

*“Fiction has a truth exceeding that of history”*

– Aristotle

#### **YEAR 4.01**

***There were two of them***, intellectuals, who’d arranged to interview him. One had Susan Sontag’s eyebrows, sign of a serious mind, and a symmetrical face. The other, with unfashionable bangs, had narrow pinched cheeks leading to a pointy chin and the severe myopic squint of someone too long at the books. They wanted to make sense of, or cash in on, or both, the myth of the avant-garde. They were quite naïve and prime examples of white privilege university educations. He had to explain to them the difference between the ‘look at me I’m writing a poem’ school and the homo-fascio anal retentive school also known as the flaming assholes. Clumpers vs lumpers. The problem was conflict of information, info wars, which side do you believe, and there are always more than just two sides.

“Poetry ponzi schemes!” he’d railed, conveniently ignoring his own poetry ponzi schemes, excusing himself for being a low key mom and pop variety, not the franchised noose that NAIF or even Iowa represented.

He’d talked about poets who had made it big in stand-up comedy or as shock jocks. They were the right kind of sociopath, the unerring eye for human foibles and weaknesses, and the sadistic pleasure of pointing them out to a room full of quivering masochists. As well, pointedly, he’d attacked the MFA scene, a debris field around an academic body as a stew of neurosis where everyone was very polite while they stabbed you in the back, with the exception of the occasional hot knives who cut through all the envy to effortlessly secure the prime academic closet, assured by the knowledge that they had made the right moves, dodged or denied the petty backbiting scandals while launching preemptive forays against troublesome associates and rivals. And if that weren’t the worst of it, they ended up teaching a Mainstream Am-lit bugged by the Brits while fellating the French. As a consequence, poets, generally perceived as ivory tower dreamers and underpaid to the point of extinction, were among the most vainglorious and unforgiving in matters of placement at readings, or in the queue for appointments, inclusion in anthologies, residencies, associate professorships, and free lunches. It was for that reason, and fear of joining the ranks of “poetry church mice” perennially going on their appointed academic rounds on campuses all across America repeating the bleats of a penned flock fleeced by a cynical unrepentant literati, that he had shied, with a few exceptions, at offers and opportunities to conduct workshops, give lectures, the kind of thing that brought him in contact with potentially clueless however ruthless ambition.

But after leaving the sanctuary of Balboa Street, he’d become increasingly anxious and desperate, and Nora had promised that if this gig went well there would be other, better paying assignments. Five hundred dollars for three days wasn’t anything to sneeze at since his other paying prospect, the column in the weekly, had gone south. She had arranged a reading and lec-

ture at Gila Community College in a farming community down the coast near Monterey. The other was speaker slash panelist at a weekend writing seminar slash retreat in Las Garritas, a gated community near the palo alto of greater Stanford.

He'd been instructed to take the Hound as far as Morgan Hill, south of San Jose, where he was met by the husband of Natividad Sorrales, poet and teacher in the English Department at Gila Community College. He was to talk to the writers club and speak to her Advanced English class and that evening, give a poetry reading for the faculty and students. Bed and board were to be provided courtesy of the Sorrales' at their nearby home.

The meal was a disaster with the husband glaring at his wife, the English professor, ESL English as she had clarified, and sniping at her in Spanish which he didn't understand but the glowering man with a nose like a bent nail and tortured swath of moustache looked at him as if the intent didn't need translating. Natividad Sorrales was a mousey little woman with a small tremulous mouth and large intelligent devouring eyes. Her tension showed by the way she held her shoulders as she nervously deflected her husband's remarks while at the same time offering her guest more food, homemade tamales, beans, rice, guacamole, three kinds of salsa, mild hot, medium hot, and hot hot, all equally hot as far as he could tell.

After the meal, Jaime, the husband, brought out a bottle of mescal and two glasses, one for himself and one for the gringo poet. He had toasted the husband and dropped the shot down his gullet. Cactus juice was not his favored drink, but this particular mescal went down smooth as quicksilver. When he expressed his surprised appreciation at the quality, the husband reached across the table and shook his hand. They were now *compadres*, and two more shots were poured, two more shots were consumed. Natividad had come out of the kitchen, surveyed the situation, gone to the liquor cabinet and procured her own shot glass. She sat down and poured herself a shot daring her husband with a stolid face to stop her. She raised her glass and saluted each of them and swallowed the dollop with one easy motion. Her husband laughed uncomfortably. She smiled and said, "It is an honor to have you join us for dinner, Señor Wendt," and proceeded to fill each of their shot glasses to the very brim, one that would require a steady hand to get the entire contents down the gullet without spilling a drop. "To your health, Salud!"

He had cheated by bringing his mouth closer to the glass and then opening wide. Señora Sorrales, with barely a tremor, lifted her glass and swallowed the contents in a blink. Her husband opted for the quick wrist snap and got it all in except for one little drop on his lower lip that dribbled down his chin. No one deigned to mention it.

The drinking continued with him offering his hosts thanks and compliments for their hospitality, adding that it was rare to meet such like minded people. The husband reciprocated with a long honorific in Spanish of which he caught bits and pieces thanks to his high school Latin and his brief stay in Madrid. In this manner the bottle emptied in quick order and the honor of drinking the grub had become his. By then, in his state of quasi psychedelic intoxication, it could have just as easily been a gummy worm. Upon reflec-

tion, he had been clearly guided to the horizontal position on a bed of fresh laundered sheets and left in the dark, the closed door revealing a sliver of light at the bottom edge. Apparently the Aztec gods had not been informed of his immortality in regard to alcohol because this stuff had really kicked his ass.

He'd fallen asleep but was awakened by loud banging, things breaking, a man yelling and a woman screaming back, then a screech, a door slamming and a woman sobbing. He'd thought to go investigate but his limbs were paralyzed and he fell back to sleep only to wake the next morning with a head that would fit snugly inside the helmet from the Castle of Otranto.

Ironically they'd gone to a McDonald's, the teacher ordering an Egg McMuffin as if she was unaware of the rather large mouse under one eye or the other swollen and red from crying. He'd figured that this probably wasn't the first time nor would it be the last time. She'd hooked sympathetic looks from the women, mostly domestics or young mothers who were there with their school aged children.

He'd had a faux latte with his tiny crayon sized sausages and laminated eggs while she outlined her schedule and how he fit into it. There would be a lot of down time so he would have to find ways to keep himself occupied. There was the cafeteria, but it closed mid afternoon on Fridays, and the library where he could examine their poetry section. Or watch TV in the faculty lounge. He'd wanted to express sympathy when she explained, shyly, "My husband is. . .very jealous." As they'd left the restaurant for campus, he noticed a white pickup truck parked across the street, very similar to the one he'd been picked up in by her husband the previous afternoon.

Gila Community College was a cluster of modern buildings resembling a water treatment plant at the end of a long straight road bordered on both sides by artichoke fields. Señora Sorrales introduced him to some of her colleagues and then ushered him into the first class, an English Lit class studying, at the moment, the Romantic poets. He'd asked if they'd learned anything about Walter Savage Landor and then proceeded to declaim Landor's epitaph.

*I strove with none, for none was worth my strife.  
Nature I loved, and, next to nature, Art;  
I warm'd both hands before the fire of Life;  
It sinks, and I am ready to depart.*

That had had the desired effect of leaving them gape mouthed so he extemporized on Wordsworth and Blake and Coleridge and Shelley and Byron, dropping what he thought was a big bomb that it was Shelley's wife, Mary, who had written Frankenstein. Someone in the back, a young woman, offered that they'd seen something about that on Netflix. The students were all female with the exception of a rather stiff young man who without even moving or lowering his lofty gaze appeared affected and feminine. Señora Sorrales explained that she encouraged her students to view historical dramas about authors and in fact much of her teaching materials about poetry were video productions from public television and Spanish language literary biographies

available through academic distributors. He'd had his attention called to the large screen TV and the shelves of what he thought at first were books of poetry but were DVD collections about poets and poetry. They did not have a text or anthology in the curriculum. Señora Sorrales was confident that the students' natural curiosity would lead them to read the poems.

He'd spent some time in the cafeteria enduring the really bad coffee and the stares of hick students and faculty. Natividad found him later that afternoon sitting on a bench in the little cement plaza between buildings and fetched him to her writers club. He could see that this excited her and with a certain pride she introduced him to the five students, four young women and one young man, the one from the earlier Lit class, who remained undecided. He gave his standard *So You Wanna Be A Poet* spiel, toned down from the usual hard edged cynicism. One of the club members arrived late and sat behind the others. A young man looking a little older, more experienced, he remembered thinking, maybe it was the moustache, and the hair slicked back, the way he slouched in his chair.

He answered the usual questions of how did you get to be a famous poet and how can I do that, too. Some may have been too awestruck or struck dumb by his mere presence. Which he'd doubted, the enthusiasm generated mostly by the teacher. Mister Moustache was attentive in a catlike way but wasn't inclined to speak up. He hadn't learned his name because the sullen young man had been late to arrive and left before the meeting was over.

He'd had to be patient while Señora Sorrales took him over to the Administration office where she was informed that his check had not been cut. She'd then become quite upset, raising her voice and berating the Accounts Assistant. Much of it was in Spanish which the young woman behind the desk seemed to understand. Presently a balding Ichabod Crane stick figure came to the door of his office and inquired as to the commotion. When the young woman and Señora Sorrales both started explaining and pointing in his direction, the spectral figure glommed him with lemur eyes and gave a tight lipped smile. The English teacher looked poised to tear the man's throat out with her teeth. The administrator nodded, handed the assistant a set of keys to the cabinet safe against the wall. Natividad had apologized to him that it would take a little while before they processed the payment check, insisting that she had put in the paperwork weeks before, and glancing nervously at her watch, expressing her hope that they weren't going to be too late for the reception at the Chair of the English Department's home. When she finally handed him the check after he'd signed a number of receipts and withholding documents, she apologized again that the only way they could get the check cut on such short notice was to take it out of a special account reserved for field trips.

The reception had been a field trip itself. The chairman's wife was British. She was given to making inane pronouncements to the small gathering of friends and faculty, yet said in her accent they had the effect of sounding haughtily profound. He'd been introduced by Señora Sorrales and had taken an immediate dislike to her. It was the way she'd regarded the English teacher with a condescending veiled look, tagging her as the ultimate British snob. The woman, Deidre, was perceptive enough to realize that he'd tumbled to her

as an elitist phony. The evening had gone downhill from there. A few others of the faculty cruised by to sate their curiosity but mostly he and the English teacher were shunned while Deidre corralled the guests, speaking to them in hushed tones while shooting daggers in his direction. That didn't affect him, being inured to such behavior simply by being a poet.

It did however affect the audience at the reading that followed and hardly anyone from the reception deigned to attend. If there were two dozen present, clumped or scattered throughout the assembly sized auditorium, it seemed like fewer due to their placement. That he had to read from a podium on the stage seemed even more ludicrous and senseless. Señora Sorrales had been clearly upset by the sabotage and the poor turnout. The fact that her husband was seated on the aisle in the last row in his white Stetson and drinking from a paper bag might have also contributed to her cabled frown and hunched shoulders.

He'd cut to the chase, made a few lame jokes, praised "Señora Sorrales' dedication to education and literature," and finished up with a poem that was basically a stand-up routine saved for just such interminable situations.

Half a dozen students, four boys and two girls, had strolled into the auditorium around the last of his reading. He was aware of them because they caused a commotion by giggling and whispering loudly as they scuffled around in search of the best seating. Not that there hadn't been plenty of choices. Judging by the staid constrained expressions of the young men, they were stoned. Señora Sorrales had shot laser beams of reprehension at them but they remained unfazed. When he'd ended by thanking everyone, they were the ones who cheered raucously while the others in the audience clapped demurely. He'd mingled with the attendees, some shepherded over by his sponsor, shaking cold limp hands or nervous eager moistness. The pack of latecomers consisted of three students from Natividad's Writer's Club. The prim young man still looked severe, but now because he was stoned, only as severe as a plush toy. The mature guy whose name he never got put a grin on his mocking and macho gaze. The young woman, compact with native features, in her late teens, had been the inquisitive one in the classroom, interested in learning the mechanics of attracting attention with her talent, assuming she had talent. The other three he did not grok.

Young moustache had congratulated him on his reading and offered to buy him a drink. This had caused Señora Sorrales to growl the young man's name threateningly. "Carlos."

His name was Carlos, Carl, same as his own. Funny, the affinity that arises in meeting someone with the same name, a naïve trust in fated coincidence, and a drink was exactly what he'd needed. Besides, the way Señor Sorrales was bobbing and weaving at the rear of the auditorium, his face red as a ripe tomato ready to burst and spatter his white sombrero, another night of passive aggressive seesawing at his hosts' abode had the potential for being trouble, troubling, and troublesome. He was traveling light, his laptop, manuscript pages, toothbrush and change of underwear in his laptop bag.

The bar was a sandbar thick with indigenous willow a polite jump across the trickle that represented the late summer flow of the Larree River.

The Indian summer day had been hot enough that the night air enjoyed a comfortable residual heat. The fire pit in the beach clearing had the look of an established artifact indicating that perhaps generations of teens and young adults had partied at this particular spot. The drink was *cerveza* and *cuervo*, neither of which he objected to. Someone had hooked their phone up to tiny speakers from which Spanish language music emanated, softly in the background. He'd been introduced around to the young men and women, some in the typical white shirt and Levi attire, others a little flashier and *risqué*. They were serious young folk but clearly enjoying the drink, the talk, the camaraderie.

Carlos presented a young woman, Jacinta, who had not been at the reading and indicated that she was a poet. She was quite pretty he remembered, and fiery. Carlos had asked her to recite one of her poems which she did with much verve and drama, entirely in Spanish, to the dithyrambic rhythms of hip hop or rap. Soon a few others joined in as a chorus or solo, improvising their own verses, and it went on like that in a kind of round robin until they collapsed into laughter and pleasure at their own cleverness.

Carlos called for Estrella, the young writer from Señora Sorrales' writers club, to recite a poem. Hers was much more serious in presentation and code switched between English and Spanish, a complaint of neglect, exclusion, and disrespect for indigenous culture, and although it was met with approbation it was kind of a damper as if someone had given a political speech at a beer bust. For that reason more bottles and cans of *cerveza* were opened and the *cuervo* passed around. It was a jolly group of *amigos* and *amigas* bantering and storytelling. Most of them were from Señor Galliego's Spanish Literature class, Carlos had explained. It was the most popular class at Gila Community College besides Farm Management and Agriculture. He himself was a big fan of the visceral realists that had been unintentionally spawned by Bolaño's novel, *The Savage Detectives*, but he loved Neruda, too, and Borges, and the French Surrealists, particularly René Char.

As the festivities brightened further under the influence of various intoxicants, and as the guest of honor, he had been asked to join in the improvisational recitation and posturing of the younger crowd. He'd counted on them not being all that familiar with Dylan's work, either Bob or Thomas, and borrowed from both freely. So he declaimed beneath the diamond sky, spoke of haunted frightened trees, the circus sands, the frozen leaves, and crazy sorrow because the times were changing. In his craft and sullen art he'd raged against the dying of the light not willing to gently go into that good night. He'd been a hit, cheered and egged on with various exhortations of the Spanish variety such as *mas!* and *olé!* from the appreciative albeit drunken youngsters.

Later, as morning rose to take the place of night, he and Carlos, now fast *amigos*, had staggered back to his pickup truck, young Carlos with his arm over his shoulder and confiding that his mother was a big Bob Dylan fan and he'd grown up listening to his albums. He'd asked, rhetorically, "Why do you think I'm a poet? But don't worry about it, I'm probably the only one of those *chollos* who caught it. Anyway, it's all about the singer, not the song." At least

in the arroyos poetry was alive albeit in another language. Anglo was deaf to their lyric concerns.

**Next stop, Las Garritas**, nothing but cul de sacs and the faux masonry facades of rustic cabin quasi-Craftsman chic, of large fireplace living rooms, useless under current air pollution regs, sparsely almost bleakly decorated minimal large canvas art and glass, chrome and leather furnishings that just screamed white privilege. . .and two and a half bathrooms somewhere at the end of the narrow framed art attended hallways, a place of intrigue and downright unpleasantness where he'd gone to splash water on his face, try on a few rakish expressions, and smooth the wrinkles from his clothes without much success. . .in the large open plan of the living space with its floor to ceiling window overlooking a drought resistant landscaping of wild grass and juniper, he entered the familiar world of sharp elbows, razorbacks, and hatchet expressions. . .all the potential elements for an orgy in place except that the milling bodies were way too uptight and self constrained. . .that would evolve to further neurosis as the effects of alcohol took hold. . .at that moment it had been as if the women's pussies were made of gold and the men's cocks, for all intents, were made of lead.

Jay Velour taught at Pepperdine, a major snake oil conman if there ever was one, where he'd bluffed his way into a teaching position using a repertoire of smoke and mirrors that even in the parched and cynical land of holly and wood still dazzled the gullible. . .they'd been fellow travelers a ways back, Berkeley in fact. . .Velour wasn't much help, reacting as if he'd been asked for his password. . .he'd laughed dryly, smirking, "You don't know Lacy?"

Sue Denim, a poet and psyche lamprey with skin like a Dead Sea scroll touched up with rouge and eyeliner loomed into view at his elbow. . .she had a smile like the Alien about to grab Sigourney Weaver by the throat. . .he'd put the buffet table between them. . .but bumped the elbow of a woman surveying the spread with narrowed eyes. . .she'd given him a look that would have withered a normal human. . .he knew the type. . .there was always a question as to whether it was their hand or their ass that required kissing, probably both. . .the indignant reaction was so well practiced. . ."Do you know who I am?"

He hadn't considered it a question. . .and of course having been in similar circumstances before, he had a ready reply, "I'm not certain what you're asking. . .do I know who you are or do I know who you think you are?"

Her name was Lacy Fabric. . .she was the alpha female running the literary scene in Las Garritas and, due to its proximity, firmly under the thrall of the university in Palo Alto where the people there were just as brainy and snobby but much more chic than Berkeley. . .and also the wife of the debonair Slavic language university professor, Serge Fabric. . .it was generally agreed that weekend poetry intensives were the height of literary pretension so all the pretenders and their acolytes were sure to attend. . .as it was also agreed that she was a narrow nosed bitch. . .nothing like getting off on the wrong foot.

He'd been scheduled to be on the afternoon panel and his mantra in such situations was "why do I let myself get roped into these things?"

They were all seated behind a long table much like the one that had held the buffet, a cast of doddering academics, literate dowagers, and himself, a rumpled wild eyed poetry pimp. . .the attendees now assembled to nosh on abstraction. . . fortunate for those who had a taste for academic inane as the panel's discussion was to be on *The Longfellow Syndrome, Bigfoot in American Poetry*

"I'm an anachronism: white, hetro, male, not interested in teaching" . . . that was always a good way to introduce yourself to a group of teaching professionals, educrats and workshop honchos. . .he'd focused on the floor to ceiling window at the rear of the room appreciating the senseless vacuity of dominating light.

"I became a poet with malice aforethought."

Why did he feel he had to tiptoe around the poetasters, pretenders and poseurs. . .poets are shameless, like professional Irish. . .he didn't like what he became when he had to scuffle for money although that was solved for the time being. . .even so he felt like he was wandering around a parking lot wearing a clown car looking for a parking space. . .thin skinned, thick headed like the Irish, they expect you to dance a jig on eggshells. . .yet he had his little song and dance down pat.

"Of course my main ghosts are the 3 W's of Poetry Americano, Whitman, Williams, and Whalen. . .but as you may know I favor the obscure as none of these guys get any respect in Anglo dominated academia. . . same with that generational ghost, Jack Kerouac. . .the Brits used to have 13 colonies. . . now they think they have 50. . .they may have lost their political dominion but their linguistic hegemony is still virulent. . .time for a second Americano revolution, to free ourselves of the yoke the Brits consider "proper" English. . .after all, we like to dangle our prepositions and grate with our minor key grammar, like the blues, and spice in some español, with dashes of far-ranging non-Indo-European accents. . .we be Americano. . .you have to understand that poetry is written in two languages in this country. . .there are those writing in conventional Brit influenced English written primarily by brainwashed English majors, and those who write in American English which doesn't adhere to conventional modes when it comes to phrasing, elisions, trains of thought, contractions, blends, blurs, slurs and word culture. . . Americano has a different ear. . .most poets today write with a conventional ear probably more out of a need for acceptance and survival in the evil Anglo language empire. . .it is these two opposing currents that have created the poetry vortex in El Norte. . . as someone once proposed 'when a poet dies two more are born' and that's either a good thing or a bad thing. . .poets are the myrmidons, the ant people, as any small press distribution catalog more than amply illustrates. . .they're everywhere and in many respects equally insignificant. . .but leave a piece of sugar or fat out and you've got a swarm, the original flash mob. . .for sugar or fat, substitute grant, publisher, fellowship, tenure, public exhibition, et cetera . . .the true anonymity of being a poet is never considered"

Once he got going on that particular freight train, it was hard to stop. . . the gaped mouth, frowning brows, and wide-eyed disbelief reward enough. . . bourgeois pretension is so easily dismantled.

“You don’t know what it is to write. . .it’s a crushing task. . .it bends your spine, blurs your eyesight, creases your stomach, cracks your ribs”. . . quoting a 10<sup>th</sup> century scribe to make a point. . .by the reaction of the audience to what he’d said, some had taken it personally.

Jay Velour had found the ear of Paul Esther’s widow, Polly, and appeared to be whispering his terms of endearment. . .Stoddard Leary had once remarked, in a somewhat cryptic fashion at the mention of Velour’s name, that he liked to smoke other men’s cigars. . .Paul hadn’t been in the ground more than thirty days and already the vultures were circling.

In answer, during the Q&A afterwards, “Oh, yeah, that’s why I’m a poet—I like the attention. . .it always has been all about me, too late to change.” And it probably wasn’t very politic of him when one of the panelists whose name slipped his mind immediately after he’d been introduced, announced that he would read a few short poems to illustrate a point, to say “Short poems—my favorite kind”. . .had he said that out loud?

During the discussion phase of the panel, Gabe Bardine, a university lit professor had stated some warmed-over leaden cliché that prompted him to say, “Come on, Gabe, you’re a college professor, what do you know about poetry?”

The Las Garritas set had their token bard, an unkempt fellow, bully, mamma’s boy, and the plaything shadow of the alpha female. . .think panda bear. . . by the name of Hayden Fleece whose shtick was to try to out-Irish Heaney. . .close but no cigar. . .he was the figurehead for a poetry package tour run by the Fabrics to what was advertized as the cradle of poetry, or the crossroads of poetry, with the unlikely name of Sunny Beach, a resort on the Bulgarian Black Sea from which no doubt the professor and his wife received substantial kickbacks. . .it also had the reputation of being a satyric romp. . . they’d circled each other at the watering hole whereupon at the conclusion of the panel the ranks bellying up for a drink was three deep as if all that dry academic blah-blah had parched them to no end so that listeners as well as speakers needed to quench what seemed like a bottomless thirst or to somehow obliterate the sheer convoluted gibberish that had filled the air with pompous self-importance. . .he hadn’t strayed too far as free booze, even if it was the much touted Central Coast varietals, was a phenomenon to be much appreciated and cultivated. . .of course standing around with a glass at the ready was all the opening most people needed to come up and spew their opinion. . .to insult or be insulted, as a kind of social jousting, and something at which he was quite adept.

“You are a snob with class aspirations. I’m just a snob”. . .said to someone’s husband. . .and the obvious answer to the oft asked obvious question. . .“I write what everyone else writes, only better.”

He did this thing with an eyebrow that arched just a bit. . .it wasn’t much but it was enough to appear threatening to some. . .a gathering of poets should not be a meeting of the Rotary Club but nonetheless the less will spin their wheels. . .always the same, the saucer eyed groupies at these parties and readings. . .there are good poets and bad poets. . .that said, they are merely points in a vast grey field.

“Her poetry. . .I’d read her poetry if it was printed on wet toilet paper.” . . .unfortunately he hadn’t caught the name of the poet. . .the DIY poets dominated such scenes, hobbyist for the most part, the lunatic autodidact fringe serving as the perfect example that a little knowledge is dangerous. . .the Notational School was also represented but no one had yet to take note. . .“Your name is synonymous with asshole and when it’s spoken it means ‘steaming piece of shit’” . . .he’d looked in the direction of the speaker, certain that it had been meant for him.

“He probably feels the same way about you” . . .said of somebody else. . . “You don’t think I’m funny. . .I don’t care” . . .“I’m this way because of all the babies I’ve eaten,” she’d said cryptically.

Well, the upshot was that he’d met Amber Chiffon, the Hillsborough matron and money behind Iron On Press. . .that had led to talk about why someone with his reputation was due for a collected poems. . .when things seem to be too good to be true, they sometimes are. . .he still had his reservations but he would be foolish to pass up the opportunity. . .so the wheels were set in motion and especially now after the Pillsbury Prize and his name had a kind of lopsided buoyancy. . . she was planning a late fall publication date. . . he was of two minds: sure, he was due, yet a collected poems had such a finality to it. . .and now he had to come up with a title. . . how does one title represent their entire life’s work?

At one point, way past the midnight hour, there were still die hard intellectuals arguing their stands somewhat repetitiously in their drunkenness draped or leaning against various pieces of furniture or in doorways. . . moaning low argumentative voices could be heard coming from the rear of the house. . .Jay Velour was giving his attention to an older carrot haired woman in a plush green druid’s robe whose bemused expression was in marked contrast to Jay’s sincere intensity. . .the buffet table was littered with dead soldiers and ravaged china. . . he had wandered into the darkened kitchen to search out possible reserves to wet his whistle. . .and got more than he’d bargained for. . .there on the preparation island Lacy Fabric was scarfing down a late night snack between the legs of another of her gender. . .Polly Esther, as it turned out. . .who knew?

**“See you in the next incarnation** where you’ll be pretty much the way you are now, a pimple on my ass.” In answer to the dick who’d said “I hate jazz.” Who’d he think he was, Adorno?

He stared transfixed at the passing scenery. That J.J. Johnson composition, *Enigma*, was replaying itself between his ears with all its incredible nuance of instrumentation: Miles, the Heath Brothers, the lyric majesty of the orchestration, heart breaking. He could actually hear a faint modulation.

“So, where you coming from?”

It took him a moment to register what the driver had asked. “Uh, the city,” he answered dully as if coming out of a sleep.

“Frisco?”

“Yeah, but they don’t like you to call it that.”

“Fuck them!”

“I’m with you there. I mean what’s the big deal? I’ve even heard it called San Cisco.”

“Now what the fuck!”

“Just saying.”

The driver pointed at the windshield and the delivery truck blocking the road ahead, and ahead of it, a pickup truck, and ahead of that, another vehicle, rear partially visible around the turn in the switchback.

“Another fucking accident? This is the third inna week!”

Behind them came the ramping up of a siren in warning. “Here comes the meat wagon.” The rescue flashed by, red, with a white stripe along the side.

The driver swore, angry. “I’m gonna be late for the sales meeting. Shit!”

He stared dumbly at the rear of the truck ahead and realized that they weren’t going anywhere. He cracked open the passenger side window to let in some fresh air and let out the thick smell of souring milk from the used wrappers and now empty box of ice cream bars.

“This better not take long!” The driver thumped the steering wheel, turned off the ignition and then gave him a look of disgusted frustration.

The warm air played against his face and he remembered Irma had said “We shouldn’t be too long.” She and Philippe were attending a retirement party for a friend in Fairfax. He might have quipped, “and I won’t belong” as an indication of just how out of place he felt in what he considered the wilderness, somewhere on the populated mesa overlooking the town of Bolinas.

However it was, in Irma’s guest room, French doors leading out to a small patio area surrounded by flowerbeds and lush greenery, much too much for him to absorb as anything but leaves of one kind or another classified in his limited urban taxonomy as either narrow or wide. The room with its profusion of natural light let in by the double doors was pleasant enough, and with a bed whose mattress might have been a trifle too comfortable, a padded armchair, a writing desk, and a wall of bookcases that served as an indication of Irma’s literate capital. Yet in spite of all of that outdoors, he’d felt confined. And not to be ungrateful, Irma and Philippe were excellent hosts, the food plentiful and well prepared, the conversations intelligent and lively. And they seemed to be delighted to have him as company despite the meaningful side-long glances they occasionally exchanged at perhaps his more outrageous contentions.

Irma hadn’t broached the subject but he knew that before his visit was over, it would come up. And he’d manage to keep his misgivings to himself. How could he complain when he was ensconced in the comfortable white wicker settee on the patio with a latte from Irma’s personal espresso machine and eye candy from Philippe’s irritatingly complete art library? Philippe being a prominent art scholar did confer certain advantages. And not only that, but ubiquitous bird song accompanied his reverie, at first to his surprise, then to his wonderment, and lastly to his annoyance. He couldn’t hear himself think! How he missed the soothing mechanical growl and purr of street traf-

fic. One bird in particular, a jay of some sort, had been pestering the edge of the foliage almost as if it were objecting to his occupying its territory. He doubted that it was more than wishful thinking but what happened next could hardly be thought of as revenge unless he was being more paranoid than usual.

Irma had a large black Persian cat named Midnight, a slothful creature who undoubtedly considered the settee its own private perch and which he had displaced with his latte and stacks of art books. He chose to ignore the remorseless yellow eyed stare and eventually Midnight found an alternate spot at the edge of the garden and stretched out in the classic sphinx pose with its front paws extended before it, inscrutable, alert but motionless. The bird kept up its racket.

He'd continued to flip through the monographs, Rice, Rivers, Rothko. He'd already done the P's, Picasso, Pissarro, Pollack, and so on. Something had caught his attention and he looked up just in time to see Midnight rise straight up through the air as if levitating and with one masterful stroke stretching its entire feline length, no longer an overweight kitty, more like an unerringly accurate furry arrow, and snag the annoying chatterbox that had apparently flown too close.

At first he wasn't sure that he'd seen what he'd just seen and had to replay it. Cat shoots straight up, agile as Michael Jordan, and knocks bird out of the air. While he was reliving his astonishment, the cat busied itself with the coup de grace. Then it proceeded to toss the lifeless shuttlecock around as if daring it to show signs of animation. As he knew, this was a house cat, fed on table scraps and any variety of canned or dry repasts. He'd watch the strangely sadistic but business-like dispassion of the cat's actions with his own detachment. Or maybe it was his own sadism and lack of mortification at this senselessness, a prime example of nature red in tooth and claw. When Midnight began tossing the lifeless bundle of feathers up into the air, he projected its taunting intent. "*Think you're so smart, doncha? Think you can fly? Let's see you fly now, Mr. Chatterbox.*" Some part of him was appalled, and it had disturbed his complacency. That might have been why he decided to take a walk to see what there was to do down in town.

***He'd written a quick sketch*** while he was on the bus that morning. He opened his bag and extracted his iPad and found the word file.

*Things I did in Bolinas.  
Got lost,  
Looked down at the surf from atop a steep cliff.  
Wondered if the sun would make an appearance.  
Identified the post office,  
Viewed the library.  
Found the bar.  
Drank coffee.  
Made small talk with local big wigs.  
Accepted generic congratulations.*

*Realized that invisibility depends on population density.  
Unknowingly wore an outfit that said 'I'm a tourist': slacks and suit  
coat.  
(either that or someone stenciled the word across my forehead while I  
slept).  
Drank beer.  
Met a pretty young cowgirl who worked for an oyster company in  
Point Reyes.  
Drank whiskey.  
Left Bolinas with the cowgirl.*

Even out in the country there was no escaping his impulsiveness, in fact it may have been exacerbated by the fresh air. He'd taken his laptop bag to Smiley's with the intent of working on the manuscript for his collected poems, now tentatively titled *Unintended Consequences*. He'd need to do an online search to see if anyone else had beat him to it. He wasn't too worried. Even if someone else had, he had more where that came from. Originally he'd been torn between *No Wonder* and *Some Assembly Required*. Then *Recent Ash* was momentarily in the forefront but sent to the discard pile for its potential mispronunciation as *Recent Ass* which would probably prompt friends as well as detractors, often the same, to comment that the *ass* part stretched much further back than *recent*. *Read My Dust* soon followed but that was a title best suited for a chapbook.

As *Temporary Eternity* had been. The letterpress chapbook published by Grand Teton Press in Montana turned up when Nora had done one of her periodic clean-ups of her office, discovered behind the couch in the debris field that was her work space. How such a successful agent could be so functionally disorganized was beyond him. Well, working with writers was like bringing order out of chaos so the mess suited her skills. On a day he'd stopped by looking for an advance on the work he was doing for her, she'd pointed to the white mailing box sitting on the ottoman and said "that came for you." She didn't bother to mention that the postmark was over two months old.

He'd been crashing on an old cabin cruiser with Aaron Shone at Mission Bay at the time. Aaron Sidney Shone, poet, songwriter and long time cohort, lived illegally on a boat moored there. Aaron was hardly ever on the boat, spending most of his time at a practice hall/dungeon/club house in the shed of a demolition yard in the neighborhood with an entourage of groupies and drug dealers around the cultish cover band called *The Reruns*, but known to everyone as *The Runs*. Although the space on board was cramped and Aaron was a borderline hoarder, its one advantage was that it was close to The Bayside, a seafaring watering hole of old favored by pier rats and the worker class. He felt quite at home there though that could be said of any number of watering holes scattered throughout the city. The disadvantage was that the gate to access the berth was locked from eleven pm to four am and those inhabitants who did not possess a key and were there illegally found themselves locked in or locked out. Not a few early mornings had found him scaling the

chain link gate to make it to his bunk and to fall asleep as the waves slapping against the side of the dilapidated bay cruiser. He'd also lost a pair of pants in the crotch, snagged on the twisted terminus of a chain link.

At any rate, the box contained chapbooks, beautifully designed, with hand-set type, and printed on rag paper by the renowned Dan "Red" Cliffords who operated his prestigious little poetry press off the grid in the shadow of the Grand Tetons, paid off or paid down a lot of markers and favors. He could have got a good price by placing some with the bookseller Harry Croft, but he wasn't going to forget that he had been set up by him, though Croft continued to vociferously deny that he had anything to do with that incident a year past that had almost got him killed.

***"My boss needs to get me one of those."*** The driver indicated the tablet. "They'd be great for inventory."

He glanced up from the screen as if coming up for air, breaking out of the depth of his ruminations in the privacy of his feelings to engage the stranger, and appreciating that going into his device might be construed as rude though he knew the younger folk thought nothing of tuning out. "Yeah, they're pretty handy. Lots of bells and whistles. I'm still trying to figure out what they all are."

The driver craned his neck to watch another car queue in behind the car behind them. "Fuck," he breathed looking back at the display on his phone, "Not even a bar."

A siren sounded ahead of them and a red and white ambulance with lightbar pulsing hove into view going in the opposite direction. In the distance the loud growl of a heavy truck starting up and rumble of a few other engines turning over, what sounded like a helicopter churning overhead.

He couldn't help himself the display pulling him in like a deep dark pool. He'd been borderline obsessive before, but now technology had pushed him over the edge.

***He'd been introduced to computers rather late***, getting rid of his old Royal, appropriately, at the turn of the century. First through the glacially slow desktop stations in the library, owning one then beyond his means, and subsequently picking up someone's cast-off, after they'd purged the hard drive. "Knowing you, Wendt" was a common assumption, plagiarism allegations following him around like he'd stepped in dog shit. And he'd learned the hard way to make back-ups and hard copies, friends letting him have use of a printer or an office machine. The last one, an obsolete laptop Angie had given him, was not wifi capable, though it had come with one of her old printers.

"I don't know what to do with them, they just pile up like broken toasters," she'd complained. He couldn't figure it, an earth conscious stalwart like Angie and she couldn't make the jump to recycling them. He'd often thought of getting a cell phone and a tablet. Short of robbing a jewelry store, back then, that wasn't going to happen. Then he met Oren Rickles, or was finally introduced to him by Stoddard Leary. He was a slightly rotund man with a

head of oily dark curls and beard, signature orange Converse. Friend of Kay Sayrah's, and apparently IT consultant to the poets.

A sign said *poetry is code* over a workbench strewn with a rat's nest of wires, stripped armatures, and solder studded green motherboards. Rickles had taken a look at his laptop when he'd asked if it was worth upgrading with a wireless connection. The tech glanced at the top and the bottom without opening it and then had shrugged handing it back to him, saying "I dunno, paper weight, boat anchor, museum?"

How dependant on his computing device he'd become. He didn't think he wanted to or could go back, even if he tried, to not being able to record himself through the magic of electrons. It wasn't exactly a deal with the devil, but he did upgrade to a used laptop with wifi, charger thrown in, word processor software, an updated version of the one he was already familiar with. Once he got the hang of the web browser, well, the world was at his fingertips like never before, every arcane fantasy could be called up at a key stroke, mouse click, dark, unknown corners brought to light in the course of a browse to spiral further down into that autodidacts' rabbit hole. It had taken about a week to scare up a down payment from various sources, the bulk of which came from Nora who reasoned that an improvement in his prospects was an improvement in her prospects of getting back the money he owed.

But he had to draw the line somewhere, or redraw it at least, and branding himself as had been suggested as a path to success, was it. He wasn't interested in the shiny lamination of a presentable product, a definable entity encased in plastic like a fly in amber. It offered a dubious immortality and in a disposable culture the chances of being recycled were slim. Facebook, he didn't have time for its compelling hypnotic appeal. There had to be a demarcation, a perforation between the tectonic plate of one generation and the next. And where the plates rubbed against each other, that's where the energy was generated, a friction felt along the fault line that filled the air with static electricity. There he drew the line,

Yet opening the laptop was like opening the lid to a treasure chest of nostalgia, the open sesame to which was whatever one wanted it to be as long as it was comprised, at a minimum, of eight characters, upper and lower case letters, and numerals. Arcane lore and magical science, showrooms of innovation and museums of ancestral excellence, documents and documentaries, the past represented in grainy photo and remnants of shadows on yellowing celluloid. To his everlasting delight he had found footage of the jazz giants in his pantheon of greats and lovingly indulged in every move, mannerism and expression of his heroes in the delineation of the music that resonated in the depth of his being. To their videos he gave himself unconditionally as if in a dream with a fixity that excluded all else.

And this was only one facet of the holographic cyberinth, there were so many corners to turn, so many surfaces to explore, so many directions to follow without a thought to ever finding the exit. And then there was porn, the brothel for the eyes, that alone providing enough proof for the primacy of the visual cortex in processing consciousness let alone on-demand woody. Never have the uses of anatomy been so graphic and sex so boring, after the first five

minutes at least. And so now anything of any visual stimulation by the abundance of choices glossily presented is designated porn for its salacious appeal and which naturally enough precipitates consumer orgies that the economy so much depends upon.