

## Collector

The first day meant less to me than the others. I had yet to appreciate my talent, or even recognize it. Instead, I carried on with it as if a blind man, spitting in the cup, but hardly seeing the action's magnitude.

There were many distractions. For instance, that afternoon a phone call informed me of my car's repossession. The loss was not significant; I had not driven the car in weeks. In fact, I did not remember where it was parked, and wondered how the claimant found it in the whole wide world.

I asked her. She responded that surveillance should not surprise me.

"Who said anything about surveillance?" I questioned.

"You didn't hear it from me," she said. The earpiece emitted a gentle click, after which came a long silence. Finally, the dial tone returned, dispelling my fears that it too had been claimed by its home company.

For a long while, I paced the apartment, admiring the action of my legs, which demonstrated a reassuring self-sufficiency. I could walk forward as well as backward. Drifting to the right was as easy as tilting my head and torso. On the other hand, I could manage other directional shifts with more stealth, keeping perfectly still from the waist up. I made a note of that possibility, recognizing a tacit usefulness in it.

Then the car crossed my mind. Its loss was not real yet. Before I could feel an absence, I would have to get over a lingering indifference to the vehicle. It cost me too much to maintain; that much should be obvious. Furthermore, it was terribly ugly, and made me feel that way too, when I drove it. No, I felt that way even when I thought about the car. I feel that way now. I feel like a battered convertible top that will not open or close, but bounces in its casing like an ice-cube in the wrong tray. How it got there is another man's mystery.

Yet liquids do interest me. For seven years I practiced the drainage of my urine in controlled spurts, which I eventually gave the name quinks. My reasoning was simple: my privates were winking and deserved a strong consonant.

The spitting, on the other hand, was a soft activity that did not captivate me until days after it began. During a crucial moment, I looked at my knee and understood. There, a gelatinous and giant amoeba of saliva slid toward a precipice. It betrayed no fear, but rather pursued its dangerous destination at a steady pace, the sluggishness of which cannot be held against it, since its nature fixed the variable irrevocably.

I watched in sheer amazement, as if awake for the first time in days, years. These creatures inhabit us like the squares of air between a woven fabric; they are fundamental shadows. Yet how much do we know about them?

That we shirk from any knowledge of them is an obvious truth, but also a stubborn one, sustained by our willful denial of denial of denial. I'm sure you understand the airtight and reflexive mechanism set to work in that behavior. Still worse, those who puncture the cocoon seldom return to the light of day with the butterfly's new perspectives. There was much work to be done. I put aside my other studies and concentrated my energy toward cold, scientific observation.

First, I developed a consistent procedure to catch the saliva and preserve it. In this responsibility I required a large collection of identical glassware, the acquisition of which would have been easier with a car. I mention that now to be tidy in my documentation, but the thought was far from my mind at the time, and did not surface there promptly. Instead, I devised a means of distracting my neighbors from the guardianship of their house and possessions, and stole in as a thief in broad daylight.

You may wonder how I accomplished that devilry. Have I not already mentioned my recent development of a technique for walking to the side without moving anything above my waist? In this instance, I relied on that tactic to cross my small kitchen garden, while pretending toward the mailbox, which lay more directly ahead of me. I never reached it, or intended to. Instead, I wrapped my hand around the tarnished doorknob of my neighbors' kitchen door and allowed myself entrance.

The Smiths, as I will call them, kept an untidy house. In my first steps beyond the threshold, I blundered across two open and unfinished board games and a pile of jacks, which stung against my bare feet. Then I realized to disengage my new manner of walking, which needed further refinement and theoretical analogs before such close quarters would be possible. The decision was a wise one, and the world opened before me like a treasure chest, whose dragon is out fumbling over uncooperative cigarettes.

My first instinct was to scour the kitchen, which room was not only already my location, but also seemed most sensible for the storage of glassware. Indeed it was, but never more than four of a kind in any set. This low identity ratio discouraged me, and I nearly broke a champagne glass against the stainless steel sink. However, I saw the better of that action, and took heart in the possibility of overcoming preliminary setbacks, which have been known retroactively to sweeten rewards by postponing them. Instead of shattering it, I claimed the champagne glass as my first prize for a future celebration, sliding it gently into my shirt's breast pocket, where its flaring stem emerged upward like an ornamental flower.

My pleasure over the smooth flow of these events into unanticipated and conspiratorial outcomes was an intense pleasure indeed. Nevertheless, I did not lose my head, or prematurely embark down the glimpsed road of success. On the contrary, I made my way into the living room, stepping

over gloves and scarves and jackets whose progressive alignment along the floor suggested disrobement while running. There was another useful ambulatory skill, which I quickly recorded for future study. It crossed my mind that multiple layers would benefit the maneuver. For that reason, I gathered all the discarded clothes as a second prize of my invasion. The garments were small and easy to tote in a tight ball beneath one secure arm.

That left the other arm free to turn the knob on the door to the basement, which lurked beyond a descending flight of straight wooden steps like a musty tomb. The smell had a historical feel to it, as if below lay the unturned pages of a forgotten book. What little light emerged transmitted a disproportionate loneliness, for which I felt an inexplicable kinship. Certainly this decision was the right one, and below I would find not only what I sought, but also that which sought me.

It was a curious sensation this mix of decision and destiny. I had experienced it only once before in my life, and that time I did not hover over any helpful physical brink, such as stairs, to underline and perhaps warn against the psychic transitions ahead. Instead, I plodded through my daily life, collecting discarded Styrofoam burger containers, cleaning them with a special solution of two parts sodium benzoate, storing them neatly and tenderly, until it occurred to me from out of the blue that this ritual implied an irrefutable business venture, toward which

I felt a great enthusiasm amid deeper dread. I spent every penny in that gamble, and thankfully exhausted its hold of me before total ruin.

This new gamble required similar investment. That much was clear as I tread down the stairs, gripping the wooden banister with my free hand. At the bottom, I turned, squinting through the darkness toward a yellowish shape. I approached it quietly, shuffling slightly to avoid stepping too heavily on unforeseen objects in my path.

The shape was a washing machine. Its lid was open and the blackness within suggested an empty tub. My free hand explored it before I knew what was happening. The cold metal had smoothness like the skin of a dolphin. Pleasure registered on my palm. I decided to relinquish my second prize, transferring it from beneath my carrying arm to the machine. There, the clothes piled and quickly settled into place like nighttime snowflakes in a well. Should I initiate the rinse cycle?

After a moment's hesitation, I chose another course. It occurred to me that here was a digression that went too far from my original purpose. Yes, I was in the basement to find glassware, jars if possible, preferably with lids. If that quarry presented itself swiftly, then perhaps a load of laundry would be timely. It would be more appropriate then too, as a token of my appreciation for stolen items. But until then, I forbade myself the luxury, and swallowed any

guilt over the prolonged dirtiness of the children or midgets at the further end of my thoughts.

"Will they miss the jars?" I could not help but wonder, but vanquished that thought too, concentrating on a thorough manual probing of the dark shelves above the washing machine and dryer, then also the shelves carrying onward to the right. Near their conclusion sat a dusty cardboard box with small sections missing around what then became a handle.

Gripping this, I pulled the box from the shelf, causing it to sit upright where before it was lying on its belly. The result of this shift was a mild rattling, which reproduced itself each time I shook the box. The sound was like the jangling of chains, yet its repeated chorus lifted my soul to new heights of freedom. I put the box down beside me and fished beneath the handle with two fingers. They found cylindrical glass. At the end of one such cylinder was the beginning of an upward thread. I grazed it with my fingernail and rejoiced.

"The family will be clean again!" I whispered gleefully, toting my new find to the washing machine. There, my happiness exploded into euphoria and robbed me of reason. I began to mutter about the need to find an overhead light, and found one. I was going to pull it but concluded I did not need to. Suddenly I believed I could see in the dark without any light, and had been exercising that talent all along. If anything, blindness referred to my inability to see all along that I could see all along. I saw the

human mind as a great hall of mirrors. I saw the mirrors as windows with new worlds beyond them that we mistake for ourselves. I wrote a short note in imagined dust on the top of the dryer: "Clean as spit and image." Then I reclaimed my package and darted to and up the stairs. The machine did not grind into operation; the lights did not burn.

Thankfully, my wits returned quickly in the living room, and I was able to let myself out of the neighbors' house as I had come, equally quietly. On their doorstep, I indulged a concluding lapse into excited delusion, pretending fond farewells between distant relatives as one departs. A tear welled in my eye, and craning my head back, I balanced the droplet on my cheek as I walked home. So arose my third walking technique. At my own door, I carefully worked the knob and entered. The tear began rolling from my face. I raced to the counter, where I grabbed the closest cup and caught the tear. It landed in the awaiting puddle of juice with a tiny ping, as if to laugh at me for not avoiding its irreversible dilution. The last word was mine, spoken by drinking. Tears were an afterthought anyway, not my goal. As quickly as the first disappeared, so all concern over manufacturing more vanished from my mind, which immediately turned to the box. I hoisted it onto the countertop and studied it.

On the white porcelain, the cardboard's dilapidation and curious saturation became highly apparent. For those reasons, I avoided tools, such as scissors, to release the

fragile contents. Instead, peeling back an end panel, my fingers entirely removed the large rectangle. I threw it in the sink. Next, I pulled out a jar and held it against my eye mouth-first.

The fat bottom at the other end of the jar completely obscured my vision so that images bent around the jar's walls but disappeared at its furthest extreme. The lucky suction during this observation heightened the effect, and the jar let out a pop when I pulled it free. The symbolic content of this occurrence was not lost on me. "From the very start these jars are pulling my eyes forward," I thought. "They want me to see beyond my normal ability." That was the second time they gave rise to that impression. One could not help being encouraged.

For me, that emotion expressed itself in a sudden kiss of the first jar. Dare I say it? The exchange left a long parcel of drool on the jar's inner rim. I stood motionless, holding the jar at arm's length, where it glistened in the afternoon sun through the window over the sink. The saliva oozed slowly downward, its head lost for a moment behind my thumb. Shortly it crept out of this hiding place and spread across the jar's flat bottom. At last its tail arrived, but the tip clung to the side without voluntarily letting go. I had to tilt the jar sternly. Its contents shifted squarely into place, bunching like a slug.

That was the beginning of my excitement. Yes, I experienced earlier happiness over the direction of my

current situation, but not until the jars did that feeling outweigh the inevitable misgivings that haunt all inspired undertakings. For inspiration is not a relative of stamina. And stamina, if overlooked, can cost one dearly. How I needed it that afternoon, and found it in the least likely of places!

Having spent days listlessly dehydrating myself by spitting into cups, I had now to conjure yet more moisture from my deepest reserves to fill the jars. To wait was impossible, unimaginable. Already my imagination swam with visions of my new work's crucial importance to scientific discovery. Yet for all that swimming in mind there was cotton in mouth.

I began to get angry, impatient. Distasteful memories came to mind, such as the time a fourth grade teacher rejected my composition without looking past the title, which read "Expulsive Habits of the Land Dinosaurs." Her face reappeared vividly behind my eyes, provoking mild indigestion. I saw her pale yellow eyes and the disrepair of her gum line behind her top, front teeth. I felt like a small child gazing upward into her hairy nostrils again, and quickly drained three long surges of saliva into the first jar. Had I not been resting my chin in on it pensively, it is likely my shoes would have worn the first official specimen. But here providence smiled, as Mrs. Klohen never had.

I wonder would she have recognized, if not then, then now, the celerity and prodigal nature of my mind. For one example sufficed for me to grasp a lucrative pattern. Yes, I would also demonstrate discipline by testing that pattern before drawing any too premature conclusions, but I already knew: every time I conjured a bitter thought, a bitter liquid graced my esophageal tract and salivary glands. And the abundance of it was uncanny, as if my mental energies worked as divining rods. I had merely to hold them very loosely and let them find water by their own innate power. They were tireless and reliable.

First, I recalled an unsavory afternoon when the electric company disconnected my power and I came home to find pistachio ice cream all over the inside of my refrigerator and spreading across the floor. Hardly any of it was salvageable! But that lucky portion seemed now to reconstitute in my stomach and rise upward like a trained snake, bending its head over my palate. The transfer to the second jar yielded nearly a pint. My mood improved at the sight of it, and I belly-danced slightly, nasally humming a traditional flute charm for cobras and pythons.

The gyrations added inadvertently to my next specimen, which gurgled forward after a thorough recollection of my last trip to the dentist, who administered the treatment for an old lady in the other examination room to me instead, smearing a gritty denture glue all over my lower gums until I kned him in the groin and he recognized his mistake.

"You're not Mrs. Sallis," he groaned in a far corner, from his knees. In a deeply sarcastic and uncharacteristic moment, I leapt from the chair, manhandled the dentist's face, and kissed his dim lights out, tongue and all. He sputtered violently, and whimpered as I left. Imagine his jealousy over what went into a stolen jar two years later instead of down his retractable rinse sink. I must thank him at some point.

The third wave of nausea had no benefactor. Instead, it arose from my unfortunate and recent witnessing of an accident between a bicyclist and a large truck. As the light turned green, the truck advanced into a right turn, never noticing the rider gaining along that side in anticipation of the same green light. As timing smiles, so it frowns, and the rider disappeared like so much ripe fruit beneath the front fender and grill. By the time the sounds of her disfigurement reached the driver's nervous system, her bicycle and her body were one inextricable mass, pinned beneath the front axle at the expense of all their spines. Paramedics arrived in a few minutes and dragged the woman free like a punctured fountain pen, flooding the street with opaque letters about the opposite of hurrying. Curious, I touched the blood with my index and middle fingers, pulling some of it sharply away from its perfect, thick pool. An officer reprimanded me for tampering with evidence, and interrogated me suspiciously. I said the blood was red

enough to have come from the brain. With that, he let me go, mistaking me for an authorized medic.

Yet he was not entirely mistaken, for most of my adult life has meandered through one scientific, and for the most part human biological, investigation or another. I will not list them here, except to say that organized experiments of this sort are not to be judged too hastily as reprehensible, irrelevant, or preposterous, as some might bark like a wired watchdog. For why call them such things? Are not our quests to know more about our component parts and substances merely expressions of our greater, universal desire to acquire self-knowledge, and with it lasting peace? Does anyone disagree with the value of added wisdom, or is aging as devoid of meaning as experimentation sometimes appears? We have the unique opportunity to nudge and occasionally vault ourselves beyond our animal subscription to patterned reactions in life. At the risk of a lunatic reputation, let us pursue that divine advancement, which often resides in the least tolerable details. Hence, I record the sprawling bulk of my experience.

How it wanders! In one moment I am sick to my stomach, but delighted to be so the next moment. Frankly, this paradoxical bullying of my emotions and digestive tract was difficult to maintain. By its operation I installed exactly twenty generous specimens that day as a measure of my inspiration and a valuable lesson against despair, which sometimes conquers itself, like fire in a vacuum. When I

was finished, I stored the young collection in the cupboard above the refrigerator, labeling each jar according to its host memory. Eight jars remained empty for future transfers or new installations as circumstances required. All the jars wore their tin caps, although half wore them with puncture holes as a measure of possible interactive effects of air.

Despite the relatively early hour and my sudden commitment to my subject, I experienced a profound exhaustion after concluding my initial preparations. My eyes felt very heavy, and seemed to stay open only because of their dryness, which made the lids stick where they sat. I drew them downward with my thumb and forefinger as if I were handling a corpse. Next I worked the sockets with the joints of my index fingers. The gentle contact practically disengaged my brain, which seemed to float in a soothing sea of black. There, the only life was in a primitive stage of development, so that green protozoa and algae appeared to drift in all directions, and occasionally change shape. At times they divided and grew to their original size in duplicate and triplicate. Eventually, the area was overpopulated and hostile. Larger organisms cornered smaller ones, puncturing them with complicated manipulations of cilia, which was originally for locomotion only. Now I perceived its transition to weaponry and also as the raw pulsing of my throat.

I was surprised to find myself stretched out on the couch, and the television on. The screen flickered several times and went out. I lurched to a sitting position, as if somehow to rush to the aid of the rest of the house's electricity. It never went out. Instead, the television returned, revealing a message of technical difficulty. I heard someone say that only a crackpot would be watching television at this hour anyway, and the laughter of at least three other people followed the remark. Soon the broadcasted message turned sideways and then upside down. It disappeared and a wash of faded colors resolved into the fuzzy image a woman's breast, which seemed more like an eye at first glance. As the camera retreated to clarify the illusion, the transmission flickered again, so that the breast and a troubled reflection of my face merged upon the screen. As I reached for the remote control on top of the set, I saw my hand groping forward as if in a strobe light. After taking the device, I sank back in the couch and changed the channel.

Yet the original station lured me back against my will. Beneath snappy edits of women reclining in provocative poses and dancing, a 1-900 number appeared, flashing. The phone was nearby and I picked it up to dial. "What am I doing?" I wondered. But the day's spontaneity lingered in my soul and I called without answering my own question first.

A woman answered and said in a sultry tone, "What's your name, Sweetie?" I answered. She explained that she

would enter me into the appropriate computer banks to match me with the perfect woman if I would give my city and method of payment. I gave them, fudging through my wallet for a credit card. This requirement took some time and the woman told me it would be easier to find things if I took my pants off. I thanked her.

"Mostly I want to register a complaint with the network," I said.

"About what?" she asked sweetly. "Those television people not treating you nicely?"

"Well. . ."

"I tell you what. I'll add a note about your bad luck to your computer entry."

"You can do that?" I asked. The woman told me she could do just about everything, except change prior notes, which the system locked in place within a day of recording.

"Do I have any prior notes?" I asked.

"Yes," she said reluctantly.

"Well, what are they?" There was a long, uncomfortable silence, followed by the giggling of several women at once. The noise in the background suggested the operation of a keyboard concluding with multiple sharp depressions of the space bar. After nearly a minute, my operator returned.

"What kind of woman do you like?" she said, changing the subject. There followed a list of personalities from shy to wicked and domineering.

"Honest," I said.

"Yes, be honest," she deflected.

"I want a woman honest enough to tell me what remarks are in that computer!" I barked. My operator said nothing. She seemed to hold the phone indecisively for several seconds before hanging up. Her eventual action was very discreet, so that all I heard was a soft click, like someone slipping their head underwater at night. Then the dial tone returned, and I hung up the receiver. By that time the commercial was over, and the host channel embarked on an episode of "Fantasy Island," which I watched through the first commercial break, but never recovered the number I had called. Nor did my phone have a redial. Soon I cared more about Tattoo's plight as boss for a week, anyway.

When it was clear he would cause only enough trouble to learn a personal lesson but not destroy paradise with this special fantasy, I flipped off the set and went contentedly to my bedroom. There, the curtains fluttered over the windows and a cool night air circulated. By habit I reached for my shoes, but discovered what I already knew: I was barefoot. The mistake made me chuckle to myself, which reaction worked as a cloth to erase all grievances from my mind. I disrobed and drifted smoothly into sleep. What dreams may have visited me were swiftly lost beneath the headlong gusto with which I greeted the new day.

The sun rose as I rose. Together, it seemed, we raced to the apex of the sky, from which vantage point everything was crystal clear without the slightest hint of a shadow to

conceal or blur the landscape's details. I knew exactly what I needed to do--namely, establish the exact protocol of my experiments by formulating tentative hypotheses and constructing data tables. The first of these began with a column for entering the memory by which the sample was drawn forth. Further columns ran as follows: mass, volume, density, specific gravity, observable cellular structures, propensity toward locomotion, gregariousness, chemical composition, and life duration. Yes, I suspected the specimens would die, but die in the name of science, which is more than most multicellular creatures can say, and so I incorporated that reality into my observations. It struck me that an honest recognition of their fate might improve our own by extension, as many experiments aim to do.

Let me give you an example. If you find a parallel disease for something that is killing off humans, you can breed it in a control species, such as mice, and hopefully learn by their death how to counter your own. Much of the work for possible cures to Cancer and AIDS begins in such measures. Similarly, diseases seem to sacrifice laboratory humans, if you will, to advance their own longevity, learning in each case how to better infiltrate a host and unfold a parasitic course. The complementary nature of this life questing is a great part of its beauty. Depending on your loyalties, you can win or lose in either case, or in every case win by embracing the interdependencies.

But I drift from my purpose. To sum up: I recorded my data over the period of one month, opening the cupboard over my refrigerator only once a day at a fixed time to make my notes and arrange my specimens as best conduced to the next day's concerns. Thus, on the fifteenth day, having no spontaneous data about the social leanings of the specimens, and loathe to conclude too shortsightedly that such leanings did not exist in saliva amoebas, I combined three pairs of jars, so that six discreet specimens now became three combinations. I should probably mention that to supplement this rearrangement, I spit into three fresh jars and added them to the collection with labels to define them.

Perhaps a detrimental flurry of variables began here, and I must admit as much to minimize its corrosive effect. For not only had I injudiciously changed three samples in mid-stream, but the newer ones did not come about by techniques identical to the old. That is, I did not work from a base of hateful memories. On the contrary, I devised a little game. Its rules stated only that I had to drool from a distance of three feet above the rim of each jar. So doing, I measured my skill at the game by the amount of time I could maintain unbroken each thread of drool. At the first sign of interruption in the thread, I was to cease the flow by clamping my pursed lips. But even here I overstepped the bounds of discretion and two of three times continued drooling as if the thread never broke. Had there been more replacements to make, I may have beaten that

temptation. As it was, I fell into it like a naughty child leaning out a high window.

Still, a good scientist makes extra specimens precisely because he anticipates a corruption of some percentage of the fleet. Mine was not without some integrity even so. In fact, its general obedience to my measurements and manipulations encouraged in me an unexpected fondness for my subjects, and soon I was calling them by names instead of bad memories, and creating secondary labels for each in a practiced calligraphy. The name Chester seemed to come out the best, so again I broke a rule of common scientific sense and gave that name to ten of them. The next day, they all looked a bit brighter, and awkwardly I added to my chart of data a new column called "Vigor," which I measured in elasticity as the specimen slid and clung along its jar's walls as I tilted each container.

The day I returned for the social measurements, my mood was very elevated. Perhaps I expected a breakthrough, and believed my patience admirable so far. But not any longer, for the specimens were exactly as I left them with the single difference that perhaps they were smaller, drier. Consequently, their vigor was down, and with it their disposition for society. I could not help but draw these disturbing connections. Vigorless, the specimens shunned my greetings, so that the approach of my smiling face to their jars caused them to slide away to the furthest possible recess. This correlation deflated me greatly, and I

explored it on one occasion by chasing a Chester around the inner perimeter of his jar until we both became exhausted. However, he returned to the center of the jar with great alacrity when I put it back in the cupboard and put some distance between us.

Who can say what causes what in this world? Still more defiant of such reductions is the world of the microbe, as if the challenge of explanation goes up as study size diminishes. Should these axes follow a mathematical relationship, we are talking about thousands of points between them. Carrying the zeroes, we arrive at a startling figure, which I do not record here, lest I affirm the budding insinuation that my study was hardly worthwhile in the first place, as prediction is too elusive. By such reasoning, we ought to distrust the sunrise and change of seasons, store the world in a vacuum by refusing to breathe. Nevertheless, I myself asked the question that digressed to these thoughts.

There were no thoughts at the time, only the reactive impulse of disappointment and revenge, as if the specimens owed me for my efforts not only in studying them, but creating them too. Thus, I dealt them a rash punishment to suit their crime: I ate them. Not all of them, but rather the ones whose names were not Chester: a total of eighteen. One by one, I turned each tin cap atop a jar and lifted the exposed lip to my lips, where the glass transmitted a slight

warmth. Then tilting back my head while tilting the jars, I drank long, hearty gulps.

The first specimen clung both to the jar and my tongue, as if to demonstrate that vigor remained and perhaps deserved continued study. I resisted that suggestion, squarely denying its validity, although I knew better even then. The amoeba quivered on my taste buds like an oyster. I pressed it gently against the roof of my mouth, measuring its cohesive pressure, relishing its mortality, as before I had feared it. Then I pulled firmly with the muscles of my throat and dispatched it, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. A popping sound came out of my epiglottis.

I felt powerful, and indulged this new sensation with the second amoeba, whose merciless capsizing sent it down my gullet like a runaway dumbwaiter. I felt its integrity fail immediately as it landed, and a viscous puddle spread throughout my innards. I lifted my shirt to peek at the effect even though it was not visible to me in the ordinary sense. Then I smacked my gut and shook it, causing the sound of minor sloshing.

Because the third specimen had a deep amber hue, I decided not to hurry its ingestion, but savor its probable richness of flavor. Accordingly, I manipulated it in my mouth so that all regions of my tongue were employed. In this manner, I pulled from the amoeba not only its acerbity, but also its subtle sweetness and saltiness. This last flavor element eluded me until I stumbled on a technique of

drawing the air from the specimen while keeping it perfectly still in my oral cavity. The resulting desiccation added texture to both the amoeba and my tongue, it seemed. And soon the saltiness of their gritty interface was unmistakable. My lips puckered and my eyes drew inward. Before I could help it, my throat constricted in such a way that it claimed the responsible agent.

I began to awaken to my deep hunger, and realized how long it had been since I had eaten a square meal. Specimens four through ten carried me over that omission. Mixing them all into a single, full jar, I drained it quickly dry, as if ending a thorough workout with a fortified drink mix. The taste hardly registered, but the benefit was instantaneous. My stomach audibly purred, releasing an eventual belch that made my lungs and brain reverberate. My heart gushed with rich, oxygenated blood. My fingertips buzzed. Did the lights become brighter? There is no other way to explain the last effect. I saw the world more keenly than before, and swelled with satisfaction with myself.

Thus, I drank specimens ten through eighteen, bidding them fond and ironic farewells by first name. With some, I experimented with household seasonings, such as salt, pepper, or paprika, which acted like a vibrant rouge upon a colorless cross-section of human cheek, one might imagine. With others, I tested straws, forks, and tea balls. But I stopped at eighteen. The empty jars surrounded me like tombstones. On each was a name and a memory.

As my adrenaline subsided, it occurred to me that I might put the jars back in their box and return them to my neighbors. In that way, I hoped to undo whatever cycle I set in motion by drinking my own children, so to speak. However, I realized that other cycles surrounded that one like the concentric rings of a bulls-eye, and I stood at the center. For example, had not the box come from my neighbors and been unpacked by me, so that packing it and returning it were the completion of two loops? Then there was the broader repetition of coming home again to idle hands, which quickly find work again, and so thrives a cycle. I decided to sit perfectly still and think.

After a long time of indistinct duration, I opened my eyes. The kitchen was as it had been, except the light was now lower in the windows and the wind had picked up. I saw branches sway beyond the glass panes over the sink, and wash autumnal colors over the white, reflective face of the refrigerator, above which the cupboard doors sat slightly open, like the shutters on a cuckoo clock. I stared at them for several minutes, half-expecting a mechanical bird to emerge and pronounce his sentence on me. Then perhaps he would ruffle his feathers and leave his perch and eggs far behind and below him, as I felt I should do. My temptation in that direction was enormous.

In the end, I overcame the impulse without indulging it, except perhaps in my imagination, where occasionally I appear as a vigilante named Chester, whose stealth against

criminals upbraids them so quickly they discover themselves alone and incarcerated with only saliva on their shoes to indicate what happened. They turn the blurry events of their arrest over in their minds, but no sense ever comes, and soon they have to give up. As they sink into sleep, they dream of botched educations and throttled alternatives, and a black cloud seems to settle. I would say they got what's coming, but the worst has hardly begun.