

In Storm Front Two O's

The watch was a gift; its owner, an impromptu tragedian, who used it to time his soliloquies; the daughter, a mild thief. While the father hunted Monet forgeries in Paris, the daughter and tragedian secretly inhabited his house, a two-story mansion on the south fork of Long Island. An impending hurricane provided the material for the daughter's excuse, should the father return prematurely to America, white beret shading the anxious furrows in his forehead. But until that day arrived, the lovers nestled in an atmosphere of candles and rainfall, making love in never the same room.

On their second evening, a fleet of caterers, led by an emaciated Frenchman, let itself through the kitchen entrance, trailing ribbons of mud to the dining room, where Claude oversaw the assembly of a decadent buffet, the fare of which ranged from caviar hors-d'oeuvres to chicken cordon-bleu and wheels of Brie. Throughout the arrangement, Claude ran his hand along the imperceptible curve of his right buttock, occasionally raising the fingers to his mouth to blow a kiss. Often, he

sashayed to the light fixture to bring the crystal chandelier to full illumination, and shut it off. The effect simulated lightning, which had not yet arrived from the Bahamas. Outside, sheets of rain pelted the house and swallowed the driveway. During a lull, the tragedian, whose name was Oscaro, entered the room in a single tube sock, halfway off. When the lights came back up, the hair on his legs pointed outward, as if involved in a defense mechanism. He carried the watch, and spoke from his diaphragm, and loudly:

What, when a man, so mortal,
in womb hath inserted devil's prong,
then lo! fly the seeds and death
takes him, a-shiver. Servants
gather before loin-fruit ripens;
always so, when a man. . .

Oscaro looked at the watch, scratching his navel, in which area a general hunger asserted itself. His intestines rumbled and contracted in response to the aroma of reheating fowl and cream sauces. As if engaged in a tacit arithmetic, the corner of his mouth twitched.

"Fourteen seconds," he noted.

Fourteen was the age
and fourteen the year
when the cruel, talonned hands
of vulture-death plucked her
from me, like an impossible rose.
I was young then, and virile,
as the horses all knew.
Before me lay a kingdom,
as yet uncharted by nary-an
flesh-navigator's hands:
the dimpled dermis atop
her darling, floating ribs,
where mine yawl went a-roaming;
the compassed cavern
among the sponge-reef; gone,
gone to death's brothel,
yet a virgin, and salty;
fourteen kisses to compose
her ghost, a shadow's dust.

Again, Oscaro consulted the watch, but did not speak. The time was 2:14 and 14 seconds. He was terrified. Jolting his balance, an electric current of fear shot from his cerebellum through his spine and exploded at the tip of his coccyx bone. His scrotum retracted in pulsing spasms. Yet mixed with his terror was an amusement; what Oscaro liked to believe was an inside-joke exclusive to God and himself, one of

immaculately timed punch lines. All at once, Fate was a jolly principle of slapstick and a four-letter word. Admittedly, Oscaro's leanings on this issue were particularly sensitive, perhaps over reactive, but how else could he explain the week's exceptional coincidences? One minute he was standing beneath the performance dome in Central Park, addressing an audience of torrential raindrops, whose voluble patter he fantasized into applause despite the weather's, at best, indifference to his hunger, which supplied the content of his monologue; and the next minute, a girl in the first throes of adolescence interrupted what would certainly otherwise have amounted to a record-length performance to ask him, of all things, if he would start it again from the beginning, because she had missed probably crucial lines.

"Go home," Oscaro said.

"I've run away," the girl told him. She carried a transparent umbrella and huge pretzel from a street vendor. Because the umbrella was closed and gripped at the middle like a baton, the pretzel was soggy, and visibly dripped, as did the girl, whose hair was tied into a long, dark ponytail by a green bandanna. Two stray wisps clung to her forehead, giving the

impression, to a park baseball-enthusiast such as Oscaro, that the girl's head was a softball stitched in black.

"Well, you can't stay with me," he snorted, expanding his chest, gripping his hips to project authority.

"Am I in the play now, too?" asked the girl, distracted by the seedy grandeur and spaciousness of the dome, into the dryness of which she skipped, exploring. "I've never been up here before. It's like the ballroom at daddy's house. He's in Paris for two weeks. I miss him very much. Whenever he goes away, I stay at mommy's and run away. She lives close to the park. I'd prefer--"

"Are you eating that pretzel?" interrupted Oscaro.

"Heavens no!"

"You laugh? Are you not aware that a prop is seldom useless? Indulge me. Please." Oscaro flourished his hand, rolling the open palm before the girl's excited eyes, which seemed to get lost in the layered, maroon folds of his sleeve. In all, there were seven layers, each one more untamed than the next.

“Oh,” said the girl, regaining alertness, and between index and forefinger extended the wet knot of dough, like a sack of cement. The tragedian prolonged a daunting eye contact, flaring his nostrils. In an overblown gesture, akin to finishing a bull with two simultaneous blades, he swiped the pretzel clean of the girl’s delicate grasp and mashed it into a compact pulp between the Scylla and Charybdis of his hands, out of which emerged a short-lived trickle.

“Water from the stone,” began Oscaro,

as promised by the belated
father-figure, who forces
this child into pretzels at
two dollars a pop, and she
calls Pop. ‘Tis fragility
of heart, wallet-clasp, and
troubled kinship that brings
her to me within my desert
of rain. Yet my teardrops
receive gratification upon
her arrival, and with her
come callipered fingers
enameled by youth’s gold.
Why must death exist at all?
I am flabby; all lights out.

Quickly, the idea had come to the girl, whose name was Ophelia, that there was the one thing her father's stuffy mansion was lacking: the living spirit of tragedy to inhabit its swirling currents of dust motes and fetid, latticed light-shafts through the iron-wrought windows. At age twelve, she had been denied a simple puppy and learned a lesson about asking for, instead of securing for herself, the things she wanted. Lately, her bodily needs overwhelmed her. On more than a daily basis, a hormonal pinball game rattled bumpers and turned scores within the arcade of her reproductive tract. The world had changed possibly overnight, receiving its, these days, scarce sunlight through a puzzling filter nothing like the normal atmosphere. Without constant reminders of the thick tragic dimension surrounding daily life, the geologic upheavals of her body's crust and mantle made no sense to Ophelia. She desired reassurance, and jackhammer sex. Without even knowing it, Oscar held the key to her flowering universe, and obliged to deflower it. There was never a time when he would not soliloquize for her.

Standing tube-socked and wistful in the dining room, he bounced the watch on his palm like a quarter, eventually flipping it over to re-read

the inscription on the back. In angular cursive, it stated: "TIME UNITES SPACE EXCLUDES BUG." For no reason, he snickered, and tucked the watch under the elastic of his sock. Its soft ticking produced the sensation of a false pulse in his ankle. The words of a monologue chimed in his head, nascently. Oscaro assumed a regal posture, as if to engage his stage voice, but Claude tapped his shoulder.

Hand flat against his own (facial) cheek, Claude said, "Pardone moi, monsieur, but, heh heh, the bill. Then, voila, the feast is beginning." He was a man of feline curiosity, and also homosexual. As if tired, his eyes drooped, lurched upward, drooped, examined Oscaro's genitals, and widened. Before mounting the stairs, Oscaro explained that, of course, his wallet was elsewhere.

Upstairs, Ophelia lay prostrate on her father's canopy bed, lost in a daydream that made a pendulous udder of the drooping, paisley fabric overhead. She thought of her arrival to her mother's house, where she stole several bras before running away into Oscaro. At her present state of development, they were too large, despite their beckoning lace-work and in one case intimidating steel support structure, to be of much

traditional use, but they translated nicely enough into bandannas for her pony tail, she discovered, and also provided precocious amusement of a possible bodily future, and in that sense were mementos of events which were yet to happen.

Beyond a chronic indulgence of almost all spontaneous daydreaming, Ophelia liked to pretend she had already experienced what in fact lay ahead of her, waiting. Because authentic reflection has no place beside this characteristic, there were never any moments of psychological epiphany, during which the girl understood how extremely her psyche derived from her father, who held that his search for Monet forgeries was nearly tantamount to looking for a key chain, or some such possession, he not ten seconds had been holding. The secret was simply to believe he had seen all relevant paintings before, had already ascertained their authenticity, and most importantly, remembered everything possible, down to the suit he was wearing on the illusory day of his hypothetical groundwork. The only confusion he experienced to result from this mental time-traveling regarded, in particular, whether or not he had slept with his ex-wife, exactly when, and what bawling life

form had come of it. In other words, his desire mentally to block this short section of his life, now fourteen years past, was not in fact a confusion, but rather a major source of the powers he discovered then dormant within him, in need of only activation. Having discovered her legacy earlier than her father, Ophelia channeled it with the special sadism of adulthood's earliest years: she pretended to herself, and after herself her nervous lover, that her father was home that moment, and right nearby.

“In the bathroom,” she explained, extending a noncommittal arm toward, if anything, the window. Her wrist was limp, allowing her hand swivel in alternating directions. Slowly, Oscaro dragged the sheet from her body, as if unveiling a pure white figurehead, detached from its ship. With special emphasis on his pelvic region, he wrapped himself in the sheet, his teeth visible beneath a tautened upper lip. But no, that was no solution, for the girl was naked, a certain affront to the father, regardless of any liberal reputation as a host. The time was ripe, even painfully ripe, for a doomed lover's soliloquy. Montagues and Capulets danced wildly, orgied, center-stage in Oscaro's impertinent imagination, vocalization of

which he mercifully suppressed to a whimper. At last, his eyes seized upon the closet.

“Or is that one the bathroom?” he croaked.

“Closet,” sang Ophelia. Oscaro hesitated.

“You’re enjoying this,” he observed, “too much.” As he expelled the last words, it crossed his mind that Ophelia was double-crossing him; that her enjoyment stemmed from the ruse that the closet was no closet at all, but rather the bathroom, in which her father waited among the plumbing like a vengeful, mortgage-paying minotaur.

Oscaro spoke:

Am fastened ankle-bound
to a devilish concubine
after blood; self-appointed
queen of treachery, whose
wily batting eyelashes
do betray her as her mouth
betrays her man, a lad
full-nude with one warm
foot a-tick a-tock
in sock of unholy design
striped brightly green.
I lunge, as to her sport.

So saying, Oscaro felt committed irreversibly to his decision and dashed for the closet. Expecting a bathroom, he was surprised to see a long train of suits receding into darkness. Underneath them were twenty to thirty pairs of shoes, each containing its own silver horn to facilitate installment of the foot. On the door was a pinioned tie-rack acting as varnished, wooden skeleton for the flesh of some hundred-odd ties, predominantly silk.

“We should have come to this room sooner,” suggested Oscaro, among the menswear. Outside the closet, Ophelia giggled, relieving his last suspicious thoughts, leaving him free to indulge his amazed sense of fashion. For a moment, Oscaro experienced the paralysis of unlimited freedom; free to choose anything, he chose nothing. But only at first, before the smorgasbord of available materials resolved for his probing eyes into an organized system of color gradations camouflaged as chaos by its mish-mosh of patterns. In less time than expected, he felt he was able to run all varieties of cranial software that grouped outfits for his consideration on the basis of cuff-button alignments, or degrees of torso-tapering; even fabric texture, as assessed without tactile

investigation. At length, he chose a blue gabardine suit as the elegant, and fashionably oversized, outer garment for a waistcoat of compact yellow fish-eyes, or so Oscaro fancied them.

At last upstream, withered
to these spent, glowing eyes,
as poppies inhabit the fields
and yearn for heaven. Great
carnival train of our lusts!
which invited remain present
until consuming host and house
alike; a spawning gyration
upon the tightropes of a god's
ticklish palm. And death. . .

During the soliloquy, Ophelia joined Oscaro in the closet, choosing a suit of her own, a light summer pinstripe, 100% cotton, above which, on a shelf she could not reach and so relied upon Oscaro, sat a skimmer of the sort old men wear at Ivy League rowing competitions. Its sturdy wicker brim possessed only one chip, which faced forward, so Ophelia wore the hat sideways, and looked somehow like a Viking. While Oscaro fixed his tie, she reached a hand through his unfastened zipper and took hold of his balls.

“My father will have these if you let Claude leave,” she said. To a wishful tragedian, her tone rang a forlorn note, as if she too would be devastated by the loss. Gingerly, Oscaro withdrew the hand by the wrist, zipped his barn door, and left. He had no money, but felt wealthy, and confident in his acting abilities.

As he descended the enormous stairway, Claude, who must have tried calling upward at insufficient volume, was leaning against the balustrade, inscribing a note on the back of a business card. Upon hearing Oscaro, his pen lagged to a stop in indirect proportion to the widening of his eyes, which suggested surprise.

“I thought you were Mr.--” he began, until Oscaro waved him off. He plucked the watch from his waistcoat pocket. After examining it, he brought it to his mouth, fogged it, and cuffed away the fog. Again, he read the watch, front and back. In slanted cursive writing, the inscription said: “TIME UNITES SPACE EXCLUDES BUG.” Oscaro prolonged a forced yawn before speaking:

Born into time after nine sheltered months,

the seedling matures, invests, relies. . .
goes thirsty. Remains a gold pocket watch
to gobble his seconds, chastise his youth.
A lonesome pocket watch, predictable friend
of the otherwise friendless; mechanized tick
of a heart moved by Spring. Wind its death.

“It is yours, sir,” concluded Oscaro, one hand extending the watch, the other pressed forearm against forehead, weeping mostly in the chest. At the top of the stairway, Ophelia appeared. Unaware of her, the men exchanged a vacant look, which they broke in response to her muffled applause. Her father’s suit was too long in the sleeves, of course, and striped fabric flailed as she clapped. Slowly, she descended the steps, careful not to trip over surplus inseam. When she reached the bottom, it occurred to her that one day Claude would be paid, and therefore, for all intents and purposes, he already had been; the happy ending was implicit in the exchange; assumable.

“Claude, we have already paid you,” she said, taking the watch from the tragedian, who was consulting it, as if considering how long his last speech had lasted. Again, his mouth twitched. He stammered violently,

regaining silence only after Ophelia had placed the watch into the yellow vest's pocket.

"I shall consult my books," Claude said, blushing. He explained that the books were at the restaurant, and left. In his last crossing of the house, he stitched a final trail of faint mud prints outside the perimeter of the foyer's oriental carpet. Oscaro studied the prints through one squinted eye, transfixed by their bowleggedness, and also their suggestion, mingling with earlier prints, of Claude's additional, concealed feet; the illusion of time. Oscaro seemed on the verge of a rare insight, which like a sneeze, would not come. Outside, the premonitory winds of Hurricane Belch, strangely androgynous, shook the property's visible oak limbs, among others. Otherwise stable diamonds of glass succumbed to jittery spasms in their window casements.

"There is nothing exciting about the steps," said Ophelia, charmed by the storm. Also, the stairway, if allowed to exist as a room, was the sole room in the house, on account of her using it more times than once, that made her listless, which condition she suddenly feared with all her being. Running a quivering finger beneath Oscaro's chin, which

responded in a greasy dialect of stubblespeak, she departed for the dining room, where for the length of the two longer walls ran a parallel assembly of covered metal buffet pans, steaming. Set in the middle of the cavernous room and carved of ice, a giant swan waded in the waters of its own basined disintegration. Intentionally or not, it appeared to be crying. Ophelia ran a crooked finger along the underside of its neck, and called it Oscaro, who entered the room in a flourish of gabardine, overhearing her, and responding:

The years have passed, increasing
my warmth, which the wandering one
made fire. Once an icicle trove,
my memory melts its own stockpile,
and she washes free, who had freed
my frozen heart, a lightless swan.

All at once, Ophelia herself melted. Her arms went slack at her sides, and somehow her hair felt limper, as if she were willing rigidity from her own being into Oscaro's. "Will he receive it?" she wondered. "Will I receive him? Where in the world has he gone!" The spaces

between her vertebrae begin to chatter. She felt her strength dissipate and escape through her skin. For a rare, precious moment, reliable erotic themes erased her usual prescience. All weight of the future lifted like a delicate garment, exposing her presentness in all its blooming, concentrated abandon. Geometrical images danced behind her math-despising eyes. A curtain was rising; a double-headed arrow performed on an indistinct stage. Its ends struggled apart, sneering, like a pair of hog-tied stallions. Reconciliation appeared impossible, unwarranted, by all means unexpected, but the arrow snapped backed upon itself, coiled, and resolved into stillness. Ophelia opened her eyes and Oscaro was taking her from behind as she clung to the swan, the right wing of which she absorbed into her sopping double-stitch dress shirt, as if receiving diluted, osmotic instructions about flying; instructions she repeated so feebly as to render them a moan.

Oscaro's locomotive thrust chugged to an end. When Ophelia lurched around to kiss him, the arrow reappeared behind her eyes in a stronger incarnation. Oscaro's and her tongue assailed each other with equivalent, pointed force. The arrow yearned outward. Ophelia saw the

unmistakable bulge of a knot directly at its center, a growth. As the chugging resumed its course, she sank against the swan. She felt her feet leave the ground and not return, and came again.

After Oscaro slid Ophelia from his thighs, he checked his watch. He flipped it over again, and laughed at the inscription. He could not help but wonder what had happened to Bug, a creature of indeterminate sex, who parted Oscaro's company in search of God knew what. There was a quest of some sort; Oscaro knew that much. But nothing behind it. And more puzzling to Oscaro, nothing in front of it, beckoning it forward, either. Was there a difference between these two nothings? One afternoon, Bug withdrew a watch from a baggy hip-pocket, picked three edible crumbs from the circular perimeter of its glass face, shared the crumbs with Oscaro two-to-one in recipient's favor, and shuffled away, looking back several times, but only at the sky, not Oscaro, who seized upon these parting glances to stuff his crumbs, one crumb per glance, into a grateful, toothy smile. It was on the third glance, deficient in crumbs, that Oscaro noticed Bug's odd concentration was not on Oscaro but the relinquished horizon. He was crestfallen, and cursed the crumbs

for their irritation of his parched throat. Of course, that was the first time he looked at the watch. The time was fourteen minutes after nine or forty-five minutes after two; it was difficult to tell. The hands were nearly the same length, and in their present position carved out a vector of nearly diametric opposition. Oscaro found himself watching their point of connection until a pigeon shit on him. He walked to the nearest air-tight phone booth and, for no reason he could name, cried into a buzzing receiver like a motherless baby.

About Bug there was something impenetrable for Oscaro, like the armor shell implied in the name. Usually he drifted to Bug at exactly those times, infrequent as they were, when some other fragile body yielded him sufficient physical penetration to encourage him beyond his hovering sense of mental impotence, as had Ophelia. Yet the puzzle would not resolve; rather, it begged always more fucking, as if a critical threshold quivered on the lips of the right woman's vagina, there to be plumbed and interpreted and inevitably lost by his dick. The mechanics of this situation being what they were, it was mostly when he masturbated that Oscaro felt closest to the question regarding Bug that

most bothered him. It crystallized at these moments like the mad chorus of his liberated sperm: why does thinking of Bug always result in thinking about myself without detecting the transition? Only after the fact did he reel out the words as such. During the fact, he yelled only "Why!" He also tightened his grip, and with the other hand, jostled the watch.

He was jostling in a like manner when he came out of his reverie, into the succulent cross-currents, like promising trade winds against the backdrop of the impending hurricane, of steak au poivre and deviled eggs; sizzling croque au vine and cheese soufflé; fresh-baked baguettes and veal with custard, which he questioned, but scooped first anyway, feeling adventurous and virile. To Ophelia's satisfaction, he responded to a great, gelatinous handful by juggling it wildly on account of its unforeseen heat, quickly shoving it into his mouth for lack of better defense strategies, protruding his eyes, chewing furiously, leaping and swaying like an overzealous hunchback, and beginning a soliloquy before he had swallowed, so that foaming wads of custard cascaded from his mouth and at times his nostrils, too:

No poison so sweet
as love's-lotion-like
the one to reveal
its wicked intent in
palate's untangling
of full flavor, and
fudgy fulfillment
Were I chef to man's
cruelty, yet still'd
I lack what dextrous
measuring and guile
twere ness'ry over
concocting so true
as here--come veal's
willing shank beneath
egg's frantic core--
stops mine heart in
spewing, sidetracked
abandon; and death.

Here, Oscar rolled onto his back, clutching his chest with gooey fingers. In a fevered act of breathing which was either laughing or crying, if not both, Ophelia, who had gathered nearly a trough's worth of delicacies during the performance, bent on one knee beside the tragedian and forced them one by one, two by two, at one point three by three, into his mouth. To judge from the extra pleat in his trousers, the sustenance did him good, despite his silence, which Ophelia assessed as

encouragement to feed on, daintily biting her own portions from the tip, corner, or top of whatever selection was next to encounter Oscar's purring esophagus. He had his hand, pleasantly lubed, in her pants when the telephone rang for the first time in their occupancy of the mansion.

Despite its novelty, Ophelia blurted, "It must be Claude," as if expecting his call, which she knew would arrive after careful examination of the Chez Umbilico's receipts: cash and credit. She listened to the ongoing ringing expressionlessly, numb. Into the vacuum of her thoughts came one promising idea, which she seized before considering.

"Tell him you're my father," she said.

"I am old enough," responded Oscar, wry. He rolled his carcass toward the kitchen, where the phone hung on a wall between a cupboard and an overhead grill of dangling brass pots, like Bronze-Age teardrops, preserved. For some reason, the setting heightened his sense of earthly futility, and a wide range of soliloquies danced haphazardly in his head.

"Mr. RRnrr speaking," he said, amused at his ignorance, freshly perceived, of Ophelia's last name.

“Ah, yes,” said Mr. Clausz, and paused. “Pardon my haste, old man. Long distance. My daughter please, won’t you?” Labored breathing accented his speech from beginning to end; at times even seemed to take its place. Oscaro listened intently to the receiver for any authentic scraps of Paris. He decided what he heard was not in fact static, but the sloshing of the Seine; against the more solid foundation of the West bank, yes. Also, the receiver transmitted a mild scratching noise, as when a crepe peels from the grill; as when the rain assails a phone booth, or window. Oscaro wondered: what fragmented portion of America traveled across the Atlantic to the nameless man beyond its other, foaming shore? The transaction seemed all the more incredible on account of its double-anonymity, as if the men were trading secrets; performing an act of diplomacy undetermined by its hosts. Heavy wind rattled an oak limb against the window above the sink. Oscaro held the receiver, mouthpiece forward, beneath the faucet, which he took great pains to run at nearly body temperature. He pictured the current as emblematic of human hopes crossing a cold, negligent Mother-sea, imparting transparent news of brotherhood to water-resistant, hairy ears.

A soliloquy welled inside him, and poignantly he delivered it to no one in a dining room of delicately prepared foods and a frozen, melting swan, as Ophelia entered the kitchen to address a distant, doting father.

Confidence-women: "Hello, Father." On the Paris end, a bungled receiver indicated her interruption of something.

"Yes, Ophelia. Your voice at last. Damned old fingers, and so many buttons to push. That man. Gloria's latest? She has a weakness for the melodramatic timbre. When we were married. . ." There followed a long story of furtive adulteries, strange obsessions with contraception, an ex-wife's overzealous encouragement of her husband's career in the detection of Impressionist forgeries, odd references to the black-and-white television era; all the while, a thumping noise. Mr. Clausz swung back to relevance by discussing his latest findings, which included an ingenious reproduction of a large canvas from the water lilies collection. "I knew it by the subliminal representation of Comedy & Tragedy in the two uppermost lilies. Remarkable. Exactly as I dreamed it. I was a boy on the family farm in Osceola. My father brought me to the butcher's block for my first chicken, but pinned a swan to the block. The axe was

heavy. I handled it poorly, like dropping the phone. My swing destroyed its wing, which exploded in crystalline shrapnel as I woke up to Paris' first snowfall of the season." Mr. Clausz relented, panting.

"And you saw the Monet?"

"Blast! Another dream altogether. They're like telephone numbers. I can't keep them straight. No, the Monet came last night. The snow has turned to rain. I fell asleep wondering why the night before father said Osceola like mascara. Sounded like Osceara. His backwoods accent was thicker than usual, exaggerated."

"And the Monet?" Ophelia prodded.

"Yes, dear. The complementary faces of Comedy & Tragedy hovered over my every move in a dark, boundless landscape. Have I ever read you 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came'?"

"Last installment was Banjo's fake book," checked Ophelia.

"Irrelevant anyway. How should I explain this?" Mr. Clausz wondered. "In the standard depiction, Comedy & Tragedy hover, not above your father, of course," a wheezing guffaw; then resumed, airtight

earnestness, “but over a curving strip of fabric, is what it is. Like a belt for a bathrobe, but. . . in my dream it wasn’t a fabric at all. Do you understand?”

“I do father.”

“Then in the gallery this morning. . .” Possibly in tribute to the powers of his slumber, Mr. Clausz indulged a napping spell; or so it seemed to Ophelia, who remained silent for its duration, reviewing her own latest dreams, which contained images of white berets strangely adrift at sea, as if following the movements of submerged Parisians underneath them. At times, they collided, taking a dreamer’s estimate of whole minutes to separate. In another, her parachute failed to open, and when Ophelia looked up, it was a white beret instead, attached to her by cables that weren’t exactly wire; rather, the same unspoken material, she understood, that to her father was not exactly fabric. She wondered if she should tell him he had called his own house by mistake, and that mistake had bred mistake until secular miracle thread the accidents into the singular intention of their phone call. But she reminded herself that he had grown up on a farm, the innate handicap of which experience her

cosmopolitan sense of fair play could never reconcile. He confided to her once, during a reverberative bout of hiccoughs, that his interest in Monet resulted from his belated acquisition of reinforced eyeglasses, without which he viewed the world as a cloud-like substance offering little for close investigation beyond his own soothsaying brain. When his father sent him out to hunt rabbit and squirrel, he shot holes in reality's quizzical canvas, returning without any skinned prizes to validate the next morning's inevitable rash. His voice resumed.

“Darling, I need you to go to my house. In two days a package will arrive. By no means open it. Presently the exchange rate is miserable. For this reason, I am giving you my credit card number. Use it to pay the courier a charge of three hundred dollars. Spend another hundred on yourself. Also, order a grand feast from Chez Umbilico. I understand the hurricane is keeping its course. Buy too much food as provision against possible isolation. You need not promise me obedience to these requests as I dreamt their fulfillment. In heaven we shall awaken from the most gripping dream of all. Tip Claude handsomely.” Mr. Clausz panted,

regained his breath, and relayed the fourteen numbers of his American Express, which contained only thirteen. Ophelia scribbled them quickly onto the roll of paper near the phone. Its dispenser was an elaborately carved oak placard with braces of brass. At that instant, the wind forced a limb against the window above the sink. In rare keeping with her youth, Ophelia cast her scorn heedlessly, smiling to herself that the fate of a tree at least five times her age--the most savory aspect--was, by human intervention, to dispense paper, which came from trees! She tore her list of numbers and returned to the dining room.

There, like a pig, Oscaro leaned into the iced trough of éclairs and napoleons, piled three-layers thick. Hearing the tapping of a foot, he straightened his spine, pivoted on one heel, and checked his watch more from habit than sternness. A complement to his yellowing foundation of veal custard, vanilla pudding and virgin-white whipped cream clung to his cheeks and broad chin in horizontal stalactites, which within the strained radius of his tongue, he obliterated, wagging his eyebrows. The time was five fifty-eight; irrelevant. Fourteen minutes before, when he handed the phone to Ophelia, the time was five forty-four; highly

relevant. But to whom? Again, Oscaro was overcome by a near-wistful sensation that God, aloft in a magisterial director's chair and possibly wearing tights, was delivering the unsettling punch line to a joke told in frequencies the human ear only partially absorbed. He remembered an experience in one of many indistinguishable orphanages of his childhood: he was sitting on the toilet, dangling feet lost in enormous, dropped overalls, when the watermelon skull of his upper bunkmate emerged around the stall curtain, and asked, "Do you want to play Ham radio?" Having fallen for the popular "No soap; radio," ruse very recently, Oscaro suspected a prank, at which everyone would laugh save its unwitting stooge, who in this case was Oscaro. He decided to ignore his bunkmate and concentrate instead on the barnacled dismissal of his turd.

Eternal childe, thine mind
suffers creation's adamant
dropkick; thine teeth knit
as football's laces; thine
breath air in a pig's sewn
intestine escapes of equal
quality; breathless, death
may nostrils twice pollute.

After a moment's formless daydreaming, Ophelia explained to Oscar her father's senility, his trouble with numbers, the creeping shadow of his arthritis, all of which details sounded strangely distant to her, as if description and its object were turning out to be inseparable, and her words belonged in Paris or nowhere. Nervously, she ran a finger white-glove inspection-style along the perimeter of a napoleon, sucking the gathered cream. The act inspired nothing more in Oscar than a belch, for which he did not excuse himself. The world of adult, heterosexual relationships was holding nothing back.

The skin on Ophelia's legs congealed into militant goose bumps, chafing against the textured cotton of her father's seasonal trousers. She wanted to run back to the phone and find her father in the middle of a dauntless reverie about his married years, stumbling through the words as once he stumbled through every last detail they resurrected. She wanted to hear biological ghost stories about her own existence as a zygote; her yeasted rising in the oven of her mother's womb; her first thumping communications against the drum skin of pregnant, maternal hide. What was she saying in those aqueous rhythms? Don't divorce?

Prepare the milk? I forgive you for everything in advance? The taste of cream on her palate, Ophelia intuited her need to say those same things even now, and knew with a child's cart wheeling incisiveness that birth was an obstacle no harried life of movement could ever circumvent. She lay down in the expanding puddle of the swan and extended to Oscar the invitation of young, diverging legs, his to ravish at the tug of an older man's zipper.