

Morissa

a sort of ghost story
by Rachel West
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Again and again the difficulty would settle like sand all through her, within ten minutes of sitting down at her desk in the sweet dark evening. She had finally come home, the day was through and now her time was her own and she'd use it for the only thing that mattered: to sit and write. Night after night she'd come home tired yet joyful with expectation and relief, turning the key in the lock and finding herself safe behind the door of her own apartment, alone with her things, her mind, her computer, her pen and paper. This was how it had always been but now it had turned into something else. It had become difficult. She had run out of ideas.

She didn't like to say it to herself that way. It was a forbidden admission. You couldn't believe it and live. And yet that dread filled her again tonight, as, predictably, she sat down and found she had nothing to say to herself.

Morissa got up from her desk and went to the kitchen to make some tea and try to deduce what was happening and how to proceed. This had been years in the making, she knew. Each passing year seemed to slow her down even more, even as she got closer and closer to completing her MFA. Could there be a correlation? The stakes were going up a bit; as an undergraduate there was nobody monitoring her output and she had very little to hand in, and in those days it seemed like endless wonders simply flowed out of her day after day. That could be a distortion, though. Morissa was known for assuming that things had been easier in the past, that some other iteration of her had had it right, somehow. For what it was worth -- which was very little -- she felt happier than ever; certainly happier than she had been as a freshman. Maybe it was true, she thought as the kettle started to whisper with steam, maybe it was true what she'd always suspected about happiness and brilliance being inversely proportional. She hadn't become happy on purpose. It was more like she started out living in a dorm in a strange city and now she had a comfortable home and familiar, friendly surroundings. Everything was easy now and she'd always been adaptable. But who went out of their way to ruin their lives? Besides Faulkner, Fitzgerald... What was Morissa supposed to do if she didn't have a naturally self-destructive personality? Give up and become a professor? But then all her professors were self-destructive, too. That was another thing that had become clear the further she'd progressed.

The tea was steeping. She inhaled its scent, relished it. How could life be this good? No wonder she was ruined.

"You can't just sit around making lists of what's missing," she said to herself, then proceeded to do just that. The tea darkened beside her as she sat at her desk long into the night writing

sex, sex, sex, sex, sex

She woke up laughing the next morning. This disturbed her, made her feel like part of her knew something the rest did not, like she'd missed the joke. It had happened more and more frequently over the past week and it always put her in a bad mood. If she was supposed to appreciate the humor and novelty in the situation, she didn't.

It was 6 a.m. Her customary leisurely breakfast seemed contraindicated, but so did sleeping in. When she was younger she'd always slept until the absolute last minute, slept all she could, with a fierce determination. She'd go around half the day with an expression on her face which suggested that being out of bed at this or any hour was an offense to heaven, and she was bent on avenging it. No one must dare to ask anything of her. Every day. From midmorning to evening. There was a strange comfort in that. The inside of her shell was lined with down and she occupied that space; she was its undisputed master. Why had she ever given ground?

Two hours later her second alarm went off. She now had twenty minutes to get to class. "Who's laughing now?" she muttered to herself, the clenched up feeling of fatigue reminding her why she had eschewed this lifestyle.

"You've got a face like a smashed egg this morning," remarked William at their usual midmorning breakfast. William liked to call himself The Doctor although he was several years from completing his Ph.D in Psychology. Morissa knew the reasons for his affectations. She still liked him. "Where's your unnatural matinal freshness?" he asked.

"It's weird," she said. "I slept in this morning."

"I thought they called it beauty sleep."

"I don't know what's going on with me."

"At last she admits it."

She kicked him under the table.

"If you're looking for an excuse to touch me, you really ought to just come out and say it. It's much more healthy."

"You are going to be the worst therapist," she laughed.

"Whatever. I just have a keen awareness of human frailty."

"Through personal experience."

"Exactly. You should appreciate that; don't they always say write what you know? I guess that means your thesis is going to be on the subject of black tea and cats."

"I don't even own a cat! I don't like cats. Just 'cause I'm single with my own place --"

"Single and aging."

"You -- Shut up." She laughed.

"Really, Morissa, don't listen to me. You know better. Especially at this hour."

"Like I said. The worst therapist. Doctor."

"Gotta keep the sci fi club girls sexually satisfied, you know that. It's the only thing that works."

"Without you they would run amok," she said, without conviction. "This campus would be declared a disaster area."

"They're all Jean Greys; each has her own Dark Phoenix within."

"Nerd."

"You'll never embarrass me like that. But don't give up! You're the keenest wit I know, you'll get it someday. As for me, I've got class. At least in one sense."

Morissa felt sadness as he got up to leave, along with a slight shame; usually she was much better at keeping up but now, she realized, she was feeling vulnerable. She was feeling the proximity of something real. Her fate was hovering. She wanted a friend. But he was going. "See you later," she said simply, her voice drifting off at the end -- more shame. She felt so ordinary and so damaged. Like a worn-down credit card.

"Anyway," he said, suddenly returning, "who cares if I'm a bad therapist? I may just go into research. Like I enjoy listening to people's problems, anyway."

"Without other people's problems you'd cease to exist," she called as he dashed away again. She wasn't sure why she'd said it, but it was something he might have said; therefore, it must be clever. She put her face in her hands, then checked her watch and saw to her relief that it was nearly time for her second class to begin. She gathered her things and hurried back towards the English department.

All through the lecture and discussion her mind kept spinning round and round the question. *When will everyone realize I've lost it?*

By 'it,' she meant her talent.

Thus far she'd been moved through her program with copious praise and approval and the highest of hopes. She'd once written things that garnered comparisons to everyone from Woolf to Eliot (George) to Gertrude Stein -- or to whatever other female author or poet sprang to mind when they were writing up the final grades. Morissa wondered if this meant she was too thoroughly female somehow, or whether being female at all meant that certain things, certain comparisons, certain heights of recognition, were always unlikely. She'd certainly never seen anything in herself that bore a similarity to Gertrude Stein. Sure Morissa could be considered "experimental," but who was not? Sometimes she was not even interesting, not to herself, anyway; and yet every semester came another top-of-the-class review, another recommendation, another appearance in the campus journal. Now t fraud was about to be exposed. It was fortunate that during the long wet season that comprised the first twenty-six years of her life she'd written so profusely that she was still some way from running out of poems to slap down for critique, but how long would the reservoir hold out? What would she turn in for her final project? She had nothing. Not even an idea. Not even a theme. Nothing seemed to stick and nothing came. And this was all she could think about, so she got nothing out of academics, or life, any longer. That day in class she thought the desperation would finally make her explode but it didn't. She sat still and to all appearances she was her normal self, so competent and plain as to be vaguely unlikable, almost invisible -- and then it was over, like another test she'd passed. Again, the question: *How long can I go on this way?* and *How can my heart be racing like this?*

"I'll make myself sick by thinking," she said under her breath as she left the building that evening. She didn't have her gym clothes, but she didn't want to go home so she walked in the direction of the campus fitness center. All the facilities were free for her use. She had learned to enjoy exercising over the past few years here. Like most other things that were important to her, however, she'd lost her familiarity with it over the past months. She felt self-conscious at first as she passed through the doors but she quickly saw that the place was almost deserted, except for a pair of work-study attendants busying themselves playing ping pong, and one man jogging around and around the indoor track. Morissa felt relieved. She climbed the stairs to where an array of climbing machines was lined up. She put down her purse, rolled up her jeans and mounted the machine. As she worked its buttons and scrolled through its excess of options she felt a good, peaceful, mindless feeling. The kindly red LED's flashed their pragmatical, dominating dance and she began *working out*. Her legs and body would dramatize her emotional upward struggle, also getting nowhere... But no, don't think about that.

As the minutes passed in the empty sterile sweatiness of the gym she began to have an eerie feeling. Her eyes followed the jogger as he seemed to circle tirelessly and eternally; he took no notice of her. She wondered what was driving him. Nobody would do so many laps in a normal state of mind.

The man wasn't watching her or even aware of her, but her sense of invisibility and security had begun to slip away, as if dissolved in the sop of sweat soaking the fabric of her shirt. The quiet, the desertion -- they weren't meaningful, they weren't frightening

her, but they were no longer comforting. Something else was frightening her. She needed to stop and have a drink and go home and take a shower but she couldn't bring herself to do it. It was as if, moving from that spot, she would attract the attention of some malicious thing.

It was nothing, surely, no different from feeling tense in the dark, getting spooked by a horror movie. She'd always been susceptible to these things, it was the price she paid for her imagination. This made her laugh a little as she thought of it. Her imagination. If she was afraid, and if there could be nothing to fear, then her imagination was still present. Suddenly she felt cheered, emboldened. She released herself, panting, from the machine. She found her legs were now weak and shaky; she'd pushed herself too hard in her out-of-shape state. It would be a long walk home now. She stopped at the vending machine for a bottle of water. *Imagination. Just my imagination. My wonderful imagination. Oh how I love it. I love it.* She got excited as she walked, even though she was exhausted. She thought she might meet it at home and it would have something to say to her at last. *But don't crowd it, don't force it. Just be patient...* She kept sipping her water and tried to ease into a calm, meditative walk. She had had too much stress today, too much quickened pulse, too much despair. She felt poisoned. She had also been alone too much lately. This thought stopped her, made her sigh. She considered, grudgingly, that she might go to William's place instead and visit -- she knew it was the healthy option, the escape from her own consumptive company. She should have taken it regularly, like medicine... but she should have thought of it before tonight. When she reached the place where she would have had to turn to go to William's house, she kept going, towards her own building. By the time she got home she knew for sure that it had never been a possibility, this night or any other night. What had she been thinking, she would seek out no one. She was not required to do that.

She came in breathlessly to her home, languorous and titillated like one about to meet a lover. So she imagined.

She stumbled towards her writing desk and as she collapsed into the chair she felt again the sweaty dampness of her clothes, and her soul and body objected to it. She rose up, pulled the shoes from her feet and the clothes from her back, leaving them carelessly thrown about the living room. Whereas she would normally have taken a shower she now fell straight into her cool white sheets with an unaccountable sense of triumph. As she closed her eyes she thought she saw movement through the door into her study but nothing could stop sleep from closing in around her, and she felt no desire to struggle.

In the morning she wondered what had happened, what had become of the enticing promise of inspiration, like a bud emerging, like a villain peeping from behind the drapes... How had she let the opportunity pass? And she never slept naked. She got up, feeling wary but capable -- a lioness. If there was something, some presence or some

intruder still lingering, in her imagination, she felt she could reckon with it. She got the white robe that lay over a chair by her closet and put it on, began to make the rounds of her domicile to make sure everything was in its place. If she was being imaginative, she might as well humor herself, encourage herself, even.

Finally she flopped down into her favorite tea-drinking chair and as she looked down at her naked legs flowing out from the hemline of her robe, she wanted a cigarette.

Later that afternoon, between classes, she sat out on the patio of the campus coffee shop with her notebook, trying to sally forth and get writing. The non-incident -- she tried not to make too much fun of herself, but she had to maintain a balanced view -- was to be fodder, an example to follow. Her own example. Hysterical poetry. What would the chimera look like? What did it intend? She welcomed it, tried to entice it closer. But now in the daylight all she could see was William, coming to join her.

"Coming with us to the cabin this weekend?"

She almost laughed aloud. "Cabin in the woods?"

"Don't worry, nothing happens there."

"Nothing? So why are you going?"

"Well, when I say nothing, I mean drunkenness, drug use and orgies. Of course I'm kidding, Morissa; it's super-casual, it's a nice cabin, I can't vouch for myself or the others but you can have as serene a time as you want to have."

"Who's coming?"

"Bianca the trekkie, John the art student -- eh? You like him."

"Whatever."

"And a bunch of architecture nerds."

"Why don't you ever invite anyone from your own department?"

"They all instinctively distrust me."

"Fair enough."

"So you're coming?"

Cabin in the woods. Cabin in the words.

"Morissa? R.S.V.P., s'il vous plait."

"Yes, yes. All right."

"Sweet! We'll be leaving around eleven, Saturday morning. I told the others eight but you're punctual, so I'll tell you the truth."

"Appreciated."

"Eleven."

He wasn't so bad, really, her William. He'd just read too many books. Or too few. Or too few that weren't by Oscar Wilde. Or Freud. Perhaps over the weekend she'd get a grip on his condition, or he on hers. Neither had any qualifications.

Saturday morning as the sunlight was just beginning to intensify its gleam in her living room windows, Morissa had her tea and leisurely packed a bag. Her rooms had never felt quieter, never looked more golden. She didn't remember tidying up, but there was an air of expectation, as if awaiting a guest. She wondered if there'd be any flowers in bloom by the cabin or by the lake. She thought it'd be nice to bring some back — but only if the weekend turned out to be something she'd want to remember every time she looked at the flowers. No sense taking a souvenir from a traumatic event.

She sighed. She knew what would happen: the same thing that always happened. She'd feel excluded from the fun and excluded from all the grilling and enjoying of meat... It was as if fun, like meat, was something she'd chosen to abstain from, and once people knew she was a vegetarian they no longer attempted to elicit any display of pleasure from her.

Morissa was partly relieved and partly frightened when she learned that the expedition would travel together in one van. She considered driving her own car in order to allow herself an escape, but escape was hardly the point, was it? So she assembled along with the others on the front porch of William's house where bacon, waffles and mimosas were served for several hours before anyone thought of leaving. It turned out the cabin itself was less than an hour away and when they arrived everyone seemed a little disappointed that it wasn't yet late enough for dissolute antics around a bonfire. As it was they had hours to settle in, swim in the cold lake, and, if they could bring themselves to do so, converse. Morissa retired quickly to a discreet distance. She took a book of poetry and sat on the front porch swing, a spot from which nothing was visible except the gravel road. Everyone else convened on the back deck which offered a view of the lake. She allowed them to forget about her, but it was impossible to relax. She sat there, outwardly calm, inwardly harassed by her own fear of harassment.

William was true to his word; nobody bothered her all day. Around sunset, just as she was thinking it might be nice to see someone but was far from ready to take it upon herself to follow the sound of laughter around to the other side of the house and face them all, William came along and joined her on the porch.

"Having a good time?" he asked, proffering a plate of raw vegetables and cheese. His voice was sincere and without judgment. She had never felt more grateful to him. Maybe he wouldn't be such a bad therapist.

"Pretty good," she said, taking a carrot. She hadn't actually been able to absorb her reading on account of all her anxiety, but one had to pretend to like being alone if one insisted upon it as much as she did.

"Looks like a few of the kids have gone swimming, less than forty-five minutes after a bout of heavy drinking. Against my advice, of course. There's still plenty of food and drinks back there. John brought the best wine. I don't know where he gets the money. If you find out, let me know."

She laughed.

"Yes," he continued, "it's just me and a few of the more sober constituents. Bianca's actually fallen asleep, I think. I could use some decent company and you could use a drink, I'm sure."

"Yeah, yeah, I'll be good. I'm coming."

Sooner or later she always had to get past that childish humiliation of being coaxed into the party, and now was the inevitable moment. She and William went through the indigo-colored darkness of the house and emerged onto a charming deck hung with paper lanterns. In the distance there were the shrieks of what was undoubtedly skinny dipping; Morissa refrained from searching the lakeside darkness for any hints of flesh.

She began to warm up to the night as William plied her with drinks and stayed close but not too close. The swimming party returned in under an hour, running past in wet clothes: John, Elizabeth, Ravi, Dale, Danae... Morissa supposed they were disappointed that more girls hadn't joined in. Or maybe not. She swallowed her drink and let her head fall back against the chair. Somehow her highball glass tipped itself over. William was at the ready with a fresh rum-and-coke.

"John," he called out over his shoulder as he handed the drink down to Morissa, "how was the water?"

"Awesome!" came the shivering reply. John stepped out onto the porch a moment later, a blanket around his shoulders, a fresh pair of drawstring shorts cinched at his narrow pink waist, his hair glittering in the dim light. William elbowed Morissa in the ribs then tried to play it off as an accident. "Excuse me, Morissa. Where's my drink?"

"Don't," she whispered through her teeth.

To prevent her from leaving, William directed everyone's attention to the sound system inside the house. "They just hooked up some discreetly placed speakers so we can listen to records out here. The sound quality is amazing." Soon they were listening to something in Portuguese.

"You promised to leave me out of the orgies," she whispered as William returned to his place at her side.

"It's just a samba."

A while later she woke up, cold and alone on the deck now festooned with spilled ice and towels and a few scraps of clothing. She crept towards the back entrance of the cabin and peeked in. They all appeared to be sleeping more or less in a pile in the living room. She was tempted to flee into the woods but instead slipped past them into the bedroom she was meant to share with Bianca. To her relief, no one was there. Once under the covers she was warm but wide awake, listening to the increasingly sinister sounds of the house and the woods. She could only do her best to ignore the quiet sound of windows being repeatedly opened and shut and the footsteps of someone or other pacing to and fro all night.

When the weekend was over she felt more tired than she had before the supposed vacation. She'd remained out of sync with the rest of the party, passing out drunk most nights then waking up to bouts of insomnia once everyone else was deep in sleep, worn out from swimming, flirting, and playing games. Morissa was never even sure if anyone actually had sex that weekend, or, indeed, ever. If sex happened for these people it was just so easy and natural and graceful that nobody needed to notice it or worry about it, it was just like breathing. That was Morissa's perception, anyway. Maybe nobody did have sex. Maybe nobody needed it. Maybe it was passé and Morissa was the only one still thinking about it. The only one besides William, that is; if sex was like breathing William was like one of those people who likes to get high on pure oxygen pumped in through a face mask. Or maybe he was just faking it all in order to interest her, and however many others he kept in his psychological zoo. He needn't have bothered with the act. She was tired of being reminded of human sexuality. She wanted to be enlightened, too.

When she got home she realized she hadn't picked any flowers at the lake, but didn't consider it a loss. If she'd happily picked flowers, they in their turn would have died. It all ended in a gradual but certain fading and smoothing out.

Her apartment seemed less tidy than she'd left it, somehow. It was a cloudy day, and all the gold of expectation was gone. She'd been hoping for something and it was gone.

She found herself collapsed on her living room couch, crying. Her bag lay in the hallway waiting to be unpacked, her life lay all around her, waiting to be picked back up like a satchel heavy with things of no use. The weekend was now in the past and even though she'd had no expectations that she was aware of, she knew it had been an opportunity, to live, to gather material, to gather flowers, and as always once she'd gotten there it was impossible to do anything. She cried and cried, but before she could work herself into a fully realized fit, the sound of something crashing to the floor stopped her.

The lamp by the couch had fallen. Perhaps she had kicked it over without noticing. But she could not have reached the floor lamp across the room, which also lay overturned, though not broken. Morissa picked up the broken table lamp in pieces at her feet. At first she felt foolish and angry with herself but at the same time she was grateful to have something else to think about. Only the ceramic shell of the lamp was broken, the electric parts were intact and the shade seemed to have insulated the bulb from the impact, which was a relief. Broken lightbulbs disturbed her. She tried turning on the lamp. It still worked. Green shards of ceramic lay all over the wood floor. She picked up the pieces, unsure whether she'd bother reassembling them. If she'd lost the chance to bring back a souvenir from the cabin, at least she'd have a souvenir of the emotional aftermath. She stacked the pieces in the kitchen, righted the fallen floor lamp in the corner and decided to take a book and go out for tea. The private space felt too demanding and isolating, like a marriage. As she headed for the door she could almost feel a great weight clinging to her ankles as if to stop her from leaving. "No!" she gasped as she stepped over the threshold, pulled the door to and locked it. She felt like a jailer, but she herself was free. Morissa fled down the hall towards the elevators.

When at last she was outdoors her mind drifted; she had a mental flash of the half-naked art student dripping with lake water. A noise made her look up at her building, like someone had banged on a window. No one was there. She trembled.

At the cafe she found herself bored and yearning and restless. She got herself a decaffeinated herbal fruit tea with a strong infusion of hibiscus, its color a bit too sensual.

It was all truly unsettling yet too amorphous to define yet. Her self-hate and anxiety were mutating, finding other, older, more insidious deficiencies and merging with them in order to double up their impact. She was going to collapse under the weight if it all remained inexpressible. If only she could express it it would be worth anything! At least she'd have her degree, and maybe even a masterpiece. She had to have mastery in her. Somewhere. If there was no potential why so much disappointment, so much harassment? From what? Certainly not her parents...

She wrote down something in her notebook and was pleased to at least have opened it and added to it for the first time in a week. It wasn't usable but what did that mean? No wonder she was blocked. She'd always resented being used.

I'll find a way to save myself

She hadn't expected to say that but it was reassuring.

*I'll find a way to save myself
even if I must come back as a ghost
no matter who I summon up to be*

Well, that was amusing enough, she thought, but too bad to want to finish.

Another thought best shut up

And that on its own line, its own page. At least this was taking up space. She'd feel good about that if she ever consumed this notebook. It was the only proof she had of productivity. It was physical. Spatial. Visible. Her despair would be reduced by inches.

*No matter what I must become
or force myself to see*

"Oh, god," she groaned aloud, throwing down the pencil with a gesture of boredom. Her hands were shaking. She considered that she was starting to sound more and more like William anytime she reached towards being honest with herself and this was quickly becoming tiresome. Creating psychological work for herself? Was that really what she was suggesting in these unformed lines? What accusation was this? *See what?* More naked art students? She laughed, but felt herself clenching up in a million different places. She should have gone skinny dipping. So what? She knew that already.

"What am I suggesting, get a steak? Get laid?" she laughed. "I want to tell myself to fuck off."

"What?" She looked up to see a hopeful-looking young man standing near her, looking at her. She didn't know him. Or maybe he was in one of her classes. He must have been passing when her inner monologue had erupted.

"Sorry, just talking to myself," she said, blushing.

He now looked embarrassed and confused and wandered off without saying more. Did she know him? She didn't think so. Maybe that had been an opportunity a wiser woman would have accepted, to make an introduction, say something intriguing and not just crazy.

She headed home then, fed up and determined to go to bed immediately. When her building came in sight, however, she stopped walking. She reached into her bag for her cell phone.

"Can you come over?" she asked when William picked up.

"What do you need?"

"I'm afraid to go into my apartment." She paused as the thought took shape. "I think there's something in there."

"What, a bug?"

"William," she sighed. "You're more scared of bugs than I am."

"I'm too drunk to drive. You'll have to come over here."

"Drive? It's like five blocks!"

"I rest my case. I have people over. I can't leave them. They might steal my property."

"William, can't I just ask you for help without you superiorly insisting on dragging me to a party?"

"I am helping you."

"Forget it. It's probably nothing." She hung up and went inside, too annoyed to be afraid anymore anyway.

When she opened the door to her apartment she found the whole place shaking, every cupboard, every window, every door banging off its hinges. "No!" she whispered, standing in the doorway in the horrible barrage of noise and displaced air; because it was impossible, couldn't be, what she saw and heard was not real and yet it most manifestly was, right in front of her, her whole world in a horrible whirlwind. Closing the door again slowly she marveled that the noise was almost inaudible from the hall; anything could be happening in there, or in any of those rooms, and no one would be bothered. No one was in the hall now but her, no one ever was. She had chosen this place a year ago with no idea it was *haunted*; back then she preferred the privacy and quiet and lack of community. Now she wished there was someone to tell her what was happening.

She made herself open the door again. This time, all was still.

"Well, if it isn't you!" William exclaimed as he opened the door. His face fell when he saw how shaken she was, but he recovered quickly. "Why don't you come in and have a drink?"

She did come in. She couldn't care less who was there, what they were doing or what they might think of her. At least they were human, corporeal, she could know them for what they were and know where they began and ended and everything would make that usual sort of sense. William sat her down in a comfy chair by his fireplace and soon placed a gin and tonic in her hand. "Was there something there?" he asked, crouching at her side.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Do you want to tell me what you think it was?"

She shook her head. "I'm not sure."

William nodded. "You can relax here for a while, we'll talk whenever you're ready. I do have to go check on Ryan just now; he's not feeling well, either."

Morissa had noticed the sounds of retching from the bathroom down the hall. It seemed a bit early for that sort of thing but they'd probably started at the campus bar as soon as class was out. She sipped her drink and gazed at the fire.

She woke up in the morning on the floor near the chair she'd spent the evening in, and for a moment she felt that her worst problem was the aches in her body and the surroundings that were not her home -- but then she remembered she had no home. Either her home was truly subject to the horror she'd seen there or she'd lost her mind, her precious reason, and wasn't safe anywhere and wasn't likely to have the chance to graduate. A nervous breakdown. It would set her back years. Or would it?

Hurrying now, she found her bag near where she was lying, got up and went into the kitchen. She sat down at the table and began to write. "Ha!" In a little while she went to the stove and turned on the gas flame under the kettle to heat water for some tea, then sat back down immediately, carving out wonderful words. Wonderful because they were there.

So it was that when William came down from his bedroom several hours later, hung-over but tidied up, Morissa greeted him more in a spirit of excited triumph than prostrated fear. He responded to this change with his usual curiosity.

"Why didn't you make coffee?"

"Why would I?" she asked.

"That'll teach me to keep tea in the house. People like you simply don't think normally."

"William," she said, "I've broken through."

"Yes," he muttered, getting together the implements for the coffee.

"Don't you want to hear?"

"I have my own self, my own needs, my own processes. I need to allow myself this much. I am, of course, eager to get to work on you but I'm only human."

"Sit down," she sighed, getting up from the table. "You're right, it's the least I can do." She set about making the coffee and arranging some breakfast.

"Don't be stingy with the coffee. Make it strong, for the love of god." While she did this he flipped through her pages, saying "Yes," from time to time. She didn't object to his helping himself to her work. Finally she came to the table with his coffee, plate of toast and butter, slid them across to him and he returned her notebook to her. "Well?" he said, sipping the coffee. "Ah. Well done." She was disappointed that he was praising the coffee rather than her poems.

"I'm going to do my thesis on the ghost in my apartment," she said.

He frowned. "Yes."

"You don't believe in ghosts?"

"Of course not. I believe you need therapy."

"To a man with a hammer every problem looks like a nail."

"I could say the same to you, since you've apparently decided to treat your own psychosis with poetry."

"Psychoanalysis is like a reflex to you; you've been doing it to me since we met."

"I'm a natural. But recap for me, please, what happened in the past twelve hours to change everything? It sounds serious."

"I came home from J.D.'s on campus yesterday to find my apartment completely possessed."

"Possessed," he sighed.

"The windows and cupboards were banging open and shut, the whole place was -- Things were moving on their own."

"What were you thinking about, what were you doing at J.D.'s before all this happened?"

She hesitated. She reached across the table for her tea. "It started before that, actually." She didn't want to tell him any of it now, it seemed too obvious. He'd jump all over it with his usual self-serving admonitions.

"When did it start?" He scrutinized her, was about to latch onto some aspect of the boring truth and reduce her to it.

"Forget it," she said, getting up from the table. "You know me too well and you know exactly what you want for me and everything's just going to lead back to that." She went into the living room with her notebook and tea and sat back down by the fireplace.

"Morissa," he moaned. "What's this agenda you believe I have?"

"You're tired," she sighed. "I ask too much."

He came into the room and stood over her for a moment, then went and lay down on the couch. He belched and groaned.

"I'm not an interesting patient," she said. "You've got it all figured out and you keep impressing upon me that all I need to do is quit being frigid and sleep with you or one of the candidates you keep choosing for me."

He laughed. "I certainly don't think that'd solve your problems, but I do know that as a person you are severely repressed and, y'know, stuck. You're not getting what you want."

"So what? Half the time I swear you seem determined to keep me that way. You're always laughing at me."

"You take it all so seriously."

"It is serious. You'll never be any use to anyone unless you can meet them on their terms, you know, William. I'm never going to be like you and you surely don't think that would be healthy for me or anyone."

"You do know what poltergeists are, right?"

She could swear he was glaring at her. "No one does," she said. "You're going to damage me."

"Psychokinesis."

"We'll see about that. I know you don't believe in any of that stuff. Do you even believe in Psychology or whatever, or is it just another way to get into people's pants?"

"Do you even believe in poetry or is it just another way to reinforce your own personal mythology?"

She quieted for a moment. "So you do have some actual theories about me?"

"I have theories about everyone. And everything." He lay back with a sigh. "But I don't think we should talk about this anymore. I've let it turn into a fight, I'm afraid. And I'm sorry you didn't have a good time at the lake. You're probably right about everything. I feel like shit. I need a little more coffee." He got up and went to the kitchen.

She frowned, watched him go. "Who said anything about the lake?"

"Well, of course you didn't have a good time at the lake. It's all the same problem, isn't it?"

She followed him into the kitchen, found him slumped at the table. Suddenly she felt guilty, as if she were being difficult.

"I knew you'd never sleep with John," he said. "But if I allowed you only to do things you liked then you'd never know there was anything wrong with you."

"Maybe it worked," she said. "I felt so bad about myself I started hallucinating."

"Anyway," he said. "I'll try to help since I've pushed you this far."

Morissa felt a flood of feelings rise up then recede before she could even recognize them. Then she just felt nervous, like someone were trying to take something from her. Nervous, flushed, angry, her heart pounding, she looked at William and didn't know what to say anymore. She sat down and put her head on the table. "I need tranquilizers," she said. "I'm too excited all the time. It's wearing me out."

He laughed softly, patted her hand. "I usually just drink."

Morissa and William returned to Morissa's apartment together, to investigate the scene, as he put it. She was unsurprised when they got inside and found nothing out of the ordinary. "Seems ordinary enough," William said, as if he had read her thoughts and was mocking their banality. She rolled her eyes but he was surveying the apartment and didn't notice. "What exactly did you see?" he asked.

"I opened the door and it was like a hurricane was blowing through. The doors, the windows, the cupboards, everything was moving."

"Did you get any specific feeling, about what was being communicated to you?"

"That's an odd question."

"Well, you're the one who believes this phenomenon is sentient."

"I said my apartment was haunted, that's all."

"It seems a bit sudden. You've always loved this place and refused to leave it. Then suddenly you're over at my place seeking refuge."

The phone began ringing; Morissa jumped and shrank with automatic anxiety. "Let it go to voicemail. It's probably --" She stopped.

"Morissa! Creditors?"

She laughed. "No." She swallowed, frowned; William's eyes followed her as she traversed the room aimlessly. "My parents. Their dog's been sick."

William's eyebrows went up at this unexpected bit of information.

"William," she sighed, sitting down. "I'm really... so tired. Can you just stay with me and not ask me any questions for a while?"

"You're not afraid anymore?"

"Of course I'm afraid." She turned her gaze to the window. "Do you feel anything funny in here? Like that oppressive atmosphere they talk about on the T.V. shows?"

"Definitely. I feel your anxiety, and not a little resentment."

She turned to him. "Resentment? I'm not resentful. I'm never resentful!"

"Look, I'm fine if you just want to order Chinese food and watch a movie, Morissa. That seems like what you want. You just said no more questions."

"I did." She shivered.

So William proceeded to take care of her. He ordered the food, even chose her entree for her, and when it arrived he paid for it saying "When you feel better you can return the favor," which for some reason she found comforting. They ate dinner and watched the old-movie channel. Morissa occupied the couch by herself while William sat nearby in a chair, both of them wrapped up in blankets. She appreciated the physical distance as well because she didn't trust herself, or anyone else. Part of her was trembling to be close to someone, but she relied upon him too much and she felt too frightened. This was a time to do nothing, to be absolutely still. It meant a lot that he seemed to sense

this. Thinking about it, she was pretty enough; everyone was interested in her but no one was passionate about her because she didn't allow it. She was pretty but not alluring; in her opinion she was more than a little annoying. Neurotic. Cold. Tidy. It was impossible for anyone to look at her and not laugh to themselves. At least William cared a little. Neurosis certainly wasn't a sexual turnoff for him; she supposed that was the heart of his trouble and the reason he would certainly find himself the center of a malpractice suit if he ever became a therapist. Tonight they hardly spoke.

She woke up thinking she had heard something moving in the apartment. Her eyes sought out William asleep in the chair; and hovering or standing over him was a shadow, a shadow on the darkness of the room, a figure both red and black, like a latent image, she saw it and didn't see it. "William!" she gasped aloud. He woke, reached out instinctively for the floor lamp which was no longer there -- she saw his arm pass through the figure and heard him say "Whoa."

"William!" She was too petrified to leave the couch so she threw the first thing that came to hand: the remote control. It clattered against the far wall and there was silence, she couldn't see anything in the dark now but the faint blue-black shape of William in the dark, sitting up in the chair looking in her direction. The thing was gone.

"Morissa?" he said. "What happened?"

"Turn on a light," she whispered. "I can't move."

He got up and staggered across the room to the light switch. The room was flooded with artificial light and looked ordinary again, if too bright. She breathed and let the life come back into her body. "It was looking at you," she said.

He frowned, and a shock ran through her -- not merely to see he was afraid, but because at the moment of his fear she had felt -- *smug*. As if she'd done something to him and liked it. It only lasted for a moment. "Ugh," she said, putting her face in her hands.

He stood by the light switch, seemingly speechless. Or, at least, he was not the arbiter of this moment. He was not in control of it. This, too, was suddenly exciting. "Ugh!" she said again. This time he laughed; and as she shrank back down under his gentle derision she felt relieved. A clarity and familiarity came back to her; she felt she recognized her surroundings again. Now she smiled and laughed. She shook her head. "I don't know what's happening!"

She felt like she should describe it all to him, her therapist, as it were. But there was something else now. "No, I don't know," she said. "You... What time is it?"

He looked at his counterfeit Rolex. "Three in the morning."

"I think we should get out of here. Want to walk to the Rat? I'll buy you anything you want if you stay with me. I'm so sorry, William, but we have to."

He shrugged. "I wasn't sleeping too well in that chair, anyway. I don't know how you do it. You always seem to pass out in chairs and wake up bright as a beet root."

He had touched it; had it hurt him? She wondered as they walked through the cool, damp night. She hadn't yet told him what she had seen and he hadn't yet asked. She couldn't tell if he was just being patient and respectful, or if he sincerely didn't want to know. Maybe he was just dazed and tired. He was probably wondering to himself why he was even there with her, the crazy energy suck who would resist him no matter how he came at her, whether he was trying to help her or fuck her... Was she fooling herself about his intentions? She often wondered. She wasn't sure why it should be important to her that he should want her, when she was determined to stay clear, clear of him and everyone else.

She found herself dying to ask him what he was thinking but this made her feel pathetic and she resisted it. She had to continue somehow, would have to speak sometime. She decided to delay indefinitely.

When they got to the all-night campus bar and diner, located in the basement of the student union, she ordered a pizza and a pitcher of beer, not knowing what else to do and wishing to foster an atmosphere of bonhomie.

"A pitcher? Seriously?" he said, laughing. "I'm so tired. What did you get?"

"The wheat beer. I had no idea they even sold beer at this hour."

"Of course they do." He looked fondly at her now, poured himself a glass. "Or maybe we're dreaming."

They sat in silence til the pizza arrived.

"Let's not do this again for a while," he said. "I run myself ragged as it is, and now this."

"You said you'd help," she said, surprising herself with her sulky tone.

"Morissa."

She tried to lighten the mood. "I can't understand why you're objecting to morning beers, at any rate."

"I object to being run out of my bed by supernatural phenomena."

"So do I."

"Do you want to tell me what happened back there?"

"Do you want to know?"

"It seems to concern me."

"There was something standing over you. I could see it. Like a shadow, standing."

"Was it not a shadow?"

She took an angry chug of her beer. "I'm not a child, William. I'm generally a very sober person as you know. Why suddenly doubt my senses?"

"It's the sober ones who go off the deep end."

"Not true."

"Sometimes true."

"What do you make of it, then?" she asked.

"Well, to begin with, if you're talking about it to me, a practitioner of science, you must be of the opinion that it's a projection of your own mind somehow. I've seen no evidence that it's anything different, so I don't know why you're arguing about the reliability of your senses."

"You passed your arm through it and you reacted. I saw that, too."

"Did I?"

"What did you feel? A cold patch? An electrical field?"

"I felt that that lamp of yours had been moved."

"Yeah, it fell over. I must have... I thought I set it back up where it was."

"I was most disappointed not to find it."

They gave themselves over to their beer for a while. Morissa had to admit it did not hit the spot.

She felt she had a dream where William asked her to dance, there in a dark corner of that concrete-floored room; the next thing she really knew she was out in the sunlight

walking across the grounds of the campus after a class she had practically slept through. Finally feeling herself again for a moment was like coming out of anesthesia. She'd been so tired, and a little bit drunk all day. Her professor had noticed. Petra Kuhl, Professor Cool -- oh no. She'd been rude to Professor Cool. Not rude, exactly, though it was never good to doze off in a workshop. Kuhl was worried because Morissa was never hung over, never tired, but was often, lately, distracted. And today, suddenly, she bore the signs of complete and total dissolution. It had finally happened. Morissa had finally cracked.

"How's your project coming together?" asked the professor.

"Well --" Morissa just wanted to shamle out of there. She'd read out to the assembly a couple of poems that she'd found that morning at the bottom of her messenger bag. They'd never been workshopped so technically they were new, she figured.

"I've been a little confused how the stuff you've been bringing the past few weeks is supposed to hang together. I wouldn't ask except --" She stopped. "Are you all right today?"

"Surely that's a matter for the counseling center," Morissa mumbled. Part of her wanted to burst forth with the news that she had had a breakthrough; but part of her wanted to throw up. Another part wouldn't necessarily call it "a breakthrough." It was nothing to discuss with Professor Cool as yet.

"Feel free to stop by during office hours," Professor Cool said sadly. She was a professional, driven woman, unused to dealing with children and probably forever cursing herself for not having the generosity and interpersonal skills needed to really truly help the artistic, damaged people who were attracted to this program. Professor Cool gave up too easily. Morissa wanted William and left the Professor standing outside her decaying classroom while she lurched off like a zombie hungering for brains.

Out in the fresh air, she'd begun to think again. She began to feel actually hungry and stopped in to the student union for a convenient lunch. Slowly sense filtered back in and she started to recover from the night she'd had. She tried to digest the shame over her behavior in class, then worked backwards to take stock of what she thought she'd been doing for the past twelve hours. She and William had parted ways around 6 after a breakfast of waffle fries. She may have slept in the library, startling herself awake just in time to get to class. Had she and William made any progress? They'd gotten drunk, so probably not. The dancing dream may have been a genuine incident. Remembering it made her feel warm and sweet, missing him again. She looked up from the memory and breathed deeply through her nose. The air, temperate today, smelled good and felt good; the grass was green; the trees; maybe she could pull herself together after all. It was too late, of course, to pretend the ghostly occurrences weren't real to her, or hadn't happened. She was going to write about them, and she was going to experience them. Fully. She and William, together. Why should that be so terrible? Why should that be irreconcilable with the world as it was? She was going to gain great wisdom.

It was time to return to her flat.

"Hello?" she called out as she crept through the front door, her keys clutched in her hand. She shut the door behind her, left it unlocked in case she needed to rush out. "Hello?" she whispered.

She thought she heard, or felt, movement in some distant corner of the apartment. She froze. *Yes*. She closed her eyes for a moment and focused her intentions, her beliefs. Tried to focus them, but couldn't put them into words. The words would come later. First she had to open herself to this experience, receive it. She opened her eyes. This time she definitely heard a crash and saw something fall in the living room at the far end of the hall. Then, as she stood there, she felt a sudden rush of movement and she watched as everything, books, pictures, everything that was on a table or a shelf was knocked to the floor like dominoes, like somebody had just held out their arm and rushed across the room and into the hall, coming towards her, tearing open every door and knocking everything from the walls on its way to her. She controlled her fear. *Yes*. As it reached her she felt sudden clarity, recognition, and a field of cool dry air around her. "You're -- you're mine!" she said to herself and to the ghost. Whatever it was was so familiar and comforting to her it had to be a part of her somehow, something she'd known and lost. She felt tears drizzle from her eyes but she was calm and energized.

Then she felt it leave her. She blinked. She got the distinct impression it had retired back to the living room. She headed in that direction, picking things up slowly and deliberately as she went.

"I hope you don't mind if I tidy up," she said, trembling.

She got no response, not even another broken lamp.

"I understand," she said, " this was just your way of getting my attention." For she knew, was certain, it didn't mean harm. It wasn't gentle, either. As she approached it she became aware that it was angry. She didn't know who or what it was yet but she also wasn't surprised to find it angry. Whatever it was, it had a right.

She sat down on the couch, carefully, her back straight. She couldn't see it now like she had before when it hovered over William.

"What *do* you want with William?" she asked.

There was no answer, no change to indicate it had even heard, if it could hear. She knew it was there, nonetheless. It was like something huge, hot and breathing heavily in and out, or pulsing energy in a steady inward-outward flow that was soundless but seemed alive. She started to feel uncertain she would ever learn anything from this creature that she didn't *already know* -- *Yes*. That was part of the meaning of the

familiarity she felt now, in its presence. It was not an alien force and its intentions and feelings were known to her, or should have been. And yet she did not seem to know the nature of its interest in William, or herself.

Suddenly the room rattled. She tensed. "What?" She'd made it angrier by not recognizing it. It thought she was... *pretending?*

She felt her breathing quicken. She felt a petulance in her chest like she was being questioned in ways she couldn't bear. How could she resent this presence? It had come to her with such a refreshing feeling, she couldn't help but welcome it -- welcome it home. But she was starting to hyperventilate. "Help me," she said softly.

She felt the cool embrace again, the enveloping spiritual coolness -- not cold, but like it was pulling the heat away from her, as if her skin were coated in alcohol and it was just air passing over, and something was evaporating off of her into it. She felt relieved; she felt her throat open, her lungs, a long-held tension released. She felt warmth of awareness in her muscles, like she was some other, stronger person. She realized how much she'd been shrinking and cringing until this moment -- for years -- so *tight*. She breathed out hard, with a grunt, a bone-rattling, powerful, cathartic grunt. She leapt up and once again in this mysterious presence she wanted to be naked, couldn't bear the tightness of her clothes, the tightness and the artifice. She wanted to be naked and to return to her true self, the person *it* had known.

As she took off her clothes she had a moment of lucidity -- either that, or an intrusion of her usual inhibition. She thought to herself *there is nothing in my past I want to return to. Whatever this is, it is something that should never have escaped, never have come to bother me. I was doing fine! And I don't want to know you. I don't want your anger and your demands, your insistence* -- But the air was streaming about her, coolness evaporating, equilibrium and vitality infusing her. The ghost's embrace. *Remember*, it said. *Take me back. Let me come home.*

Suddenly she cried out. "No! I can't! I can't!" She fell to the floor and cowered there as if the room were on fire. "Why did you come here?" But she refused to name it. She scuttled out of the room to her bedroom and pulled a coat around her nakedness. She grabbed up her purse and ran outside again.

It wasn't what she wanted it to be. Her ghost. She had assumed it to be an impersonal force, or someone she could get to know, not an emotional stalker come to force change upon her or criticize her. She'd done nothing wrong. She'd made tremendous sacrifices to ensure that she did nothing wrong. She'd killed her own art.

She shook her head angrily. It was already at work on her. There was nowhere to hide from it. William, her only friend, was clearly implicated in its designs. He was just another aspect of this ordeal.

She could try to write through it, process and contain it. Yes. But where? How? She was now naked, wearing nothing but a long coat. She gasped and struggled to suppress a well of satisfaction brimming up in her loins -- this was an erotic situation -- *No*. It was an embarrassing and compromising situation. What could she do?

Had she locked the door?

Was it following her?

This was unreasonable. There was nothing left in her to dismantle. Her life, every part of it, was necessary, proven, stripped to its barest utility. Her phone rang in her purse. She felt dread chill her through and through. "Damn it." Her mother was still probably trying to get through to her with some useless information about their dogs, designed to make her feel guilty, implicated in death itself -- "Your dogs are dying because you only want the expensive, inbred ones! And you do it all on purpose because you never want to stop grieving!" she shouted at the ringing phone, holding it out in front of her. "Well, there's nothing I can do!" She threw the phone to the gutter where it broke into pieces. She stopped, stood over it, breathing heavily. She crouched down and looked at the little destruction. She'd broken it. This thing, she'd broken. No ghost had knocked it out of her hand.

She knew she would have to talk to her mother eventually. Why did this part of the cycle have to come around now, when she was already dealing with her own madness? Now she had to decipher her parents, too? She knew what the ghost thought of them. *They have no right. They can do nothing but look on in horror. They're nobody's parents.*

Her lip quivered. "Enough," she whispered. "You have me. I can't get away. There's no need to be harsh." She picked up the pieces of her phone and headed back to her apartment. When she got there she'd sleep. In the morning, she'd write.

She put her hand to her feverish forehead, suddenly exhausted as if she'd just spent hours in a tropical heat. She looked around and saw her apartment for the first time since she'd begun working that morning. It wasn't tropical at all. It was cool and dry in the artificial way of the central air, whispering through the vents. Outside it would be damp, but in here it was just as she wanted it. Had the spirit departed, returning her to herself? She checked her watch. It was time to go to class.

Being on campus, among all the students, seeing them, the familiar ones and the ones she'd never seen before (amazing how many new strangers the world could conjure up each day even in such a closed society), she already felt a kind of nostalgia, like she were a ghost herself. She'd lost the life she had made. At least she had a strange faith that William would come with her, wherever she went. He'd never expressed this kind of loyalty in words but if indeed he blamed himself for her breakdown, he owed her something. That would keep him close to her. Under her power, as it were. They were

mutually under one another's power. The two of them plus her ghost could fill this otherworld.

She missed thinking normally. Maybe this was just the price she had to pay to have her talent back. Before this she'd been saner than ever in her life, and it had almost killed her. If not a physical death it had been a death of her authentic values and desires for herself. Had those values and desires come out of madness, a madness she was descending back into? She didn't care. She now knew that life would have been pointless if she'd continued the way she was going. "What's the point of being ordinary?" as Taylor -- that was her brother -- used to say.

There. She'd gone and said his name. Not aloud, of course, but in her mind. That was enough. Now she knew the ghost's name. She shuddered. She couldn't tell William. She felt herself calling back to the ghost, pleading for help in covering it back up. *Not likely*, she knew. The ghost would drive her to William, or, if not William, someone else. She was being driven out of hiding. The consequences could be anything; the ghost didn't care, the ghost was dead and it still had more power than she did alive.

William was the only one who could help her, the only one she needed, but how could she go to him and risk -- she felt she'd be risking everything, if he was the only thing really holding her to reality, to the world. And this was too much, too much. She'd never meant to say it to anyone. But William had driven her to it. It was what any therapist would do.

"Morissa!" She heard him calling her; her body tensed. Of course he would choose this moment to appear. She hadn't decided what to do, and she had no time to hide her emotions as he came down the steps of the student union and charged toward her.

"Ugh," she said aloud, knowing she was as good as finished and this was going to be a fiasco. She wanted to simply run. *If I faint, then I won't have to speak to him.* As he reached her, she collapsed, so that he could catch her, but the blackness that flooded over her was real. It was as if she had merely predicted it.

She would have liked never to have regained consciousness. To die, just like that. But of course she woke in the medical center with William at her side. "Take me home. I want to sleep," she said. "Alone."

His brow twitched, like an antenna searching out her meaning. This made her laugh, at him.

"They said you were a little dehydrated," he said, then appeared to be at a loss. *Good.* For once he didn't know exactly what to make of her, for once she wasn't transparent to him. *Good. Oh, good...*

She sighed out loud. "I'm all right now. Don't worry." She started to get up from the cot where they'd laid her out.

"Morissa," he said, "I'm losing my grasp of you."

She laughed again. He smiled sadly.

She got William to drive her to her apartment. She got out of the car, slammed the door and ran inside without turning to face him again. She was desperate to have him with her but it couldn't be. She couldn't offer anyone else up to this thing that had broken in on her. And yet she wasn't afraid of it, it had been with her for almost as long as she could remember. She knew she could curl up right in its beating heart and stay there for however long it wanted to rage at her. It could never make her yield.

Inside it was still, to all appearances, but every surface, every wall, seemed to shift as if a silent reverberation were constantly pulsing through the room. It felt spiky. It had the atmosphere of a deep subterranean cave, yawning with darkness and invisible things. It was familiar. It was one of the atmospheres that had existed inside her, after her brother died. *So this is to be my home again.*

As she thought this the atmosphere changed, seemed to rumble with anger. The walls bubbled inwards on her like contracting muscle tissue, pushing her until she fell to the floor of her bedroom. She crawled into the bed and pulled the sheet over her but now there was a heat she could barely tolerate. "What, then?" she screamed.

You wanted to have a conversation.

It had answered.

You wanted to write about me.

"No, I certainly did not," Morissa whispered.

Then you are not you. You can talk to nothing. You can communicate nothing. You knew this. You didn't want it. You wanted me.

"Taylor," she whimpered, the word barely sounded.

No. Not even that. What you did kill. That is what I am, and all you have.

"I don't understand."

You will. Do you want to work?

"Yes."

You will. But it comes at a price. You must buy your life back.

"And William?"

There was no response.

W

"Morissa," said William, "I'm losing my grasp of you." She had just laughed. He couldn't decide if she understood what this meant to him. As she herself had admitted in the past, Morissa had always been transparent to William, or so he'd thought. So they'd both thought. They'd relied upon it. Now it seemed there was a dark spot that had grown until it filled her and he could no longer see through her. That spot was, now that he thought about it, something that had always been there, floating around insignificantly within the bounds of her insubstantial self. Now all at once it had solidified against him. He was more locked out than ever.

He wondered if his last pleasure in her was gone forever and whether he should cut her loose. If he could only solve the mystery, though! That would be best of all. He could help her. He could get her back on his side. What a sudden change! He could feel her withdrawing, like she really meant it this time. She must know something, or was on the verge of knowing it. And without him revealing it to her. He really had lost her.

No use going to classes today. He returned to his house to smoke and to brood. New strategy required. Cut losses and maybe at least sleep with her once, before she loses all coherence? Breathing out the smoke he felt tears welling up. Was he really thinking this way about his friend? She was a friend, an interesting case, and sexual prey all at once. It seemed he'd really fucked himself up somewhere along the line. Maybe this was just the thing. He could come to her as a sacrifice, blunder into her trap. That was what they all became, the crazy ones: craven spiders. Human or not, he wasn't prepared to leave her to deal with this alone. There was too much he still wanted. He did care, too, he thought, drawing on his pipe. He wished it weren't already too late for him to be a good person. He'd have been so good at it and it would have suited him in his middle age, like the beard he still intended to grow one day, once he was established and respectable. Feeling lonely, he reached for his phone to summon a few friends who were probably just waking up at 2 in the afternoon. *God, the rich. All of us paying a fortune in tuition just to skip classes and snort coke. I've got to get out of here, but where to?*

Morissa.

But there was no hiding there, now. He decided to go ahead with his original plan. An hour later the first knock came on the door. It was John. *Well, if Morissa has no use for him,* William thought as he pulled the golden youth in, hand on the back of his neck compelling him into a kiss. Naturally he liked it and the two of them were back in William's room fucking as the others arrived one by one; accustomed to this, they made themselves at home in his living room to indulge in some repartee. It warmed William's heart to hear their voices just under the sound of John's moans and his own fevered breath. *I am the genuine article* he thought to himself.

"With people like you running loose no wonder everyone's biphobic."

Jesus. That was it. Morissa was the last one he could rely upon to criticize him. She couldn't go down the drain now. He couldn't let her. Life would lose all its spice. Life is better when one's conscience is housed in the body of another person.

*What's left when we stop punishing ourselves and each other?
What fun will Paradise be?*

He was now remembering a poem she'd written long ago, her own attempt at diagnosing *him*. For Morissa -- and, he supposed, for all writers -- putting something into words was a way of possessing the thing, controlling it. In the case of him as the thing, it hadn't worked. He doubted it ever worked. He had to admit he understood the impulse, however. It was what they had in common. Now maybe they were both just trying to contain the same problem in their various ways. He wished he had copies of her latest poems to study. Did he dare contact her? He would prefer to break in and steal them but he lacked the expertise.

Feeling John's body tighten and pulse toward climax, William returned his mind to the business at hand.

The two emerged casually from the back room moments later. John flopped down on the sofa and tried to disguise the fact that he'd just had his mind blown. "You may be wondering why I've called you here today," William drawled, heading for an open bottle.

"Have you got any more of this stuff stashed away?" asked a friend, brandishing an empty sandwich bag that had recently had a few flecks of marijuana left in it.

"Fortunately for me, yes. You shall have none of it for I am saving it for a special occasion."

"I doubt that, but okay."

"What's the occasion?" John challenged. He was in the mood to get stoned, or to get more stoned.

"Experimental new therapy."

"You need to give up on that uptight bitch friend of yours," said John. "Doctor."

The group had a good laugh at that. William humored them. It wasn't exactly what he enjoyed hearing but it was all in fun and fun was sacred, after all.

Morissa.

That's what haunting feels like, he thought. Words whispered in one's ear by unknown voices. Chills. Feeling watched. He knew it well. What's the big deal? So she had a desire she couldn't realize. That was what was making the walls shake for her. He wondered, *is it me?*

Maybe she was right about him, with thoughts like that. What kind of a healer could he be if he was always on the lookout for sexual interest on the part of his theoretical patients? And there was always plenty of interest, every where he looked. It came down to genes, of course, and perhaps style was in the genes, too, just like cunning intelligence: all things William had in abundance. It didn't add up to lovability, per se, so at least his illicit affairs would be brief.

Depressed, William retreated mentally from the gathering. It was not difficult to do. None of these people cared for him. They barely even cared for their posh degrees and future petty positions of middling power; they took all he offered as their due. They took it from everyone. None of this had ever bothered him before.

Morissa.

"The balance must be restored," he said aloud. "Excuse me." He went to the kitchen where he wouldn't be overheard, took a breath, tried to collect his thoughts, failed, dialed her number.

She didn't answer, which frustrated him. "Morissa. I have this feeling. Your mother's dogs. Why --" The machine, or voicemail, cut him off. That shouldn't have happened; was it possessed, too? He'd barely had any contact with her and he'd already contracted the weird. These were the first symptoms. But it was no good thinking like that. He should be able to know the difference between reality and hypochondria. He wished there were another word for fallacious beliefs of this sort. Something between hypochondria and hysteria. It would be its own pseudoscience. Only he would know how to treat it. He had to figure that out right now.

William snuck out the back door of his house, leaving his friends inside to entertain themselves. This much was out of the ordinary but he doubted they'd notice. He took a circuitous route to the main road, afraid of being seen. Cutting through someone's backyard, he tripped on a bit of downed clothesline and had a moment of panic. *Shit, I'm too high to be doing this.* He shambled to his feet, looked around, heart pounding. Nobody emerged from the house to which the clothesline belonged, no bystanders questioned him. This was a worse day than usual for his equilibrium. Maybe a walk

would calm him down, like in the old movies when Humphrey Bogart would make his drugged damsel walk up and down the room to sober up from the roofies. If he ever made it to Morissa's she might have to douse him with cold water to revive him, or perhaps slap his face. She could do it; she could summon the manly restrained violence of Bogie if called upon, he was sure...

Most days, it had to be admitted, William had to take it on faith that his exterior presentation of self passed muster and nobody noticed how stoned or drunk or hung-over he truly was. It had taken a few years to achieve this state of saturation; he could only imagine what post-grad would be like. Feeling vaguely nauseous now, he wondered if he really intended to do it -- become a doctor, that is. Perhaps the weeks to come would determine all. Morissa was, after all, the case he was building his career on, in a metaphysical sense. If he could help her, he was a helper. If not, then perhaps not. From the beginning, since the day he'd met her, he had determined to be absolutely himself in all his dealings with the woman. It was clear to him that she herself was not herself, not in the least, and yet she never understood what he meant when he told her as much. In the intervening years there had been glimmers of authenticity about her, often when she was drunk, and the closer he placed himself to her, physically, the more he could see, though at these times she tended to flicker like a guttering candle. Meanwhile he'd found the whole thing intensely erotic. At times it seemed there was something inside her feeding on this very eroticism, seeming to intensify and gather strength from his own vaporous orgonal emissions. In his more psychedelic states he could very nearly see the steam coming off him and sucking into her person as if she were a giant ventilation grate. When this happened he had to leave the room before succumbing to the terrors. There was a lot going on there, yes indeed --

He soon found himself on her street. Good start. He wasn't sure whether to expect to find her at home or not. If she wasn't home or refused to answer, he supposed he could devise some other way in.

Approaching the security keypad on the front door, he punched in her room number, as far as he remembered it, then realized he'd never done that before and was being silly. His hand went to his pocket for his cell phone, but not only had he left it at home, he'd already attempted to reach her this way. Did she even have a land line? How --

"Hello?" A voice answered, but it wasn't hers.

William thought fast, but not well. "I have a delivery?"

"For who?" The voice was suspicious.

"Uh --"

The line clicked dead. He supposed he could keep trying it until someone was gullible enough to let him in. Fortunately, however, at that moment -- or some moments later

which his own personal sense of time didn't allow him to take notice of -- Morissa herself emerged from the front door.

She seemed not to see him as he burst out from the bushes where he'd been contemplating his next move. "Morissa!" he called.

She stopped, her head turned but she didn't entirely look at him. "William?"

He frowned. Heavens but she looked strange, and what a curious way of regarding him. "Yes. It's me."

She looked away again for a moment and seemed to think, then turned and approached him. He stepped back with a gasp, feeling something -- seeing something -- the glimmers of authenticity he'd previously convinced himself he was perceiving were now gleaming at him as if from the roof of a cop car, flashing aggressively in his eyes. Maybe it was her eyes. He'd never seen such unabashed lust in them before -- and it wasn't her expression, which was quite blank, or rather, quite frank. She was most definitely still not herself, however. Something else was winning out. Nevertheless he felt a powerful desire to kiss her. *Restraint. Find some restraint, man. Dig deep. I swear your life depends upon it. She's mad, completely nuts...* He was, possibly, paranoid, but the combination of intense fear and intense desire flustered him. He did his best to stay rooted to the spot and smile benignly. She was like the Risen Christ. She was not to be touched. "Morissa," he said. "My god."

"What?" she said casually, but it was something else playing the part. Playing it well, at that. It could very nearly replicate the ingenuous, friendly, slightly exasperated look she usually had for him when he surprised her. Very nearly -- God, he needed to sit down.

"Excuse me," he said, retreating to the front stoop of her building. "I am feeling a bit rough this morning."

"It's five in the evening, you know," she said.

"Of course."

"William? Are you all right?"

"Well, I've either overindulged quite spectacularly or you yourself are possessed by the Devil, I can't decide at the moment. Would you sit by me while I think about it?"

She did. She sat quite close to him, right up against him, in fact, the way he thought he'd seen lovers do but which no one had ever actually done to him -- how odd to realize that just now. Their hips and shoulders were touching. Her head was leaning right against his. This was not normal. He could hear heartbeats, two or more, more and more... He wanted to lean on her, wanted to be held. He rarely indulged in such

cravings. It was contrary to his upbringing. He laughed. "Do you mean to unman me completely?"

"You are high."

"Yes. But it's strange. I've been thinking of you all morning and it seems to have acted upon me like --" She moved her head to look at him; her hand turned his face to hers. "Like a lethal dose," he murmured as she kissed him. "Oh God, please don't," he said after a moment or more in which he'd nearly given himself over, to, "Just -- You have to let me sober up, Morissa. You're in trouble. You asked me to help you."

"Is that what you want to do?"

"Obviously I want to fuck you til -- til ectoplasm fucking shoots out your sweet little fucked up eyes, but -- Right." He got up. "Let's walk very briskly around the block."

She laughed. "Whatever it takes."

He shook his head. "Are you serious? You really are an interesting phenomenon, aren't you, so damned casual."

"Casual. Yes."

"So, what is it?" he asked as they started walking. "Split personality? Dark Phoenix? Some kind of suicidal ... rounded affect?"

"There's nothing wrong anymore."

"What about your ghost?"

"My ghost," she said, almost mockingly.

"Well?"

"You figure it out, Doctor." She sighed. "I'm tired of all that."

"All what?" He was questioning her desperately, only half understanding anything. The exercise might help, though. If he could gather his wits perhaps he could still save them both.

"The dynamic has changed," she said.

"I can see that."

"Nothing comes between us anymore."

"Us?" William swallowed. *Is it me?* But she didn't elaborate. They walked briskly, arm-in-arm. She looked at him and smiled.

"All right," she said. "We'll do it your way. I'll allow you to proceed with your plans. They'll work, I'm sure of it."

He was no longer sure what his plans were.

"Everything you ever wanted, everything I ever resisted. I mean, go ahead, put me on a couch, ask me anything, shoot me up, fuck me --"

"I may have been wrong. I'm not actually a doctor."

"You certainly aren't. And I'm not crazy."

"You aren't well, either. You never have been."

"I'm still not?"

"You're different, but you're still fractured. And if you seriously think you're sane, any saner now than you were, I have to doubt the reliability of your narrative."

She laughed. "You're more confused by the minute. Science will betray you one of these days."

He scoffed. "My methods have never been scientific."

"Perhaps that will change now. You might find a bit of structure useful once your imagination's burned out. That's what tends to happen."

"Science is as much a rabbit hole as anything else. Even facts have to be taken on faith. There's no fucking ground to stand on anywhere."

"Are you sure you're up to this?" she asked, without any particular inflection of concern in her voice.

"I have to be. You were the most reliable thing in my life."

She faded a bit like a dying Tinkerbell at that; he saw a flash of the old flat obfuscated girl he once knew. His heart cried out for her so much that he had to put his face in his hands and conceal the intensity of his feelings. God, he missed his mastery of this woman. If he bedded her now he'd hardly be able to enjoy it, at least not in the usual way, as it would clearly be her victory, not his. *Is that what I'm like?* Perhaps he could beat her by resisting. He'd be an exorcist if he couldn't be a therapist. Wasn't it all one and the same?

"I'm scared," she said.

He felt his cock instantly arch upward like a racehorse at the gate. He got the sense she had said that just to excite him, which was an even more frightening thought.

"Everybody get out," he said as they entered his home by the front door which was standing open. "My friend needs me. At the very least go to the basement and be quiet." He led Morissa by the hand back to his study, where he had the whole setup: a chair, a couch, comforting and reassuring surroundings according to the suggestions of the interior decorator he'd consulted who specialized in these things. It was not clear whether this decorator specialized in actual psychiatrists' offices or in simply creating the appearance. On high-end porn sets, for example, or commercials.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" she asked; they'd been sitting across from one another in silence for some minutes.

He just stared at her. He knew this wasn't proper technique but he was busily building up a maze inside his mind and placing himself at the center.

"I have the terrifying feeling that life is meaningless," she said, as if she intended to conduct the session all by herself. Why not let her? "Or, rather, that having gained something, I may be greater than all the world and there is nothing left for the world to offer me. No one to learn from." She cocked her head. "Surely you can relate."

"That's curious; why would you say that? About me?"

"You've been a free person all this time."

"Have I?"

"Yes. That was the essential difference between us. Do you feel there are parts of yourself that are hidden from you?"

He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Now, wait. This is -- I'll ask the questions."

She laughed. "Well, you weren't saying anything. I thought I'd get the ball rolling, so to speak."

"What is it you have gained?"

"I'm reunited with the source of all power. The nature of myself, of the world. I was in denial and now I've reintegrated it."

"Have you?"

"Do you doubt it?"

"I don't believe such power exists."

"You wanted to jog my memory. You thought I was repressed."

"Whatever you've done to yourself is not... You've..." He wasn't yet sure. He stared across the coffee table at her again.

"You'd be terrible at chess, as well as therapy," she said.

He didn't respond. She'd needled him but she gave away no clear sign of being uncomfortable or annoyed. She'd given very few clear signs of any feeling. Her eyes were blazing under half-closed lids, yet those lids were grey with despair. How to tell her this, however? She clearly thought she was cured and dared him to suggest otherwise.

"You feel empowered. How did you gain this power?"

She pursed her lips, seemed to toy with the idea of not answering.

"I'm content," he said, "to add minutes to my life by any means necessary. I sense there's a certain amount of material we need to get through before this comes to a head and if you want to delay that, as I said, I'm content."

"And as I said, life is meaningless. Yours, mine, everyone's. You're joking about me *killing* you, aren't you?"

Now he hesitated. "You remember how your ghost hovered over me."

"Suddenly you believe me. Well, what of it?"

"Maybe it's just my self-centered view of the universe talking --"

She laughed. "The universe is full of inexplicable, undefinable dangers and you're just perpetually at its center, aren't you? No wonder you're nervous."

"What would your advice be?"

"Just know that you're not that important."

His foot began to tap anxiously, irritably. *Mustn't give it all away... At least pretend I'm not caught up in a folie a un parallel to hers, revolving around hers! How humiliating.* It was too much to have to unravel at once. "What ever happened to the ghost? Is it still in your apartment?"

"It's where it always was. Only it's not a ghost, it's me."

"I see." He was starting to agree with her on the meaninglessness of it all. They would arrive at the same destination, by different paths. Of course this could be said of anybody. What in particular could she be so tired of? Her old self, her beautiful old human-sized self? "Take me back to your place. I'd like to see it."

She huffed petulantly but rose from her seat without hesitating.

He wondered how many times he could change locations before she managed to catch him. Now they were walking again.

"I did my best to turn that place inside out," she said, her face set in a frown. She actually seemed anxious as they neared her apartment.

"Inside out?"

"God," she sighed, "I could so easily just tell you what you want to know. It's no secret to me anymore. But that would spoil all your fun."

He did feel his heart beating faster at the thought of it. "I'm not so sure you know as much as you think you know," he said. He'd hold his ground, by god, whether it was true or not. He'd staked his claim upon her inner life and wasn't going to be chased out. "Morissa," he said, "tell me what that phone call was about the other day."

"What phone call?" She sounded downright bored.

He didn't even know how to talk about past events now, what he would even mean by the word "you."

"Your mother called," he reminded her. "You said something about her dogs. You never explained why that meant so much to you, why you were so upset."

"You know how people use dogs as stand-ins for children, right?" She let it spill out as if she'd decided on a whim to forge ahead.

"It's a tautology by this point."

"Well, my parents are the worst of all. They keep rescuing wolfhounds. Always in pairs. And they won't have a bitch in their house. Yeah. They only want male dogs, ones that are guaranteed to sicken and die in a few years. Weakling blueblood dogs. Lean, elegant, somber, feeble patrician dogs that never last. Like that little boy in *The Secret Garden*."

"You always loved that movie."

"It's a book, jackass."

He looked at her in hopes of catching a glimpse of something familiar but she disappeared again quickly.

"Here we are," she said.

The building loomed up over William with a new ominousness in the evening light. He hadn't sobered up as much as he'd thought. It was unclear also how much power she had over this space. As they got into the elevator together William remembered a thousand moments over the past three years, riding up or down in this elevator in various states of intoxication and merriment. How he'd loved her, how he'd loved to laugh at her and to luxuriate in her false sense of security. As false as it had always seemed to him he'd lived in it as if it was real: her habits, her fastidiousness, her clean-living, tea-drinking, polite-poetry-writing days, the days they'd shared, influencing each other, ticking the balance a little bit this way, a little bit that way, always wondering how it would come out, like a little game. Now she was sitting on her end of the scale like some kind of apocalyptic yogi with the weight of a hydrogen bomb, and he was tumbling into her lap.

As promised, all vestiges of that life he was so nostalgically eulogizing in his mind were now thoroughly destroyed. The desk in her study had been overturned, the books pulled from the shelves, the shelves themselves in pieces. "Cheap pressboard crap," she muttered as he gazed about in horror. "What a crock. I didn't even mean to break it, it practically fell apart on its own. Typical."

Morissa had spent years, and all the money she had, adding those little touches to her apartment. He hadn't thought anything of it. She was a grad student; of course she was poor. But these parents of hers, lavishing all their money on their dogs' medical bills while their daughter had gone almost a year without a working fridge? He remembered now: he'd enjoyed that time a lot because she kept asking to store things at his place and was always there, conveniently forgetting which of the food was hers. He'd ruined it by pretending to get angry about her drinking his wine; instead of offering to make it up to him she took it all seriously and bought herself a mini fridge for her apartment, which she later sold to an underage freshman. William had suggested she stock it with beer and let the boy pay her in sexual favors. "Go right ahead," she'd said, full of judgment.

Now, as he stood in her bedroom looking at the bare mattress, once covered in twee little cotton sheets from Target, he felt like the repressed one.

"Getting ideas?" she hissed in his ear, before pushing him down onto his stomach. He gasped, his head swam. She climbed on top of him, straddled his bottom and began to rub his shoulders. Trying not to panic, he folded his arms under his chin and thought back to the last time he'd shoved someone down on a mattress. A perfectly natural thing to do... He grunted with discomfort as his erection twisted and struggled under their combined weight.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'm just playing."

"Ha." In vain he attempted to shift his hips into a less painful position. "Most comforting."

"Am I hurting you?"

"Of course not."

"What shall we do now?"

"I don't know."

"Well, obviously we can't dispel the sexual tension this way. It'd spoil your little power game."

"My power game? Oh, my dear, it long ago stopped being my game."

"You don't believe that. You're still holding out hope. Still strategizing."

"If you could see inside my head you wouldn't call it that."

She laughed. "Meaning what?"

"It's too incoherent at the moment to be called strategy."

"Keep on hiding behind that drugged up camouflage. You can't bear to interact with me sober. You never could. Not that I blame you."

"That doesn't sound right."

"You need to keep better track of your dosages, William."

"Let me up. I can't talk to you this way."

She dismounted and went out into the study. He pulled himself up off the bed and followed her. She set up two chairs facing each other, sat in one. William took the other. "See?" she said. "Here we are. And you're perfectly reasonable. Ready for a serious conversation now?"

"Are you offering that?"

"I'm always serious."

Her face didn't even flicker. She appeared to be serious, if only in the sense of meaning business.

"So --" He coughed. "What is it you'd like to talk about?"

She shook her head. "You clearly don't understand what I'm trying to do. What my life has been, William. What it's all led up to."

"You don't imagine *you* understand everything."

"That's not very medical of you."

"Yes, well, I am learning on the job so I appreciate the feedback, but let's stay on task, shall we? Now, about those dogs."

"You want to know when my parents started collecting dead dogs?"

He very nearly retreated, considered changing the question or trying to distract her before she could answer. "Well, they're live dogs to start with," he muttered, but it wasn't enough to deter her.

"It started at my brother's funeral, William."

He looked up. "I didn't realize you had a brother." His throat clenched, dry and sticky. He was entering the sweaty, palpitating phase of whatever cocktail he'd taken today. He wondered if all his emotions were just biofeedback -- effects of illness and overindulgence -- and, if so, just how long this had been the case. Well, fuck it; at least drugs provided a ready explanation for his behavior. And maybe that, in turn, was a good enough reason for his being on drugs all this time.

"It was a sunny day, and these two great big dogs were going by like rainclouds on the street outside the cemetery. My mother spotted them and ran over to the owner to try to buy them, on the spot. Right in the middle of the eulogy. How do you like that?" Morissa laughed. "Isn't that just tacky?"

"Tacky," William agreed.

"The owner, not being insane, refused to sell. This gave her something to do for months afterwards. Trying to acquire some of those dogs. Dad resisted at first but he got swept up in it soon enough."

"Where were you in all this?"

"That was the point, you see. It was all to avoid me. I recognize that now. The intolerable fact of my presence drove her away from the funeral and right out of her mind as well." She shrugged. "I suppose it was for Freudian reasons that my father was less ready to reject me and the reality I stood for, but he could only hold out so long. Anyway, nobody wanted to question their motives by then, certainly not if they were

going to turn out to be Freudian motives. There'd been enough incest in that house already, hadn't there?"

It was all William could do to keep his hands in his lap as they kept trying to fly up to nest in his hair. "Sorry to fidget." He couldn't stop being aware of the restlessness in his extremities. They wanted to leave immediately. "Did I hear you correctly? Incest?"

"Oh yes," Morissa said. "And my father abandoned me also, once he began to suspect that he might be next."

"You and your brother were involved sexually?" That was probably the right language to use, William thought.

"Allegedly." Morissa uncrossed her legs then crossed them again. "It was all in the note. Taylor's suicide note. He revealed everything."

There was a pause while she waited for his reaction. He was sure he was giving her everything she wanted no matter how he tried to hold back and keep his professional face on, the one he'd been perfecting in the mirror. Finally, unable to help himself, he laughed. "You're not fucking with me, are you?"

She smiled and shook her head.

"Is that a no, or is that just disapproval of my methods? My language, perhaps?"

She shrugged. "Would I offer you disapproval now? Those days are over. I know how you need it, William, need me back the way I was so you can stay the way you were. This is not about giving you what you need."

"Wow," he said. "I mean, of course it isn't. It's about helping you."

"I don't need help. Not that kind of help. I do need certain things in order to move forward."

"With what?"

"I've been avoiding myself for years. Just like my parents did. Right? Why don't you say your lines, William?"

"Well, yes, that's one possible interpretation but I'm not ready to get into that just yet."

"I can't move at your pace if you don't even know what you're doing. Keep up!"

"All right. Fine. Avoiding yourself. Can you explain what that means to you?"

She rolled her eyes. "It's only what you've been saying all along. I'm repressed. I was, anyway."

"Ah, so you admit it."

She narrowed her eyes and he could swear the room darkened. The sweat and the palpitations were gaining strength. "What do you need, then?" he asked softly, fairly cowering by now as she seemed to loom larger and larger like a great dark shadow bulging closer and closer to him. But when she knocked him off his chair and onto the floor it was the same frail, slim body as ever, her hands and arms that were pinning him down, her thin and formerly prim mouth forced sharply upon his and he could only compare the sensation to how he imagined it must feel to have a potato masher brought down on his face. "I can guarantee you this is not therapeutic," he sobbed as she pulled away. She began to unfasten his belt; he began to talk faster. "Don't do this, Morissa. You don't have to. You're not poisonous. That's what you think, isn't it? It's not true."

"Oh?" She pulled his boxers off, balled them up in one fist and wiped herself between her legs.

"Oh. You are crazy," he whispered. He didn't know why he couldn't move, how she, his friend who had been known to exercise once a year at most was restraining him this way. He wasn't fit but he'd always been able to defend himself or to get his way, whichever the situation called for. Now she was forcing herself down onto him, so tight and so dry it hurt him to a degree that was downright startling. Soon he was seeing blood, but there was no knowing whose because her terrible demonic visage was also twisted in pain. "Morissa," he managed to say in spite of the suffocating weight of her, "are you a virgin?"

Without answering she shoved her pelvis against him, began to move up and down in a savagely mechanical way; his erection was in full retreat but she felt like hot asphalt inside. "You couldn't have done it," he persisted, "with your brother."

"So you split my little red cherry wide open like you always wanted. Proves nothing," she snarled. "Maybe he never got to fuck me, but he's dead; let's find out what happens to you."

"Not your fault," he mumbled in a daze.

"Well, I think I've proved you wrong. Who's to blame for what's happening to you, William?"

"Well, you are, you fucking bitch, stop!"

"When I want to, I will. Do you think I care if I destroy your body and mine?"

"For what purpose?"

"None at all. I can't live the way I was, I was already ruined. Useless. A joke. I wanted to be a writer. A nice person. How could I ever do that? With this inside me, clamped to my fucking ribs, all the time? What was I thinking?"

"You were right. Put it back. I'm sorry I teased you."

"Ha." She tore herself up off him, leaving him to curl up shivering on his side, reaching a hand down, his brain made simple calculations and analyses of the danger, the damage, treated him to a minor sense of relief that his penis was still there. She might kill him next but he felt as cold and dazed and mechanical as some kind of wind-up tin duck, lying on its side, eyes wide open because they were painted on.

"I was in love with you, you bitch," he heard himself say. "Why did you have to get it into your head..." he trailed off.

"Still asking questions," she murmured. "Forget what I said. You're a great therapist."

He heard the shower come on; she'd left the room. He stood up and walked towards the bathroom, found the door open. She was in the shower, washing the blood from her thighs and hands. She didn't object when he got in with her. They didn't touch, didn't speak. He didn't really feel she was there. They just washed themselves, as if they were people somehow other than the people involved, as if he were not William and she were not Morissa, or as if they were children who'd both been beaten by the same parent. "I won't forget what you did," he said, as if to counter this, as if it might be a trick.

"No. Don't forget," she said.

M

As if a cloud had come to cover the sun, the colors in the room had gone soft. The air was cool and still. Morissa was sitting on her couch with a towel around her. Her hair lay wet against her neck. *So this is what it feels like*, she thought, without knowing what she meant. There was no more need for conscious knowing, not in the same way. She felt as though a screen had been lifted from behind her eyes. She could see out, and in.

She remembered everything, and what it meant. She had ended her only friendship in a criminal manner, and everything was resolved. The monster had taken shape and merged with her. Now she could do what she had always intended to do.

She got up from the couch and returned to her study. The furniture was wrecked, of course, but she didn't need it. What she was looking for was lying in the corner with the rest of the books. It was her own notebook, half-full, the one she had started at the beginning of the semester and struggled with, page by page. Yesterday she might have torn the pages out, desecrated the evidence of her former self in its own temple. There was no need for that now. The battle was over. All she surveyed belonged wholly to her.

She heard the door of her apartment open and close. William had left. She opened the book, found a pen lying in a shaft of light on the windowsill. She began to write.

W

William began to write, too: a letter to his advisor. He considered writing to Morissa's, too, but it was none of that poor woman's business. How strange to be in the position of sheltering one's elders from the truth.

Dear sir,

I have decided to leave the program, as my masterwork is already accomplished. I myself have gone nuts, and driven another nuts in the process. Or vice versa. You object to the word? Very well: my detailed diagnosis follows shortly. If you require further information I would refer you to the American poetry section in the library, 811 by the Dewey Decimal system, which is the only system I know offhand, never having entered our school's own library, which I believe uses the Library of Congress classification system.

At the beginning of my term here I met and befriended -- no, that's a euphemism. I fell in love with a young woman. I misused my natural abilities and my shallow study of psychotherapy to force or rather goad her into a premature psychotic break. I don't entirely blame myself, as it is now clear to me that she had many deep-seated neuroses stemming from what one might call *very fucked-up experiences* in her past. While I now believe the fallout from these experiences will never be resolved, she has, in a strange way, integrated them. As a result, it is possible that she may now uncover her full genius as a writer and psychopath and go on to achieve untold success in both fields, possibly many more. I now place nothing outside the realm of her capabilities.

I remain the keeper of this woman's three selves. I treasure the one I destroyed most of all. I considered pressing charges against her but who would believe me? After all, I have lived the life of a libertine. Not being a feminist nor in any sense reformed in my habits, I see nothing wrong with blaming the victim in this case, or any other. I am impressed with myself that I can even name correctly what has happened to me. Even so, I will not name my rapist. I have no doubt, however, that by this time she has a chapbook coming out very soon, and perhaps even a reputable publisher to promote it.

As for me, I plan to go into confinement at my family's lakeside cabin, where I will hopefully come to terms with it all. This would be my second great masterwork. Can anyone expect two?

Epilogue

Autumn. walking with a dog through the woods around your parents' cabin. proves nothing. still feel like your spine is a sword or that the vertical arrangement of your internal organs has hardened, into a sword, so that every move you make cuts you, so that moving, existing, is a constant series of inner wounds opening and closing. but you have this dog.

you don't know whose dog it is, but it's some kind of terrier. it's a classic dog. a working dog. a no-nonsense dog. you like that about it. you want to project yourself down into its little skull and get a taste of what it's like to be — you don't even have words for it. To Be. that's it, maybe. that's all.

you want to name the dog Arthur, and you want to forget your own name.

so each morning at eight you get up, walk very slowly and carefully to the kitchen, make yourself a cup of weak tea, peel a banana. sometimes the banana won't go down; the texture is too specific, too mushy, it nauseates you. but you're keeping yourself alive, that's the goal, doing right, eating right, giving yourself a chance. therefore, bananas and tea, and the gentlest and most nourishing of foods. all this goes down like glass and ragweed but that's just the signs of bad attitude and the wear and tear you've put on yourself over the years. your soul and body resents this good treatment. your soul and body think they want to lie down and do nothing. you tried that already. all you wanted then was to get up and eat bananas. so since it all comes down to force, you force yourself to walk about the house each morning partaking in what ought to be the good life. is there any positive evidence? yes: you look forward to seeing the dog. the dog comes usually within a few minutes of you stepping out onto the back deck with a packet of meat or a pot of stew or whatever wholesome leftovers are at hand. the dog comes and you share, and there's tremendous rightness.

the dog is small. it could bite you, of course, but it won't. its needs are simple and the friendship between the two of you is all above-board. Transparent. from time to time you do look fearfully into the distance in case the dog's owners should come along and tell you to stop spending so much time with their dog. it's hard to deal with it, needing something that isn't yours, sneaking off with it on lifesaving missions.

This dog has no collar, however, nothing to indicate a permanent residence, so who is to say it's not yours? the dog appears to have no concept of ownership, unless it is the ownership of you, by the dog. yes, it seems quite likely that the dog considers you its property, or its responsibility, which is somewhat the same thing. it's not what you'd normally consider a herding kind of dog, though. terriers are supposed to hunt small animals, get the little ferocious things out of their dark holes, drag them out, struggling and bleeding, into the light to be killed. Killed, for fur, for meat or just for fun. the dog

doesn't know the difference between fur, meat, and fun. dogs were bred to work, to delight in their jobs. you wish you had delight. even a job would do if it were as truly suited to your own physiognomy as the dog's work is to the dog's body and soul. everything about the animal is right. it leads you about through the crackling autumn woods, you follow it as it does what it wants, sniffing here and there, each day going deeper and deeper and further and further into the uninhabited areas around the lake, where nobody built cabins. you've been coming here all your life and rarely strayed from the back porch or the dock or the gravel path that connects the two. you were never that kind of boy. you kept to the well-trimmed areas, not out of a sense of conventionality or fear, but from a lack of patience for any wildness but your own.

"How do you like that, Arthur?" as if the dog could actually hear your thoughts. it turns its head when you speak, then once again dips its nose toward the ground and hustles onward.

Today it's been sniffing feverishly as if it has an inkling of something yet distant which will turn out to be interesting. And -- there! Arthur's body convulses with heightened attention as he finds the scent he's been looking for. He keeps walking, but faster, his little legs moving impossibly fast. You, on your lanky loping legs, have to jog to keep up. "How much farther?"

Not far. The two of you walk along for a while, then suddenly again he becomes attentive, breaks away and dashes forward. You follow him into a clearing over which the trees arch like the pillars of a cathedral. On the ground there's a dark shape, about the same size as Arthur. He stops to sniff it and nose around it, making a rasping sound in the dry grass. You know it's some dead, mutilated thing and you don't want to see it but you feel compelled-- As always, you feel compelled, to come near. You find yourself bending to pick up a small stick with which to probe. And there it lies, some kind of black, bloodied pheasant. You know that if you turn it over the ground beneath it will be white and wriggling with maggots, ants... Its flesh and feathers will be filled with disgusting things. You turn it over anyway. Your head swims before you even see anything, or smell anything. It was the act itself. It's you that has frightened you so much that you fall to the ground.

You wake up later. You can tell some hours have passed because the sun is floating in the clouds in the lower quarter of the sky, making faint, long shadows around you. Arthur and the dead thing are gone. It's up to you to pick yourself up and find your way back to the cabin.

Walking. You're alone now. This is the first time you've fainted but not the first time the dog has left you on your own. It's no more than you'd expect from a truly dedicated guide. The dog's volition is its own, just as your fate is your own. The dog wants you to learn that. Are you getting worse? What did you see there in the leaves? Best forgotten. You're on your way home now. It's getting dark and it's time to concentrate on dinner. You're a little bit tired of being alone but you're in no shape to see anyone. Not your friends, not your parents, you're just staying here playing the part of official hermit. It's a

kindness that they're leaving you alone. But how nice it would be if someone was here to cook, or watch tv, or just believe steadfastly in appearances. That's the prerogative of the older generation. That's why you miss having them around. Their neuroses have all settled and gone underground, resolved or forgotten or masterfully translated into a language you, the young man, don't have to recognize and don't have to speak. Just another subsonic vibration. Maybe you're in the process of translating your pain that way. That's growing up. That's what you're here to do.

You have a candlelit dinner of hearty, meaty stew. Tastes like nothing. You check repeatedly to make sure you're not just chewing on your own tongue. You decide to stop eating meat. The image of the dead bird flashes into your mind, rises up and asserts the great spreading blackness of its wings.

After dinner, and after cleaning up the plates, food and vomit, you go back to your bed.

Here you can somehow hear every strange sound the old place makes. The old quilt lies heavy on you and you sweat. A sound like someone walking in the hall. A window opening. You tense up. You know no one is there.

This bed. You can almost feel it happening to her, right here, in this bed. A long slow process culminating in some mysterious... Forces we can't even feel slowly split the earth in two. You might have known that before you took it upon yourself to do everything you could to split her, with your slight but constant pressure. You're feeling nauseous again and you think you can almost smell her. You get out of bed.

This cabin has a small library and you now see it was designed for you. The lower shelves contain the books you read as a child, and each shelf symbolically rises with you as you grew in size and importance. Each shelf, with its increasingly advanced subject matter, represents a new stage in your progress towards your destiny, as your parents saw it. You used to spend Summers here; or maybe only a few weeks out of the summer. Time is different when you're young. Somewhere right about level with your shoulder there's a stack of good old Psychotherapy Digest, driest and dourest of the trade magazines your parents still subscribe to. You take one down and sit with it in the leather chair by the window with no view. If nothing else, this will put you to sleep.

You open it and it's full of poems.

Appendix: The Poems

If you want to know how she did it

The view from her window didn't change for five years
More than that
And maybe you asked how she was
pointed out the gathering dust on the glass
Maybe you went to wipe it away
and this made her start to cry

Well, I understand the effect
this may have had
Who can stand by as she goes on parade
all naked
pretending to wear a shroud

Yes, I can understand

How she merged night and day

She disavowed everything but herself
Everything but the patio furniture

And there was nothing to set out on that cheerful table
Nothing unbloodied

Fortunately all the relatives had gone
Everyone had gone

That was the first step

How she conceived violence

What else has ever been
conceived?

I met with her family

Oh yes,
it was clear from the start
from the very start

The girl had legs like
the beak of a crow

Come down
Come down

How she conceived love

Broken chair
Horse hair, white
A bed
A door
Unremitting laughter
from out in the green, green yard

That is an invitation to suffering:
Eyes that look upon eyes and do not know
what it is
to covet one's own falsehoods

An innocent disguise
soaking up snow

Her first note

I'm starting to wonder
who this is for
Yesterday, I left
knowing my departure was unsanctioned
I forged the documents
I am skilled in forgery
Except I found myself out
and something has accompanied me
back

Yes, praise me
for agreeing with you
for lending strength to your argument
I promise not to finger
the moth-eaten

I am a rag
eagerly soaking up
by the gutterful

what do you expect
when you wring me out
like that

(the act of writing is a pleasure
given by some egotistical god
whose nature is to recreate himself in miniature)

Her second note

i found you
swimmingly deceptive
therefore familiar

everyone loves repetition
it implies deathlessness

continuing things acknowledges,
however,
that they might have ended

wouldn't it be better never to have spoken of it at all?

In all ways,
my brother resembled me.
This is sufficient and contains everything.

I will press you like a flower
Because I love you
And we will both be very sorry
Because I love you
I will press you like a flower