

“Fiction has a truth exceeding that of history”
– Aristotle

Year 4.09

Don't be paranoid? It pays to be paranoid. Paranoia is the first step in prophecy. Interpret the flight of birds. If there's danger lurking, they'll know. So far the only birds I've seen are gulls, some unknown black seabirds that shit enough to cover the rocks beneath them with calcium white slurry, and a flight of pelicans like workers returning home from the dayshift with their lunchbox beaks.

When I look back on the inevitable flight path of my life, it's enough to make me paranoid. I struggle with paranoia as all unsung geniuses who think too thoroughly do. Val was the same way only so much more talented—a classic passive aggressive which fit perfectly with her S&M fantasies. She'd say one thing and the next second deny that's what she meant.

Val. A one syllable mantra, the expiration of a breath. Just that. Val. A few months shy of fifty, from septicemia, invasion of the bloodstream by virulent micro-organisms from a local seat of infection. Blood poisoned, dirty needles they'd said. One year, one month, and five days ago at some unknown hour.

And so too Sheila, two old loves in the space of little more than six months. Although the door on that episode has long been closed, I still have an inventory of all the baggage stored behind it. The cancer shut her down the same day I left the hospital. A private memorial was held a few weeks later. I wasn't invited. Or I was but too depressed and feeling sorry for myself, I couldn't get out of bed. I pretended it hadn't happened. To save myself the grief. Courtney's anger was fierce when I bailed. That may have been when the regret for her generosity began. I had my excuses, but that's all they were. In some way or other I always manage to fail, to disappoint, the women in my life.

Nora had it right. “People care about you, Wendt, but they just happen to be the ones you push away.” But then it's always been all about me.. Both Sheila and Val had basically said the same thing using almost the exact same words at one time or another. “You don't care about me. You just want me around as an audience for your cleverness.” My whole history with women is fraught with the freight of my ambivalence and cowardice.

Sheila, toward the end of us, disdainful, critical of everything I did. Our paths had diverged. She wanted success, I wanted immortality. We would never see eye to eye. We talked past each other hoping that the close calls would reveal our secret desperation. The break up came soon after I had raged, “What do you want from me, eat seeds, shit flowers?”

Once, in a moment of inextricable moroseness after one of the many blowups with Val, I remember thinking “women will be the death of me.” I've kept it at the back of my mind like a get-out-of-jail-free card. But maybe I've been wrong all along. It's not Sheila or Valerie or Wendy or Mac or any other women I've accommodated and who've reciprocated. Maybe it's a more ab-

stract, that Dame Fortuna, Santa Fama, will precipitate my downfall. Fame and fortune, if the first one don't get you, the next one will. The original serial killer twins of poets.

There really never has been any room for women in my life. Except for the muse, and she's always a little indifferent to my attentions, especially of late. Miffed because of the Pillsbury I'll bet so now I'm tainted with the stink of hubris. Just like a woman. Well, what's the muse anyway but a convenient fiction, a figment, an ideal, a mark high on the wall of the labyrinth to aim for? And I've always been more interested in writing my name in the snow.

I've made bad decisions, gone the wrong way, mistaken paths in the tangled jungle of the heart and had to double back, retrace my steps, pick up the pieces of my shattered ego and repair it with the superglue of denial.

That explains my greatest fear: fear of woman, fear in the face of her unfathomable meaning, fear of the seductive abyss of the void, Plato's unspoken unspeakable cave of chthonic mystery

On the other hand, I'm not dirtier than any dirty old man, knowing full well my prime purpose has to be constrained by cultural convention and social taboo. Nature has provided a surplus of fertilizing agents just to be on the safe side. That writhing energy, more of a wave than a particle, requires a method of venting or appropriation to let off steam approaching critical mass. A successful channeling leads to greater cities and high-toned penthouse ideas, something to keep the extras in line for when the time comes to stand in. But as I approach my expiration date, a tick at the tip of my chromosomes, and not that my swimmers aren't robust, it's just that other factors contribute to a less attractive appearance. There comes about a separation of elements, animal and magnetism no longer advantageously bound, a congealing that is barely congenial to affability. And with it comes the tang of cynicism, inevitable as oxidization. What's lost is sensuality, a round fullness, healthy glow and sparkly eyes to renew an understanding of the basics of an enfolding overfolding crashing wave degrading and being reconstituted by a leveling force.

The solid bass line of Mater Creatrix and my own airy piccolo, out of sync, always a little ahead of myself or hurrying to catch up, never quite sure of the ground rules but willing to give it the old college try. Sometimes I wonder why I bother. Things start on the same page but assumptions and presumption, guess work, always hit the wrong note and the delicate framework of a promising relationship splinters into lethal shards. There is no room for improvisation as the guidelines were carved in stone ages ago.

The full value of sexuality nature has given woman can only be imagined which is why I am aroused to my primal mission by an image or a word. Women are the emissaries of necessity, beautiful when the nature of their work doesn't make them terrifying. Like the fates they only talk among themselves in the secret arcane language of destiny. A woman's voice has a harsh hysteric edge to it but it also rings a bell with its teasing music. The oscillations of the cosmos are like that.

Annie Bola came to town claiming to have talked to me telepathically. I avoid her like the plague. In tripping the synapses of where “all the women I’ve been with” are stored, one inexplicably looms up: Helen Weals, *Squeaky*, for the way she used to chirp a twelve tone harmonic of orgasmic sounds, a symphony of ecstatic expression played by the joyous emanations from the windpipe. All her tattoos, and how each one had a story connected to it, not only a rationale, but the circumstances surrounding it, how it was a kind of skin memory, a picture album etched in the epidermis and a correlate of grey matter. Even though it depicted an erotic narrative, I have to admit that, yeah, I have a problem with girls with tattoos. Kinda like I’m in competition with the tat for the body, and it’s obviously been there before me.

Chrysie’s mascara ran down her cheeks and made her look like Alice Cooper. The sweat glistened on her nose and her bare arms. She sang sweetly but like the Sirens of myth, dangerous in close proximity to her rock. With Danni Markov it was all white walls, tastefully appointed furnishings, and decorator art. Just walking on her antique Persian carpet I was tracking my muddy working class assumptions across her aristocrat vanity. I thought I had hit the jackpot but it turns out that I was destined to be just another one of her accessories. She was going to remake me, teeth fixed, hair done, new clothes, jewelry. I pawned everything I could except for the gold chain.

We were introduced at Megan Twohy’s reception for the Women’s Auxiliary Museum Society. But I had first laid eyes on her dark and intense beauty once before years ago at the Brautigan publication party on Green St. She’d seemed troubled and restless even then. Just my type. She moved among the upper circles of poetry hell, academics and old money. Definitely not the coffeehouse and bookstore type. For some people their drama is all they have. And later that evening when the formalities had ended and everyone had left except for a few of Megan’s friends, she sat on the floor across the coffee table from me, knees up, legs splayed with a “look what I got” smile. What was I supposed to think?

Danni claimed to be a distant relative of a famous Russian mathematician who had developed a probability theory known as the Markov Chain. She’d explained it to me as a random process whose main characteristic was memorylessness, a concept that implied that random properties related to the future depended only on the present, not the past. I’m not sure that I actually understood it all, but it gave me something to chew on. It sounds a lot like modern poetry.

The poem as a probability model used to describe phenomena that evolve over time and space, specifically the progression of the poem represented by a variability whose change is subject to random deviation. Instead of a poem that can only advance in one way, each word represents indeterminacy. Even taking into account the implication of previous word groupings, at every subsequent point there are countless directions in which the poem can evolve. The movement to the next word or line depends only on the poem’s current state, and is independent of prior vectors of meaning.

Danni realized, as had most women who’ve known me in the biblical sense, that I was impossible to live with, and that I had only one true love, po-

etry, which by default was the triple deity, me, myself, and I. Toward the end when I insisted that regular sex would help with her restless nights, she'd replied, "I don't need sleep that bad." I just wasn't living up to the expectations she had of what life with a marginal literary celebrity might be.

She said she had to fly down to LA to visit relatives. I figured she was going to stay a while by the way her apartment was packed up. She was seeing a shrink, the guy she eventually married, and he was moving his practice to Santa Barbara. I should have seen it coming. What was it about "You are a wretched impossible human being!" didn't I get? The final straw coup de grâce was "And your feet stink!" I admit my feet are graveyards of dead skin but that was still a low blow.

I have to own up to being an incurable romantic. In the intimate boudoir of romance, wearing your heart on your sleeve is never a good idea. It will likely get brushed off and stepped on. Unlike that old George Benson song where the greatest thing you could ever learn is to love and be loved in return, the reality of the situation is more along the lines of Lacan's "Love is something you don't have that you try to give to someone who doesn't want it."

All women are crazy some of the time. Some women are crazy all of the time, but not all women are crazy all of the time. The old Orphic trick to avoid being ripped to shreds is to know how to identify some of those women and stay well away from them. It's not always that easy.

Angie had dragged me to an art gallery opening on Market Street, of all places. This was around the time she was shopping for suitable seed with which to become impregnated. Maybe I was showing off. I'd said it before, and it mostly got a laugh. "Forget the sperm bank, I'm a walking ATM." Third time was not a charm. I'll never forget what I saw in her eyes at that moment: rage, disgust, disappointment, betrayal. Don't shoot the messenger I wanted to say but I'd been on a roll and the transformation from ham to ass is almost inevitable. Besides who else is there to shoot or decapitate besides the sperm delivering messenger? The purpose of the Orphic is to stir up female frenzy before the mass fuck fest where the sacrificial victim, always a male, is torn limb from limb.

That had come up in the discussion of *The English Letter* by M. Portmanteau in which the Brits were accused of ruining American literature. I'd been chatting with Lily Mao and her partner, Ann Toenin, the Russian author of *Art Ode*, a long poem consisting of exclamatory expressions such as *Oh! Wow! Eeew!! Ugh! Hunh? Wha? Yuk! Bing! Bang! Boom! Crash! and Kabloowie!*

I was holding forth as usual and unwisely described the nature of women as concentric. Linda "Whore" Eisen gave me a narrow look. I was being serious. By concentric I meant round, full, centered in consensus. My first mistake was not following the golden rule of mixed company conversation. Such generalities are often viewed as mansplaining in the delicate negotiations of cross-gender communications and can leave you out on the proverbial limb.

“Cuntcentric? Did I hear you say women were cuntcentric?!” Linda wasn’t going to hide her disdain.

That wasn’t what I said, but since the opportunity had arisen I thought I would see how much more of my foot I could fit into my mouth by espousing the minority opinion on the etymological origins of the word. *Cunt* comes from the ancient Akkadian *khnt* which denoted priestess in the temple of the Goddess Inanna, and was once a positive term to describe women. With the denigration of ancient cults by usurper religions, the word had accrued negative connotation. I don’t know why I thought that would cut me some slack.

She didn’t mince words. “None of what you say changes the fact that you are a condescending dickhead, Dickhead.”

Nothing can prepare you for the irrational self-righteous bitch or the crazed homicidal maniac, each tainted by their own hormonal destiny and hijacked by the ruthless almond shaped pea-brain.

Men may be idiots but women are lunatic.

It was Halloween night and the following morning of *el dia de los Muertos* should have found me dead. That was when I came to hate her. I knew that it would be harder for Mac to appreciate than for me to explain because it was then I understood her to be the most perfect example of feminine impermeability in all existence.

We spent the long day together in the Castro as the colorful and often risqué carnivalesque swirl erupted from bars with drunken hoots and shrieks, parading down the streets in high, very high, fashion. And with hardly any chance to talk, to catch up, jollying and jostling with old friends and new acquaintances, my own celebrity but mostly her credit card keeping us well watered. It was an evening destined for excess.

“Listen grapenuts, I’d be gay but I can’t do the snappy finger thing.” And like a broken record, much to her chagrin I’m sure, “Some of my best friends are cocksuckers.” Someone in the group jammed a powder blue wig on my head and shouted in my face, “You’re just an old queen!”

Eventually we found ourselves on the terrace at Enrico’s, a table overlooking the street, costumed freaks and partiers parading by, the default costume being do-it-yourself zombie, smeared catsup on face and clothing and moving like imagined reanimated corpses might walk. A few *chollos* in their best orange and black walking their pit bulls followed by a bevy of transvestites dressed like they had just come from partying with the Sun King or returning from Cinderella’s Ball. Feathered nymphs and bare breasted goddesses exhibited themselves followed by a pack of male supplicants and slaves in leather. Teen couples drinking jello shots or sucking on alcohol laced sno-cones ventured into the orange neon haze and the shadow black of night dressed as adults, indistinguishable from adults, all history and all mythology exhibiting the seven deadly sins.

On the street directly in front of our table, a man of about fifty, drawn cheeks no makeup could affect, grey stubble swathing his jaw, had stopped to stare at us, holding by the hand a small boy dressed in oversized clothes, and carrying on his arm another small child held to his shoulder. He was a transi-

ent, maybe even homeless. The children's rags were not costumes. Maybe he had taken them out to relieve the horrible monotony of their uncertainty and poverty. It wasn't at my powder blue wig the man had fixed his gaze, perhaps even wonderment, but at Mac's purplish glowing light-reflecting red satin low cut dress that left nothing to the imagination. That and the pair of little red horns topping the liquid curls of her carrot tresses. The wicked smile was not part of the costume but it fit the occasion.

Song writers say that pleasure ennobles the soul and softens the heart. The song was wrong that evening as far as I was concerned. Even as I was touched by the haunting eyes of such desperation, I felt ashamed for the drinks we hoisted, too big for our britches. I turned to her, to catch her attention and convey a shared empathy. I looked into those green eyes, home of caprice and governed by the moon, as she said, "Those people give me the creeps." And summoning the waiter, "Can't someone do something about them?" So maybe hate is too specific a word for what I felt. Certainly disappointment.

For an instant I entertained the notion that I was looking at myself but in the past, and that those children were ours and I had finally found her after she had abandoned our marriage and left me penniless and caring for the kids. And it chilled me, that her disdain came so casually, so callously, that she didn't realize that I was just a step away from them.

When I came back from the can, there were strangers at the table. I snagged a waiter and he remembered Mac leaving with a couple of guys, headed up in the direction of Columbus. The sidewalks were packed with revelers and I had to weave my way through them. I thought I caught a glimpse of her heading up Columbus toward Green St. but I couldn't be sure. There was more than one devil afoot that night. Then I lost them.

I heard my name called. I didn't recognize Wendy at first in her ladybug outfit: black leotards, a black turtleneck, and a vest that supported the black polka dot red carapace on her back. She was wearing a white sequined mask around her eyes. On her head two bug eyeballs at the tip of wires bobbed independently when she walked or talked.

Every time I ran into Wendy it was the same thing. She had become a stalker, at first moonstruck and then completely bat shit obsessed. And each time I had to explain that I wasn't avoiding her even though I was, and that I didn't get back to the old neighborhood much anymore since Angie sold the house, that I spent most of my time making sure I had a place to sleep and enough to eat so I was pretty much occupied with my day to day survival. I had tried not to hurt her feelings, cowardly avoiding the inevitable confrontation. But that night, fed up with Mac and probably myself, I told her, cruelly perhaps, that she had to stop thinking we were in a relationship. Her face contorted in confusion. "You mean I'm not your girlfriend?" Likely it was impolitic of me to point out "We had sex, exchanged bodily fluids. Don't make it any more than it is" but at the time it seemed a necessity.

I walked away up Green St. leaving behind a ladybug weeping on a corner crowded with superheroes, witches, fairy princes, and hockey masks. I thought I caught sight of the devil going into Giancarlo's.

If a bar is a hole in the wall with bad lighting then Giancarlo's is a bar. I had been 86'd from there a number of times, probably the only one ever banned for non-criminal behavior. I could be just that obnoxious. It was a hangout for the Aether crowd, adherents of the questionable poetics of Jack Spicer. And drinking among them was like feeding time at a zoo, every little crumb of a comment was taken with defensive exception. The more outrageous the observation, the more it roiled the self-righteous indignation. So many buttons to push, it was often too irresistible.

That night the big attraction was Rex Coprophilius, King Shit, crowned with a large white spotted red *Aminita Muscaria*-like Phrygian cap. He was a traditional figure in North Beach at Halloween, dressed entirely in various layers and rolls of newsprint, phonebooks, and streamers, led through the throng so that people might tear at his attire to propitiate the gods and monsters abroad that night, the torn scraps known as "pieces of shit". He'd started off with twenty pounds of headlines stapled to his chest. By the time I followed him into Giancarlo's he was down to his yellow pages.

And there was Mac at the bar talking to this little fireplug of a guy in a suit that was definitely not a costume. He was with two other guys in suits and neatly barbered hair. I immediately thought "cops" but couldn't understand what the law would want with her. Not that it mattered. I walked right up. I said something. Derisive disappointment. Fascinated disgust at her selfish callow evil. She threw her drink in my face.

What words had I used? They hide from me in memory, skipped over like a needle in a groove to the part where the angry red pissed off face of some guy is insisting that I couldn't say such things to a lady. I didn't deign to even look at him. "Get this clown out of my face." One of my talents is to be a complete arrogant ass.

The bartender, busy as he was, threw a thumb toward the entrance. "Ok, Wendt, you're out!"

"But I just got reinstated."

The bartender made a face. "Do you want me to have Jo-jo explain it to you?" Jo-jo was the bouncer, an Albanian giant who didn't have the reputation for being gentle. I caught the drift and sauntered out to the sidewalk terrace of my own volition. I lit up a cigarette. I should have known it would come to this.

"Snort it." she'd said. We were in a room at the Hotel Rex. She was naked and shiny. I was showing my age. She'd ground up the blue pill in the ashtray. I looked at the blue powder, "snort it?" "Yes, snort it!" Then her phone rang and she answered it. "When?" She stared at me. "Thanks, Nicole, I owe you one." And then to me, "My husband is in the lobby with a couple of Fremont cops. They're on their way up." And as if she had to say, "You better leave."

Clutching my suit coat and holding up my pants in the hallway, I heard the elevator ding arriving at the floor. I did an about face and headed for the

door with the red exit sign above it. I heard the voices and the knocking as the door closed behind me. My unwieldy lumber jutted out from my briefs constantly in peril of snagging the iron pipe railing of the stairwell in my frantic descent. That had been a close call. It was apparent that Mac's marriage was not as open as she claimed.

I was leaning on the wrought iron barrier to the terrace out in front of Giancarlo's mulling the replay when I spotted Wendy coming toward me with a look of agonized determination. I stepped on my cigarette and turned to leave. The fireplug who had been talking to Mac was blocking my exit.

"You can't talk to her like that."

"Why, was it your turn?"

"She's my wife," arrived at about the same time as his fist to my jaw. Then the rain of blows coming from all directions sank me to my knees. I tried to squirm away on the sidewalk, absorbing the kicks to the gut, shielding my head with my arms, curling up to make myself smaller, more compact, and then the intense bolt of pain as a shoe crushed my shin against the edge of the curb, hearing as well feeling the snap of bone with my entire body. I screamed, gasping for breath, an anguished naked roar. The gunshots, now that I realize that's what they were, not the sounds of my rendering, accomplished a pause in the attack. I tried to crawl away, desperately seeking to leave the scene as well as find an equilibrium that might make sense of the searing heat in my mangled leg. What I finally accomplished was vomiting and lapsing into unconsciousness.

I don't know if "lousy poet" actually accompanied the beating. Maybe I just imagined it. Come to find out it was Mac's hubby, and his Fremont cop buddies, practiced in the take down. Nothing ever came of it or I never heard that it did. Cops stick together, a fraternity, unlike poets, unaffiliated, cults of one. I'd heard that someone described the incident as "They were beating the hell out of a guy wearing a powder blue wig."