

“Fiction has a truth exceeding that of history”

–Aristotle

## **Year 4.02**

**Oren Rickles was an odd egg** but fairly personable for someone with borderline autism. His workshop/squat took up the rear of an industrial building in the flats off of Third and one of the State streets. Apart from being a computer nerd, he fancied himself a poet and a literary theoretician. But because he was a tech, no one would take him seriously when he spoke his ideas about poetry. It was, yeah, thanks for fixing my computer but I’m not interested in hearing what you have to say about literature. So typical of English majors. And because Rickles was letting him buy the reconditioned laptop on time, and that he needed to be talked through the open source operating system, its quirks and whistles, and the kind of product review that only a guy totally obsessed in discerning the x-y coordinates of every aspect of the techno-sphere could give, he had lent a superficially sympathetic ear.

What transpired during these tutorials along with helpful hints and various shortcuts was a recitation of Rickles’ opinions on the failings and future of poetry in the cyber age. Such as the internet had exposed a vast wasteland of writers of poetry whose only definition of the art came from the dictionary and children’s nursery rhymes, and that they far outnumbered the really intelligent working artists, threatening to redefine poetry by their sheer number and shameless ignorance, and comparing the situation to the cult movie *Idiocracy*. Also, that a tsunami of shit poetry would wipe out any accumulated innovation and reset the bar to ground zero. In his opinion, authentic poetry would rise from the obliterating sameness in an adjacent possible where it would flourish in ways unknowable as a creative adaptation to new technology. Language changes, he’d insisted, because new words are needed for new concepts which are then parsed as common denominators. And, in turn, that affects the direction of cultural drift. Rickles had a lot of other crazy ideas. He’d even quoted Italo Calvino to him. *“The author, that spoiled child of ignorance and romantic myth, vanishes and gives way to a more thoughtful person, a person who knows the author is a machine and knows how the machine works.”*

He’d come to similar conclusions. Now with his own personal access to the internet and the millions upon millions who wrote poetry, he understood that good or bad was no longer a valid standard, that whether a poem was good or bad really didn’t matter. Obeying the laws of entropy, poetry was becoming static, flat, dissipated, an infinity of poetry particles whose repulsive polarity, no longer negative or positive, was, as a consequence, losing its energy. It didn’t matter if he had written a good poem or a bad poem. What mattered was who his friends were, who he knew in advantageous positions, and who could exercise their power by awarding him boons or influence others to do so. Yet poet was such a solitary occupation. And success required social skills, the one seemingly a betrayal of the other. That left only the luck of the draw.

Though certainly less tactile than a cocktail party, there was a similarity to online interactions. Internet poetry groups were like children lost in a forest calling out their positions or locations to each other or merely, as birds in distant trees or thickets, defining the edges of their territory with song. They represented not so much an avant-garde poetry underground as they did isolated instances of undifferentiated ground litter. And as in the actual world, the cyber world of poets was its own kind of hell. Well meaning intention could count on being easy prey for poetry trolls and grammar ogres eager to exploit potential for conflict.

The faith of these poets in their simpleminded intent reflected a particular innocence. Uninformed of the latest developments, their poetry was lacking in the most basic acquaintance with the breadth of literature and its significant history. These Volk or folk poets were often driven by self-righteousness and exhibitionism similar to those of itinerate preachers or evangelicals. In spirit, they believed in a true poetry, unhampered by the petty questions and quarrels that made up the dark matter of the literary universe. On the other hand, and not surprisingly, theirs was also a very conservative poetry, one not so much devoid of inspiration as perhaps of innovation and imagination. The styles adopted or imitated were modern only in the sense that they were developed in the Twentieth Century. In some ways, they could be considered zombie poets, the living living off the dead in a clueless regurgitation of great art.

And that went for those who recited free associated lists as a claim to a pedestrian edginess as well. Their poems championed a self-conscious abstraction. Abstraction, the deadliest of language mires, was the beacon of pretenders. Ironically, only parodies of abstractions were actually bearable and anywhere near being truly abstract. But presenting this metaphorical porridge as jambalaya was criminal not to mention nauseating.

Still others wrote the poetry of misguided journalists whose feeble ironies served only cliché while yet others aimed to be photographers, subjective in their Ansel Adams black and white objectivity. Poetry workshops and writing groups, to further the muddy the waters, fostered a self-esteem that verged on delusions of reference in which celebrity was the ultimate attainment. What all of them could not comprehend was that poetry was tautegorical, not intellectual. The poem did not represent the thing, it was the thing. Consequently, poetry belonged to the sphere of affectivity and will.

Poets surround themselves with words to assimilate the world of objects. The poetic mind never perceives passively, never contemplates things, and all its observations spring from some act of participation, some act of emotion and resolve. Even as the poetic imagination materializes in poems and presents the definitive outlines of an objective world, the significance becomes clear only if the dynamic sense of life from which it originally arose can be detected. Only when it expresses itself as love or hate, fear or hope, joy or sorrow is the poetic imagination roused to the pitch of excitement at which it begets a definite world of representation through the agency of the poem. And only when the entire self is surrendered, possessed by a singular impression, is there the utmost tension between subject and object, the outer

and inner world. Then external reality is not merely viewed and contemplated but overwhelms with its sheer immediacy, with fear, hope, terror, or wish fulfillment. A spark jumps the synaptic gap and the tension finds release as subjective excitement becomes objectified and confronts the poet as a poem. The earliest products of poetic thinking are neither permanent, self-identical, or clearly distinguished as poems, nor are they immaterial inklings. They are like elements of a dream, objects endowed with poetic import, haunted places, accidental shapes in nature resembling something of portent, all manner of shape shifting fantastic images which speak of larger ineffable ideas of good and evil, life and death. Their common trait being that they evoke awe in the connectedness of all life. Poetry does not give rise to discursive understanding. Nor does it beget apperception by sorting out concepts and relating them to distinct patterns. A poem tends to bring together great complexities of related ideas in which all distinct features are merged and assimilated. He'd said as much to the two women who had come to interview him.

"Finally!" the driver shouted with exaggerated triumph. A stream of sedans, pick-ups and delivery trucks rushed by, going in the opposite direction. The delivery van ahead of them belched from its tailpipe noxious carbon particulates. And slowly, like a pipe unclogged, the train of motor vehicles inched forward.

Gazing at the tangle of curling understory along the side of the road he doubted if an answer to his incomprehension would be found there among the tatters of styrofoam and fast food litter, the stooping choirs of a species of oat gone wild, the snarled maze of winter fall and decay. It was as if his destiny, something before now he thought he had well in hand, had been repossessed by a fickle whimsy. In exchange for his recent windfall, perhaps. He'd had misgivings all along. The whole chain of events had an aura of fiction about it.

In his convalescence, he'd also grown fond of Rude Christine's, a cyber café off of Fillmore in the vicinity of Japantown.

It was a Monday, he remembered. He had passed the time surfing the web, jotting in his notebook file stray bits of conversations, making observations:

*"The manager and her mother will let anyone in. Are you man enough to do it? Someone has to guard the door while the other one goes up."*

*Three gay cocks lit blue as gas flames. The owner has a chest condition. "When you get done, we'll play backgammon." The lead singer from an old seventies punk band has a sore throat.*

*"If you fall by Tuni's, I'll turn you on to some tuies."*

*Kinda rhymes.*

*Stacked saucers, flowers, a Cubist era style calendar.*

*"I owe damn near 300 large on my rent. I'd just as soon cut off my nuts as give it up."*

*"I'll be leaving at about half past eight tonight."*

*Six mirrors always reflecting each other.*

*"I think we're just getting deeper in shit."*

*Dear Sir, you are a lousy crumb (in response to a negative review – the irony perhaps too subtle.)*

*That woman has a nose like the tip of a sewer snake.*

*Louise forgot her fur. Me, I don't need a fur nor am I cold. A guy known to everyone as Danny smokes a cigarette (outside) and checks the bus schedule. A black cat traipses across the brass rail.*

*"Those crepes were exquisite."*

*The soda fountain trickles. Dress black as her nail polish. It's completely impossible.*

*"Here you go, mister. Malachite ring."*

*The floor sown with sawdust. The redheaded waitress took off with the bookstore clerk. A reporter I vaguely recognize from elsewhere.*

*"Listen, Jack, what I'm about to tell you is of the utmost importance."*

*Passenger Cargo Manifest (art deco poster for a steamship line.)*

*"So he says to me, mister, would you like to see what I can do with etchings or oil? I've just got this little cutie."*

*After lunch at the café on Steiner.*

*"Once there, he introduces me to some big shot who tells me, 'look that's all well and good, in Syria, Naples, Tunis, but good God, where is it? The last time I was in China. Gotta be eight or nine years ago.'"*

*Honor often arrives at the stroke of the hour (the beginning of her shift).*

*The upper hand (something he felt he had to gain).*

And that was where one of Hugh Klidian's associates had found him to tell him the good news.

***He'd been similarly idle at Smiley's*** in Bolinas though the atmosphere was a shade more rustic, and he was fussing with his iPad rather than his second-hand laptop. But his anonymity there had been compromised. Someone must have made a phone call or texted. Word got around that he was visiting Irma and the literati who had sequestered themselves in this coastal enclave hoping for a little pastoral cred and attaching themselves to the cachet of living in a hip backwater surfing destination wandered in to gawk and say hi. Soon there were grinning faces and hands proffered to shake. And things like "Congratulations on the award" and "You deserve it" and "let's get together for lunch while you're here" were said. He'd wonder at the last, "What's wrong with right now?" Not that he didn't appreciate the attention. He did have to restrain himself from hitting them up for a loan, out of habit. How would it look if a guy who'd been awarded a quarter mil had his hand out? The cash, would be the reasoning, should be going in the other direction.

He'd had a premonition that he'd find himself in such a pickle, the shoe on the other foot, the reversal of roles, now that he had what others might want. It was the look in Hugh Klidian's eyes, gleam actually, when they shook hands after he had signed and dated the paperwork in multiple places. Like he'd just been initiated into a club, the club of people who smelled of new money. A notary was present as was the branch manager of the bank in the

same building as Klidian's office. He'd been in a daze, elated by the news that he'd been awarded the first ever Pillsbury Prize, named in honor of the late Dorian Pillsbury and funded by his estate, yet he felt a nagging in his solar plexus like his amygdala had just given him the shot of adrenaline required to address a vague unknown fear. He'd caught himself looking around for the exit.

Eventually he moved from the table in the corner in Smiley's to the bar where a rather besotted professor emeritus was holding forth. He'd gone from dark roast extra cream to carbonated sugar free flavored water. He saved the waitress a trip and paid at the bar. While he was there he listened in to the old guy with the rosy cheeks, shamelessly red beezers propping up large dark framed eyeglasses, all else bare and blotchy pink except for tufts of white hair sprouting around his ears. He was making a point about women to the bartender and anyone else who would listen, illustrated by a folk tale of Indo-European provenance.

Apparently an old chieftain, patriarch of a large clan, was tired of his wife and wanted to take as his bride a younger newer woman. Had it been for political reasons, it might have been understandable. But it wasn't. He told his old wife to take whatever she thought most precious to her and return to her people. She in returned reminded him of all the children she had provided him, and because of her, grandchildren and great grandchildren. She had stood by him as an ally to her father's people. She had guided him to the prominence that he now held. Her arguments were to no avail. The chieftain called his relatives and clansmen together to celebrate his betrothal to the fair youngster, younger, in fact, than many of his own children. Some of the children commiserated with the mother. Why doesn't he just take her as a second wife or even a consort? But the mother hushed them and pointed out that the young bride was the daughter of a respected man in the clan and to make her subservient would be a grave insult. The feast went on for many days, with the old chieftain showing that he could still hold his own in both storytelling and drinking. Finally the old chief showed his age and passed out, dead to the world. During this time the wife had busied herself by putting her affairs in order before she left, and when the celebration ended shortly thereafter, she set about cleaning up the banquet hall with the help of her daughters. When the old chief finally came to, he was completely disoriented, having no idea where he was. First, he was moving or the floor beneath him was moving. It was then that he realized that he was in the back of a wagon packed with trunks and baskets. When he sat up he saw that he was in the middle of vast grasslands, the circumference of the dome of endless cloud streaked blue visible in every direction he looked. Pulling the wagon were two teams of oxen, and leading the oxen, a short shrouded figure that, at his angry shout, turned to reveal his wife. He demanded to know the meaning of her actions. Did she not understand that he had sent her away? The old woman waited for the wagon and her husband to come abreast. I am doing exactly what you told me to do, dear husband, she answered, I am returning to my people. But why have you kidnapped me, the chief demanded. But husband, you said that I was free to take that which is most precious to me.

“When a man loves a woman,” the old professor said by way of making his point, “it’s all about what he’ll sacrifice for her and the fear of the loss of what he’s sacrificed. When a woman loves a man, she’s in for the long haul no matter that she’s disrespected and disregarded, the nature of her love is what matters.”

He’d wanted to interject that Picasso once said, “When a man watches a woman sleeping he wonders how he can make her dreams come true, but when a woman watches a man sleeping she wonders what kind of sauce to serve him with”, but just then an elderly woman entered the bar and, smiling, caught the professor’s eye. The old man unglued himself from the stool, leaving a pile of singles on the bar, saluted the bartender with a finger off the edge of his brow, quasi-military style, bowed in acknowledgement to his listeners, and spoke “my Volkswagen awaits” with an air of drunken aplomb.

It was watching the old dean depart that he’d noticed the sign painted on the window advertising *NAL on Tap* again. He’d seen it when he’d first walked in and it had made him curious. When the bartender came around to check on him, he’d asked, reading the sign in reverse like it was someone’s name, “What’s NAL?” to which the bartender had answered “New Albion Lager.” A long ago bell of familiarity sounded, and he’d responded like Pavlov’s dog. “I’m just going to have to try a pint of that.” How easy it was to disregard the doctor’s advice with the excuse that just one drink wouldn’t hurt. How easy to step off the wagon. He could have at least waited till it came to a stop.

Remembered only in snatches, the vague contours of what had happened next stood out like silhouettes, shadow puppets with dialogue. Standing outside a restaurant. Point Reyes. Talking to the young girl in the western hat by the pickup truck. Older model, blue. But before that, having had a few more NAL’s which he found himself pronouncing “nails” and soon progressing to the harder stuff, he’d had a conversation with a young woman who approached him and said “Tell me, don’t I know your name?” She was a robust blond, roughened by the elements, delivering something he later learned were oysters. She’d mistaken him for someone else. But to keep up the small talk, he’d asked, “Know of any good places to eat?” When she told him of a place she liked in Point Reyes, he’d slyly invited her to join him, not really expecting her to accept, but just to feel that he could still be bold, and perhaps a little gallant. He’d been having feelings of gallant lately. Maybe it was the medication. But she’d said “sure” and “I’ll come by when I finish my deliveries.” By then he had a skin full. She’d assumed he had a car, but when it turned out he didn’t, she agreed to take the company truck.

The dinner passed in a blur and he was spending like a drunken sailor. He was, in fact, the epitome of a drunken sailor, one of Francis Drake’s, with a huge credit line. Then in the parking lot. He’d made a clumsy drunken halfhearted advance. He distinctly remembered her clasping her red rough hand on his shoulder with a surprisingly strong grip and looking up into his face to speak the words he would remember to the end of days. “Time to give it up, old dad.” And then immediately, just like a woman, felt pity for him and

handed him a burlap bag of oysters from the pickup bed as a consolation. At least they too smelled of the sea.

Next thing he knew he was at the side of the road holding a smelly burlap bag and trying to get back to Irma's in Bolinas. His cell phone had died somewhere along the way so he couldn't call Irma and Philippe to the rescue. The driver who'd picked him up, a wild eyed speed freak whose jaws were so tweaked he could barely talk, and when he finally did some many miles down the road, said "You're in luck, I'm going all the way to Sebastopol." It was then that he realized that he was headed in the wrong direction and was faced the choice of either getting out in the middle of nowhere to go back in the right direction or continuing to a destination that at least had street lighting. That was how he had ended up in Sebastopol. And all this time he thought it was a port in the Crimea.

***The self once damped by alcohol***, and necessitated by his medication regimen, in the process of drying out, had begun to emerge, the knee deep doubt that planted him in the precarious position of having to reconsider his past, soberly. It was a self he had dodged with drink, fortified against a persistent sense of doom or anxiety about his life choices. Some paths were less traveled because they led to dead ends, although all paths inevitably led to a dead end. It was the promise of a shortcut or easier inclination that enticed the lazy and the foolish. But blinkered by booze, he'd relied on the rosy glow of unrealistic expectations and overly romanticized delusions. What he also knew, how easy was the slide back into the elbow bending habit, anesthetizing the turbulent doubt inflaming his frazzled psyche. Had it not been for the admonitions of Dr. Darcy D'Mise, the physician who had advanced the diagnosis of POEMS Syndrome, he might have never known how close he was to dying. In the medical sense, at least.

He'd even had fantasies, drug induced no doubt, while lying in the hospital bed, of a young Middle Eastern or Indian intern standing over him with a clipboard saying, "You've got testicular cancer." And his smartass answer, "Ah, a case of the punishment fitting the crime." Or the doctor, now a dark-eyed East Indian woman, telling him, "You have rectal cancer." And his witty retort, "Well, what can I expect after all these years of being an asshole." It was during that morphine induced haze that he'd come to the realization that he should have died young like all the other promising talent but through some fluke he had been spared that fate. The gods had smiled down at him. Or maybe they were smiling smugly and cruelly behind their hands, as only superior beings can, with the knowledge that his hubris was going to cost him big time.

So when Doctor D'Mise brought up POEMS syndrome, he thought she was pulling his leg, the good one. She had learned that he was a poet and this was her little joke. But she was dead serious and had no idea, nor did she seem to care, that he was a poet. POEMS Syndrome, she went on to explain, was a rare blood disorder that damaged the nerves and affected many other parts of the body. POEMS stood for *Polyneuropathy, Organomegaly, Endocrinopathy, Monoclonal plasma-proliferative disorder, and Skin*

*changes*. Yikes! Talk about a gang of tortuous tongue twisters erected as a monument to foreboding hypochondria.

Ticking them off on his fingers, yes, he had been feeling numbness and a tingling in his legs, particularly the one with the fractured femur, but that was to be expected. Yet it also fit the symptoms of polyneuropathy. Enlarged liver was a likely diagnosis of a booze hound such as himself, but an enlarged liver counted as organomegaly. His thyroid had tested borderline hence the endocrinopathy worry. But some of that might have been a result of the beating and the ruptured spleen. Also, the blood tests showed that plasma cells floating around in his blood stream, possibly as a consequence of the fracture, were producing monoclonal proteins and so the reason for the monoclonal plasma-proliferative disorder concerns. As for skin changes, he'd always been blotchy, and after the bruising had faded, either on the skin or the muscle underneath, little areas of roughness or atrophic inflexibility were perceptible.

But, as D'Mise had cautioned while trying to assuage the panic that must have shown in his face, POEMS Syndrome can be misdiagnosed because the signs and symptoms mimic those of other disorders. Which was why she'd advised that he stop drinking, both to take the stress off his liver, and also because the medication she was prescribing had a dangerous interaction with alcohol. "POEMS syndrome progresses rapidly and may become life-threatening," he remembered her saying, "so early diagnosis is important." He knew that the treatment might improve his symptoms but would not cure the condition. His options included radiation therapy, chemotherapy, and peripheral blood stem cell transplant. He shuddered. But he was getting ahead of himself. More tests were needed. The booze helped to muscle the pessimism out of the way and at the same time it was killing him. He wanted a cigarette so bad just then.

***The driver pointed out the windshield*** at the wreck. "I knew it, some idiot taking the top of the curve too fast."

The line of vehicles was moving at a slow enough pace that the older model sedan wrapped around a tree, pine or fir of some sort whose shabby lower limbs appeared to be reaching down to comfort the crumpled roof and webbed windshield, was in full display before they came up on the Highway Patrol unit, the tow truck, and the volunteer fire company's surplus fire rig, and were directed around to the one lane by a young man in baggy yellow pants with red suspenders over a blue tee shirt. The flare pattern spread out along the roadside like footlights on an elaborately staged set.

"There's always a wreck here," the driver said, assigning blame to the location. "There should be a flashing sign up here that says *slow down* or something, doncha think?"

He wasn't listening. He was picturing a similar scene a little over a year earlier. He had come to, the left side of his face throbbing after momentarily being numb from the impact of it hitting the ground, the illusion of the lawn's softness only masking the hard pack underneath. He'd ripped his pants, the left knee shredded, palms abraded, and perhaps a tad concussed

from the nose dive precipitated by his having tripped on the concrete wheel stop escaping someone who had tried to run him down in the parking lot. He might have lost consciousness because the next thing he knew someone was standing over him saying, "I saw it! That guy tried to run you over, I swear." A few more feet and legs approach, some running, and he'd accepted someone's hand in getting up, "You OK? That was a nasty tumble." He was all right. "Anybody get a license?" But no one had. It was dark, it was foggy. There were sirens. "Did someone call 911?" No one had. And the sirens passed them heading back toward the avenues.

He'd dusted himself off, found the package containing the Lucien Graff first edition, assessed the damage as slight, assured the few who'd witnessed the chain of events, either getting out of their cars or getting in, that he was fine, thanked them for their concern, and headed back home to lick his wounds. And self-consciously, too, to avoid giving anyone a glimpse of the wet patch that had spread in the area of his crotch

Still slightly stunned, he'd boarded a city bus just arriving at the bus stop at the head of the parking lot. He hated taking the bus but he knew he wouldn't make it back to Balboa on foot in his condition. The bus was nearly empty at the head of its return route and he took a seat by the window to stare at his mirror likeness and the bruise blossoming on his cheek.

The bus had traveled not more than three hundred yards before coming to a stop. Flashing blue and red lights, white strobes freezing shadows, blocked the path. A female patrolman held up a hand in the glare of the bus headlights talking into the radio mic hooked to her epaulet, and then waved them forward. Off to the side of the road, a dark two door sedan had met its match with an immovable hundred year old cypress. A squad of firefighters had gathered at the driver's side with extrication tools.

"You got a cigarette?"

The driver looked a little surprised. "Uh, no, trying to quit." He pointed at the center console and the empty box of ice cream bars. "Why do you think I'm eating these?"

He thought of saying, but didn't, "I've heard of cold turkey, but that's an interesting variation." He said instead, "Got a little rattled by the wreck. I quit, too, about six months ago, but whenever I get stressed, I get the urge for a cigarette."

"Yeah, I know whatchu mean, and there's not always a convenience store around the corner."

***How he'd put the two together*** was one of those instances when disparate elements brought in proximity to each other form an agreeable union. The close call had decided him against selling Dorian's copy of the signed Lucien Graff, admitting to himself that it was despicably low, even for him. When he went to return it, he was met by Terrence Klout, Dorian's business manager. Julie was in the hospital in critical condition. Dorian had taken a turn for the worse. The prognosis was not good. And the police had been by. Terry didn't think Dorian should have any more visitors to further agitate his breathing difficulty. He'd left the Graff with Klout. The mention of

police had stopped him before he headed back down the stairs, and he'd inquired why the police had come to see Dorian. Klout explained that because Julie had been in a car wreck he assumed that they had talked to him because he was her employer. They'd asked to speak to Dorian in private, detectives, a man and a woman. He didn't realize then that he would never see his old friend alive again.

He'd put all that aside to deal with the impending move from the Balboa address. To his relief, Andy Porter's basement studio was available to him for all of May while Andy was in Shanghai. As that was only temporary, he'd had to look further afield. Nora had nixed even the barest hint of couch surfing. He'd looked in on a couple of old girlfriends, but most of them had new boyfriends. Tom Presley's place over on Albion was good for a few nights but he knew that Elle loathed him so the atmosphere was hardly congenial. That had left Aaron Shone's cabin cruiser on the Bay as backup. Mary O'Nyett, author of *Hanging Out With The Poetry Puppets*, had taken pity on him and let him housesit while she spent a few weeks in the Sierras. The upshot was that he was never settled. The twelve years as a boarder at Angie's had atrophied his instincts. He'd spent not a few nights in twenty four hour coffee joints trying to stay awake long enough for the library to open so that he could rest his head on a good book. Or find an unclaimed shady spot in Golden Gate Park. It was not that his friends had abandoned him but there was only so much they could do short of adopting him. And nobody wanted to do that.

What finally got him over his anxiety about contacting Grace Niklia was due in part to his excuse. He was curious to know if she had been one of the detectives who had paid Dorian a visit because of Julie's accident. He was hoping that it wasn't because she had reported the Lucien Graff as stolen. He was surprised and elated when Grace suggested that they meet for coffee, a chain diner over on Larkin near the State building.

Grace had handed him a photocopy of a page ripped from a spiral notebook. Apparently it was a note found in Jeremy Beljhar's room. "Is this a poem? If it is, it's a really bad poem" she'd opined which had called for his favorite comeback, "There are no bad poems, only bad poets."

He'd read it through and offered, "I've seen worse."

"But it's gibberish, right?"

"Gibberish, poem. Poem, gibberish. It's a fine line."

"That's what I thought at first. But then I realized that it was gibberish with a purpose!"

"Gibberish with a purpose? I think that would stand as a definition of poetry."

Grace ignored him. "It's an acrostic!"

He remembered re-reading it several times, stunned, silent.

**When sun touches the crimson ocean  
Exactly between the golden span  
Nearby a tiny green door creaks open  
Desire's dismal return always reminds**

The mammal brain of its intrinsic purpose  
In spite of culture's encompassing rind  
Solemn as a lizard's plodding advance  
Nature holds tight the reproductive patent  
Excepting nothing but forgone conclusion  
X-ray eyes penetrate far beyond  
Thermal illusion's blink of horizon

"I guess I did learn something in Granahan's class."

"Oh, yeah, what's that?"

"How not to be afraid to look below the surface of a poem to understand its reason for being."

But that was not the least of it, and momentarily he'd had a sudden paranoid chill shock the base of his skull. What he wanted to know was why the police had gone to see Dorian and was it connected with Julie because he did not like the narrative he was writing for himself given what he could gather from coincidence.

Grace in turn wanted assurances that none of what she told him would appear in his gossipy newspaper column. "Because if you publish any of this, I will find you."

He'd explained to her that the column was history. With Charlie Reyes out of the picture, the editor who, as it turned out, actually was a friend of the late Reg Meyer, had no compunction about letting him go. "I like the sound of that."

She was her no-nonsense cop self that day. "You won't."

The way she explained it she'd tumbled to a pattern of poet involved deaths, ones that were deemed accidental or suspicious. It was busy work while she served out her disciplinary time assigned to the mayor's office. She was made to review reports of accidental deaths and suicides at the city's SRO hotels and come up with some numbers. Her boss didn't care, any numbers would do. They would be crunched further by the analysts at Human Services to either get more preventative funding or to justify the funding they were currently receiving. Using raw data from the coroner's office, she would list the SRO addresses as parameters to narrow down the sheer number of deaths in the city. It was dull, coma-inducing, not to mention ghoulish, work and to her mind hardly fit punishment just for calling a supervisor a woman-hating rat-faced son of a bitch.

Be that as it may, if they thought they could punish her with boredom, they hadn't considered that boredom was the mother of necessity and that necessity was the mother of creativity. She'd recognized a name on the dead roll, a writer, the poet Luke Recess, author of *Natural Thang*. Then an obituary in the daily caught her eye, Jasmine Gore, author of *Get Out Of Here, Poems of Escape*, killed in a motorcycle accident. And there was the news that baseball celebrity, Ben Adams, author of a book of poems entitled *I'm Back!* had died under suspicious circumstances, possibly a drug overdose.

Since she was playing with the database to begin with, she added poet or writer as an occupational category to further define her parameters. There

seemed to be a trend of accidental or unexplained poet deaths beginning a few years prior. When she searched for what they might all have in common, she'd uncovered a rat's nest of incestuous relationships and internecine warfare in a mad quest for fame and fortune. She'd ascribed some of the suicides to the recognition that these poets' unrealistic goals would never be realized, and that warm fuzzy bubble of self-esteem, punctured by the mocking chimera of cruel delusions, emptied of any hope. Some of the accidental deaths involved blunt force trauma or motor vehicles. None of it really added up to anything until she noticed that a few of them had been recipients of the Latham Award which led to a further coincidence in that they were also associated with New Arts Institute, San Francisco. When she narrowed the connections down even further, a common thread was the Holbrooke Foundation and its chairman, Dorian Pillsbury.

She felt that if she was right in her assumptions, and some of them were leaps but what difference did it make, boredom had driven her to it, then perhaps others in that circle were in danger. Ian Blake's death seemed to have confirmed her thinking that the poets associated with that coterie were at risk of untimely or unexplained demise.

Jeremy Beljhar was another name on the list. He'd been surprised to learn that Jeremy had received a grant from the Holbrooke Foundation. That must have been the money his landlady had mentioned. Niklia had tracked him down and interviewed him but had dismissed his rant about a serial killer of poets as something she wasn't going to entertain no matter how bored she was. Then his suicide added more weight to the possibility of an invisible hand behind the deaths of poets.

His name was on the list as well, and Grace had remembered it because Granahan had mentioned it numerous times in his Advanced Poetry Seminar as belonging to a great poet who would never get his due. He remembered liking Dick's comment but was annoyed by the prediction. And it was wrong. He was getting his due if the recent accolades were any indication.

After reading Jeremy's acrostic poem, Niklia thought that it might be a good idea to pay attention to the poet Carl Wendt.

But what did any of that have to do with Julie he'd wanted to know.

Among the things found in Julie's trunk at the scene of the accident was a set of fake plates that matched those on the vehicle that was involved in the hit and run that had killed Alonzo Murphy: 1H8P085. Julie had died from her injuries so all of that was moot although it did cast suspicion on previous unexplained and seemingly accidental poet deaths. Julie might have been behind them but now that she was deceased no one in the department cared to follow up on Grace's suspicions. Poets were not high on anyone's lists of priorities.

He tried not to think about Grace but occasionally memories came back to punish him, like the one after their heart to heart talk when she had laid it out on the line in no uncertain terms that "they" were not going to happen so he'd best get her out of his mind. And devastated by the realization of his gross egotistical misconception, he had tried to laugh it off. "What are you going to do if I don't? Arrest me?"

Her expression never changed. “No. I’ll have someone else do it.” She was one tough cop.

**“This is as far as I go.”** The driver had turned off the highway onto a side road and stopped. “This is Boonville.” He pointed to the cluster of buildings lining the highway further on. “You shouldn’t have any trouble getting a ride out to Elk.” And once he’d gathered his bag and as he climbed out to close the door, “Good luck.”

He stepped out of the shade of the oaks at the intersection and walked toward the wide expanse occupied by low slung single story buildings, some with cars and trucks parked at an angle in front of them. The late morning sun made its presence felt almost immediately. A sheen of light perspiration populated the pores of his forehead as he adjusted the bag slung over one shoulder. The weight reminded him of his past and the future. He was seized by a self-loathing for being such a hack, a cynical charlatan. Did it matter that his intentions were pure? And were they, not just a little sullied after years wrestling with the demons of doubt? When he caught a look at himself in the reflected glare of a passenger side window he saw a weak man, unreconciled, frustrated. As for the future, what was the impulse that had led him to this wide spot in the road?

He’d taken down the walls. They were the last of his things to be packed away. The framed prints and broadsides, the posters, snapshots and incidental art that had occupied his walls, particularly the one above the old phonograph. They were his trophies, signposts to the past, prompts to nostalgia, diversions and inspirations, indications of his presence in a mad dog poetry world. He had none of that in the makeshift shelter of Courtney’s office where everything was either hers or David’s, and he was obliged every morning to erase every trace of himself from that space, particularly once he was ambulatory again. And as things stood now, the smoldering atmosphere was suffocating, as if he’d set another bridge on fire.

All of his things, the file cabinet, the boxes of accumulated memorabilia and correspondence that he must now sort through and try to sell to an interested institution or collector. And he’d decided that it was imperative that he find his own place that would hold all of him, ancillary or otherwise. But things were looking up so maybe that wasn’t quite so impossible. He had acquired a new shine with the recognition bestowed on him by the Pillsbury Prize, and his sparkly refraction of the divine spotlight was attracting attention. So he needed the key to the storage unit in South City. Angela had the key. He had misplaced his copy of the key long ago. She had informed him, through Nora, that she had finally moved all of her furniture and miscellaneous items up to the country and the rent for the unit was now up to him.

He needed to talk to her about that. He missed that aspect of their relationship. The talking, unguarded, free from judgment thanks to what seemed like her infinite patience, but engagement on a personal level, nonetheless. He’d often joked that she was the only woman he’d lived with

that long without some conjugal arrangement. She would make a face when he did, and blood would darken her cheeks so he didn't go there that often. Her feelings were close to the surface and he respected that. After Sam was born, their familiarity bordered on domestic. He could have waited for Angie to come to the city to get the key from her, but her sojourns to the Bay Area had become less frequent, settling into the routine isolation of the country. She could have mailed the key to him. And he wondered if coming out to visit her had not been at the back of his mind when he'd accepted Irma's invitation to spend a few days in Bolinas. To him, in his poet's illogic, the two places, Bolinas and Elk, because they were both situated on the coast, were practically next to each other. Only now did he realize how distant they were, worlds apart, actually.