ronald. I say I do. She asks me if he is still alive. I say he is, that I am friends with him on Facebook and that she can reach him that way too. She says she doesn’t use Facebook because she is a Jew and Trump is collecting data on the Jews from social media and that sooner or later he will round them up.

She says my blood pressure is fine.

“Cohen is like Smith,” I say trying to be a guy in the know.

“That’s right,” she answers.

“I’m a mix, myself, I’m an Irish American mutt,” I say with the prescribed self-loathing of a Bay Aryan.

She asks me if I have done a 23andMe test. I say I have.

She asks me what the results were. I answer no, really, nothing spectacular, Irish, Scots, a little German, a mutt. As she seems to linger on the topic, I ask if she has been tested. She snorts like a veteran from some long lost war and says that she would never do that because of her Jewish genes. They are gathering all of that data, everything.

She starts running down the list of my medications. Ah, this is the time. I have prepared my story. It isn’t a lie, not even an exaggeration. It is, however, a dependency. Being an alcoholic of the AA brand, I have of sense of guilt about taking anything that would dilute my sobriety but actually, I don’t care about my sobriety, I just don’t want to drink. I haven’t touched a drop in eighteen years. I love the right drugs, but the alprazolam doesn’t get me high, it gives me two hours more sleep. I have a hard time passing from consciousness into sleep. I can feel myself dipping into somnus’ swamp and then bobbing up again, like a person who acts coy at his execution. Since the operation, I’ve slept the best I have in years but I usually wake up after two hours. In total six hours sleep.

I can’t stand humiliation, imaginary or otherwise, but I won’t get mad. If I can get home with my prescription and without losing my cool I will have a double victory.

“Have you had a flu shot?”

“Yes, at my Safeway pharmacy.”

“What kind of flu shot did you have?”

“I don’t know.”

“You should know. I’m going to give you a pneumococcal vaccination.”

While she is injecting me, I begin to explain that I would like a prescription of alprazolam from Bay West.

“Have you signed a DNR form?”

“What is that?”

She finishes with her needle and wipes me off. ““Do not resuscitate’ form.”

I still don’t quite know what that means but I have an uncomfortable inkling. I once saw a straw figure in the shape of a human. It was like a human being could fit right inside of it. It was a street faire. I asked what it was and a rather pleasant woman in her sixties with this sweet rosebud face told me it was for natural burial. You could just slip it on and rot. I was newly sixty and it set me into a wee spell of *memento mori*. This DNR has the same whiff.

I tell her that I don’t want to deal with that now.

“Don’t you accept your death?” she asks accusingly.

I tell her I want to think about it at home.

“Well, if you don’t have this order, they will try to revive you even if you are brain dead.

It puts a tremendous economic and physical load on the hospital staff.”

She reaches for a red form from a wall file holder above my head.

I hate the way she is treating me with that familiarity I could easily construe as affection, compassion, confidentiality. I don’t like it, don’t trust it. I would feel less embarrassed had she stuck a finger up my ass.

I remember Paul after the triple bypass in the ICU, the physical therapist in his baseball cap, the incentive spirometer, the sputum and phlegm, his delight at a chance to humiliate me. And the cardiologist, Dr. Kumar with his, “Haven’t you lived long enough?” And now her, this nurse practitioner. You can’t help getting the idea that they enjoy teasing you when you are teetering on the edge, that probably most people do. Do they have any idea how painful it is, how humiliating

to be at the mercy of anybody who comes in the room? Most certainly they do, and some enjoy it. There is a tipping point where there is so much pain and vulnerability that it reeks of a torture chamber and surely the animal in us lurches for the blood and meat. It's all there in the ugly red room all painted white. No, I do not accept my death.

I say something like, "I am a writer and poet and, of course, I constantly consider death." But that isn't it! Didn't I have a triple bypass only a year ago, and an endarterectomy? Hadn't I had to wait three months for my face to become less paralyzed? Had I not felt the chill as the night ate the days away until that morning when they would split my chest open and stop my heart? Why am I not giving her these answers? Have I not, in fact, in spite of all the time and the terror, have I not accepted my death? Oh my god, I haven't. I don't like Nurse Cohen, but I pretend to like her the way I do when someone has busted my bluster.

"Since you have atherosclerotic heart disease, I want you to have a lipid panel, a CMP, CBC, and a hemoglobin test. You'll have to fast for that."

Jesus, I know I had that lipid test! Doesn't she have a record of it?"

And then, almost as an aside, she says, "Here is a prescription for xanax and a refill."

I've kept my cool. I've worked hard on that, but I do call her "kiddo." I know that will irk her: I say, "You've been a charmer, see you next time, kiddo." I do not sign the DNR form nor do I take one home.

Is it a coincidence, my annual health checkup? Lolly Cohen? The DNR form? Does it mean anything? Is it something I'm not confronting? The Woo Woo Gang would think so. They would say that it is not coincidence but synchronicity. Synchronicity: when something I need comes flying through the window of chance. I don't know, I can't quite believe in it. It's like Santa Claus. Problem is, I don't like the balderdash people either, those women and men who pride themselves on being skeptical. I don't mind the "skeptical" part, I don't like that they base their doubt on logic

and evidence. When people focus on logic to the exclusion of other functions, it is a sure sign that they are prone to illogic and, by default, erect logic as a hysterical defense mechanism. As far as “evidence” is concerned, well, that implies meaning and we have no real evidence that meaning exists. Meaning is *survival*. Meaning means *WTF, I’m still here!* It’s not the lack of logic that bothers me about the Woo Woo Gang, it’s the easy wish-fulfilling answers they latch onto and their childishness in the face of catastrophe. The Logic Types are as constrained by the cataracts of rhyme and reason as the cowardly Make-a-Wishers. Both quell investigation by the sheer bloat of their omnipresence. Bully and victim. The callus of worn-out experience.

I am unlocking my bike, the regular one. Don’t want the electric one to get stolen. I always feel atilt after a medical appointment. Being released after a checkup is like getting my passport stamped. I don’t want to leave anything of myself behind in those places. I did in this one: she had caught me, Lolly, the physician’s assistant. The DNR form isn’t sticking in my pocket but it’s in my brain. I’m afraid that it will be waiting for me back in my studio, in my home. My home is the tenuous “me.” I cannot let just anyone in but I have. It is true, I have lived my life, I’ve taken my turn and now it’s time to take responsibility for my cadaver.

Here I am, thinking about this while I’m riding my bike. I could get myself killed. What is so fucking frightening about death? I think it’s the “forever” part.

I remember my first forever. I was in Saint Vincent’s orphanage. I was pondering what Sister Cecilia had told me about my mansion in heaven, and the flowers waiting for methere, and that for every prayer I said another flower would grow. When I died, I would go to heaven and I would see all of my flowers. How long would I be in heaven? “Forever,” she had said, and an ecstasy of terror went through my five-year-old body. Why is forever terrifying? I’m stuck either way. I could be dead forever or alive forever. I could read the New York Times with Woody Allen

forever. That would be fun for a while, but not forever. It's really "forever" that shatters me and takes me to a place beyond fear. I can put it off only so long.

What does that mean, "put it off"? Put what off?

Being and Nothingness was my second forever. I read Sartre at eighteen. Not an easy feat in 1958-Bible-Belt-Marshalltown-Iowa. He loaded an ontological pistol and laid it on my lap.

Now I'm turning left, passing that crazy 27 Muni bus shelter that faces the wrong way. When I try to find it, I get lost. I have a bad sense of direction.

The first forever came with innocence, the second, reading, the third, reality: my marriage. My first wife, Alice. Poor Alice and her Frankenstein husband ... She's twenty-three, I'm twenty-five. It's 1965. Going to be married to me for the rest of her life. Did she bargain for that? I hadn't. I thought that getting married was the beginning of life, not the end of it. Six years later, it was the end of it, the marriage, but not the regret it spawned, which has hung around my neck for forty-seven years like a cadaverous amulet.

Here I am, already going down 26th Street.

What is wrong with me? I am a child. Everybody has to die. I don't care, I am with Woody. Getting up to a fresh cup of coffee every morning forever is fine with me. How terrifying and tedious they were, those awful months before my bypass, talking about a living will and wondering what I had that was of any value except me and since I was losing that, what was there to leave? If there is no me, there is no they, there is no world. I guess I'm with Ayn Rand on that.

I like the fascinating hum of consciousness, the feeling of awareness. I like its inevitable stillness. I like the way it makes me see things as they pass through it. Sand through the hourglass, granules of light, fat rich hemocytes, the junctions between nerve cells, all pitter-pattering down the little Amsterdam streets of my ganglia to the Red Light District of my libido. That's what I like. I love to hallucinate. I love to speak gibberish. And, oh, yes, I like it with a future. There's

always a now, and then a now and another one, doled out by fate like a blind card dealer, *Nows* are like wicks. How big is the charge, how long is the wick? I am seventy-eight, *Now*. What do I expect? Still, I'm disturbed; I fear I've chased a ghost into my room and it will be waiting there when I get home.

I am on my way home. I am on my bike. I'm done. I got my xanax and a refill. Still, there is that slip for the blood work. I would have to fast eight hours before. No coffee. I'd have to wait for the results after the test. Perhaps my veins are collecting plaque even now on my way home in spite of my dieting and pills and exercise. I'm sure I had blood work done less than a year ago.

Is Lolly Cohen—with her urgent personality, her big white round glasses, her white smock replete with stethoscope and DNR form—a synchronicity? Is Lolly Cohen Hecate, the woman at the threshold telling me that if I want to complete my life I have to come to terms with my death?

The trees of 21st and Shotwell have scattered their leaves, the two-story Victorians with their porches and quaint chairs and the stocks of dead flowers and the clean empty windows could just as well be in New England as in the Lower Mission. I love this patch of street. I feel like a ghost pedaling through a pre-Raphaelite fantasy. I feel haunted.

All of these medical issues may be disguising a hive of synchronicities. The obvious causes may not be the actual causes; the actual causes may be subtly hidden in the obvious: I am in a clinic, the clinic is in the hospital, in the hospital is the same cardiology department that worked on my heart. But you see this is not really about my heart (the physical one) but about a change I need in order to complete my life, even if it is the last thought before I cease to exist. Oh, these adolescent musings. They seem to accelerate when I'm riding a bike.

Here I am, between what's left of the original storefronts, defunct garages, carpenter gothic Vickies, refurbished factories, and the new five-story Lego apartment/office buildings that mark my neighborhood. Much of San Francisco is prettier far away than close up. I hope I don't see

anyone. I am opening the electronic gate. I'm riding in on my bicycle, a rather grandiose presentation but why should only the gas-guzzlers get the remotes?

I am riding through the center parking lot; thirty-three windows surround me on three sides, big square windows, sixteen panes apiece. I know, I've counted them from my loft. I am well aware that I might be under scrutiny just as I have scrutinized others. It is early afternoon, everybody's either working in their studios or at their jobs. Project Artaud is unusually private for a building that covers an entire block, is three stories high, and has at least eighty residents. I don't know, god damn it, I feel blessed. I don't give a shit: I, an outlier, an alien, with little or no income, was voted into this building thirty years ago by a group of artists, most of whom I hardly knew. Every year I live, the subtle staggering consequences of that decision grow larger.

I'm riding up to the door. It's hard to get the door open in the tight space surrounded by houseplants and potted trees the gossiping neighbors have planted to decorate what would otherwise be barren asphalt. I hope they don't open their door. I fidget the lock open. No one in the hall. It's a long, well-lit hall half the length of a block, busy with studios, the back doors of a ninety-nine-seat theater and a fine arts printing press. I am confronted by the gray metal landing doors of the freight elevator. I am glancing around, I don't want to see anyone right now, I don't know if I have enough skin.

Push the button; it lights up. Something kicks in from on high, then a long purring crescendo of cable, counterweight, and cab as the elevator descends, old and obedient. It has been in the building in one form or another for over forty years. It once was more hands-on but now is automated. Behind the big metal landing doors, the car wheezes to a stop. There is a clunking sound as if the elevator is gulping then the landing doors spread, followed closely by the purr and soft grumble of the cab as it stops and opens its gates.

They clank into place. I roll my bike in.

One—two—three buttons on the silver panel for the floors. Push three. Wait, one ... two ... three ... then a little polyphonic ditty as the doors close and the eighteen beeps begin and the elevator ascends. Inside: the conveyance permit, blue, green and black recycle signs with pictures of various forms of debris, a placard: *Do You Know How to Get Rid of Your Used Art Supplies?* explaining the nature of toxic chemicals and a hazard protocol. There is an announcement that *Your Building Has a New Green Cart for Scraps and Soiled Paper*. There is something about compost. Then the funny fading bellhop someone painted in the early days on the counterweight as it rolls down and I go up.

I moved into Project Artaud in 1989; it's 2018, so that's almost thirty years I have shared a wall with the elevator. Thirty years multiplied by 365 days equals 10,950 times this elevator has gone up my shaft. It probably averages five times more than that so 54,750 might be a low estimate. I can hear it in my studio. They had said it would be one of the detracting points, but I don't notice it. I was too grateful at first and then I got used to it; now, I mostly forget about it. It's gotten quieter as the decades have passed.

The elevator stops, the cab doors spread, followed by the metal landing doors. I roll my bike out as the eighteen beeps begin. After eight beeps, the two doors close in concert and the elevator goes silent.

I live in the Switzerland of the third floor, exactly between the two wings: Froggies and Alchemical Rhetoric. There are windows at either end of the hall the length of the building. The hallway lights are always on and cast a gentle wash with the light from the windows. Oil paintings line the length of the hall—big ones: landscapes, portraits, and still lifes; a huge double painting of the World Trade Center cascading into billowing smoke. Above my door, someone has printed "O'Keefe Hall." It was a while ago—a while ago is probably twenty years. I felt complemented

then and now I feel it might become a fateful epitaph. After they find me in my room and cart me away with the other old-timers, they will probably name this part of the doorway O'Keefe Hall.

There used to be a circle of grime around my doorknob from all the years of touching, but I scrubbed it off a couple of years ago. Shit, I don't want to make a big deal of this, but this deadbolt lock and this heavy door between me and the outside is a big deal, especially now with the country the way it is. And this city, this fabricated techy zoo: to have a place of one's own for any length of time is a literal treasure. Too bad we don't own the property. The Non Profit owns it. We don't have a landlord. Somehow we run it all ourselves. I don't run it. I'm barely in it. I live off the good graces of others. Social Security pays my rent and I help out as much as I can without getting into the politics. It's safe to say that the property has become valuable. We, the biology inside the property are of less value.

What will the smell of the room be like? That's the first thing that hits me. It is an olfactory way of taking the temperature of my age. That "old-man smell," what's going to greet me when I open the door? A sour smell somewhere between rotted fruit and old sweat? I only have a moment to catch the whiff before I incorporate it into the countless days I have spent eating and sweating. I'm delighted that it is not sour this time for I emptied the garbage and just changed the sheets.

I am home in my box of bricks and concrete and glass, three stories up; my desk, a level down on the floor; my kitchen and bed, three steps up like a stage, and a wall divided by four windows of sky, only one of which can be opened. That leaves me down in my pit, my lovely pit, sequestered from every single thing in the universe. The all-seeing eye, my computer, sits on my desktop. Ahhhh.

I push my Jamis bike under the ladder to my loft. Helmet off, cheap deal with a visor I proudly purchased from an Amazon Friday Special. I pull off the Timbuk2 backpack I had carefully researched. It is manufactured in San Francisco and common among the bike-peddling

Hipsters. I thought that, by some sympathetic magic, using it would make me live longer. That was before I had the heart attack.

I pull things from me: the ninety-dollar sunglasses I bought from Sports Basement one night as a declaration of my reality, a fake alligator vintage coin-purse my ex-wife gave me, oh, and, of course, my keys, the ones that include the lock for my Jamis bike, not the ones for the e-bike. I hang those on the bottom hook, which is drilled in the concrete wall for the fire extinguisher. I take off the gray polyester jacket that a man gave me a few days before I was to go into surgery. There is an attractive little logo of Shakespeare on it that represents a theater group he had been associated with. He was honoring me with it and wishing me well. I hang it on the wall next to a row of old coats: a San Francisco Giants jacket I bought on Market Street across from my favorite strip club, an Iowa Hawkeyes Jacket from when I was an artist in residence at the university, a yellow windbreaker for my bike I purchased when I gave up the red VW Camper I bought with my wife in 1969. Cloth memories, plastic ones, barnacles. They scratch the light out of my comfort. They are damp and they will never dry out. I am just seeing that, just now and that I should get rid of them, but I know I won't.

I toss the snap-purse on top of the wooden cigar box on the lower shelf where I keep all of my tchotchkes: a replica of a John Deere tractor I got outside of the Iowa Toledo Juvenile Home, where I spent two years; a cookie jar in the shape of a San Francisco Victorian I purchased at an old bakery that no longer exists; an authentic World War One German bayonet I got at a flea market for myself after writing a play about Laura Riding and Robert Graves; a bamboo flute I bought in 1974 on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, when I was living in my camper; and a bust of Aphrodite I purchased in a Greek store when it got busted while I was shopping. I got a good deal on it: I was living between Manhattan and Artaud. It was in my salad days. There is a fat good-luck Chinese coin bank I stuffed with change fifteen years ago when I was broke. I'm still broke

and I still haven't used it. I have saved up fifteen years of future; what will I do with it now that I have so little left? That dents my contentment a bit. I've probably unconsciously thought these kinds of things every time I entered my room. Wait, I haven't shoved the door tight. I push it carefully so that it will make that certain "click" that announces I am alone, locked in with my things.

I don't like tchotchkes. Why don't I get rid of them? I could do that in a day, or less—throw all of the stuff on my shelves into a big garbage bag. Haul them out to the dumpster. Then the books! Oh, and the files, the papers, the pictures, the snuff of memory—ugly, ugly feeling. Worse than death. Slow-motion death. Looking at photographs. The dead jacking you off. The yawn of the ancestors. That slow glissando. The unexpected smell. The choking. The eyes watering tears as large as agates. Disgusting feeling looking through old things. Hideous. Like a living will or a DNR order.

2*

I've been sneezing lately. I was thinking that it's the onset of a cold, or worse, flu. For a man my age, the flu can be a death sentence. Those people who say age is just a number should check the statistics about age and mortality with regards to the flu. Being old is pretty damn great, but you have to accept certain givens, like the possibility of getting pneumonia, the old man's friend. I might be sneezing because of the electric heater at my feet on the floor. It draws a lot of juice. I can see the desk lamp dim considerably when it kicks in. The heater is old, probably lots of dust in it. Dust? Just yesterday while admiring my studio and gloating with gratitude, I inadvertently noticed dust on the tops of everything, the ledges, the books. The pipes had long black lines of dust (pollen, human hair, textile fibers, human skin cells, and meteorite particles). Perhaps the new air filter I bought because of the huge forest fires is stirring up the freaking dust. "Freaking" because it is like fucking sand in the hourglass. That dust must be twenty years old!

Instead, I use the newer, smaller heater. I like the word studio, not apartment or certainly not room—reminds me of Marx or Dostoyevsky.

Now that I think of it. I simply hadn't expected to be back in my studio. That surprises me, that realization. Does it mean that I hadn't expected to survive? I think so. And that scares me. It's probably changed me. I think it has and it is unraveling now. There is somebody in there, in me. It is bewildering that this amorphous creature could confront death so decisively. He is in me. He is real. And he is turning into skin.

So I'm back in my room again, with my DNR form in the back pocket of my left brain, where it won't leave me alone.

3*

I didn't know it then, but coming home from the bypass was the end of one life and the beginning of another. I died and this is something else. Perhaps it isn't another life but an annex to the one the operation has created. Perhaps this is an illusion that comes with old age, that your life has been lived in a semi-conscious haze of hormones and culture, and that now, at last, in this final stage, you have caught up with yourself. It is a nice way to manufacture meaning, but in my case, meaning is palpable. I remember back at Kirksville State Teachers College. I was a voice major. I was on my way to Saint Louis with a Serbian family when I had a car accident. I wasn't driving, the kid was. He was a basso profundo, the way the Russians like them. He invited me to come join his church choir. They were going to Saint Louis from Kansas City. The road was wet and slippery and the car started swinging after it passed a semi. I remember that pendulum motion as it launched that station wagon across the freeway in a long clumsy arc, the car spinning and the occupants dodging and bucking in its little room, yelling and squeaking. I was as mute as a lock and as frozen. A tilt-a-whirl canyon ditch glide and bloody meat of wet earth but we, all unhurt, climbed out of that car. That breath of air, that first one after I climbed out of that car, that was

consciousness made palpable. You could cut it and spread it on your bread. The breath of life sandwiched with the flesh, the wind blowing over the water. That was the breath that got me here. The surgeons stopped that breath, the original one, the first one, and put me on a machine and stopped the beating of my heart, and started it all back up again. I climbed out of that bed like Lazarus. Fragile. Things haven't landed yet ... ever since they shattered the silence with breath. To paraphrase a medical journal, "The CABG (Coronary Artery Bypass Graft) recipient, stunned by the terror of the insubstantiality of consciousness, often returns to health in a fragile emotional state." We are reborn into that first forever experience, viz., that this doesn't last forever. Some experience it differently. I ate up the chance to oblivate my terrible self and be reborn. It's the same with alcoholism: the chance to reform myself is welcome. My mother went through cycles of reformation. I can understand why she did it, and I outlived her. She died at seventy-three of breast cancer.

4*

Exercise, it's really important. It is the difference between life and death. I hate doing it. I do it best inadvertently and continuously. I walk and pace and run in place. I can't stand the gym. I don't know why. I can't stand swimming. I don't like getting wet. I shower but it as an important act, ceremonial, in fact. But with a bunch of men? For a while, I traveled by bus to the hospital, where the official physical therapy takes place, but it's an hour's trip on Muni, and taking a San Francisco Municipal Bus anywhere can be a freak show. It can also be a sweet experience. Only the poor and insane take it now, and the serving class, and a few tourists and the rear-door street people. I asked one of the staff at the hospital if I might work out on my own. She said that it was fine and that I should walk at least forty-five minutes a day and then up it to sixty minutes. I began the ten-thousand-step exercise plan. I downloaded an app that counted my steps and then later, I bought a knock-off version of a Fitbit. I climb the three flights of stairs at least three times a day.

YouTube supplies walking in place with calisthenics. At first, I used a video from the British Heart Association, then graduated to Leslie Simpson's walk at home, both versions, which amounts to six miles a day. An app collects the data on my exercise and even gives a readout on my pulse. At first, I took my blood pressure several times a day and was delighted to see that it was as low as it had been in recent memory. Of course, I take a number of medicines, lisinopril for blood pressure, baby aspirin to thin the blood, a statin to lower the cholesterol and a half-tab of metoprolol to slow the heart a smidge.

Food is not a big deal for me. I'm just glad to have it. The American Medical Association is vague when it comes to diet. When I asked Dr. Ryan about it, he smiled wryly and said, "People get superstitious about diet. The AMA dances around the subject because there are a lot of corporate interests running "studies," and now something that was good for you is suddenly bad. I use a form of the Mediterranean diet, myself. It's balanced."

He had his assistant set me up with a dietitian. A quite attractive dietitian actually. Elizabeth accompanied me, and we both enjoyed her company. She laid it out pretty clearly: no salt, no sugar, no dairy, no tropical fruit. Easy on everything else. You get used to it. You lose weight. With exercise you get strong.

DIET:

- Oatmeal, walnuts, flax, blueberries, coffee
- No-salt salsa and .03% sodium chips
- No-salt bread
- Eggs in a basket (a hole in a slice of bread with an egg in it)
- Scrambled eggs, black beans, and kale
- Salmon

- Pieces of chicken from Trader Joes and stir fry (with olive oil) cruciferous veggies, tomatoes, mushrooms, onions, snow peas, carrots
- Peanut butter sandwich, peanut butter and banana sandwich, peanut butter and almond butter sandwich, peanut and butter almond butter banana sandwich
- Oh, and almonds
- Stevia
- A break twice a month for a burrito

I don't eat out except with Frank and that is at a Vietnamese place. I hate eating salad, so kale smoothies with berries.

As it breaks down, you discover each part of your body. You connect your taste to your stomach and the stomach talks back. Your tongue and stomach get together, and the size of your feedbag changes. For me, it's not so deep: no salt, no cheese, no sugar. Never was a big deal except for getting fat and shrinking down and getting fat and grabbing skin and all that shit. I'm grabbing less skin now. It isn't a problem anymore. Isn't that strange? It's like not having lightning storms in California or yearning for a companion; what you thought you couldn't do without you can do without. In fact, you can actually forget about it. For me, it was alcohol eighteen years ago and now it is physical love. Is that right? Physical love? I masturbate a lot, but it's for me and my fantasy world. I don't desire skin. Still, isn't that strange? Now it's becoming that way with food. I'm getting lean and more healthy as I deteriorate.

Reality is setting in; it's cramming up the ass of my universe, and I keep hitting my nose against it. Learning bravery and compassion in the face of calcification. I am healed, the primal toad breathes. It is still alive as ever. The primal toad is ageless. It dies, but the roiling chemistry never gets old, bag of skin the shape of a toad. I think perhaps the toad is the alien we've been looking for. It grew out of the slime beneath the twilight and steam.

My feet are killing me. My knees have hogged the pain for forty years. The left knee is the most greedy, but the right knee gets a few of the crumbs. I have limped through the streets of many cities, both here and abroad since the age of twenty-nine. That's when someone landed on my knee during a lunchtime basketball game we branch librarians played every Wednesday. That was 1969.

I noticed my feet after I started using long walks to augment my cardio therapy. I had walked long stints before my surgery. I would usually walk from my home to Castro and 17th St., a two-mile round trip. By the time I reached Castro, I had to sit and rest my feet they hurt so much. But I disregarded them, for as I said, my left knee took precedence over all my worn-out parts. A year later I got a total knee replacement. It was more painful by far than the bypass, and I didn't see results for more than two years, but then the healing gained gradual momentum, and in the last months the healing increased and my left knee was born! I can crouch, even lightly jog. I can shift weight and skim across my concrete floor the way I used to do in the Hawkeye days when I was in my thirties. It was only then that my feet began to take the center ring

I have always been proud of my feet. I thought they were pretty good looking. I don't like most of my body, but I like my feet. I never had much in the way of insurance so I had never gone to a podiatrist. I used my Anthem Blue Cross and made an appointment with one. I was curious to see what he would say about my feet. He X-rayed them. I thought he would come back praising my wonderfully preserved arches and graceful ligaments. He told me that my feet were some of the worst he'd ever seen and that I must have a high pain threshold. He showed me the X-rays. They looked like something out of a concentration camp. The bones, rather than being neat and lined up, were tangled together. The x-rays were painful to look at. I said somewhat rhetorically, "I'm probably too old and the damage too extensive to have an operation." I saw that I had taken the words right out of his mouth. "You have bone spurs, tendonitis, plantar fasciitis, and an old

stress fracture of your right fifth metatarsal. The best I can do is fit you with a pair of insoles. They may help a bit, but you won't be able to walk very far." He took casts of my feet. I would be able to pick up the custom insoles in two weeks.

When I left his office, I felt the way I did when I gave up Siegfried, my red '69 VW Camper. I didn't renew my driver's license after that and opted for a California Identification Card. I worry about that. I worry about adopting the habits of old people too early. I know people who drove into their nineties, but I needed to unburden my life of the care and feeding of a gas-guzzler. I had practiced using my bike for a year before I tearfully sold my old camper. That's ten years ago. It marked the end of a lifetime.

The marriages, the lovers, the apartments and houses, the campsites, the boy I raised for twelve years, my college, what I considered the stuff of life: gone. It hits me even now as I write these words. I'm pulling up stakes. I'm beaching my boat. I'm tightening my belt for the increased poverty that accompanies the aging of a bohemian. It's okay: I'm free. I know too that it marks the end of romantic relationships. I didn't want to think about it at the time, so I kept it on the outskirts of my consciousness where the gun shops and strip clubs are. I probably would have kept driving in the old days but now, and this bears witness to my modern soul, I am riding an electric bike in a new groovy San Francisco along with the Birds, Limes, Jumps, and GoBikes.

6*

I know I will inevitably sign that fucking DNR form, if only to capitulate to the pressures of my progressive environment. You know, "face fucking death, there's nothing afterward, use cremation." The question is how I get to the next place. Is there a place, or does time just run out? I think the latter. Yes, time runs out. How do you die, then? I think you just do. I think, basically you go along for the ride. By signing the DNR form you are cleaning up after yourself, like in a motel room; no, more like an apartment, you don't have linen service in an apartment. However,

in the end, you have a sixty percent chance of dying in a hospital and they have linen service, so life is more like a motel. Or is that an Airbnb?

7*

Is this the phase when “the one thing after the other” starts happening? That the accumulation of medical problems is going to continue indefinitely until I am dead is a hard pill to swallow. Next stop, death. Isn’t that what Nurse Lolly means about “accepting my death”? How do I accept it? I didn’t need to accept it when I was young but now, Mr. O’Keefe, I should accept it like the good nurse says. It isn’t a social thing I can rebel against. No, I can’t go my own way with this one, nor can I hide. I am going to have to really accept it. “Really” as in real. “Accept?” What does that entail? The reality that I am going to die on the sooner edge of later; and that, yes, Ms. Lolly, it is natural and that I had better get over myself. I have to take care of things; in this case, it is about what to do with my corpse and all of the tchotchkes I have accumulated over my entire life. You understand that these tchotchkes are my books, and my amulets, my beauties. Some made of fabric, some of plastic, some are made of iron, and some of wood; all born to the slow incinerator of meaninglessness. Procrastination is over. Everything I thought meaningful has become outdated. The “it only happens once” has almost all happened. That little rug of denial has gotten pulled out from under me. Or I rolled it up. In either case, I know that it is true.

It’s scary, but worse, it’s boring. I’m going to have to make arrangements to clean up after myself. *Literally*. Brings up nasty stuff. Brings up impulses that are deeply selfish and resentful. Stems from the primal rage of waking up, that little big bang in each of us. The necessary escape velocity that brought life out of oblivion is not easily put asunder. It is an angry fight. It is the fight between heaven and hell and the source of the stories of the heavenly battle, of any heavenly battle, of every battle, of every fight. LIFE. Savagery rendered inane by bureaucracy.

What the fuck should I do with the DNR form? Just go get one and sign it. Better yet, google the motherfucker and download it, print it out, and sign it. The only problem, my printer is on the fritz. I can send it on down to Candace in the office, and she'll print it out for me, and we can have a conversation about it. Yikes! She's the kind of person who would sign a DNR form—not one for denial is she. But me, I am drenched in denial, I am the very river. Ah, these furies that pelt my waking life with shit. Facing death is just another piece of shit. Echoes are created by crystallized agony. They shatter in your ears and only the Holy Ghost can calm you, or some other marauder right out of Jesus's mouth. There is no way out of it, but it wasn't anything to begin with. Everybody made it out to be that way but it ain't. Okay? You just keep doing things. That's how it is. You do things until you don't or can't do them anymore.

8*

I have to keep my blood pressure down. I begin to take note of when I become anxious. I use a pain scale hospitals use: 1 to 10. I find that I become fearful at the most unusual times. As a Northern Californian, of course, I have paid attention to the bugs, spiders, beetles, and mites that crawl about my psyche, but this time with the aim of enlisting a counterforce necessary to effect a physiological change. Follow Ariadne's string to the source and expose it to the light of day. Simple ole psychoanalytic hocus-pocus. Chasing the rats in my basement with a broom or a shotgun.

Sometimes, when I tie my shoes I get butterflies. Sometimes, I get so anxious my hands tremble. That is a 5.5 on the anxiety scale. So I do a bit of old 1960s gestalt therapy; I start to tie my shoes and wait to see what happens. I get anxious. It is a strain of anxiety that contains frantic anticipation. It is like a particularly nasty turd from a particularly nasty fruiting body. So I stay in that position, and a memory comes—one I had many times and had forgotten in as many. I am in a detention center. I have been in other ones before, but this is the weirdest. I am probably younger

than ten. I don't remember things much before ten. The walls of this detention center are painted with Disney characters. There are four kids in a room, counting me. Goofy is painted on the wall. So is Mickey Mouse; his head is as big as a garbage can. There is even a cell with pink bars. "Hurry up, your mother's at the door," and this kid pulling on his pants and shirt and trying to tie his shoelaces. "Hurry up! Hurry up!" But the laces are like mouth-hot gum and they keep sticking to his fingers and he keeps forgetting how to do it, how to chase the rabbit through the hole, and running down the stairs with his shoelaces flapping, he hears, "She couldn't wait any longer."

Maybe I am always scared when I tie my shoes because it is the prelude to the door which I will have to open. A doglike impulse is the slivered fear. Outside that door are unaccountable dangers and humiliations. Perhaps I unconsciously push through it. There is a certain pain threshold that you build up when you live with forgotten memories. The experiences are there under the skin but the analgesic of suppression meets them just before the needle goes in and shoots you up with stab-thoughts.

You get used to it. You live. What are you supposed to do? But then, when you begin to take note of the feeling, you realize that there are a lot of feelings like that, and that they come from separate operations, from turning a doorknob or wearing a certain color, or even the weight of a shirt; flying things that clot up the blood work and produce cortisol.

I want to stop it. I want to fucking tie my goddamn shoes without getting the shakes, for Christ's sake! It's a peculiar kind of pain like something ingrown, like a kind of rot that sprouts out of my chest and dangles in the ether. It usually comes in as a small bite, then seeds my consciousness with its liquor, an extract of stifled memories. Little wonder I don't like to go out.

Here I am in my own psych ward with my own guinea pig. Another memory comes. "Hurry up! Dudley's waiting in the car!" And he's tying his shoes. He's spent one of his first overnights with a friend and now he is going to get into Dudley's car and Dudley is drunk and he's going to

get into a crash but he doesn't know that yet because it hasn't happened, however, I know it now because I am an old man crouching in a child's body, trying to tie my shoes. I got permission from my mother to camp in a tent in a neighbor kid's back yard, met his parents and sister, had spaghetti and for dessert, ice cream. My mother came in the middle of the night and dragged me out of the tent, drunk—we both were now drunk, me riding on the back of her intoxication. By dawn, next morning, before the cops found her, we were on a Greyhound to New Orleans. The worst—the very worst—was trying to tie my shoes when I was just about to be driven from a foster home to a juvenile home, where they would lock me up with some hard asses. But first, they would fumigate me and put me in solitary for a week. After that, they would release me into a world of shit. Mr. Ditzler, the professional Boy Scout leader, no shit. He was pure priest even though he was protestant; liked to play with my adolescence. Sent me away after he got a new job someplace else. Wonderful family, Elly and Beanie and Mr. Wienie. It feels as if it is happening, but it isn't. How to turn off the alarm? I have to convince that child lost in time that he doesn't have to get in that car, that Dudley is fucking dead, just like his mother and Mr. Ditzler. He is just like everybody else now.

I have to go back and correct what is missing in my education. I am old. I now have the time. I have always had the time but now, at this age, freed from the sturm and drang of hormones, bringing all of my abandoned children home is my first priority. So I find this kid trying to tie his shoe and I tell him, "You're just like anybody else now, you can go out of your house and you can come back and you don't have to ask anybody's permission, and the chances of you getting hurt are just like anybody else's." That seems to help. I calm down to a 3.5, enough to complete tying my shoes. Thus it goes, the taming of my wild heart.

One of my particular handicaps manifests itself in a kind of geographical dyslexia. Dyslexia isn't the right word. The "dys-"(difficult) is right but the "-lexia" (words) isn't. I am

geographically challenged. I have no sense of direction, I can get lost in a house as easily as I can get lost in a city. What is worse, I don't seem to learn from my experiences. When I get lost, my anxiety is anywhere from a slow boil 4.5 to a near attack at 7.0.

I know in part this has to do with my past too. I moved from place to place and state to state haphazardly on a whim at the beck and call of a drunken crazy woman: Los Angeles, San Diego, New Orleans, Chicago, or Des Moines, anywhere and everywhere, just ahead of the police. I'd been to so many places they all looked like the same place, so I limited my horizon to the next square yard of turf beneath my feet. Be it cement or weeds or mud, it is the same place and I am always lost. In a sense, I have been permanently lost all of my life. I am safest when I am at home. I am safest when I lock the door.

These are the reactions of a frightened child. I suppress them, but they are there. Why did I have a heart attack? Why do I have high blood pressure? It is genetic, dietary, and, of course, psychological. There is terror hidden inside of me, and confusion, fright/flight. That doesn't help my sense of direction. When I get lost, I get furious at myself. I excoriate myself. Inside, I scream at myself like my mother did at that five-year-old boy. What I mean, is that so often the effort of going someplace is not worth the effort. That habit has to change. I am seventy-eight, I don't want to become a shut-in. It is possible even in a building full of people. It is being a shut-in in your brain. If I go out with that kid and come back safely perhaps we can live together here in our home.

Taking the bus is always a big deal for me. I don't know uptown from downtown. Although there are Google maps and algorithms to create bus routes, I seem to always get lost. I have planned to study the bus system by taking buses. I have often thought of writing about it, but honestly, it's too real. It's also tedious, and sometimes it's actually dangerous. And besides, I simply don't want to leave my house. I avoid taking the bus whenever I can. I can't control its speed or where it goes. I have to know the schedule and the route and I have to be on time, and if there are multiple buses

I have to be on time that many more times. I have waited for buses and watched them drive by without stopping. Then there are the amorphous bus-stop markings (sometimes no more than a dirty strip of paint) and the often-shoddy environment of bus stops.

I have been living in the Bay Area since 1972, for crying out loud! I remember when I was around fifty, wondering what I would be like at the ripe old age of seventy. I am almost at the ripe old age of eighty, and my geographical problems have remained the same.

My appointment with the podiatrist to pick up my new insoles would be a perfect foray into the wilderness of physical dimension. I will purposely take a bus. My child will come with me, of course. He always comes with me, and many times I don't notice him, but when I do, it is not always pleasant. Sometimes, his delight lights up this old man's eyes as he reclaims his innocence but sometimes, his fear stifles all life and possibility, not to mention the parade of sketchy characters his distress brings with him. Sometimes, his rage gets him into deep shit. His tantrums are bad enough but little Johnny in an adult body is Johnny the criminal. I have been working on this a long time, and now with my new blood, the craving to parent my abandoned kid is coming afresh. Making a home for him is making a home for me. I will go to my appointment and pick up my new insoles and I will study the nature of my anxiety the way I do with the tying of my shoes. I am going to take the bus on the way to finding myself. If I have to sign that DNR form, I want to find who I'm giving up. I will consciously take my kid along. We'll work together.

I plan my trip to the podiatrist carefully. It takes me an hour. I don't know why, it's not more than a couple of miles away. I don't have to change buses, but the fear comes out of nowhere. It is a grumbling fear. I could mistake it for whining, but it is fear. It comes in the form of trepidation, which causes me to check and double check the results of my search. I send a bus route to my iPhone; I draw it on a Post-it and put it in my jacket pocket; I check the times of departure and arrival over and over. I have to be at least fifteen minutes early. Should I take the Muni 27 or

the 14? The 27 is only a block away, but the stop is farther from Saint Luke's Hospital, heightening the possibility of getting lost. The 14 is three blocks from my studio on one of those amorphous bus stops in the middle of the block. There is no digital display to let me know when the next 14 will come, so I won't know if I missed it. The bus stop for the 27 has a digital display. I'll take the 27.

Oh, dear god, how afraid I am! It comes on. I talk to myself, yes, out loud and as I do, I pick up the necessities for my trip which I placed the night before so that I would only have to take them and leave.

I am already nervous by the time I reach the bus stop. It is about a 3.5. I'm thinking perhaps I confused the arrival time for the 27 with the 14. I hadn't thought of that.

No, I don't think so. I'm sure of it. The 27 stops every 18 minutes while the 14 stops every 31. No, don't think of it like that. Think of when it stops. When does the 14 stop? The whole thought process, anything that has to do with adding up things, is difficult for me. My panic rises concomitantly with my attempt to fix the numbers in my brain. Shame & Anxiety stands before yet another new class of third graders, bites its lower lip and clenches its fists. It cannot concentrate. All of this loaded into a thought process. Frankly, it is simply like being stupid. There is no "like" about it. Now I am going to pace and look down the street for the bus and I will keep doing that every ten seconds or so. I will eventually talk to myself and what I say will not be very nice. First, I will repeat the Serenity Prayer I learned in AA. I do that a number of times, not realizing that it actually exacerbates my anxiety, for it triggers a conditioned response: I always say the Serenity Prayer in times of stress. I am at 4.5. I am just about to say the nasty things to myself when I come to my senses. I am doing this as an experiment. I am not going to say bad things to myself.

I say this aloud, I mutter it under my breath, "I am not going to say bad things to myself." I go through a series of calculations about when the bus will appear at the farthest end of the street

and how long it will take, about five minutes to reach the bus stop. Experimenting is all well and good, but I have an appointment with the podiatrist to keep, and he is fitting me with insoles that might help me walk. Besides, they are way over my budget. Then I start talking to myself. I remember screaming at my poor new wife in the rain in Munich and how her glasses were splattered with drops and I knew she couldn't see out and that she is crying behind them.

Still no 27! 5.5 and climbing.

Then the mollifying, "It's all over. That was 1967, I can't take the sin back, I've tried a thousand times and that image always returns."

Still no 27 and now, I have all but eaten the fifteen spare minutes I had allotted myself. Why hadn't I given myself an hour? "After all, there is nothing important I'm doing with my life anymore." The "old fart and the old fuck," is mixed in there too, so is "worthless."

There it is, the 27! I might make my appointment on time but not early. I get on the bus and look at my iPhone. I can't see anything on it because my eyes are so bad. I am due to have cataract surgery in a few days, and besides, the dang letters are too small. I can't afford data so I can't ask Siri for the phone number of the podiatrist in case I am late. It doesn't matter, I've forgotten the podiatrist's name. I put it on a Post-it. I check my jacket pocket. I left the Post-it on the desk! I thought I had it on my iPhone but I can't see! My GPS is on. I can see the moving dot that represents my phone and realize I am taking the 27 in the wrong direction!

I tell the kid that we are going to get off at the next stop. The problem is that the next stop will take us far away, and our feet can't take it, and so we're going to be late. The bus has just pulled out and is stopped at a stop sign. I have seen people ask bus drivers to let them off when they had missed their stop and I didn't like them for it. People took notice of them. Worst of all, the driver all but denounced them for asking. I have to do something heroic for my kid to respect me. After all, the driver has only just pulled away from the stop. I do, I ask the bus driver if he

might open the door and let me out. He does! I thank him, but not profusely, just naturally like anybody else. And while I am de-boarding I actually stop and ask him where the bus stop in the other direction is. He doesn't get mad, he points to the shelter that marks the bus stop across the street.

My anxiety is at 5.0. I know for sure that I am going to be late. The kid helps me practice what I will tell the receptionist. I will simply tell her that I took the wrong bus and apologize, and that will be that. I can't see my iPhone screen in the bright sunlight so I duck into the shadowy doorway of a nearby bar. A middle-aged man in a denim jacket is eyeing me suspiciously. I don't care, neither does the kid. I feel him standing right next to my knee, looking up at me. I tell him that I can't see anything on this piece of shit iPhone except the dot that represents us, but I know for sure that the 27 will take us there no problem. The kid waits. I wait and it comes!

We take a seat, me and my kid. I tell him, hell, we are a family, the family of everybody on the bus. He seems to like my answer for I go down to 3.5. There is a pretty mother tending to her baby in a pram. It is a striking image. "Like a holy card," I think, a *bonita madre* on the Muni 27. I have to break my stare. Here we are, my kid and I, sitting in the now and going in the right direction. I look at the digital display and see the streets rewind. I know I'm going in the right direction. When I glance at the young mother, I find that she is staring at me. I smile, but with my eyes. I have to break the spell.

I stand up while the bus is rocking. I don't look back to see if she is following me with her eyes; I have to look out for my kid for he is tugging at my hand and is putting me above a 5. I ask the driver where the nearest stop to Saint Luke's hospital is and he answers, "Mission." Still, I wonder if I should get off a stop early just to make sure. I don't want to sit down where I have been before and face Bonita Madre. She might think me a dirty old man. It's not that: I could look

at her and her child all day, especially when she returns my gaze with her own. I feel like we are on two sides of a holy card. Mission is only a couple of stops more.

The announcement, “This is the 27 Bryant, Jackson Street to Mission Street, Mission Street next stop.” And it is!

I make the appointment only three minutes late. I act as if I haven’t hurried. I don’t ingratiate myself with the podiatrist, but I do laugh a little too hard at his joke about people not taking care of their feet because what is “out of sight is out of mind.” I find out that the four hundred dollars I paid was for both feet, not just the right one.

I take an elevator down with an Hispanic family. There is an elderly woman my age, a girl, and two middle-aged women. I wouldn’t have noticed, but they all are smiling at me the same way the *bonita madre* had. Why? I’m not sexy, for God’s sakes! I look in the mirror on the way out. I’m wearing all black, my hair is short and neat and my beard is white. If I hadn’t been wearing a San Francisco Giants jacket and a pair of sweatpants I might have looked like a kindly old priest. I like the look. I was raised in Catholic orphanages! I am going to get a nice black jacket, just for San Francisco midwinter days.

The bus shelter is across the street. I have used it before. It is the right one, but it looks wrong. It’s pointing in the opposite direction of the bus’s destination. I can’t get cocky, I am easily fooled. The kid is still with me. We cross the busy intersection to the little shelter. There is a digital display. It says that the 27 Bryant is coming in eight minutes. Surrender and trust are all that is left. My mind stops doing anything. My kid and me, we just sit there. We notice an old man pace from right to left—not so much the man, but his speed. It is slow and steady. Then we see a car whisk by, then movement to the right and then to the left, as if motion itself was winking into existence. The objects aren’t important, only the movement is. Movement is a river that flows between objects whenever they are set in motion. It is alive! It is an entity! I remember back in the

seventies, walking behind a woman who was wearing a long hippie dress. I watched her body translate that dress into motion, how the folds found the shores of her form and disappeared; she had turned particles into waves.

The bus is coming. Just to make sure, I ask a woman standing next to me, “Is this the 27?”

“Yes,” she answers.

“Is it going to 16th and Mission?”

“Yes,” she answers.

We get on that Muni 27, and I know that I look like a priest, even though I am wearing a San Francisco Giants jacket. I look handsome. Everything is okay now so we can experience the real world. It is beautiful! It isn’t only the world but the experiencing of it; a world without fear and confusion. Here’s my neighborhood; I know it by bicycle. Still, in the end, I hesitate and pull the cord for a stop. I’m two blocks too soon. Should I get out early? Should I shout an apology at the driver that I made a mistake? I do neither. I just shut up. The kid is looking up at me, chagrined. I tell him not to worry, everybody does it. It’s no big deal. The bus stops but no one gets out. We keep our seat and look straight ahead. I want to make sure that when I pull the cord again it is for the right stop. I’m up to 4.0. The kid is worried; so am I, but I’m bigger and I know where I am. I pull the cord too early again. I don’t want unsolicited attention so we get off at 18th and walk the three-quarters of a mile extra. My feet hurt all the way there in spite of the new insoles. It is a victory though. I may not be good at directions but I am learning. I can take the fear without freezing. I can take care of the kid, I can take him home. He knows it. We both grin. I’m not even pulling a 1.0 on the anxiety scale.

9*

I’ve hesitated writing this. Sometimes superstition is a guise for denial. Denial is a way of carrying on when you have little control over your fate. Superstition has its singular merits,

however. When disgust and terror eat at the roots of survival, and you pay close attention to those minutes and seconds unique to fear, the nearness of finality burns away logic with its terrible star. You see the world where cause and effect and superstition hold equal sway. So I wonder if writing this might be tempting fate. I suppose it might be a little like performance art. Here is a fellow writing about successfully recovering from heart surgery who dies while finishing. He should have written about something else.

10*

I'm hungry! That's what my stomach is saying. It is sudden, that's why the exclamation mark. It happens this way now after the operation. I'm not sure whether the operation is the cause for I am also having a race with a natural deterioration of a seventy-eight-year-old man. Old men are like infants when they get hungry. Yeah, that's me; it's setting in, just like thinning bone density. But there's also more blood going around in me. It's probably hungry, the blood, right? Placebo effect, right? Footprints sprinkled on a fairy dust trail. Yeah, it's true. I feel that way. I feel good. I'm not feeling good. *I* feel good. Like I said, I feel like a newly turned vampire. When the body feels good like this, how can I describe it, the blood feels like an animal, like a cat purring in a sunny bookstore window. And sometimes, it gets terrified and it jumps in my skin, bolts about my body and makes my heart throb. Sometimes, I wait for it to knock me unconscious. Sometimes, I get so tired of being afraid, and my blood cat gets weary too, tired of the inane, hideous traction of time, and in a gesture of capitulation, sends me into numerous daytime naps.

11*

CATARACT SURGERY AND THE LIGHT

Age creeps up on you. You are already decrepit you just don't know it. Take my feet, I had no idea that they were shot. I have plenty of energy and motivation but after a half mile I begin to feel like I am walking on burning coals. Now I understand why old people walk that way. Their

brains aren't broken, their feet are. The same goes for eyes. I remember getting off of a Greyhound bus in LA after a nine hour trip from San Francisco. It was in the late afternoon. I looked up at the full moon in the daylight sky and saw what looked like an explosion. I thought that maybe Trump had exploded a nuke on the moon. It didn't cross my mind that it might be the result of cataracts. The brain adapts to your infirmities and quietly cripples you. Sometimes you have to make your own gruesome discoveries. This whole thing started because I wanted a new pair of glasses.

Here I am again, going into the same hospital but this time to the forth floor to see Dr. Kumar, the cardiologist. I am going to have a new EKG and finally get clearance for my cataract operation. After a heart attack, an endarterectomy and a triple-bypass I pass! He tells me that I can proceed with the cataract operation.

“It'll be nothing for you. You're a veteran.”

That was the nicest thing he ever said to me.

LEFT EYE

I present myself to Dr. Arash on Jan. 11, 2018. She is a beautiful Iranian doctor around fifty. She is tall with long black hair and dresses in a more European fashion than casual San Franciscan. She is pleasant and professional befitting her rank. She has three offices, including an elegant downtown clinic. She lays out the procedures. I am to go through a regime of eye drops. She will operate on the left eye first. Two weeks later she will do the right eye. I can get laser surgery or the scalpel. Ah, America, the laser cost's thousands and the knife is covered by my policy. I choose the latter. I can get corrective lenses put in. Would I like close up or distance? Ah, not to be searching for readers, but I choose distance because I ride a bike and San Francisco is a small crowded city.

I look fondly at the start of this journey when I was a lusty, naïve 76-year-old. But here I

am, after a my circuit of pre-op eye drops. Three medicines going into my left eye. I do two of them four times a day and then at night I do a last one, a sticky one that comes out of a tube. They cost so much it is unbelievable!

There is always something you have to pay in exchange for cheating Nature. I am supposed to have cataracts. After all, I have been using my eyes for years and the gracious sun has turned the lenses dark. Now blindness should come and perhaps a broken hip and then compassionate pneumonia and this old Cro-Magnon will meld with Mother Earth and make room for the saplings to find the sunlight. I pay with depression. I have had so many procedures. They are catching up with me. I feel shaky. I want to do something meaningful besides getting old. Another month of living like a cripple, two weeks with drops, another two for recovering while I prepare for the second operation. Sometimes I think I'm doing this because I am being told to do it.

Ultimately I get through the days of eye drops and goo, and at last I find myself in a large waiting room at 8 a.m. I'm surprised that there are so many people waiting too. It seems that a group of doctors use this facility for their procedures. People go in and people come out with bandages on their eyes, usually one eye. They are mostly old like me. God, I am getting accustomed to being with this crowd. We have nothing we have in common except that our organs are breaking down. I have to pay two hundred dollars for the anesthetic. I can't skip that. Now I'm sitting in yet another waiting room. I'm not the oldest, the oldest are in various stages of frailty. I sit straight and strong in my metal chair. A nurse calls my name. Here I go, yet another operating room. But this one is crowded! It is filled with hospital beds and fat examination chairs. I'm put in the latter. A young man is checking my eyes. The eternal question is posed, where are the drugs. Versed is going to be employed. Ah, hypnotics, how I love them. As usual they wait until the last moment. In the meantime, I see the pattern. The fat chairs are for preparation. Then, when it is time, they put you on a bed. This time I get to keep my cloths on. Fuck, it's like going to the dentist.

Two weeks with drops and tests only to wind up being operated on in my civvies. The room is full of people in hospital beds with their clothes on. It all seems unkempt. I guess I am a surgery veteran. At last, a gurney rolls in for me. I get on. A doctor is standing next to me. Oh, yes, at last the drug. Then through the two doors to the operation parlor. There are a number of rooms, maybe seven along the way to mine. All of them are operating rooms. It reminds me of a chicken farm but perhaps that's just the Versed kicking in. I know it will be over in a few minutes. They say that cataract surgery takes from 20 to 30 minutes. There she is, the elegant Dr. Arash, her dark hair tucked in a shower cap. If she says anything I don't remember it. I am chattering though. Of course, I studied the operation on YouTube and I am iterating the steps as she goes along. Oh, yes, I remember her saying something.

“Please stop talking, I'm operating on your eye.”

And that was that. The removal of a cataract from my left eye.

I emerge from the operating room into the waiting room with a wad of gauze taped over my eye. I look like all of those bandaged old people come back from the war.

At home I spend my days in twilight. Finally, the day comes when I will get my bandage off.

When the ophthalmologist assistant lowers the lights and takes the bandage off my left eye and I see the light I start crying. Maybe it is because I have gone through so much to get here. It's bright! It's a head full of light! And the edges are sharp. Dr. Arash put in distance lenses and improved my sight. So when I get my right lens in I might not need readers. But the light! And the colors, especially blues and the subtle shades of white! Everything is clearer. Being clear is like a color in itself. It creates dimension. My left eye is done, leaving my right eye in its original state so I can see the before and after. The right eye with the cataract creates a smudgy universe because the colors are filtered through the brown protein floating on the eye. Without the lens the edges

are blurry and the whites, muted into anonymity. But now I have the left eye of a 20-year-old, and I feel the light shooting into this old brain. “This moment is a keeper,” I am muttering. No, I think I’m louder than that. All the way home I marvel at the trees and the flowers, grinning like a Jesus-freak.

RIGHT EYE

Back in high school an optometrist told me that I had amblyopia, lazy eye. It has something to do with the nerve pathways between the retina at the back of the eye and the brain. The weaker eye receives fewer visual signals. Finally, the brain ignores the input from the weaker eye. He advised me to get an eye patch. I put it over my right eye. Within minutes I was blind. My right eye didn’t kick in and the eyepatch looked stupid, so I threw it away.

I have been waiting for two weeks with the bandages covering my right eye. I have been more than half blind. However, I can see that the light is brighter through the bandages. Or is it my imagination? Two weeks in the dark. Eyedrops four times a day.

- Do not bend or stoop with the head below your waist.
- Do not lift anything heavier than 10 pounds.
- Wear the plastic protective eye shield at bedtime.
- Avoid sleeping on the side of the operated eye or face down.
- Avoid any blow to the head or eye.
- Do not wash your hair
- Do not be fucking depressed...again.

My right eye is bandaged and full of brackish tears. It’s like the time that stripper broke my heart. I think she actually killed me or I killed myself with shame. That’s when Ken calls me.

Ken: How *are* you, John?

Perfect timing, I'm in my second week of left-eyed darkness. Ken is a flamer, he is a show. You can't pull a homophobe on him for his kindness precludes the possibility. A cunning choice for a receptionist in a psychiatrist's waiting room where the questionable condition of your mental health is momentarily exposed to anyone who walks in. Ken is there with you, an ambassador of tolerance. He immediately strikes up a conversation and talks to you as if he has known you for years. There is a sense when you talk with him that nothing would surprise him and that in his twenty years of working for the good doctor, he has probably seen it all. We hit it off right away.

The psychiatrist is well known and high-end; I got connected with her through a married woman with whom I had a misadventure in Manhattan. She is in her 80s and well known for working with abused children. She was strong and not apparently kind, but upon second thought, was deeply kind without leaving a lot of herself behind. She spoke veteran "shrink." She was not abstract. That always bothered me, that in spite of the fine original art on her walls and her multiple degrees, she only spoke in concrete terms, no Freudian, Lacanian, or Jungian spoken there. I had gotten angry in her office. She had noted that I shouted. When she saw that I was paranoid she got up and showed me that the doors were sound proofed, and then continued her original line of inquiry. She understood me, I think, but she never let me know it. I realize now how smart she was and how blind I was. Right now I realize it. Lamb of God, how certainty empowers delusion. She liked my mind. She let me fling myself around her office for six months, psychologically speaking. The big thing though, was that she took my side. She was a big sister and protective mother at once. She stood up for me. Unlike other practitioners, she didn't guilt trip me.

I got to see her through Medicare for a year. She retired from her Sutter Street office and cut back on her patients and stopped seeing people on Medicare. She moved to an office in an upscale residential area in the City. I couldn't afford her after that and I didn't think I needed her.

"I can't afford her, Ken," I say.

"Pshaw! She loves you, John, don't you know? She's not charging you, she wants to see

how you're doing."

I tell him I can't go out because I'm recovering from cataract surgery.

"How about a telephone session?"

He is giving me some dates but I can't concentrate.

"How about today at 4 PM?"

I get a lump in my throat.

"Do you think that it's okay?" I ask.

"Yes, darling."

He gives me a time and a number. He tells me that he is lonely since the Doctor moved into the residential area. He's working from his apartment in Sausalito, and that no, it's not as nice as it sounds and that I should call him again to make another appointment.

What a strange, kind intrusion. How can I deal with calling a psychiatrist? I never open up when I'm with a brain agent. You always put your best face on. I'd been in trouble so many times. Once you are on the inside of trouble you can never find a way out, even though you mean to be good. Like once I broke a glass inside a kid's mouth while he was drinking milk. I didn't mean to. He was picking at the hair on the back of my neck and I threw an elbow to stop him. The bloody white stuff started pouring out of his mouth. His mother screamed at me that I was going to jail. I was only six. I've never known ages, I still don't know them now, but I know the dip and grind of terrifying guilt. I am the shit that escaped a rubber that got caught in some old red headed whore's cunt. Don't say shit to the authorities. And every one around you is an authority, black or white, big or small. That's the kid. The kid is fucked up too. He's messing with shit on the floor, loose papers, broken pencils and dirty erasers. Before, in times like these, the floor would have been strewn with wine bottles and beer cans and the scree of over turned ashtrays. I have to wait until 4.

I call her. I tell her about the ten days I am spending in the dark waiting for the bandages

to be taken off my left eye. I do something I've never done with a shrink, I start sobbing. Whenever I cry I watch myself doing it, not quite convinced of my sincerity. Crying is really dangerous, that's what the kid tells me. He also tells me that he fucking hates everybody and I do too, but what are you going to do, kick the cat? So I am angry and full of vile syrup, it sticks between my fingers and comes out of my mouth while I fucking sob and sob. She doesn't comfort me. She treats my tears like any other part of a conversation. She is practical. She isn't dramatic. She tells me to go outside and get some light. I thank her profusely and go out into the world and the weather.

The wind nearly blows me off my bike. The streets are glutted with hateful occupants. It is Friday! The mouth of Hell has opened and the serfs are let loose for two days minus the time for commuting. Broke, angry, resentful, no where to go, and no one to be with, not actually, but pretended and reinforced by the need not to live in a nightmare that ends in death, they sally forth. My isolation is a blessing, the world is being nuked and I am outside the blast zone. The good doctor is always wrong but in the right way. I get off my bike and roll it through the haggard streets back to my dusky little home.

CATARACT FREE

The light stabs my eyes. At first I don't see objects, only dazzling surfaces without depth. Then they join together and form a room. I am like the blind guy in one of those old time movies, who, when the doctor unwraps the bandages cries, "I can see!" I am embarrassed to admit it, but I gush so much that even the ophthalmologist begins to tear up.

Light! Both of my eyes eat it. They open wide and swallow the world. Two eyes in stereoscopic barrage. I'm crying again. Delight! De-light!. My brain cries out. It has its own joy, IT, my brain, the one that is going to die, loves so much this brilliant light the color of the world. Consciousness shines like a pharaonic sun on the corn flowers and the little golden sticks. I am this blazing light, this roar. And all of it is geometry, angles, boxes, roofs, floors and walls, cones

and bifurcations. Ha ha ha ha ha.

12*

There is an uncanny brightness to experience. I still feel the same surge I did a year ago, a slow, impending orgasm. All the pain and worry is there—gobs of it—but there is an undergirding sense of gratitude that keeps me afloat and makes me glad, in spite of my existential need to be dissatisfied. I am satisfied. I have three plays going on, but it is coincidental and I don't expect much from it. That is the point. I am glad to have these few years, come what may.

12*

I had put the dragon to rest. For years, I had avoided coming in contact with anything that would remind me of the fact that I have been forgotten while I still live. Living for someone else's approval is absurd, but that is the way of orphans and artists. And then, without my beckoning, three of my plays are produced—two in Los Angeles and one in Sacramento. They stimulate those old desperate feelings of abandonment and terror and neediness. Surprisingly, the productions threatened my world. They made me feel bitter that people could love things I did in the past and love again now, here in the twenty-first, and yet forget them just as quickly. My values are mixed with scars and have collided with my career, and my fight/flight personality didn't help me. I wasn't schooled in suburban manners. I was half-wild. I was reckless. I didn't know that I was in those antechambers that lead to national attention. I don't think I actually wanted it, certainly not for my performing. I have been fixated on being recognized as a writer. I think it is because I had a hard time reading in sixth grade. They put me in a slow class. When they sent me back to the juvenile home, I only went to school half days.

Being a writer was proof that I was literate, that I was smart. If you were a singer, you could still be considered stupid. When I was in a foster home in Des Moines, I saw a girl read a poem in assembly. I asked the teacher where she had gotten it. The teacher answered that she had written it. I didn't know that someone could actually write a poem. On the way home, I wrote my first poem. When the teacher read it, she realized that I wasn't slow. Writing that poem in sixth

grade changed my life. I would write from then on through foster homes and juvenile homes and into high school and into graduate school.

Singing, acting, and writing kept me out of prison, kept me alive, gave me a goal. I am an outsider, and these things are my connection. Turning them into a career was something different. Yet it is in the nature of humans to compete and dominate or serve; it is hormonal, and I am no exception. But to what end? Where is my heart now at the end of life? And if I live much longer, what do I want to live for? I know it's my work, but what would fulfill me right now at the event horizon of old age?

The plays went on, and I went to see them. I brought my friend, Frank to one of them in Los Angeles. I was irritable, though I didn't want to be, but I could find no place comfortable. This suite of circumstances didn't fit me. I am not to great joiner; I didn't want to join in my brief revival. I knew what some people would say, the ones who loved me. They would say that I was going to be rediscovered, especially my plays. The plays did well. The contemporary critics were as dull-witted and narrow as they had been years ago when the plays were first produced. Perhaps even more so. There were rumors of extensions. There were nominations for awards.

My greatest victory was that I did not bother the producers with inquiries as to whether the plays were going to be extended, or what I might do to get them extended. I used to be impatient to find out or to influence the outcome. I wanted to come out of this situation having the director, the actors, and the producers talk of my warm, consistent support throughout the rehearsals and the performances. I could score a win on becoming a classy person, like those people who live in houses.

I did: that is the sweet part of it—the letters and gratitude from the producers. I was hardest on them in the old days. This was not a career move, but one of personal evolution.

But they stirred me! Goddamn, were those fucking actors good! I'm used to having good actors, but this gang, wow! They knew how to talk. They didn't just behave. And this was in LA. They spoke my language. Right there, sitting in the audience, I started crying it was so good.

13*

I already accepted death. I accepted it when I continued living in this building. I gave up. Six hundred dollars a month rent in this beautiful city, among artists. Is this the last stop? I don't want it to be. I'm discontented. When I had a triple bypass, I was so glad to be alive and to be here, so grateful to all of the people in the building who helped me. I have never felt better in recent memory, but memory is ephemeral. I'm scared for a new reason. I'm scared inside where the kid is. Got to go out into the world. I'm old. I look that way. You should see the chicken skin and the blotches. I have a white beard I grew when I got that endarterectomy to cover the scar. I grew the rest of the beard full to announce that I acknowledge that I'm no longer necessary. I just shaved it off.

14*

"Melanie says the nurses know more about the surgeons than the doctors," says Stephanie, the receptionist for Bay West Family Care.

"So, Dr. Reed doesn't know any good cardiologists?"

"Not really, according to Melanie. Besides, Dr. Reed is with Brown and Toland so he isn't your doctor anymore."

"Is that right? I didn't know that. What should I do?"

"You should call your insurance company. What is it?"

"Anthem Blue Shield."

"Bay West Family Care doesn't cover you anymore."

"You don't?"

“Call Anthem Blue Cross.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome.”

15*

“Sutter Health is no longer in our network. We are offering you a two-month transition period so that you can have extra time to visit other providers.”

“Does that mean that I won’t have access to the surgical team that performed my triple bypass?”

“Yes, if they were with Sutter Health, this is true.”

“And that goes for Dr. Kumar, who was in charge of my surgery?”

“Let me see. Yes, Dr. Kumar is not available any longer. He is with an independent doctor’s group, and they are no longer with us.”

“Is that independent doctor’s group Brown and Toland?”

“Yes.”

“So if my primary-care physician is with Brown and Toland, I have to get another?”

“What’s your primary care physician’s name?”

“Dr. Reed.”

“Yes, he’s with Brown and Toland, so you will have to choose another primary-care physician. Would you like to see a list?”

“I’m not quite ready yet. The list is on the web, right?”

“Yes, just look for them under Anthem Blue Shield.”

My cardiologist, my heart surgeon, my vascular surgeon, and the nurses I so cherished are banished from my presence. They can never cut my body open again, nor poke it with needles, nor give it Ativan, nor lay gentle hands on it. What a sop! But I am taking this personally. That comes

from not having had health insurance most of my life. That's the dumb you get when you live off the grid, self-righteous naiveté. Still, it hurts.

I avoided Kaiser Permanente because I didn't like the corporate feel of it, and besides they had rejected me for having a pre-existing illness, namely alcoholism. I had taken one of their own alcohol intensives. I went into the program in order to save my second marriage. Both of us were alcoholics and seven years of mutual drinking was getting to be too much. I wanted to stop; she didn't. The Kaiser Permanente couples therapist assigned to us suggested that we take their program for alcoholics. My wife made excuses to get out of it, but I went in. When she applied for Kaiser Permanente insurance the next year they accepted her but rejected me. The couples therapist made appeals but all were rejected. Now, after a divorce and eighteen years off of the booze, I've reluctantly decided to choose Kaiser Permanente for my supplemental health insurer. At least they would keep all of my files in one place. The receptionists are nice. Almost all of the artists I know use Kaiser. I can choose from many doctors. I've chosen Dr. Lao, the doctor of the most narcissistic and entitled person I know.

I'm getting a "your goose is cooked" attitude. It helps when I am opening an official-looking letter. My heart leaps in fear, but I realize that I'm fucked anyway and right now I'm all right so I don't need to worry about it. There's something about the whole feeling of fate I never had before. Don't worry about the money you're going to be dead in two years. Do I believe that? Am I hitting my head with a velvet hammer so I can sneak a few moments of surrender without completely giving up the ship? I don't know. I'm walking the plank.

16*

There are little wads of toilet paper on my desk and on my floor from shimmying the hinges of my loose glasses. I'd get them tightened, but I can't because the place I bought them isn't covered by my insurance anymore, and I can't get them tightened at Kaiser Permanente because

they didn't insure them in the first place. I could probably get them done, but I don't want to argue with them about it. Fuck it, I'll wad up a couple of fresh ones.

17*

I'm looking at my electric bike. I don't look at it much because having such a luxury makes me feel guilty, but this evening at rush hour, it got me home. It was just after sundown, and the streets were full of traffic and the honking was so loud I wanted to tear my head off, and people were making clucking motions with their eyes, mean-like and insane. It seemed everywhere I looked people were arguing in the most insidious and demeaning ways. The streets had turned into arrows of rage. I had to keep my head and that e-bike just purred along, untroubled. It got me to the back streets, where there were fewer cars and where I could see the warm lights of the evening windows with their shades pulled down. That e-bike—what should I name it?—gave me shadows and silhouettes of trees beneath a full moon. It took me home, just like my old camper did. The camper was my home for many a year. I feel better about that bike.

18*

There comes an end, when you find that your need to make amends is an extension of what you had to do when you were a kid. If I'm going to have to die, I don't want to do the same things I did before. I always had to apologize in the foster homes because I wasn't blood and didn't know the rules, and the rules, above all, were most important because they were arbitrary by necessity and therefore proof that you were willing to do meaningless rituals in order to get in. It was an initiation into the tribe and it was only extended to the sperm and egg and not necessarily to their in-laws. When they brought someone into their "home," it was a big deal. "Home" was a great place to apologize because they have shared it with you and you must needs learn to take your place in it. "Fuck Fest" was what I was going to call it, the family unit, but then I realized that most of the fucking was over and the after-party trash was all that was left, namely, the family—

and “they don’t mostly like each other neither.” Somebody was stuck with somebody, and somebody was sloshing the bucket with somebody’s sister, and somebody was beatin’ up on somebody’s wife, and somebody was hiding money in a coffee can, so went the barnyard. Civilization was agriculture. Foster families and institutions were good places to learn the rules because they were simply the rules without the fabrication of “love.” Oh, those cozy little Ozzie and Harriet homes. Did that mean anything anymore? The Ozzie and Harriet show in the 1950s? It was the prototypical American Dream. Oh, god, I wanted it. Judy Martin, my Autumn Girl, would be my bride. We’d live in a cottage in Maine and have two children and a dog. Damn, I wanted that. But the herd of Ozzie and Harriet spawn didn’t. In 1968 I was chasing after what they despised. That was before I started to have cuckold fantasies about my Autumn Girl. I realized I was too warped to be straight. I didn’t know how to have a place of my own, so I lived in a succession of women’s houses. But after forty or so years, I finally found a place of my own.

I’m tired of apologizing, of regretting all the terrible things I have done. Live with your own face. This is who you are. This is what you’ve done. Don’t get so crenelated about who knows you and why. Stop apologizing. Wake up!

Cut this

~~You want to know if there’s teleology? Just cum. Now you know it. It’s when you cum. What are they on? You can’t hide it. You can’t hide. Serotonin, isn’t that it? Those searching eyes. Oops, they landed on me! They caught me! They can see me! Look! Gone now, stockpiled in some neuron cluster.~~

19*

What is it about me that I turn on people? My mother digging her fingernail into my knuckle when I was a kid when I said that I would like to see a movie about sword fighting rather than the one my mother was sending me to. We were on a bus, the guy was just having fun with

me and I was too, I didn't care that much about it either way. She could turn on a dime. You'd never know if she was going to kiss you or smack you. I think I have that; perhaps genetically; what a gruesome thought. That's why I'm so careful. I should have died years ago, probably in prison. Perhaps I'm a serial killer. I don't have the guts. I have me some impulses, though, but who doesn't, right? Right? Anyway, I've almost made it through. My bone density is not as dense, and in a couple of years, I'll be a stick.

20*

I have worked on them, my reactions. I have studied them like a shrink studies a psychopath. With this extra time, this addendum of heartbeats and blood, I feel uplifted and re-emergent. I find myself listening to my neighbor's stories, sensing what is happening in their daily lives. They are all interesting—unique, actually. I see brilliance; I see foolishness. I see them when they are tired or down and when they are full of hope. I watch them and marvel at how the life force moves through their faces like wind through wheat. They're actually living their lives right in front of me. I watch them seek out experiences and see them encounter the unknown on a daily basis. I have seen some of them as babies and watched them grow up into adults and have children of their own. How many among them have I talked to about death, just in passing, just as a part of a conversation? How many do I now know who are dead, who have died within the last year? How many times my eyes well with tears, realizing how brave they are, how vulnerable, how naked. I don't always like them. They are shit. I mutter hateful expletives about them to my shadow.

Yes, what a cliché. But in the aftermath of my operation, the world still holds an apocalyptic dilation; angels, hearts and hydrogen, and us alone here on this little planet in a lifeless universe; empty churches, godless men like Carl Sagan jonesing for little green men and crazy-ass fanatics beating spears into pruning hooks. Crazy fucking world, it's going to end up badly for anybody here, but for the moment, we can put it off and them off. Besides, even if there are aliens

we wouldn't notice them. We are stuck in a loop that creates the tautology of matter, so we can't conceive of them. I don't care, for once, I don't care. I want to live; I want to know. This new blood makes me both excited and exhausted. I am glad to have these few years, come what may.

21*

I seldom dream, but last night, I remembered a dream. It was so brief I almost confused it with an hallucination, but I could tell that it was a full-fledged dream, just the way I can tell the difference between a skunk and a bat—and this was a skunk of a dream. In the dream, I am enjoying myself as I usually do, sitting here, typing words onto a screen. I am actually joyous. All at once, a guard comes into my studio and tells me that they are ready to carry on with the execution. I realize that I am in prison and this is my last night. I know I am going to be executed by being crushed to death. I realize that all of this happiness was an illusion I created because I couldn't face the hideous conclusion of life.

22*

You change when your regrets and bad karma haunt you and entangle you until they force you to make changes.

The roots crawl in and around, from within and without, out of my heart, invade my hands and eyes, my mouth, the rivers of my brain. Regret, guilt, remorse engulfs me, clots my life with its plaque. I am forced to make the changes to relieve myself from the pain. I am going through the white lights.

23

Steps:

Change ...

Becoming us ...

Becoming you ...

Changes accelerate as you age. What might have taken years to change can change in a day. The trials of the past are culminating. That which is understandable begins to be understood. You get some things finally, and you reconcile yourself with the things you don't; and with less despair and frustration.

Balloon rising to the edge of space, the curvature of earth: people become like the earth—me, the balloon. Strange and lonely, this yearning for something else.

Walking out of your own coffin doesn't guarantee that you will lose your skin. You may have to grow it again.

24*

I started speaking gibberish with a pigeon. Actually, at a pigeon, I don't think the pigeon answered. But it didn't move, the pigeon. It felt so incredibly natural to speak to it that way, in gibberish. It was a Sino-Sub-Saharan Jib. I tried to assign the four tones and also a few voiced bilabial plosives. I suffused it with some milky glides and thick-tongued laterals. It was a hoot. I started laughing. Oh shit, now I know what it meant when Hesse talked about the laughter of the gods.

25*

My kid and I are getting along. I wanted to say, "my kid and me," but that seemed like posing. My kid isn't stupid. He isn't even a kid. He's an entity. I don't know if he is as distinct as that, but he laughs at what people do when they intend to be funny. By proxy, I laugh too. I also notice when he is interested in things. He's a lot smarter than I thought.

Both of us like to stay at home and play. There is a central force that binds us. It may be of a kind I didn't expect. It might be a natural process akin to mentation that works for our overall survival. It plans and anticipates what will happen as in a war room. It uses the paradigm: ETIHAO

(Every Thing Is Happening At Once). Quantum entanglement works with this premise. This primordial brain web plays dice with quantum potential and works for the best overall odds. We are as alien as the trilobites and inarticulate brachiopods of the Paleozoic era. Those brains still buzz in us and perhaps glean information from the articulations of sunlight and shadow as much as from white space and pixel. We eat information and as we consume it, we improve our connections with the tempo of evolution, we, in fact, help create it. There may be a central “I” but that “I” is a portal to the collision of Being with Non-Being, it both creates and obliterates reality, like bugs on a windshield. That is why it is interesting that humans shoot themselves into “space.” It is literally a materialization of an abstraction. There is a door there, to the self, an openness as wide as oblivion. That we leave our corpses is abstraction made material. Who are we? Everything. I am becoming a witness to these many functions as I age. Society and what people do becomes quotidian for the elderly (who benefit from having less-deluding hormones) that what seems normal becomes a source of primal information. We become abstract as our bodies disintegrate.

I am running my fingers over my body. It is wonderful. I’ve just gotten into bed. It feels cozy. I must be a mammal. I’m bobbing on the waters. When they come up, they will absorb the boat and drink it down. The light of my consciousness bobs on the waves of the darkness. The darkness is not dark. It is composed of seething experiences, hallucinations, pure primal discharge ...

26*

Just when I start to feel like there is no hope for me and people, I get this little interlude of conversation, some kind of silly joke and the world breaks open between us and we laugh. It’s probably about one of our bodily functions or politics or some stupid everyday animal thing, and human life becomes worthwhile, joyous. How does that work? Everything that is interesting is

invisible, it seems: behind the makeup and the hairdo and the funny clothing there is something else, then just disappears and you forget about it; not only do you forget about it, you forget that even exists. It is so peculiar that a creature who could make me giggle and sigh and rage could just stop breathing. And they know this, all of them. Is this the end of it? Is this where the skin touches the air? Are we merely the top of the food chain? Is there something more to us than that? After all of these years, why do I know nothing? I love the gibberish beneath the beat of our conversations. I mean some really crazy shit we can talk that makes no fucking sense. Ah! Then speaking is like birdsong. Ha loo! Baag cloak. Dew U Jimmy jag? Then you laugh. And you laugh in that world, one foot out of this dimension, and you can almost smell the gunpowder of outer space.

27*

Beware of people doing things for your good as you grow older. People down there in planes less laden by time know nothing about the hallucinations natural to old age. That doesn't mean that we outliers don't know what's going on down there. We are awake; the minnows of our reason still swim in the Sea of Corpus Mentis even if it is on some Galilean moon. Ageism is in part incomprehension. Think of us as wearing space suits.

Hallucinations ...

Gibberish ...

Dementia: the land down under. Its fury strikes you dumb, but in a slow way like a half-cooked egg. You don't know you're there until you realize that you have been in another world with another life, or a life right next to yours, that you're in a multiverse. That's when you *snap* out of it or *roll* awake. That's when you lose the thread of an argument that is quickly slipping from your grasp.

Some call it nodding out. First, you get tired, a gravel road kind of tiredness, not something slippery and young and wet and smooth, but coarse and brittle and mucilaginous and sticky with the sleep of putrefaction. You simply cannot stand. You cannot hold your head up. You must lie down immediately. A cloud of gnats fly out of your mouth and you have to tilt your head back and open wide to let them out. And there you stay, head cocked back, mouth wide open, eyelids fluttering, snorting moth dust. You are deep in The Land of Jib where gibberish comes from. Gibberish is the lingua franca of Dementia, Hallucitania, and Rethanatos (the baby end of death, which is the oldest form of being dead, closest to the exit, the exit to the exit, in the back rows of the Oblivion Movie House where the hanky-panky takes place with popcorn and jizz). Gibberish is the ultimate language.

28*

I have slept seven hours without Xanax two nights now. It has been a hard ride, maybe ten days of restlessness and exhaustion, but gradually I am learning to surface from the deep and drift back down again. I am beginning to merge with this cycle, perhaps circadian, like a merry-go-round I have to jump on. I have found a brindle horse with a black mane and oval eyes of blue. I only woke up once last night, dreamless. I snowboard the clouds between the sunless land and outer space; not quite dreaming, coastal, layered, bordering the land of factuality that has no somewhere, only a between. At best, it slinks away from daylight, hovers like the blue refraction of sunlit sky.

Grenze, isn't that "boundary" in German? My kid likes that word, "*grenze*." That's what he wants to be called. "Hello, I'm Tony Grenze."

31*

My feet are getting nimble. Doing all of these YouTube exercise classes with Leslie Sanson and Ellen Barrett, and the ten thousand steps a day, I have learned to work my way around my

concrete floor. I am moving with fluidity. My knee is good, it's never been better. I can bob and weave better than I did when I took boxing in my fifties. I'm beginning to move the way I used to. I have balance and flexibility. Of course, this is all relative. Sometimes by the end of the day, I can barely walk. My replacement knee gets sore and I have to ice and elevate it. I put my thumb out trying to lift too much weight. Sometimes, the fierceness of my exhaustion hits with such force that I have to throw myself on the bed. But still, I am getting my body back, albeit temporarily. I fear that this is the grace period between old age and frailty. But I'll take it. I'll take whatever I can get.

In spite of the sick and dying and my own end of days, I am uncannily happy. "Uncanny," yes, a ghostly word and appropriate for the old, but spiritual also in a surprising way; in almost a wrong way, I am the happiest I have ever been in my life. What I am really feeling, and this is frightening, is glory. I am feeling the dew of evanescence. I am culminating. Do you understand? I have learned up close how much work it takes to simply be alive. That's why I call this section "Afterlife," when I went into that operating room and let them stop my heart I gave myself up to death. Every minute I live now is like life after death.

32*

There is an entity on the other side of my eyes. It is in the dark of my brain. It sees the light outside. It sees everything I can see; so too with hearing and the other senses. It seems to be confined within this body. When I lie down in bed at night I can feel it just behind my eyes like a passenger. Sometimes something in me fears for that entity for it seems to contain my consciousness. At first it is separate from *me* and then I realize that it is me. The experience can be startling. It's like jumping into my own body. But there *I* am! A gentle electricity. It's just a shift of perspective to find it. I forget it on the other side of the darkness, the one I wake up from in the morning. I caffeinate it. Educate it. Ride it. Drive it around. Shop with it. Get high with it. I

treat it like a mule. And it's always there in the background. Sometimes when I'm with some one and we catch our eyes in a certain way or under the influence of a particular conversation I see that person's being looking back at me. They usually notice it too. We seldom say anything for fear of embarrassment. I get frightened when I feel it wink out as it passes into the plane of Hypnagogia. There it becomes just another member of a society beyond comprehension. In a sense I go out. It joins another Totality, the one on the other side of the light. Maybe it's Nothingness. When you can't put it off any longer, when time has caught up with you, when fear overwhelms you, when there is nothing left but to find a way to surrender, that's when you find yourself wide awake from yet another sleep. The entity turns inside out. It finds at its core the surrender necessary for integration. That's when the gentle electricity lights up, lights you up. "Peak experience" in modern parlance. When outside and inside are one. When you don't have anything to prove nor anything to be afraid of. These high moments. Satori and that stuff. "Enlightenment." It's no big deal. You were enlightened the day you were born. There is nothing normal about this shit. Check with science if you doubt it. And I'm right in the middle of it. Sun, moon, infinity, death and life.

I find myself writing this during a solar eclipse. It's live on YouTube right now. It's coming from the Cerro Tololo Observatory in northern Chile. 7200 feet altitude. Late afternoon. I've been watching it for a little while. It is a live feed from the Washington Post. I can hear the operators whispering to each other in Spanish. There is the big round orange filtered sun. I don't see sun spots. There are number of cameras. Hundreds of people are spread over the hills around several pristine observatories. Shots of people all wearing the same orange rimmed protective glasses, a united eclipse nation waiting for the sun to fill up with the moon. No music. I'm sure they will put that in post production. This is the raw feed. The hillsides are prickly with telescopes and there are scientists of every shape and size. They are all intensely studying one object. I have never seen so many atheists meditating at once.

“Ten minutes until first contact,” a man calls out.

The mosh of excited speech and laughter.

“Five minutes until first contact.”

Off camera a man is being interviewed about his experiment.

“Two minutes until first contact.”

Sound of crowds, a child calls out.

“One minute!”

A shot of people in hoodies standing over an impressive array of instruments.

“Thirty seconds!”

“Very original,” a young man calls out and sticks up a thumb.

“Twenty!”

Now a shot of the shot of the sun.

“Ten seconds.”

Sun. Silence.

“First contact!”

Some one shouts, “Yahoo!”

“I think it’s on the left.”

“Bottom left, bottom left...”

Hushes and gasps.

Silently, a shadow nips at the bottom of the sun. People applaud. There are hoots and howls.

Shot of a young woman in a brown and yellow windbreaker smiling, a pair of eclipse glasses hooked over her Ray Bans.

She cries, “Oh, I see it now!”

People laugh in delight, wow’s and whistles.

“Here comes the moon!”

More laughter. Someone is singing the first lines of George Harrison’s, “Here comes the Sun,” but is substituting “moon.”

“Tres bien.”

More whispers.

A big white dish, people beneath it. It reminds me of “Childhood’s End,” by Arthur C. Clarke.

A magnified shot, the nip has become a bite. People are whispering like children watching sex. Someone is playing a pan flute.

“Vamos-vamos-vamos-vamos poquito,” shouts a man urging on the moon.

There is a lull. The voices dry into restless chatter. A

Shot of arid mountains. The moon is covering half of the Sun.

“30 minutes until totality.”

Shot of a guy talking to a puppet in a red hoodie on his left arm. Both have eclipse glasses on. The mountains are getting hazy. The shadows fading, yet the darkness builds.

“20 minutes until totality!”

“Thank you, Bill.”

More laughter now, a few almost giggling. People are settling in for amazement.

“15 minutes until totality.”

“It’s getting cooler,” someone says.”

“Yes,” another answers.

Shot of the sun, now a waning crescent.

“It’s getting so surreal, huh?”

“Totally,” answers someone.

The landscape is a dismal wash. The instruments are disappearing. The moon is sliding over the sun. Whispering in bed in the dark.

“10 minutes until totality.”

“Bueno,” comes over a walkie-talkie.

“I can actually see the shape of the sun in my own shadow!”

The voices are getting more excited. There is an impatience in the air. The collective is gearing up. There is a knocking about of things as attention stumbles to its feet.

“Look at the color! It’s red!”

“Red and orange.”

“Yeah, sometimes it’s red and orange but look at the sky!”

“The sky is cooler, it’s blue.”

“Yes, blue.”

“Yeah, more contrasty.”

“Very...weird...”

“It’s a little sliver.”

“Five minutes until totality.”

Some one cheers.

“You can see the shadow on the horizon already.”

A woman coos.

The contrail of a passenger jet hurries across the sky. People start laughing at it as if it was a bad joke.

“Five minutes until totality,” announces the man.

“That’s insane,” cries a young woman, “it’s the shadow of the moon!”

“It’s bizarre. No wonder people were freaked out in the old days.”

“If you didn't know what was happening...” says one

“...you'd go mad!” finishes another.

“There's Venus,” announces the man called Bill, “right above the antennae!”

There are cries.

“Oh my gosh!”

“You're right!”

“Yes!”

“I love it!”

“Two minutes until totality!”

Murmuring. Gasps.

“Sirius,” calls Bill, “Sirius!”

“Look at the sun!” cries out a girl in primal astonishment.

“Oh! Oh! Oh!”

A gathering unease of amazed pleasure, people once moved, move again with the same forty thousand year old awe. How silent, how smooth the transit of the heavenly bodies, how elegant their power! I am driven to tears.

Now, the sun without a filter. It is winking out in the faded blue sky.

“One minute!”

A close up again. The sun is an orange sliver.

A Lovecraft landscape of shadows and the icy rays of a smothered sun.

“Thirty seconds!”

Cries of victory. Then silence of awe as the moon blocks the sun and ascends the throne of the sky. The naked eye can see it now in the last seconds; the light extinguished. A lone man cries

something out and then the corona. All is still, the mountains are gone. The moon has drawn the curtains closed. Hieros gamos – the sexual union between the sun and the moon has begun.

“Filters off!” cries Bill.

Then everyone seems to get it all at once for they cheer the darkness.

“Baily’s Beads,” announces Bill.

They are the sunlight shining through the lunar valleys, chasms and mountain peaks.

“This is really cool,” says a man, “I’m almost crying. I’m almost crying.”

A black hole surrounded by light hangs in a black sky.

A bead of light at the lower right edge of the moon appears.

“Diamond Ring,” calls Bill.

The sun and moon have tied the knot.

“Filters on,” cries Bill.

“Awesome.”

“Goosebumps.”

The light blasts through for it cannot be long contained, then rapidly expands.

There are gasps and groans in astonishment, cries of victory (same cries as in a football match) cheers, and applause.

“Good morning, good morning everyone, breakfast time!” calls Bill.

They are already mourning its passing, the enthronement, love planetary style.

“That round thing in the sky, the Corona, Venus, Mercury, the stars...” the scientist’s voice trails off. The camera shows the Chilean landscape, mountains waking, blue mist rising.

A couple just off camera whispering in Spanish like lovers after sex. Birds are singing.

“One hour until the end of eclipse,” calls Bill.

Cameras chirp and click. Through the lens the sun is a molten crescent.

“Forty-five minutes until end of eclipse.”

“Next year,” someone calls.

“Thirty minutes until the end of the eclipse.”

They are clearing out of the mountains, leaving like after a concert. People do that, they just go. Even if they don’t want to. With or without ceremony everything changes. The light gets tired like a bright board. The day is back. A few whispers pick at the air. Murmurs like “goodnights.” A few hang on, they mill about the instruments.

“Fifteen minutes until the end of eclipse.”

“How long?”

“Fifteen.”

“Vielen dank,” someone down the mountain shouts.

“Airak ha’dawn,” another calls.

Someone working the camera pops open a can and murmurs something that ends in “empanadas.”

“Ten minutes until the end of the eclipse.”

“Thank you!”

Everyone has forgotten the moon. The sun is setting as if it had a place to rest just over the horizon. We are left striving for totality.

“Five minutes until...two minutes...one minute...thirty seconds...ten seconds...end of eclipse!”

Cheering.