

Revenance by Alison Armstrong

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To my beloved Nicki, to my mother, and to my step-brother, whose love has nurtured my writing and my soul. To my grandparents, whose strange, entertaining family stories have, in fictionalized form, found their way into this book; though dead, they often visit my dreams. To Michael Easton, whose inspiration, encouragement and support have helped make this book possible.

Note:

Portions of this book, including my opening poem and one of the Tooth Fairy sections, have been included in my previous book, *Vigil and Other Writings*.

I come scratching at your window,
wraith claws caked with mud,
hair sooty with revenant smoke
from our embered fire.
Where you walked,
where you ate
encoded in me
like a reflex gasp,
a ruminated cud
resurging from dissolution.
A strand of your hair,
a yo-yo thread
binds me to you
with need and dread.
A lagging distemper
disjoints,
anoints,
seethes,
unsheathes
as I tap the glass
with bleeding palms
stigmated
by your
subcutaneous touch.

The end times are coming, or so the preachers say,
scuttling about like roaches, thriving on oblivion. In the
meantime, I rest, not at peace, waiting for my Awakener.

A flower rots in my cramped fingers. Pretty little lily
corrupted. Visions of half-attained desires, scenes from
books and movies that fueled my imagination combine in
crazed mutations, atrocities of invention and compulsion,
the poison apple visions of a slumbering Snow White
whose prince has not yet come. I see my fragmented
scream in a shard of shattered glass as the too-late brakes

squeal with futile remorse, and then I am silenced,
shrouded, entombed.

I wait for the call, the kiss. My muse is here. Time to
kill, then time to arise.

Invisible to human eyes, he walks through the white corridors of the old medical school hospital, looking for those who are praying for deliverance.

Raspy, wheezing, cajoling, demanding, obsequious, desperate, the voices only he can hear call to him. He is their savior, their lost love, their forsaken but fervently desired hope, their nullifying nowhere-guiding last embrace.

A sigh, like a drooping flag, signals surrender. He pauses, breathes in the subtle scent which, eluding antiseptic, tantalizes his nostrils. It summons him, and he approaches the little girl from whom it so seductively emanates.

Tubes slither from her frail, bruised arms, tubes ferrying clear liquids and dispatching yellow fluids. She is the port through which these watery cargoes proceed.

One liquid flows untubed, undisturbed. Underneath her cool, blue-white flesh this liquid churns—warm, pulsing. Placing his fingers against her neck, he feels the wild throbbing of hidden tides.

Her eyes open, their dark brown depths muddied by disease. A tall, slim man stands beside her, his long black hair shimmering darkness within a halo of flame. Fire of warmth, fire of comfort. She smiles, thinking of Christmas stockings and her grandfather's cottage, the Yule log burning.

The flames surrounding the stranger billow towards her. They are everything she wants them to be. Her will is their command. All she has to do is make a wish and they will become her favorite things. They flicker, becoming blurry, malleable dream taffy shaped by her imagination.

Kittens with fluffy fur play by the hearthside, tickling her toes. Silver tinsel dangles from a Christmas tree, the pine scent, ancient yet fresh, promising blissful surprises. Red foil packages seem to wink at her as the flirtatious flame reflections glide across the shiny wrappings.

Everything twinkles and sparkles in a firework bravado she hopes will never subside.

His lips, soft as her mother's satin nightgown, press against her throat. He cradles her in his arms, the flames beckoning her into their warmth.

That paler wisp of flame is a golden pony, its darker companion a stately stallion. The black stallion whinnies softly, inviting her to climb upon his back.

"Yes," the stranger says gently. "All the pretty little horses, all your favorite things are yours, forever and ever."

She grasps the black mane and clutches tight, as eyes closed, she feels a soaring gallop merging her with a force stronger than any fairytale magic. Riding with this force, fused with it, she is flying into a radiant sunset, which, like the fireplace flames, bathes her in warmth. The rays of the ebbing sun reach towards her, orange red tendrils caressing. "Hush . . . shhhh," they whisper as a darkness even more beautiful than the black horse, dappled ponies, fluffy kittens, or endlessly twinkling tinsel, ushers her into its sheltering, inescapable depths.

On the hill the graves of unbaptized children stand, apart from all the others. The wind blows colder there, as if abandoned by God, there is no warmth or shelter anymore. Inside the tiny coffins the remnants of briefly-lived bodies decay, baby bones snapping like twigs in the remorseless crush of time. Above the bones and worms and damp earth, the spirits flutter, moths seeking light.

They wait for their wishes to be granted. They wait for their prince to come. They wait for ice cream and watermelon, tinsel-bedecked Christmas trees, all the delights of life they had lost, all the happy-ever-after futures their parents and the fairytales told them could come true.

Fragile dandelion seed fluff hovers over their graves, upside down spiders hanging by silken silver legs, fairy messengers bringing wishes from dead little girls and boys. The voices and memories of these lost children echo in this neverland vortex. I hear the whisper of the endlessly recurring dreams, the hiss of candle flames being snuffed again and again. Never will their wishes be granted. Never will they be adults. Never will they be anything.

A new member tonight enters the ranks of the dead. Whether she will join those on the cold, windy hill, whether her wishes are to be granted or whether she will forever be kept waiting, I do not know. My muse has sealed shut her eyes.

Down she falls, her body as light and insubstantial as the faltering fluff. Down we all fall, ashes to ashes. Like her, like the children on the hill, I, too, had once believed in fairies and wishes come true.

For years, it seems, I had waited as I grasped the decapitated dandelion stems and watched the parachuted seeds float above the unevenly paved driveway, relaying my wish to a faraway kingdom in the sky. Ignoring the seeds fallen wind-thrashed upon the cement, I thought

about my wish, my fingernails etching stigmata of bloody battered beliefs upon my palms.

Scratches became scabs. Scabs, dug open, became scars, port holes of infection proliferating as my childhood wishes metamorphosed into futile, intangible desires. I yearned for something as yet nameless and elusive. I seethed with anger.

In a blur of rage, I would plug my guitar into the amplifier. Nourished by the rage of my bandmembers and my audience, I would, at the end of the performance, walk down the alleyway leading to my home, unconcerned with the blowfly buzzing of people and the huffing frenzy of traffic-congested cars. My ears sizzled, manic radio broadcasts hissing in arcane tongues. I didn't hear the predatory snuffle of the approaching car. By the time I heard the gloating growl of its engine and baboon-like shriek of its brakes, I was unable to escape. Mangled, broken, obliterated, I now am covered by layers of ever darkening shadows.

The chill of inevitability seeps from the ground up, a chill as desolate and distressing as the eternally damned. I hear their cries, these lost souls, children and adults, who have given up all but their most desperate hopes. No longer do they wish for the comforting joys of life, the simmering summer barbecues and gentle motherly kisses. They have forsaken the fairy messengers and other whimsically enchanting emissaries of youthful imagination. There is nothing innocent or happy about their hopes. They crave absolution, only that. I feel their knotted, clammy, granite-grey fingers as they grasp mine. They cling to me, clawing, pleading with me to intercede for them, their flesh falling from their bones and sticking to me like a layer of adhesive leprous skin.

I cannot help them, nor can I help myself. All I can do is wait.

He drank in the little girl's dying wish, the splendid warmth and sweetness filling him with the glow of memories from his own childhood as his mother, scented with lavender, sang to him.

He always drifted to sleep before her songs were finished, succumbing to the soft down pillows that, like clouds, stopped his descent into unsheltered night. Her voice seethed like honey-soaked ants, stingingly sweet. Chocolate covered moth balls and lead-tainted lollipops were just that sweet, just that deceptive.

Then one night, when he was about four years old, the lullabies stopped. His mother went away, leaving him with his father and older brother. No one ever mentioned her whereabouts, and although he missed her songs, the sense of comfort she and her beautiful voice bestowed, like blessings, upon his sleep, he soon found a new night-time visitor to answer his lonely pleas.

He would lie awake, listening to the ocean as it grumbled and hissed beneath the cliffs surrounding his family's estate. Down below it waited, always hungry, the jagged teeth of rocks gnashing in restless expectation while remnants of misdirected mariners gurgled within the salty bile. When his father and brother thought he was asleep, he would hear them talk of ship wrecks, the jellyfish flesh of corpses bobbing amongst the waves as seagulls swooped and shrieked, wings fluttering with carrion-laden exultation. In the hungry voice of the waves and the seagulls he sensed a presence, female, feral. It lurked somewhere within the froth of that hypnotically undulating sea.

Night after night he listened. The voice was getting louder, more distinct. "Shhh," it seemed to say. "Shhhh." It was a seeping breath silencing fear and resistance, challenging, conspiratorial.

His mouth ached, yearning for the words to summon the being tempting invocation. One of his teeth throbbed, a deep-down bone drum pounding a slow, heavy

lamentation of bleeding tears. Snuggling his head against the pillows, he cried in a muffled voice no human but himself could hear.

She heard, though, and smelled the blood which, like a sticky, heart-raveling thread, guided her to him. With the night breeze, she trickled in, a moonlight-pale spectre shrouded in sea foam and mist hovering above his bed. Tiny orbs of silver, blue, red, and gold whirled, illuminating the night like paint-splattered fireflies. Squinting his eyes, he could gradually see a form—slender and graceful with long, lustrous black hair—emerging from the multicolored mist.

Her body, naked underneath a translucent gown, glowed with the prism sheen of ocean-birtherd opals, abalone, mirroring uncannily beautiful aberrations like the visions in dreams, impossibilities too lovely to retain upon awakening. Such imaginings could not be captured, could not be tamed. They were of the night only, of the underwater regions where drowning pirates grasp at phantom treasures. Like the oddly shaped pearl-white beads dangling from her necklace and the delicate chain belt of silver coins encircling her waist, they were magic and mirage, elusive entrancements.

The coolness of mint filled his nostrils as he breathed in her scent—lilac, musk, brine—and the taste of blood again clogged his mouth as her fingers, probing, pulling, yanked at his throbbing tooth.

I listen to the voices of the spirits around me—derelict wails, faltering prayers. They keep moaning, begging, hoping their piteous cries will be answered with a loving embrace that will end their restless suffering forever. I hear the sizzle of electric wires, lines of current hissing, and the occasional soft thud as some small creature, a bird or a squirrel perhaps, falls with jolted convulsions, to the ground. The smell of lilacs, sweet yet tinged with the stagnant fishiness of decay, somehow trickles downward to my tomb. It seeps into my mouth, its flavor like blood and molasses.

My teeth are drenched in this briny balm. They ache, thirsting for more. I drift back in the tide of this taste, this sensation, back to a time in my childhood.

My mouth throbbed with a slow, grinding pain, the taste of blood mixing with the salt of tears and snot as I cried. Across the hall my mother slept. Her gentle snuffling exhalations, usually so comforting, failed to ease my pain and fear as the sounds outside my window—the rattle of June bugs against the screen, the crunch of staggering steps upon the fallen insect shells—crescendomed within the stifling loneliness of my room, insistent accompaniments to the plodding monotone of my toothache. Suddenly, though, the click and clatter subsided, replaced by the lulling hiss of waves. “Shhh,” it whispered, breathing into my ear as something mist-like touched my face. Opening my eyes, I saw a diaphanous scarf billowing around the bed. It whirled, a dancing blurring cocoon of silk from which the form of a woman, glistening with the powder of moths’ wings, emerged. Her long black hair shone with the blue radiance of an underwater jellyfish, tentacles probing the darkness. Her long blue-white fingers drifted feather-like over my face and across my body, disappearing beneath my sheet. I felt them slip under my nightgown, caressing just on the edge of secret places.

Cool air filled my mouth with the flavor of mint candy as the woman's graceful fingers, floating over my body, paused at my jaw. I heard a tinkling like far away wind chimes as a belt of silver coins slithered across her hips and a necklace of shiny white beads rustled against her breasts.

As the woman rubbed my jaw, I smelled her lilac perfume, so sweet and tantalizing I wanted to drift away into it, drown in its whirling, engulfing, suffocating fragrance.

My room was spinning, pink and blue jellybeans winding in cobblestone chains along a path. The woman was dancing, and as her feet touched each one of the jellybeans it was transformed into a brightly colored sugar skull. In a voice low and yearning, she sang of autumn, of worm-wombed apples dropping from rust-leaved trees, of candy-sated children falling from nursery beds into swallowing maws beneath. The song rolled up and down my spine, pressing into it like the fingers of a flute player probing the holes for hidden timbres. The song trilled through the hollow sockets of the candy skull held in the woman's hand and offered to me.

I opened my mouth, savoring the sandy-sugared butter treat, but as I chewed on the delectably sticky morsel, I tasted something salty, felt a tugging as my tooth wobbled on its bloody filament. The woman's thin fingers, suddenly thrust inside my mouth, coiled around the tooth, yanking it free from its cushion of taffy.

From her belt the woman unfastened one of the silver coins, and gently patting my pillow, placed it underneath. Around her neck the white beads clicked and sparkled, teeth of children glistening, incisor joining molar joining bicuspid in a necklace dance throbbing together to the rhythm of dying insect wings.

The Tooth Fairy left that night, and I thought I would never see her again. Yet now I feel her presence by my

graveside. She sings of sleepless nights, initiations, partings. On her left, clutching her with skeletal hands, is the trench-coated, grandfatherly nemesis from my nightmares. Further into the shadowy depths lurks the one I await, my nameless muse. Although I do not see him, I sense his presence, stealthy yet sublime.

Moths sizzle against the buzzing fluorescent lights, limbo-bound angels colliding against the purgatorial flames as he walks down the hallway. A cart carrying withered flowers whizzes by him, leaving in its trace a sickly trail of purple blossoms. Smug doctors and cowed, overfed nurses brush against him, not seeing or feeling his otherworldly presence.

For a week, he had traversed these corridors, unobserved, an imperceptible trespasser, an impossibility subverting the medical profession's pretended omnipotence. Drawn by the scent of blood and suffering, the last, ebbing exhalations of pain and yearning, he found the hospital to be an easy source of sustenance. Something else beside the readily available, helpless prey seemed to call him here, though. He heard a faint voice, different from all the rest, summoning him, one he could not ignore. Unlike those whose dreams of desire or terror unknowingly invoked him, this voice came from someone who knew the gift he could bestow, craved it as much as he had when the Lady of Sea Foam and Mist had offered it to him.

Stopping outside one of the rooms, he catches the unmistakable whiff of someone's last breath. At the foot of the bed, invisible to everyone but himself, he sees the hovering spirit of a teenage boy. The spirit peers down at the corpse on the bed. It swoops down, grasping at the pale, stony face, mirror image frozen in time, like a photo from an antique shop. It tries to pry open the mouth, sneak back inside the gradually chilling sanctum, hibernate there until life returns. However, as if suspended on a rubber band, the spirit keeps bobbing up and down. No sooner does it make contact with the body than it is forcefully jerked back upwards, gravity's antithesis preventing further descent.

He watches the spirit trying to break back into its former home. Eventually wearying of this futile attempt, it will either "give up the ghost," so to speak, and accept its

“eternal reward” or wander restlessly like a hermit crab seeking sheltering substance.

Fortunately, he was spared such a dismal destiny. The Lady of Sea Foam and Mist gave him a much more satisfying alternative. From that first visit, when he was a small child, she had become his secret confidante, his obsession. Nightly, he yearned for her and tried to summon her. But she would rarely respond, only visiting when her enigmatic whims resonated with his desires. As he became an adolescent and then a young adult, her visits grew less frequent. It was as if she were testing him, making him wait and suffer. He would dream of her, only to wake up alone, his thighs wet with the spillings of lust. Then, one night, after almost a year’s absence, she again answered his call.

Her soft moonlight-white hands fluttered capriciously over the blankets enshrouding his jutting erection. They paused on the precipice, a tempting whisper of caresses so sweet they would, according to all he had been taught, bring damnation.

He thought of the time, several years ago, when he had first touched himself in furtive urgency, his hands jerking hastily in a convulsion of libido. Although he had struggled, as the Church instructed, to keep himself pure, he had given in many times to temptation. He knew his craving had summoned the woman here, to his bed, and only she could ease his hunger.

Slowly, layer by layer, she removed his blankets, hesitating on the towering summit as he writhed in expectant torment. He moaned as her soft, full mouth evoked pent-up demons demanding release.

She claimed him that night, bound him to her relentless will. But although she infected him with her fiery embrace, her disease, like a tuberculous obsession, would take time to sprout inside his impressionable soul.

Night after night, he stirred, drenched in sweat and the sticky residue of her seductive visitation. He longed to be consumed and transfigured by the thrilling kisses of his seductress. He yearned to prowl in the silvery moonlight with a lynx's glowing eyes and hushed paws, to breathe in the scent of worm-churned soil dank with the sweet cedary rot of trees long dead but still lingering ghostlike in the decaying, regenerative mulch. How many generations of humans had gasped their last breaths, forgotten under the cold, fathomless heavens as they replenished the voracious earth? How many more would bequeath their bones, their blood, to its insatiable hunger?

As he called to her in his dreams, he lay on the bed, in naked surrender to the cold, rasping breeze and the wanton wails of the night-roaming creatures outside his window. In the pauses between the snarls of hungry dogs and the muffled, mangled shrieks of their hapless prey, he heard the soft clinking of a necklace and the whisper of sea-scented air that heralded her approach from the mist and tide.

His flesh tingled as icy lips hovered against his closed eyelids and even icier fingers lightly touched his forehead. Opening his eyes, he gazed longingly at her thick, tousled dark hair spilling over her shoulder, almost shrouding the pale beauty of her face. As she leaned ever closer towards him, he caught a glimpse of the opalescent beads encircling her neck, tooth fairy tokens of stolen youth. Amongst the glinting offerings of teeth taken from beneath the crumpled pillows of sleeping children was one of his own, luminous as starlight.

He breathed in her briny sweetness as she ran her catlike tongue against his neck and murmured in an unknown language. A flash of lacerating white glinted in the darkness; a flash of white ripped through his veins and rabid spasms shook his body as her soft, fierce lips pressed against his throat.

With each breath, each swallow she took, he felt his flesh prickle, as if he were playfully pelted with tiny particles of warm sand on an empty moonlit shore. He was sinking slowly into that sand. It sifted around him, nestling against him, gently covering him in its lullaby embrace, hushing all thoughts and trickling like melted butter into his heart. Love such as he had never before known seeped into his pores and smothered the last breaths of his mortal life.

Her lips covering his, she clasped him tight, an anaconda embracing and engulfing. She breathed in his muffled, ragged sighs and gently licked away the tears that flowed in heedless abundance from his eyes, tears not of sadness or fear, but of rapture, tears that washed away the final traces of human guilt and doubt.

Slowly, loosening her grip, she let her fingers dawdle through his hair and placed a soft, lingering kiss on each eyelid, closing them shut. He felt the trembling of his soul, a dark fluttering moth hesitant to approach a light so scorching it could bring annihilation, the sanctified silence of eternal rest.

“Listen,” she murmured. “Listen to the voice within you. With this voice you have summoned me; with this voice you have screamed my name as you eased your lonely lust with fevered hands that became my hands quickening and making you shiver. Render unto me what is within your heart and loins. Come to me, my dusky moth, and embrace my blood-red flame, a fire that illumines your inner darkness but brings no peace or serenity. Show me now your desire for me or turn away and face the blinding light which promises salvation.”

As she hovered above him, she pushed aside the wayward strands of hair that splashed against his cheeks. Slowly, he opened his eyes, glancing hungrily at the beckoning whiteness of her throat.

“My hunger seethes within you,” she whispered. “Claim it. Make it yours. Feel the bristles tingling your throat. Feel the claws ripping at your belly. Feel your

parched tongue chafing against your teeth. Feel your teeth sinking into smooth, yielding skin. Feel them. Feel them now.”

He felt the bristling, the clawing, the raw, aching, ravaging hunger. Lifting his head, heavy and numb, from the smothering soft pillow, he tried to speak, to beg her for the thing he needed most but couldn't identify. It was a nameless need that rang hollowly through his empty veins and throbbed inside his teeth, now dagger-sharp and pulsing like an open, blistering wound. Staring again at her supple neck, he could see the grey-blue ley lines of blood-rich subcutaneous rivers. It seemed that all he had ever wanted lay buried within those succulent veins. His body trembled as he pressed his cold lips against her welcoming throat and tasted the tangy lemon-lilac nectar of her immortal gift.

Chill, again, claws at my abdomen, trying to enter, trying to infest. The smell of rot pervades me, cabbage stench of swamp-soaked leaves. Red and gold, the leaves cascade from the sky, landing in a heap of mulch. Colors fade. Peter Pan putrefies. Can't keep them fresh and pretty forever. If only. If only.

The wail of a guitar, like a withering hope, echoes in a narrow, corkscrew-twisted club. "Forever good night," it moans, as a cackling sigh, the voice of my nightmares, guides me through bleakly illumined caverns.

Down, down, like Alice, I go, following a prescribed trail. A maimed rabbit hops lethargically ahead of me, bloody ears twitching. Along the way misshapen beasts glare from narrow tunnels, freakish dachshunds with Slinky-spring abdomens, wizened mice with pencil sharpener snouts, atrocious blends of mammal and machine. The crooked path jerks upward, then left, then right, becoming wider. Sunshine filters through the darkness, spilling softly upon the grey cobblestone lane that leads to a small gingerbread cottage with lace curtains.

Back and forth the curtains rustle, stirred by a gentle breeze. As they billow, yielding like enraptured, frilly-skirted dancers to the touch of invisible hands, the crack between them widens, inviting me into a secret, half-remembered place of my childhood.

This is the threshold of my most vivid nightmares, the weathered welcome mat I shun to approach. This is my entrance into the deceptively cozy abode of Morbidy Graham. He has many guises, many names, this chameleonic "what if" magician, this trench-coated trickster. He's the stranger offering mildewed candy and insect-filled treats. He gives you a piece of chocolate cake, and as you bite into it, you watch the crumbs crawl. Red ants sting your tongue, forcing your silence and forever suppressing your joy. He's the announcement from the sponsor forecasting dread omens. He's the voice you hear

as you make that fatal mistake. He's the face at the bottom of the grave beyond which faith eclipses, but, whatever form he chooses, he is always old, his ancient presence as familiar as your life-ticking heart. Unlike my nameless muse and the Tooth Fairy, who bring beauty and yearning, Morbidy brings nothing but pain and horror. He is there, presiding over the experiments we dread to imagine, competing with God by creating his own malignant Mutter Museum monstrosities. With a mad scientist cackle and a flash of lighting, he births another aberration, invents another misery.

Lingering momentarily, I gaze at the large iron door knocker made in the image of a Scottish terrier. From furrowed brows, the rusted iron dog glowers at me, like an Old Testament prophet denouncing blasphemers, its deepset eyes blazing with a fiery pious wrath. The hollow clang of its knock resounds throughout the small cottage.

A tap-tap-tapping of a cane heralds my host's approach. The door opens, and Morbidy politely welcomes me. Although it had been several years since I had last dreamed of him, he looks the same—his skeletal face the color of chicken gristle, his grey-white hair thick and luxuriant, enveloping his emaciated head like a billowing cumulous cloud, his body stooped and frail. His smile, though, is animated, genial. "The better to trick you with, my dear," his gentle grandfatherly expression seems to say, as he lies in wait with rapacious glee, ready to seize one's trusting innocence.

He shows me to the living room, and I sit down upon a large burgundy velvet sofa. As Morbidy hobbles into another room for a moment, a small tabby kitten, hobbling like Morbidy, approaches. One of its front legs is missing, amputated at the shoulder, but the kitten, mewing affectionately, seems relatively unaffected by its loss. It crawls up onto my lap and begins to purr.

Hearing the tapping of Morbidy's cane, the kitten jumps up from its brief nap and runs down the stairs into

the basement. Morbidy, holding a doll-sized cup of tea in his hand, limps over to where I am sitting and places the cup onto the table. He sits down beside me as I sip the tea, its rich autumn bitterness tickling the inside of my throat with fond farewells. "Say goodbye to what you loved," Morbidy says softly. "Drink deep and remember. I have some things to show you." Reaching out his cold, bony hand, he clasps my fingers. For a man who looks so frail, his grip is amazingly strong. Grasping tighter, he pulls me to my feet and leads me towards the basement.

"Some of these things you may recall," he murmurs, opening the heavy wooden door. "Some you may not want to know. Not all treasures are desirable. Not all knowledge is worthy of pursuit."

His wooden cane tap tap tapping like a hollow hoof, bone without marrow, he leads me down the basement stairs. With each step, I walk deeper into my past.

Dolls with paint-chipped cherub lips and ever-winking glass eyes, glowing like the rays of a grocery scanner, stare up at me from their subterranean shelter. "Why did you abandon me?" they accuse. Their laser glare probes my memory, deciphering its barcoded secrets.

A mangy teddy bear, its fur as matted and sticky as an old bathroom rug, grins at me with frayed-thread mouth. "Remember those nights we shared?" it sneers in reproach at its exile. "Remember. Remember," it chants in a deep canyon-echoing voice which sends me tunneling backwards into more distant memories I thought I had forgotten.

I am back to that spongy engulfing womb where frightened fetuses await deliverance. I am darkness screaming in a bloody placenta plateau, my infant skull clenched between my clawing hands, like Munch's famed death-head, while the sunset horizon spins seasick. Squeezed and ejected from a viscous wet hole, I am tearing apart the sticky mucosal strands.

I am pulling aside the slimy uterine curtains, and emerging, toddler-grown, have arrived back to the basement I remember as a child.

Morbidly smiles, his face becoming a near-duplicate of my own grandfather's. He (or is it my grandfather?) is telling me about the history of this place.

At one time, long before I was a born, there was an ape in the basement, some black, brooding, spider-armed simian. My grandfather, much to my grandmother's dismay, had acquired it from a laboratory where he worked as an assistant. The ape was being retired from its experimental duties, and temporarily homeless, had been granted a place to stay by my grandfather. Despite my grandmother's revulsion towards primates, especially those "red-assed apes," as she called them, my grandfather had decided, without her consent, to adopt this creature.

He hadn't told her about the creature's cruel treatment, how it had been jolted with electrical currents, injected with hallucinogenic drugs, then, during the grad student interns' lunch hour, fed hot pepper sandwiches by perverse pre-med hopefuls, who giggled in harmony to its angry screeches of torment. All my grandmother knew was that here was something she feared and loathed, something that seemed to represent everything she found most disgusting about animal and human nature, something that shamelessly shit in its food-strewn cage, all the while staring at her with ancient, half-familiar eyes.

She, who had always been squeamish about the body and its functions, had to go down to the basement almost every day to do the laundry for her brood of three children, her husband, and herself. With a baby still in diapers and another baby on its way, she was constantly battling assaults against her family's freshly-cleaned linens—spatterings of puke, poop, and pureed peas staining her hard-won victories for cleanliness.

The baby inside her writhed, twisting her intestines into a contorted pretzel of pain and dread as she tread down the stairs day after day. Glancing nervously at the cage and trying to avoid eye-contact with the thing behind the bars, she would quickly gather up the clothes from the washer and bring them in a basket upstairs to be hung outside until they were dry.

One morning, however, she noticed that the cage door was ajar and the beast was not inside. The basement reeked of urine and decaying bananas, the odor growing in intensity as she started to head back towards the stairs. Something hairy and pungent brushed against her legs, nearly throwing her off balance.

The creature shambled towards her, its wrinkled yet strangely fetus-like face scrunched in a semi-smile or snarl. Lifting its front paws from the floor, it began to stand upright. She could see its appalling maleness, the filthy organ dangling between the stumbling legs, as it toddled closer.

With a howl of terror she turned and ran for the stairs, the baby in her womb kicking and jiggling like a drunken marionette. She and her squirming little homunculus, later to become my mother, made it to safety.

The ape was not so lucky. After being returned to the laboratory, it endured a few more years of shocks, injections, and hot pepper sandwiches before dying from a seizure. Its skeleton was then carefully preserved in an enormous sealed glass container filled with greenish fluid. There, it shares the basement pantry with Korean War-era canned beans and cobweb-feathered pharmaceutical bottles.

Morbidly reigns here, ruse ruler, umbilical thread-puller. We hand him the strings to our puppet flailing fates. We give him the memories, the scripts, the dreams, the blank pages of our stories.

I clench my hands, fingernails digging into my palms. The three-legged kitten, hobbling over beside me, gnaws at a paw. I don't want to see any more of what Morbidy wants to show me, but he is eager to continue his tour.

With a gnarled, bony finger, Morbidy points to an old *World Book Encyclopedia* yearbook, its white cover crusted with fuzzy grey mold. He turns the page, showing medical and technological achievements of the preceding year. A black and white picture, glossy despite its age, shimmers amidst the fly-specked print. In the picture a scientist, Vladimir Demikhov, gazes admiringly upon his masterpiece—a two-headed dog created by grafting a puppy's head and upper torso onto a full-grown German Shepherd. The puppy's front paws flail, racing through air, as if he were chasing a nonexistent tail, whirling and whirling until the scent of ether freezes his ebbing resistance.

"This is what mankind is to be remembered by," Morbidy explains, smiling sweetly. "His twisted and often ingenious obsession to create pain. I do what I can to assist, of course."

I stare at the book in front of me, the words blurring. Tangled scrawls of letters form knots of serpents, twisted, hunch-backed basilisks, and other infernally-leering grotesques. They writhe across the page, clinging on bedraggled vines of l's and y's, infesting the hollow sanctum of o's, like the medieval demons tantalizing Scripture-weary eyes from the pages of illuminated manuscripts.

I feel a prickle, needle-sharp and cold, slithering up my spine, inch by inch. The air whooshes through me. I am hollow. I am possessed.

Entering the room, he gazes down upon the young woman whose desolate yet fierce whisper summoned him, the one whose voice, unlike all the rest, seethed with hunger for his gift. Bandages cover her head and face, mummy wrappings entombing her in a convoluted comatose netherworld. Through this perpetual limbo she wanders, drifting from dream to dream like parachuted pollen, rising, floating, crashing. Desperately, urgently, she calls to him, demanding that he help her.

Down deep portals she falls. A hole opens halfway, like a nightmare-twitching mouth, a portal of opportunity he can, now invited, enter.

The hole tunnels backwards, a snake-twisted alley he traveled through two years ago. The winding coils lead down into a nightclub standing on the mangled remnants of a dying metropolis. New York City Lower East Side. Rats in trash cans, cats chewing on scraps of unknown flesh. Hunger lurks in every filthy crevice.

Lights flickered, glaring then dimming. A bluish gleam illuminated the back of the stage, silver letters emerging from the cyan-tinged gloom to proclaim the name of the group—The Neurasthenics—as four scrawny young women appeared from the shadows. They walked proudly, with the clumsy endearing grace of adolescence. Long-limbed and androgynous, they seemed indifferent or perhaps hostile to their bud-like breasts. Their apparent fragility masked their ruthlessness. Mantis maenads on a rampage, they felt invincible. With their bones as their armor, corseting in their fertile female flesh, they sought to defy the seeping, leaking flux of time.

He approached the stage, standing right beneath it. The light dissolved into him, cold blue anesthetic rays.

The lead singer, gangly with scruffy chestnut hair and an incongruously soft cherubic face, had rolled up her left

sleeve, laying bare grayish-white arms trellised with scars, railroad tracks converging and erasing.

Her nail-bitten fingers tore at the fraying threads of her right sleeve. Slowly, she rolled back the yellowing linen, revealing a cloth bandage the same color and texture as her shirt. Like a shriveled pupa emerging from a cocoon, she unfurled her covering, unshrouding wound by wound, lie by lie. Her eyes were dark, indecipherable. Her voice was a crooningly seductive death rattle, a cicada screech.

***“Rage,”** she wailed as the guitars droned in discordant mimicry.*

***“Rage,”** she repeated, picking at a scab. Its gumdrop covering ruptured and oozed snot yellow, releasing her disgust.*

***Taste of mustard,
Rises in my throat
I want to choke.
Slippery strands spill
From my mouth,
Pumpkin seeds
Snotty seaweeds.
Pussy slime
Birth brine.
I’m not a mother,
Never will be,
Too many orphans stuck inside me.
Consuming creations
Gnaw at my womb
Dredging up my
Familiar sense of doom.***

She gazed at him, seeing his true essence, a ravenous otherworldly carnivore subsisting on liquid life and phantom imaginings. Say goodbye to the flesh as you know it and embrace what you are, he urged her in silent seduction.

***I cry into my pillow,
But I know there's no tomorrow.
The ending light
Eclipses my sight.
With anger and blight,
I tell you good night,
Forever good night.***

She spat out the words as if everything she had ever consumed rose up inside her in revolt. She snarled, growled, then sighed, surrendering in a sorrowful spasm, her fingers pulsating as if touching the eyelids of a sleeping child. The lead guitarist and the bassist swooned, the drummer flailed her arms, slender bodies waving like wind-rocked saplings.

The guitar screeched, a tremulous, suffocating lament, and the drum, like a rapidly accelerating, arrhythmic heartbeat, seemed to pummel itself into oblivion. A howl, drunken, idiotic surged through the room, as the crowd, agitated by the gouging rhythms and ranting, emetic incantations was stirred into a puking, paranoid frenzy.

*The Neurasthenics exited, their anger temporarily
appeased by the appreciative retching of their fans. When
they left the stage, the next performer, Spitz Nevus, hovered
in the wings, feasting on the mania, the delirium.*

***In search of perfection,
Affliction,
I come to you, my atavistic imago.
My paramour,
My mirror.
The fear within the fascination
The danger within the seduction
The razor within the caramel apple
I shape myself to feed my longing.
Paring away, paring away
Flesh to bone.
Bone to stone.
The Sphinx, lion-breasted,
Hides beneath my skin
Year by year, clawing
Trying to scourge human sin.***

The song memories buzz inside my ears, a foreshadowed summons for my future lover. He has waited for me, just as I am now waiting for him. In the pauses between the games of let's pretend, the brief intermissions between childhood diversions, a shadow flitted across my eyes, as if a theatre's curtains were being drawn, and the red darkness inside my skull deepened when I blinked. Somewhere in the twisted confines my tantalizing incubus lurked.

As I walked off the stage after singing this song, the last in my set, Spitz Nevus was smiling appreciatively. He winked, sharing my secret, as he, too, envisioned a magical seducer to steal his virginity while transforming his soul. Spitz, my friend, dreamed of an "addict-eyed" amour. Although he had kicked his heroin addiction, he still yearned for that orgasmic metamorphic fix that once captivated him.

"Obsess me. Possess me," Spitz sang, the yearning lament piercing the summer evening with a cold saber's finality.

The evening pulsed with the sacramental frenzy of locust lust friction and firefly flamboyance. It was the time of year when mantis females crushed the green pulp of their mates and spat out the fertile juice into the dry grass. It was the time of fervor and annihilation. Soon everything would be subsiding, slowing, chilling, dying, but for this last flurry, it was still a night of heat and desperation.

Although the sounds of the insects have been nearly silenced by the buzzing chaos of human civilization, I know the ancient invertebrate rituals are still as fiercely celebrated as ever. They will long endure after all the human artifacts have been crushed by time. Now, though, they remain like cryptic clickings of a primordial code, obscured by the frantic screeching of cars and the manic banter of cell phone conversations. These man-made sounds drew me to my doom. I was the sacrifice stepping off the curb and gored by mandibles of chrome.

He stands by her bedside, joined by two guests, longtime acquaintances invisible to mortal eyes except in dreams and visions. They are called by many names, assuming the aliases assigned to them by their host. He knows them as the Lady of Sea Foam and Mist and the Perverse Obsessor. Together, the alluring enchantress of desire and the morbid magician of dread, stand vigil over the young woman. They watch with him, unseen, as a middle-aged female doctor with grey-flecked brown hair tentatively unwinds one of the cloth layers, peering and probing, then winding back the cloth and leaving the room.

A scent of basement bones and wilted violets pervades the hospital room's antiseptic shield, like a seeping, unforgiven sin. The young woman has been in a coma for several weeks as a result of head trauma, he had heard the doctors say. They had no idea whether or not she would recover.

Gently, he touches her bandaged head, his fingers sensing her thoughts. She is calling to him, begging him to awaken her.

Peeling back a strip of the gauze, he feels a spasm surge upwards, as if her brain is coiling, serpent-like, at his touch. He feels it writhing beneath the shrouded skull while a jolt of pain shoots through him, remembrance resurrecting, clawed and unappeasable.

A light seared his chest and ripped through his body, a red light glowing hot as lava, then turning a cold, anesthetizing blue-white. His consciousness was clenching, in and out, here, not here, blinking like an old black and white film unspooling. Celluloid memories melted and congealed, monstrously reshaping into mutant rerun nightmares as the razor-sharp teeth of red light shook his body like a savage dog with a limply flailing kitten, and the Perverse Obsessor watched, smiling. The teeth gouged, consumed, and dissolved, jagged rays of fire flaying his

flesh, then subsiding momentarily as the blue-white light engulfed him in numbing oblivion. Again and again, the memory replayed—spinning in a circle back to the beginning, an ouroboros, tail to mouth in a fate-wrought loop. “How could anyone ever love a damned creature such as yourself, an abomination?” the memory accused as flames nibbled at his toes. The voice was the Perverse Obsessor, yet it was also his own, the voices merging in dissociative stereo.

Flickering moments from centuries past reeled brazenly, accompanied by the taunting, echoing voices—his hands clutching the young woman who loved him; fingers grappling, entwined, ensnared; fingers burrowing and clawing into the flesh underneath her satin dress; his cold, parched tongue pressing against her lips; the jasmine-amber scent of her neck beckoning kisses more taunting and urgent than her hesitant resistance could withstand; her eyes flashing with awakening desire for the first and only man she had ever wanted; her blood pulsing, a purring invocation, within her veins; a shiver rising up his spine; a shrill ringing in his ears; a shriek and a shudder; the look in her eyes, their grey light clouded with terror and reproach while he ripped her dress and crushed her with his smothering, brutal embrace.

To try to escape that gaze, he had fled the room and vanished into the night, emptying with fierce desperation the bottle of cheap Italian wine and the defeat-clogged veins of a hapless drunkard.

Even after he, sated and weary, had returned to the room where she lay, tossed like a shattered porcelain doll on the floor, he thought he saw that damning glare in her dull, dead gaze. Lying beside her, he turned his head away from her face and its expression of unforgiving scorn. He stared at the Oriental carpet, the black, swirling arabesques perpetually merging and consuming in a muddy maroon sea of unending carnage. He gazed without

focusing, assailed by the shapes and patterns of objects, once familiar, now floating, unanchored to meaning.

The scrollwork on the back of the mahogany chair she had sat in writhed and convulsed in front of him, a tangle of snakes in an infernal chain of fanged mouths and rattling tails. They were sticking their tongues out at him, their sibilant voices luring and tempting as they gorged and groped in a cycle of endless hunger and lust.

“Come to us,” they had whispered. “No one else will love you. No one else will want you. Come, let us kiss you. Let us serve you.” Their swollen bellies slithered in servile homage to him and their forked tongues licked his toes. Acrid tears slithering from his eyes, he surrendered to their worship, letting their tongues tease and entice, coaxing sighs of desire from his exhausted body and jaded soul. Their skin glimmered, a radiant red-gold aura enwrapping him in its emblazoning halo, a ring of flame, a ring of power, sorrow and obsession.

Within their fiery depths he had glimpsed a vision of his fate: a silver blade piercing his heart, blood pumping from his chest and dripping from his mouth as he stumbled, falling into blackness, teeth of light goring and maiming.

The rays—ruthless red, then numbing blue-white—tossed him back and forth, the oscillating rhythm pulsing through his unraveling thoughts—one, two—on, off—pain, obliteration—two choices—to let himself be seized and shaken by the agonizing red rays or succumb to the pain-free annihilation. The decision lingered like a last step over a precipice, a moment poised in emptiness before the collision into unyielding, eternal fate.

He made his choice. Hurling over the edge, he abandoned himself to the ravenous red flames. He let them devour him. He let them worship him. They bowed before him, curling and hissing.

“It’s time,” the Lady of Sea Foam and Mist whispered. At the sound of her voice, the flames sputtered and diminished, fire turning to smoke, then to vapor, as if

drenched by a torrential rain. "Time to awaken," she soothed, her soft, cool hands caressing his maimed body, healing yet arousing. Breath surged within his lungs. Blood coursed within his veins.

He had chosen life, hunger, instead of nothingness. He had chosen her, his Lady of Sea Foam and Mist, even if that meant also choosing her consort, the Perverse Obsessor. Desire and dread had triumphed over his second death. He had proven himself worthy of the gift, worthy to bestow it upon others.

A snake-entwined caduceus looms above the young woman's head. On its right hovers a crucifix—Christ impaled on a stick, writhing, worm-like, on the hook of torment. A symbol of healing and a symbol of anguished redemption flank her bedside, but she is far beyond their help now. They are placebos masking the pain that no doctor, no drug, no dogma can heal.

The Perverse Obsessor has left her room, having found new victims to torment.

He is back in an alley somewhere, goading the junkies, antagonizing the addicts. "One more fix," they beg as he rubs salt in their needle tracks and laughs, knowing the "cure" is merely a brief hibernation, a sleep with piranha dreams.

The Lady of Sea Foam and Mist has left also, gone to the bedroom of some lonely, tooth-throbbing child. She is stealing innocence, opening holes, taking tribute.

Guarded by the caduceus and the crucifix, the woman in gauze waits to be transformed. Alone with her and these ancient emblems, he touches the strands of auburn hair that straggle out in untamed defiance from their cloth confinement.

"Rage. Rage," he whispers. "You know the song. You know its power. It can give you life. Fight against the nullifying light. Reclaim the darkness. Touch it. Taste it."

She is trembling inside her cocoon. It is time.

He calls to me, my nameless muse. I have seen him from the corner of my unblinking eyes, redness briefly illuminating the all-inclusive blackness. Somewhere on a dark lake a foghorn sounds, desolate, empty of breath. Somewhere scattered city lights sprinkle the night, distant and oblivious to private pain. Angels strum discordant harps, deafened by the echoes of desperate prayers, my own perhaps? "Hush, hush," his presence seems to whisper. "I am here."

Sparks of confetti burst like supernovas, then sink back into black oblivion. Phosphorescent specks glide and weave, forming chains, flickering and merging, fireflies emitting summons to distant mates. I'm here. I'm waiting, itching and twitching for you.

The very ground beneath which I am submerged is twitching. It convulses and moans. The gauze shroud encasing me unravels and shreds.

Something silken brushes against my hair, tickling my scalp with pinpricks of heat. Something soft yet bristly as a cat's tongue touches my lips.

He unwraps the bandages, layer by layer, gauze by gauze. Her dark eyes unglaze, hieroglyphs decoded, as she stares at white walls and white sheets. His lips press against hers, his slight bristle chafing her tender newly healed skin, as her mouth opens expectantly.

A drop of his blood trickles onto her tongue, releasing the words so long trapped in silence.

My throat is parched and raw, shards of unuttered words lying cracked and jagged as the thick, rich fluid spills into the arid, silent crevices. The urn is shattered, the genii released.

As I gaze up at the seductively beautiful man who has awakened me, I try to speak, but my voice sounds like a wind-up Victrola recording, creaky and faint.

“Who are you?” I manage to ask.

“I am the one you’ve dreamed of, the one you’ve always wanted,” he murmurs, his long dark hair shimmering in a reddish swirl of light. The light glints in his blue-grey eyes like a Siamese cat’s, sanguinary aquamarine. Something about his eyes, his hair, his sensual grace reminds me of the Tooth Fairy, but in male form. He is her counterpart, one of her chosen. “My name is etched upon your wild, defiant heart. Look within, and you will see it. Open to me, and you will hear it.”

It is a command, a promise of wholeness. To be not alone, such is my unanswered wish. To throw out the lure and be hooked instead, bait for one even hungrier than I.

He whispers his name, a name of sharpness and sibilance, a secret name of ecstasy and magic.

I kneel before him, a supplicant on the cold, polished floor. The light from stained glass windows pierces my heart, like an angelic arrow thrust into St. Theresa. But my bringer of ecstasy is no angel. His light is not the white of frigid snowfields and sterile-gloved surgeries, but is instead the red of blood and wrenching births, the release brought by the kiss of razors against obstinate flesh, the lacerating whisper of obscenities seducing obedience.

I feel his mighty hands yank back my head, clawing into my hair. A shard of ice stabs my spine as fangs penetrate my neck. Ripples of pin-prickling shivers cascade down my back. He tears at my gown, ripping it into tatters on the prism-lit floor. With his hands still coiled in my hair, he rides me with the urgency and fury of a long-suppressed nightmare, flooding me with dissonant cravings.

I need your fix.

I need your strength.

I need your magic.

I need your life.

A yowl, banshee beast released, echoes through vaulted hallways, rebirthing limbs of stone.

With every drop of blood he drinks from me, a void deepens. A black door shuts, a black elevator drops, a black tunnel swallows. I return to the emptiness from which I, umbilicus-tangled, sprang, a timeless, dimensionless, craving consciousness governed only by need. It is hunger, chaos, a gnawing hollow friction of bone against bone, an unrelenting thirst for the life essence I once willfully shed as I cut into my arms with playful malevolence.

A spattering of his blood gushes into my mouth. I open wider, drinking in the taste of amber and civet, honey, brine, and rust. Each mouthful is a pulsing birth, a spasm of memory. Red walls engulf me. They pulsate, contracting, pressing against me. Tighter. Tighter. Pushing. I am a scream squeezed through a long, narrow tube. I am red darkness plunging towards searing white razor-shearing light.

“You are here, again and again,” he says, his voice like fur and brandy. “Always you. Always me. Always the call of blood to blood. Here is where we and those of our kind started.”

Stone monuments encircle a treeless plain, grey skies looming with furrowed gods. A crow pecks at the eyes of a woad-painted warrior. Dark-haired children gnaw gristle from bones, their faces smeared with gore and grease. Opalescent teeth glisten from within a seaside cave. A misty woman with a wicker basket collects shells and skulls from the rocky cliffs.

My bare feet stumble over rocks as he leads me through the terrain of our shared dreams. The sea, as grey as the sky, thrashes with ravenous ferocity against the grimly stoic barricade of stone and fossil shielding land from water. Within the fossils trilobites sleep, scaly outdated armor of no protection against the relentless surge of evolution. They are the losers. We walk upon their time-traced imprints, as someday, perhaps, we will also walk upon the grimacing skulls of our human progenitors.

We stand at the edge of the cliff, peering down upon the fiercely flaying waves and goring obdurate rocks—equally fatal foes united only in carnage. A limp white and red form is tossed back and forth between them. The waves hiss, baring blood-spattered froth as the rocks passively gouge shreds of flesh.

As I stare at the sacrificial feast below, I feel dizzy. A part of myself, like a phantom twin, seems to disengage from the pit of my stomach. I sense this other self dangling from a tinsel-thin filament, a silver thread connecting me and it. I feel it surging towards the depths, trying to pull me down with it. I see it suspended over the edge—so far down yet so sudden the descent. My throat clenches, my breath awaits, a hushed intermission between thought and act. I grab my abdomen, summoning my too-curious counterpart back inside. With a sigh, I bring the wayward imp safely home.

“This cliff is what unites our kind and the mortals we once were,” he explains, touching my shoulder as the icy wind brings sharp sea-salt prickles to my flesh. “Look down, far down, into those depths,” he commands. “You will see our common ancestors.”

I stare, my eyes blurring. Outlines grow hazy, sea, rock, sky, land, grey mist. From those vast amorphous vistas the maenad, culling sailor bones, awaits ecstatic tribute. Wrapped in a seaweed scarf, she emerges from the waves to take and transform her chosen. Her necklace of children’s teeth, mine amongst them, sparkles with sad, stolen lustre.

The fog forms tendrils, clammy as old man jissom. The tendrils elongate, becoming arms. I know these arms, know this skeletal being taking shape from the dead-fish mist. He stands beyond the veil of “what if” possibilities. He is the conjurer, the magician, the trench coat emcee, the entity I know as Morbidy Graham, the one my Awakener terms the Perverse Obsessor. He and the Tooth Fairy (the Lady of Sea Foam and Mist) give shape to dread

and allure; they are what compel us into that abyss of terror and creation. We, like them, inhabit the dreams of fear and fatal yearning. We follow the dreams, the entrancing jellybean paths, spider web mazes, and other perilous labyrinths that lead us to the dreamers' secretly desired demise.

The hunger circles, like an insane beast endlessly chasing its tail, snapping and spinning. That beast, fanged, sublime, is within us both. It demands sacrifice, an epiphany of shudders.

I drift in the flood of archaic memories, a world more enigmatic, fierce and fascinating than anything I encountered in my mortal life.

His lips against mine, I close my eyes. When I open them, I am far away from the hospital. Freed of my bandages and tattered hospital gown, I am clothed in a black silk shirt dress, luxurious yet loose and comfortable. We are sitting together on a dark red print couch in a large hotel room.

On the bed a burgundy bedspread lays in slight disarray. Examining it closer, I see stains that resemble blotches of egg white or semi-gloss translucent paint. I smell the musky scent of mortal men spilling their essence onto a stranger's bed and leaving before daylight brings regrets.

The rolling grumble of cars, indistinct chatter of voices in unidentifiable languages, screech of sirens, and thunderous thudding of a subway train identify our location as urban.

“New York City,” he remarks, sensing my unasked question. “Chelsea Hotel. It’s better for us to travel light, stay in hotels, especially ones, like this, with the ingrained memories and dreams of artists and those who try to be artists. Your acquaintance, Spitz Nevus, for example, is here. As you will soon realize, there’s lots of vitality to be absorbed from within these walls. Even the stains have energy traces.”

“You seem so familiar,” I tell him, “even before the hospital. Did I know you somewhere else?”

“Yes,” he answers. “I saw you about two years ago at the nightclub. Your band was opening for Spitz Nevus. I was impressed by your hunger, your rage. I knew then that the hunger and rage were ancient within you. You had them since childhood. I looked inside your mind and saw your dreams, your fears and yearnings. Remember the prayers you said each night before you went to sleep? You would kneel by the bed, blessing everyone close to

you, so worried that you would leave someone out and then they would die. You would obsess over every detail, and the prayers kept getting longer and longer, feeding on the fear. Then, one night, you had to give it up. You were too afraid to pray because leaving someone out would be worse than not praying at all.”

As he recalls my memories, dulled by the anesthetizing cynicism of adulthood, the raw emotion momentarily resurfaces. On that prayerless night long ago I realized there was only one true desire in my heart, a desire defying words and comprehension.

“That desire was your hunger,” he continues, interpreting my thoughts. “You tried to forget that hunger. But your dreams kept reminding you, so you have summoned me, your Awakener. I know your dreams, for I have shared them. ‘Good night, forever good night,’ as you had said in your song, is what we have. We have rage, we have hunger, we have immortality.”

He looks at me as if I were something he had just created, a fragment of fantasy retaining vestigial awareness of pre-existence. His eyes had watched me sing, watched me bleed from behind the curtains of gauze. “Test. Test. Test,” I had whispered, feeling that I was being auditioned for a part of something greater than I had believed possible. Anticipating my questions before I can ask them, my Awakener describes the need we fulfill as we satisfy our own. His words evoke mysteriously impenetrable thickets of imagery. I hear the delicious sound of words liberated from narrative space, “primordial,” “feral,” “oneiric,” “atavistic.” The magic of these verbal sounds, these immortal incantations, animates and resurrects.

My legs wobbling as I walk for the first time in weeks, I head towards the bathroom to check out my injuries. The mirror reveals no scars, no signs of damage, but I wonder if, like Dorian Gray, I am altered in ways only a picture of my psyche could reveal. I imagine Dorian as he

stares at his decaying portrait. Pustules of corruption barnacle around his mouth. Cheddary gobs of hypocrisy drip from his nose. But while his portrait grows progressively more repugnant, the face he presents to the world is as alluring, young, and innocent-looking as ever. He seems to have conquered time, eluded karmic retribution. Yet somehow the fear lingers that this cannot last. He keeps thinking about knives, blades ripping into canvas, gouging, undoing. The what-if compulsion, Morbidy's lure, taunts us all. Inside everyone there is that hideous shadow, the witch in the mirror that scratches at your eyes, the temptation to know what you most dread to see.

Now that I have joined my Awakener, I see this shadow within others as well as myself. It comes through, uncensored, in dreams. Often it is more sad than evil. It is the unrequited feeling of being cheated out of something you always thought would last forever. Although manifesting sometimes as anger, it is primarily a sense of tragic loss, the loss of that eternal childhood promised in fairytales. We rage against the lying stories told to placate children. Within the lies, though, are truths only partly glimpsed. My Awakener has shown me a form of immortality, not complete, not perfect, but an approximation. It is worth the sacrifice, the need to seize dreams and the life offered us. We take what is given, all the while knowing that despite our familiarity with Morbidy and his workings, our existence is also in risk because of him. We, too, are plagued by the self-hating, self-annihilating torments Morbidy has so expertly perfected.

Sometimes in the dawn, I feel my Awakener tremble beside me, gripped by thoughts or dreams from which he struggles to escape. I see him, late at night stare at pages from a book he keeps stashed away in a locked drawer. He licks at the fresh blood staining his mouth from a kill, and his eyes glaze with sudden dread as he reads

whatever is scrawled on the handwritten pages. Picking up a pen, he starts to scribble onto some of the blank pages remaining in the thick leather-bound journal. He writes as if possessed by a force even darker than himself. Shadow fingers flicker in the dim light, scratching and scraping. Will his writing eventually free him from his possession or only make him more vulnerable? Forbidding me to look at his manuscript, he has hidden the key to the drawer. I can only wonder what anguish lurks within it.

From downstairs I hear Spitz singing in a tired, cracked voice:

***Afraid of the time,
Afraid of the words which bombard my mind,
I pack my thoughts into tight little boxes
And add more bricks
To build a wall
Which traps me in
So I cannot escape . . .***

He pauses, strums a few jangling chords, then stops.

A dank, musty basement presence seeps into the room, Morbidy exerting his noxious influence. He taunts my Awakener with memories evoked by that secret book, and he goads me to try to locate it. The poisonous compulsion towards self-destruction, the only disease that can kill us vampires, tempts our immortality.

My Awakener has vanished on some mysterious errand, so I am left alone for the first time since my transformation. Being by myself in the hotel room fills me with that same sense of foreboding I used to feel as an adolescent when, outgrowing the need for a babysitter, I was left unattended for a few hours--the nausea, the gnawing emptiness, the sensation of voices luring, medicine bottles shimmering with unknown potions, blue, green, Coca-Cola brown, poisons iridescent as dragonflies. To take flight from this body, this existence, the voices urged, all you need to do is take a sip. Within the medicine cabinet Morbidy cackled, his ventriloquist skill giving the elixirs the gift of eloquence as well as death. Although there is no medicine cabinet here and I am no longer mortal, the claustrophobic panic is just as intense.

I pick up a newspaper left on the bedside table and turn on the TV. Noise, especially the inundating inanity of talk shows, often drives the other voices underground for awhile. A woman on the TV is talking about a teenager who apparently killed himself because of a lyric in a song by his favorite band. "*Go now. Go now. Smother your cares*, the lyrics told him," the woman sobbingly reports to the blonde talk show host. "And I just didn't know what to do. I couldn't help him, my poor boy." The host coos soothingly and hands the woman a Kleenex; then there's a cut to a commercial.

Children wearing mouse ears are riding on rollercoasters, laughing. Everyone is happy, except for the bawling baby in the next commercial who has a leaky diaper. Then there are some happy families at a pancake restaurant. Whipped cream drips from the pancakes onto the floor as a messy child stuffs his face with the berry banana breakfast special. The woman on the talk show is wiping her nose and babbling about her impressionable teen. I have enough and turn off the TV.

The newspaper is not much better at distracting me. Stories of torture, maulings, sodomy, and Justin Bieber

alternate with advertisements for cheese-slathered hamburgers hustled by clowns.

I want something invigorating to read, something to fill my emptiness with meaning and menace. My Awakener's journal is in that drawer underneath the bedside table. It is what I crave, what I have been trying not to think about. Like the mysteriously seductive medicinal potions of my childhood, it is a forbidden poison with power and knowledge to transform or destroy.

"Go ahead," Morbidy's voice, mimicking my own, urges. "Look for the key."

"No," I tell myself, "I can't betray my Awakener's trust by probing into his secrets." This self-given advice, so reasonable and right, however, is not as persuasive as Morbidy's surreptitious suggestion.

Trying to convince myself that I am just scrounging around the room to look for something to do, I start rummaging through the contents of the dresser, bathroom cabinet, and any other unlocked furniture opening that might possibly contain what I don't want to admit I am seeking. Finally, having almost given up, I decide to look under the lumpy, stained mattress. There, amidst gum wrappers, used condoms, and bed bug feces, I find a key.

Inserting the key into the lock, I open the bed table drawer. Carefully, as if I were touching a rare first edition manuscript by Shakespeare, I remove the dark red leather book and start examining the journal.

It appears to have been written at stages sometime within the last twenty years or so, judging by the condition of the ink, paper, and leather binding. Some of the incidents described, however, are from a much earlier date, possibly from my Awakener's childhood or adolescence. Skimming through the pages, I can see that other incidents are quite recent. I pick a page at random, and, vowing to only read a little bit at a time before returning the book and key to where they were hidden, I begin to read.

Journal Excerpt

The moonlight swarmed over my younger cousin and me as we stood on the silvery rocks at the edge of the cliffs. As usual, he was afraid our parents would discover our absence, but I convinced him it would be all right.

Together we stared at the sky. With each beat of our hearts, the blood in our veins was making another circuital journey, orbiting deep within us. Beyond us, thousands of years in the past, the distant stars had lit the sky for ancient travelers seeking rest and haven. Their austere, eternal flames had beckoned and confounded, perpetually beyond reach, tauntingly beyond comprehension.

Not nearly as far away but almost as mysterious were the gnarled trees which stretched their twisted branches towards the cold, beckoning light. Within their tangled shelter lurked the prowling beasts. The woods seethed with the sibilant rustle of stealthy movements through the branches and undergrowth. My breath quickened as the sounds became more insistent, and I was not sure whether it was apprehension or exhilaration that surged within me.

I had told my cousin about the Lady of Sea Foam and Mist, but he did not believe me. He had little faith in miracles, except those in the Bible. Unsanctioned mysteries scared him, yet he concealed his fear behind a mask of scorn.

Usually, the sound of the waves, silken and purring, reminded me of the Lady of Sea Foam and Mist. But on this night, it sounded different, yet still somehow familiar. It was deeper, a grumble and a wheeze rather than a soft, seductive purr. It was how I imagined my voice might sound if I were very old and sick. It talked inside my head, like a priest seemed to do when I confessed my sins and he

would tell me everything will be all right if I said the magic words. "Come a little closer," the voice coaxed. "Tell your cousin to follow you."

I stared down at the rocks, as sharp and terrifying as the teeth of a wolf or some other deadly creature. They could tear, and gouge, and mash into pulp anything that inadvertently happened to land upon them. What they did not rip to shreds, the seagulls would, tossing their plundered prey back and forth in a sadistic avian game.

Looking down upon the rocks, I could feel myself falling, surrendering to the cold, blistering kiss of the wind and the pull of the hungry sea. Stronger than these forces, however, was the tugging clench in my navel, a desperate rope-climbing upwards, forcing me further back from the edge.

"Did you hear that?" I asked my cousin.

"What?" he smirked. "Hearing voices again?"

"No," I assured him. "It was something real. Maybe if you come closer to the edge, you can hear it, too."

"This is silly," he scoffed, but to persuade me he wasn't afraid, he walked a few steps further.

I think I honestly wanted him to hear the voice, and that's why I urged him towards the edge, but maybe I was just trying to convince myself of that. Maybe a part of me actually did want him to take that one last step and give in to what I feared, thereby experiencing vicariously the downward plunge I had so vividly imagined myself taking.

Whatever my reasons, I had succeeded in goading my cousin, whom I loved as a brother despite his mocking ways. I remember smiling triumphantly as he walked nearer to the edge. He was smiling also, glancing backwards at me with a grin, having proven to himself as well as to me that he was not afraid.

Then his smile turned grotesque, like a dead fox's frozen grimace, as he tripped and fell. He was still looking back at me, his head wrenched sideways, while he

dangled, for a few agonizing seconds, over the precipice, and then plummeted to the rocks below.

In the night his blood appeared a darkish grey and his body a pale moonlike white. The silver rocks glowed like a lethal diamond, perhaps even more lovely than before, as if, nourished by their offering, they would shimmer with the timeless lustre of the stars.

Journal Excerpt #2

“How could anyone love a damned creature such as yourself, an abomination?” the Perverse Obsessor taunted me as I stared at Celia while she danced with a young blond man in my family’s ballroom. Dark hair, loosely flowing in sinuous curls, large grey-black eyes glistening with kittenish mischief, she, alone of all the numerous young women at the ball, clutched at my heart, flooding it with restless desire. She had an ethereal grace reminiscent of the Lady of Sea Foam and Mist, but unlike my lascivious goddess, Celia would be mine alone, to seduce and arouse, to awaken the passion so coyly trembling within her loins.

She had gazed up at me, shy yet fascinated as I held her gaze, pinioning her soul, piercing it with lurid yearnings. Already I sensed her love, but the Perverse Obsessor kept compelling me to test it.

“Let her be like an experiment for you,” he goaded. “See if she passes the test. If she does, indeed, love you, then she will give herself to you, no questions asked. But if not, then you will know that I am right.”

The Perverse Obsessor was an expert on experiments. His ruthless probing, his relentless “what if” speculations were the types of morbid inquiries fueling many scientific explorations. Vivisection flourished under his sadistic impetus masquerading as Reason and Progress. The bloody scalpels dripped while the Haydn concertos played to politely restrained applause.

Celia, of course, was innocent about such atrocities committed in this Age of Enlightenment. Sheltered, chaperoned, indoctrinated in the refined arts suitable for a young lady of her era, she did not know much about the world beyond the sparkling tiled ballrooms and genteel estates. She certainly did not know about my true nature. I

had learned well the tricks of camouflage, masking my feral attributes whenever necessary to blend in and survive.

I had intended to woo her slowly, then, only when she was ready, reveal my real self. However, as I watched her dance, I imagined how easy it would be to take my little kittenish Celia, throttle her delicate silken neck, pierce her soft, warm flesh, and savagely violate her. Maybe the Perverse Obsessor was right—I was an abomination, a loathsome, twisted creature who could only force her sweet, pure soul to comply with my debased desires. No, he was wrong, another part of myself protested. I could wait for her to yield, no matter how long it took.

Having tired of dancing, Celia walked towards the hallway where I stood, her satin dress slinking around her hips like the unctuous hands of a lecher. I longed to touch where they touched. Her scent, jasmine and amber overlying honeyed musk, filled my mouth with a fiery thirst.

When I offered her my hand, she grasped it tenderly, with an eagerness that surprised me. We stood together, talking of things I do not remember, silly, rather inane topics popular in that era. Although her words bored me, her lilting voice stirred me with impulses I struggled to conceal from her naively curious downward glances. For about a half hour perhaps we lingered like this at the doorway. I waited until the orchestra left and the crowd began filing out of the ballroom before I asked her to accompany me in the study.

Her eyes flashed mischievously as she considered my invitation. Her chaperone was nowhere to be seen, and the slightest hint of indiscretion my suggestion implied was intriguing to her. I could sense her attraction to me, the sensual tingling of an emotion she had never before experienced. She seemed to be falling in love with me, but I wanted to make sure. I couldn't wait any longer.

Journal Excerpt #3

The ache was growing. My body felt heavy, as if tethered and weighted with iron chains. A scorched taste, like battery acid and burnt sugar, seared my throat, and a corrosive magma churned up from my belly as I vomited.

Splotches of the regurgitated blood swirled amidst the black arabesques of the Oriental rug where Celia lay before me, her accusing eyes dull black buttons, her mouth a red rickrack grimace. I had taken her, defiled her, drained her, spewed her out, but the hunger still raged, as if mocking my grief and remorse. I had wasted her essence and needed to feed again.

Someone else would die that night to appease my hunger, some man whose name or face I would never remember. I only remember his blood as it surged within my mouth, a sour and repugnant contrast to the sweet red wine we both had drank as we sat at the bar numbing our already dead souls. That taste scalds my tongue whenever I think of Celia. It brands me with its indelible fire.

She wanted to love me, but I didn't deserve that love. Even after I had grabbed her, stripped off her delicate satin dress, and began clawing at her breasts, she still wanted to love me. She kept pleading with me, "Stop! You are better than this. I know you are." But I obeyed only the voice within my head, the Perverse Obsessor whispering to me, "Take her! Make her show that she loves you. Make her prove it."

Her pleas turned to sobs, wails, appeals to my "better" self and to God. They were shrieks wrenching my insides with self-loathing, yet the more she screamed, the more desperate I became to prove her wrong. No, I was not better than this. No, I could not stop.

To drown out her stubborn cries, I put the pillow over her face. After ripping through every last shred of satin and lace barring my access, I rammed myself inside her. The

blood slithered down her soft, smooth legs, and as I licked it, my ferocity grew. I tore into her throat, drinking deeply from her jetting vein.

As the blood ebbed, slowing to a defeated trickle, I thought I heard her voice, a raspy sigh, like a smothered crow. A curse or a last goodbye? I do not know. The words evaded comprehension. They were a dark mystery, a cryptic conclusion to a life filled with light, hope, and innocence.

She had been too trusting. Like so many of her era, she placed too much faith in the deceptively sunny façade of Reason. She did not see the shadows, the ambiguities behind the surface, especially those lurking underneath my vows of love. To this day, I do not understand my feelings for her. Whatever I convinced myself then was love has become as distorted and unsettling as a painting by Hieronymus Bosch—aberrations, monstrosities, pain, the Perverse Obsessor prodding and probing. Celia would have rejected such phantasmagorical imagery, but maybe that's why she met her murderous demise and the beliefs of her time period now seem hypocritical, laughably absurd in their denial of discord.

She has paid for her naivete, and her brother, fulfilling his pledge, made sure I would pay for her murder. His silver dagger, as foreshadowed in my fiery snake vision, sent me straight to that Boschean realm of darkest imaginings.

The rending red rays of light have gouged and pierced my every pore. With every torturous jab, the Perverse Obsessor has challenged me to renounce him, but to do that, I would also have to renounce my Lady of Sea Foam and Mist. Without one, I could not have the other; I could only have death and whatever annihilating peace or emptiness it bestowed, but, choosing both, I was reborn.

Sometimes, though, the lure of annihilation taunts me. The memories, my own and my victims', accumulate like bottled specimens in an anatomy lab—a nephritic kidney

here, a cholecystitic gallbladder here, a menagerie of afflictions. The poisons within build up, each death I cause infecting its unique and incurable contagion. They become part of me, and my original being, whatever that was, has been lost in the layer upon layer of ingested yet indistinct, fragmented lives.

Journal Excerpt #4

Summoned by desperate dreams and by dying breaths, I close the eyes and open the veins. take what is offered. This is my redemption and theirs. Having returned from the abyss, I can now escort others to its threshold. I am their guide, their anodyne, their deliverance. They use me, and I use them. Our relationship, though brief, is symbiotic.

The centuries have taught me patience and restraint. No longer do I seize a life not willingly discarded. I wait to be invited.

At the hospital the invitations abound. There are so many, I cannot always meet the demands. Often, unfortunately, I arrive too late.

As the wails, and groans, and wheezing whispers engulf me, I try to pick out the most ardent and irresistible. There is one voice, however, that mystifies me. Unlike all of the others, this one does not want my euthanizing embrace. She wants something I have never before given. Her hunger is my hunger.

I gaze down at this young woman whose voice, different from all the rest, seethes with ferocious vitality. Although her head and face are covered in gauze, her thin, nearly emaciated form and the scars on her arms, like railroad tracks leading nowhere, evoke familiar impressions. I recognize her as the singer I saw at a Bowery club a few years ago. Her group, the Neurasethenics, opening for Spitz Nevus, had intrigued me with its deeply encrusted rage. One of her songs, aptly entitled "Rage," hissed and spat against the lies, the placebos, the euphemistic treacheries committed to keep doubt sated.

The strips of gauze shrouding her face seem to conceal mysteries ensnaring us both. I peel back one of the layers, the cloth unwinding, a cobra uncoiling. I hear the hissing as the red teeth of light gouge and rend. My flesh is flayed; my

choice is made. I will give back what I have taken. She will share my gift.

Journal Excerpt #5

Spitz Nevus has been practicing a new song, something about walls and not being able to escape. I hear him almost every night singing, but this one, his newest creation, will be his last. He is ready for his sacrifice.

This is what he wants and what we shall make possible. We will be fulfilling his dream, helping him become a glorious casualty, one of the immortal rock pantheon whose brief, intense lives and self-destructive obsessions gave them mythic importance. Unlike the American Idol wannabes he despises, Spitz wants to be spared the disgrace of commercial success. No one will ever see the artist he could have become with time and endurance. He is to be cut short, severed from the coiling grip of fame yet saved from the pervasive mediocrity he finds so loathsome.

Spitz's greatest gift will be his legacy of disgust towards what he perceives as lies and complacency. From the first time I saw Spitz, about two years ago, I was struck by the depth of this disgust. Repulsion oozed from every scabby pore of his scrawny body and sullen, haggard face, repulsion lacking a distinct target or focus but just seeping out everywhere. He was like a disease, a physical embodiment of a virus, inimical, insidious, nihilistic. Once seen, he could never be forgotten. His lyrics were even more unsettling than his physical presence. Combined with the tinnitic throbbing of his music, they evoked feelings of nausea and despair.

Although I have not become acquainted with Spitz on a personal level, I have gotten to know more about him through you, my initiate, who, disobeying my warning and heeding the compulsion to read my journal, will partake of Spitz's martyrdom.

You see, my dear, I knew you would find this. It was meant to be read by my novice, my love, and you, after all these years of searching, are the one I have chosen to fulfill

that role. But to leave my journal unlocked, unforbidden, would not give it the special power it now possesses in persuading your complicity. You now share the guilt, the responsibility. You know, at least in part, what I have done, what I have suffered, and you cannot pretend innocence. Any innocence you once had is gone forever. Although you may dread being an accomplice to Spitz's death, you will assist me in bringing it about. You will be satisfying Spitz's desires as well as your own.

The journal lies upon the burgundy bedspread, the page open, the black ink scrawling menace across the thin-lined paper. Words blur, swirling and clenching. As they did in the basement dream of Morbidy Graham, the letters transform into monstrous parodies of meaning. The dot of an “i” becomes the slash of a razor, attenuated and savage. Angular crossbars crucify t’s. The medieval grotesques spawned in illuminated manuscripts invade the shapes, basilisks, serpents, and other fanciful aberrations far less frightening than the words they obscure. I unfocus my eyes, wanting to immerse myself in these hallucinatory pranksters safely unreal. However, eventually meaning resurfaces, and the terrifying realization of what I have been chosen to help do can no longer be disguised.

My Awakener, of course, was right. By warning me not to read his journal, he knew that I could not withstand the temptation to do just that. There is no use denying what I have done. Morbidy’s lure was too strong, the compulsion too insistent.

“Did you read it?” my Awakener asks as he enters the room, tossing his keys upon the bed. He isn’t interested in any excuses, so I don’t bother with them. There is nothing to say in my defense anyway. We are of similar natures, he and I; the same perverse tendencies compel us.

When I ask about his plan for Spitz, he doesn’t give any details. When the time is right, it will be revealed,” he explains, then suggests I accompany him for my first kill. “You’ll feel so much better afterwards,” he assures me. “Your worries will vanish, and you will become that animal you so longed to be. You will be savage, splendid, filled with the grace and beauty of a true predator. No more will you feel trapped in your former human body. You will be limitless.”

My skin prickles with anticipation, and the thirst surges, stinging yet silken, like some kind of insect with barbed feet. I pace around the room, walking faster and faster to try to quiet the thirst, but it mockingly accelerates with every move. I walk slower, and its sting is slower yet perhaps even more intense. By the time my Awakener decides he is ready to leave, I feel as if I want to claw my skin into scabby shreds, tearing away at the blistering itch only he knows how to ease.

My Awakener and I trespass flagrantly, jaywalking between sacred and profane, taking what we need with fierce delight. We are passengers, observing the scenery of dreams, avoiding superfluous interaction with the human world we watch through stalking eyes.

Always, though, the thirst pulses, a furtive centipede with filamentous legs of fire. It scurries and stings, transmitting obsessive visions and fervent, never-appeased lust.

"There is no water in Hell," a lurid pamphlet at my feet proclaims as my Awakener and I walk past the vomit-smearred discards of derelict preachers and drunken penitents. The sky is dissected with metal, aluminum skeletons stretching aimlessly upward, arms askew in prayer. Underneath, just outside the hot, dank orifice of the subway, the sweaty sermonizers lurk, waiting to thrust their soiled leaflets at oblivious passersby. "Be prepared for Judgment Day," a scowling recruit screeches in a tense, emasculated voice while bloated trains, jammed with commuters, echo belching hallelujahs.

Descending the greasy, gum-stained stairs, we are greeted by the familiar stench of Pine-sol, piss, and rat poison. The platform seems narrower than I remember, just one sliver of cement jutting out into the abyss. Damp, steamy heat wraps around us, suffocating, seeping into our skin as we try not to breathe in the mildew and decay.

Paper cups, soda cans, shattered bottles, and smashed ketchup packets litter the tracks. A broken umbrella, sharp spikes twisted and lethal, hovers below. A little further down the rails a child's plastic action figure lies amputated amidst a scattering of peanut shells. From some secret crevice a large roach the size of a schoolboy's shoe scurries out onto the track, antennae flickering, then disappears.

All along the platform the savagely scrawled leaflets lie trampled. "No water in Hell," "Judgment Day." Only if

you accept this or that competing evangelical group's dogma will you be saved, the pamphlets threaten; just say our magic words, recite them in your sleep; stop thinking and count all those prettily bleating sheep.

Time stretches, long, open-ended, and unfathomable, a tunnel from one dark mystery to another. We stand in the stagnant heat, awaiting the brief, welcome breeze that signals an approaching train. I can see the hunger and thirst in his eyes—red sparks within the blue flame. But now there is no opportunity to give into it. He has plans for us, and we must head towards the Bowery in order to fulfill them.

Finally, we feel the slight stirring of the air and the distant clattering of the rails as a train grows closer. When it screams into the station, we wait for the few passengers to get out of the nearest car; then we enter.

The train shrieks and lurches as he leads me through the sliding doors from one car to another in search of an uninhabited space. In one car a young man is standing, reciting passages from *Naked Lunch* while the other passengers bury their heads in newspapers or look blankly into space as they sip coffee.

As we pass through another car, we see a man draped in a black trash bag hobble through the aisle, rattling a can of coins and muttering, "Help me. Help me." A woman throws a few pennies on the floor, then hides her face behind a *Wall Street Journal*. Another, plugged into her Ipod, rocks back and forth as tinny wails, barely stifled, gnaw their way through atrophied neurons and rats burrow underneath the train tracks.

Stepping out of the subway, we gaze at streets we once knew, now forcibly, brutally face-lifted, the grimy, wrinkled former inhabitants pushed to the rapidly smoothing contours as the neighborhood was being cosmetically enhanced one building at a time. Scaffolds scratch at the sky in a fierce passion to create clones of

themselves, more office spaces, more overpriced apartments, more malignant consumerist growth.

“Listen to the sound of the dreams,” my Awakener reminds me as we sit, unseen, on the stoop outside an abandoned bakery. “Forget about the waking world around you, its creatively stunted artifacts. Focus on the dreams, the desires, dreads, regrets, and find one with a hunger so vast it can only be satisfied by death. That dream will summon you, and you will respond. It will be your invitation into the dreamer’s deepest yearnings.”

He and I wade through the dreams, their presence reverberating within our ears like tinnitus shrapnel from a ghostly battlefield— sizzling phone wires with mangled, miscarried conversations and hijacked high-frequency whispers. The garble of sound gradually forms patterns, visual images, staticky cinematic settings. They ebb and flow, mind waves tossing little bits of garbage from the day before, mixed with derivative fictions, self-glorifying screenplays, and long-suppressed urges shrink-wrapped in symbolic shrouds. As observers, we watch what takes place, perceiving thoughts and images, yet remaining detached, indifferent. We are the filters, the invisible interpreters, predators who have been ushered into our subjects’ secret fantasies.

Somewhere amidst the deluge of insistent, insidious sounds and sights, a dream of fatal all-consuming desire reveals itself. In the corner of a dimly lit restaurant, scenario of her nightmare, the dreamer sits. Her hair is short, a drab beige-brown invaded by furtive incursions of gray, and her face, partially obscured by a menu, is worried. She has been to this restaurant, her favorite, many times before, but it looks disturbingly different. Although it is only a few blocks from her home, it seems foreign, alienating.

A large grandfather’s clock ticks with solemn precision. She glances at the Roman numerals embedded like amber-trapped insects in its antique yellowed face. 6

p.m. Shadow butterflies of reflected candlelight whirl backwards above the tables.

Overhead a chandelier hovers, crystalline shards impaling the thick, tense air. Ageless, it has presided over the spittle-pasted ruins of countless meals as desperate diners appease their mortal fears with borrowed flesh. Shaking pendulous scythes of glinting glass, it waits in lethal balance, poised above the unsuspecting customers, who, oblivious to its lethal blades, slurp away in gluttonous abandon.

At tables scattered throughout the spacious restaurant people are loudly smacking their lips as they talk. Their wooden yakking jaws flop open dumbly, like a cow's in mid-cud reverie. Their snide smiles curl, so sweet, so curdled. Some diners, white-shrouded, grease-smearred, huddle in the back, gorging on ortolan. Tiny bones crunch as entrails slither omens like fortune cookie messages to their overfed devourers.

The woman does not see us as we enter her dream, yet she feels the chill of hunger, raw and merciless, true animal hunger, something none of these satiated gourmands will ever understand, the hunger of wolves gnawing the bones of the last caribou as the long sunless winter erases all possibility of warmth.

It is the woman's birthday, and she is depressed because of it. She does not want to be reminded of her age and the relentless span of years comprising her featureless life, nor does she want to know what lies ahead of her, the senescent horrors glimpsed in unilluminated mirrors late at night, and only her cats to help keep away the emptiness. She does not know that she sits at the precipice of a cliff, beneath which all is blackness, charred meat, singed flesh, the so-called bottomless pit of imagination driven insane.

A waiter, tall, white-haired, emaciated and withered, visits each table, sprinkling grated pepper onto the pulsating entrees. Grinning obsequiously, he gives her a

wink of disturbing familiarity. Skeletal trickster, “what if” magician coaxing maimed rabbits out of smooth satin hats, this being, Morbidy Graham, has glimpsed the shadowy fate she fears. For her, he has prepared a gift, a revelatory birthday feast.

She waits, nervously tearing her paper napkin into ragged strips. Perhaps these little paper strips will lead her, like Theseus, out of the labyrinthine abyss she has unconsciously created for herself. Perhaps not.

She suddenly remembers that she forgot to feed her cats before she left. They will be yowling for her. The ones in the alley will probably come to visit also, including the mother cat and her newborn kittens. Her favorite cat, James, was most likely waiting in bed for her. Cuddling with him comforted her more than anything else these days. As James wrapped himself around her head at night, he blocked out almost all the sounds of the busy streets--the drunken shouts, screeching brakes, and frenzied lunatic car alarms—sounds that made her feel lonely and afraid, isolated from the incessant pulse of a city she once loved.

Morbidy returns to her table, bringing a silver tureen. With a limply stagey flourish, he lifts the cover, revealing an uncooked pumpkin. “Voila!” he proclaims as she stares, haggard-eyed, at the bizarre item she most certainly did not order. He hands her a silver knife, curved like a scythe, and spreads out a newspaper. “Cut, Madame!” he commands. His eyes burrow into hers, excavating secrets.

From the newspaper place setting, grey-white faces peer up at her. “Dearly beloved father,” “devoted daughter,” the obituary notices declare as the photos gaze ghostily from the great unknown.

Standing beside her, Morbidy watches while she begins to cut into the pumpkin. As if she were making a jack-o-lantern, she slices into the top and takes off the lid. Into the orange flesh she hacks, her fingers scooping out globs of pulp and seeds. Strands, Medusa hairs, spill out

in occult, tangled clumps. Hieroglyph letters, scrawling sperm-like forms, twist themselves into illegible shapes, snares and snakes and coils. “Peter Peter pumpkin eater,” she finds herself muttering. She is opening the door to a pumpkin chamber, a fetid little Halloween hovel where she can lock herself up in forever. “Must make room for cats,” she tells herself, giggling nervously. If only, she fantasizes, if only she could be like that good witch in *Thomasina*, her favorite childhood movie and book. That witch was young and beautiful, living alone in the woods, surrounded by the animals she healed with her loving magic. Too late for that now, though. Too old, too tired.

As she digs deeper, and the pile of gore grows, saturating the newspaper, obliterating the preciously departed, her fingers touch two tiny, hard mounds about the size of golf balls—two miniature pumpkins nestled inside the ravaged womb.

“Life or death,” Morbidy whispers. “These are the twins awaiting your decision. Take one with you, abort the other.”

With her eyes closed, she reaches inside the pumpkin, pulling out one of the small round embryos. She places it on the table atop the eviscerated remains, then wrests the other one from the cavity and clutches it in her hand.

“This one,” she rasps, her voice weary and defeated. “This one I choose. Please take everything else away. I just want to go home!”

“Death it is, then,” Morbidy announces in a booming voice that startles the other diners from their contented feast. “You heard the woman! We will now give her the present she has chosen.”

The woman opens her mouth, letting loose a wail—noooooooo. The o’s are hollow eye sockets, the air oozing from a deflating tire, the blood whooshing from a punctured vein.

Eat or be eaten, the peeling sign warns all those who enter. Beside the doorway, hidden by the fortress of

garbage cans and soggy cardboard, squirming, sausage-shaped newborn kittens suckle their mother's teats. Tiny mewling cries of hunger and satisfaction affirm the desire for life.

We follow the trail of cats, the yowling horde traipsing through the alley and leaping into a nearby apartment's open windows. The mother cat we saw in the doorway of the restaurant dream is the last to arrive. She carries her squalling kittens one by one into the room and stands over them protectively, guarding them from the unruly mob. To this small home of her provider, the dreamer, she has returned.

On the black and white linoleum kitchen floor the woman lies, water from a broken yellow ceramic bowl spilling out onto her white cotton nightgown. Her leg is twisted to one side, and a scraggly tiger cat is nibbling at her calloused toes, purring with hungry contentment. The woman whimpers, a high-pitched, crooning "Nooooo" as the other cats start sauntering towards her, yowling and staring. From a gash on her temple, blood trickles slowly. Apparently, she had been refilling the cats' water dish when she slipped on some water, fell and injured herself.

An orange tabby, round as a jack-o-lantern, licks at her head wound, tearing off a small piece of skin and growling menacingly as a slender Siamese cat approaches. Timidly, the Siamese retreats, finding an unguarded area by the woman's thigh to chew upon.

"James!" the woman gurgles, staring up at a black cat with mantis-green eyes who crouches beside her. He gives a slight mew of acknowledgement, then bats his paw at her fearfully fluttering eyelids and rubs his tail against her horror-stricken face.

Milling around her and meowing triumphantly, more cats claim spaces beside her helplessly writhing body. Theirs is a victory, but a victory, unfortunately, to share. A lanky grey cat with a tattered ear claws at a plump, fluffy white cat, snatching a piece of gristle from the longer-

haired feline, who is too lazy and well-fed to put up much of a fight. Other cats, calico, tuxedo, young and old, hastily gobble shreds of flesh torn from the woman's legs and torso. They glance up at us, eyes questioning, wary.

Inside their semi-conscious entree Toxo Plasma lurks, the unacknowledged gondii god parasite presiding over the feast. Although "merely" a protozoa, this being has spun the thread of fate which now, like a spooling ball of yarn, entices the cats, goads them into action. It tickles inside the woman's slowing brain, sending out the summons, here kitty, kitty, kitty. It is the prototype Morbidy, the worm in the shriveled apple, the beckoning finger of the forbidden.

The cats heed this call of the wild, the sabertooth hiss reclaiming their kind from the bonds of domesticity. No more will they consent to be human playthings. They are no longer complacent Purina-placated predators. They, like us, have abandoned the mastery of human rules.

Trying to perceive the dying woman's mental images, I sense surges of panic, followed by cold, grim sloughs of resignation, sharp crests and flat, featureless plains. Erratic visions of cats with pointed, fiery auras, like those in the art of Louis Wain, dissolve into mandala patterns, gleaming orange eyes gazing upon an abyss of squirming fetal forms, larvae metamorphosing into skull-winged moths bringing escape from loneliness.

Slithering past the silken, growling throng, we lie down beside the woman's head. The cats, intimidated by our unearthly scent (neither animal nor human nor anything they have encountered), watch as we close her eyes, concluding the scenario scripted by viruses.

Immune to the karma encoded by Toxo and his infectious cohorts, we drink in the throbbing essence of her sadly stunted life. Since this is my first experience at a kill, my Awakener lets me take what I need first before joining in. Her blood, though not nearly as rich, complex, and invigorating as my Awakener's, has a surprisingly

musky, feral taste, sharply contrasting with her repressed, spinsterish appearance. Each swallow reveals intriguing flashes of memory. I see the woman in her childhood—blonde, with long braids and a carefree, wide-gapped smile. She is giggling as she holds a black kitten in her arms. I see her a few years later, standing in the back yard of a suburban home, crying as she places a glass jar filled with dandelions on a mound of dirt, the grave of her first pet. She is cursing God for taking her cat, and her face, defiant despite her tears, is unforgiving. A few swallows more brings me to her teenaged years. She sits in her bedroom of what appears to be the same suburban home and is scribbling angrily in her diary. “I hate that boy!” she writes and scratches with a pencil as if to blot out his existence. “Junior high makes me sick. I don’t ever want to grow up. Things will just keep getting worse and worse the older I get.” As I near the end of my feast, the memories get denser, more clogged and bleak. I see her in her twenties, watching people gyrating in a dance club, the clothes and dance moves glitzy, devoid of spontaneity. I see her perhaps ten years later, wearily returning home to her New York City apartment, closing the drapes, turning on the TV, and feeding her five cats. My last swallow of her brings me to a much more recent memory. She is sitting in her chair, nine cats milling and mewing around her, one cat lying above her chair, his green eyes majestic and imperious. Although the rest of the woman’s life has been stifled, snuffed of joy and creativity, her cats, this one in particular, reminds her of the vital, free, willful being she once was, the being that I can still taste within her blood. What made her turn so bitter and depressed I can never know for sure. Except for the memories I briefly glimpsed, the rest of her life remains an untapped enigma, her yearnings nearly smothered until death’s release.

Only now is she free to flow into those thrillingly dangerous realms of her childhood dreams. Only now can she undulate through the keyholes, slip past the censors. Having become one with her beloved cats, she will never be alone. With them, she will glide through the darkness, free, savoring all her fantasies.

As the cats, growling and hissing, continue their feast, we crawl out the open window and walk a few blocks away, heading towards the Bowery nightclub where Spitz Nevus is performing. Abandoned buildings glower at their posh neighbors, upstart replacements for sullenly familiar shacks. Beside a graffiti-sprayed restaurant supply warehouse, two old men, greasy-haired and bleary-eyed, wrangle over a large cardboard box.

“Mine!” one howls with toothless glee and lurches towards the other, who staggers into the street and gets run over by a taxi.

“Mine!” the victor howls again as the cab driver speeds past the bed-less, lifeless bum he had the inconvenience of hitting.

Oblivious to this cardboard-inspired mayhem, a throng of people assembles beside the tattered canopy of the nightclub. Hulking underneath the banner, the perennially first-in-line stands, her hefty, belligerent presence blocking the entrance as if she were some Foo dog statute protecting the Imperial Palace. Her lank, dull brown hair is pulled back tightly in a ponytail, and even from a distance, I can smell the blackberry brandy infusing her corpulent body, marinating it like a fruit-glaze on a ham.

The simian jabbering of the humans crowding the entrance to the club becomes louder as the door begins to open. Foo Dog Girl and a bevy of less imposing females seeking protection by her bulk surge through first, scrambling towards the stage, followed by a raucous wave of grasping arms and frenzied feet. Chickens jerking in headless dance, the groping, clamoring bodies are propelled by a force stronger than mind or senses.

We stand apart, anonymous observers, passengers never arriving, only watching and seeking as faces flash by like desperate soon-to-be-smothered flames. While the crowd lunges, bruised and cursing against the door, we

wait to straggle in afterwards, just before the performance begins.

Once inside the club, I stare at the ripped posters of long-dead rock stars, faces obliterated by freshly scornful newcomers in a seemingly endless cycle of rebellion and futility. One scar replaces another, and the nails crucify another illusion in the palimpsest of earthly fame.

The speakers embrace the small stage, black monoliths broadcasting final judgment. With a crackle, a static turbulence, invisible wires connect like the tenuous webs of fledgling spiders, encircling the captive audience, trapping them in the sticky filaments of sound. Slivers of pale green light seep through the darkness as guitars are plugged into amplifiers. "Test. Test. Test," a man's voice intones, the monosyllabic words as chillingly austere as a Tibetan chant. From behind that narrow stage I had heard similar rites of invocation before the stage was readied for my entrance. Two years had passed since my last performance, but the club seemed unchanged. The process of decay had been halted but not reversed. Nothing had marred its mildewed mystique.

As I had left the stage my final time, Spitz Nevus had been waiting to clutch the chaos the Neurasthenics had roused. He had kept the fervor, the anger, alive.

The marred faces from the torn posters looked down upon the crowd with derisive boredom. They waited for another face to join theirs, a new grimace, a new smirk, a new mirroring sickness.

Spitz Nevus, lurking behind the curtains, hopes to be that new face memorialized with the others on the tattered, overlapped posters. I can sense his excitement as he paces back and forth, awaiting his cue to enter the stage. He does not know I have returned. Although we had shared this stage on the same nights, we had never performed together. We were confreres, twins unrelated by DNA but bound by kindred beliefs, our physical similarities reflecting our shared credo, our bond of anger and nauseous hunger. There was, however, one major obstacle to our closeness—Spitz’s addiction. Despite kicking his heroin habit, he had never been able to banish its allure. His imagination, his music, as well as his appearance, was scarred by his opiate fascination. At the time I could not understand the drug craving. I prided myself on being in control, demonstrating my mastery by the artfully imposed stigmata of razor scars yet all the while longing to be possessed by someone or something other than myself. I did not realize that my need to mark my flesh was merely another form of addiction.

A lot has changed since then. I have been released from one form of imprisonment to be enchained by another. Now I know the addictive thirst. No longer human, I am a voyeur living off the dreams and essence of those who call upon me. I watch and wait. I drift through the lives of strangers, going wherever I am summoned, taking and leaving and continuing in the infinitely circling tracks of yearning and despair. Knowing what was to become of Spitz in his act of greatest fulfillment, I feel an odd mixture of guilt and anticipation. I hate my complicity but know Spitz needs me to help make his sacrifice meaningful. I deserve to share in it.

The dim lights fade to a pale crescent of grey, and the crowd howls in anticipation. For several minutes, the darkness and discord reign as the audience grows increasingly impatient, even hostile, at being kept waiting. Glass shatters, liquids slosh, women titter, men bellow.

When the light slowly returns, forming a sickly urine-yellow halo over the stage, the band, already plugged into their instruments, gaze sullenly as Spitz strides onto the narrow platform separating him from his unruly audience.

Spitz leers, his mouth a lopsided lightning bolt of red blackness against moth-white, carcass-thin flesh. His bandmembers, nondescript, bespectacled, lurk in the shadows.

“You know it’s a lie,” he whispers, the amplifiers distorting and elongating his sigh of disillusionment. Saliva slithers from his lips and drizzles upon the stage, lingering there like dirty rain upon a baptismal gown.

***You know it’s a lie,
The capitalized I
A delusion of strength
A scarecrow’s bluff
Mere straw and fluff.
Dust settles and obliterates
With a sigh
All the self-deifying dreams.
You know it’s a lie.
The capitalized I.***

Engorged by the drunken whistles and catcalls, the piss-scented fervor of the audience, Spitz seems to expand, swelling with malignant potential. His is the cryptic curse of dread, what-if worst case scenarios. Cut, cut, cut as you may, you can never remove that poison imagining.

More insistent and compelling than the energy of this manic crowd or the infectious thrall of Spitz’s music, however, is the faint tinny sizzle of someone’s dream calling us.

The dream forms itself, a fragile fortress of books and newspaper, easily assailed, easily toppled. Within this insubstantial fortress an old woman stands by the door,

guarding its entrance. She does not realize that her desperate yearning has called us, invited us to trespass where no one else hardly ever enters. After checking the locks for the fifteenth time, she heads into the kitchen. Her daughter and two sons are coming for a visit, and she wants to prepare their favorite dessert, baked apples with homemade whipped cream. They rarely visit anymore now that their own children have grown up, so this is a special occasion for her. Reaching for a serrated knife, she makes a circular incision in the center of each apple, removing the core, sprinkling cinnamon and sugar in the hole, then placing the pan of apples in the oven.

Her task completed, she goes into the bathroom, where she starts running water for her bath. Slowly, with a grimace of pain, she removes her clothes and glances at herself in the mirror. Her breasts, once firm and enticingly full, cower in flaccid disgrace. Purple-red knots contort her prickly legs, and her womb, having birthed three children, sags with thankless abandonment. The face in the mirror is laughing, its nearly toothless mouth a hollow, oozing wound of jeering despair. It is like a picture she saw once in a museum, a painting of a woman named Ida by the artist Ivan Albright. Horrified yet fascinated, she remembered that painting all these years, and it had come back to visit her, seeming to invade her own flesh as she looked into the mirror. The mirror woman is joined by a white-haired male counterpart, hunched over and emaciated, the Scary Man from her childhood dreams. “You are old, Madame Marian,” the two cronies sneer, voices in unison, as they point at her with clawed fingers while parodying a poem by Lewis Carroll, “and your hair has become very white. And yet you incessantly stare at your face. Do you think at your age, it is right?”

This nursery rhyme, like the painting, reminds her of all the years she has lived, all the things she wanted to do but never thought she had the time to attempt. There had been too much to take care of with her husband and her

children, but then her husband died, her children grew up, and it was too late to worry about what might have been.

In the oven, the apples sag, wrinkled, smothering in hot, sugary juices, their cinnamon immolation scenting the house with memories of better times—holiday gatherings, Sunday dinners with friends and family, the quaint little Norman Rockwell moments she wished she could somehow gather up, like fossil-etched blocks of her protective past to shield her from the terrifying darkness that swallowed her up, taking her husband and all her joy with it. She wished she could immerse herself in these visions of long ago and never have to resurface.

Breathing in the comfortingly cloying scent of the baked apples, she steps into the bathtub. As she slowly sinks into the warm water, she feels as if she is being carried, lifted over a threshold to a realm of sensuality and passion. The water caresses her thighs, massages her breasts. It is her lover, her husband, and this is her wedding night.

She eases into its embrace, letting it cover her face. No longer does she want to endure the condescending smirks of her children as they stop by for one of their rare, short, dutiful visits. No more does she want to listen to their pleas for her to give up the apartment and let them move her into a nursing home. “Stubborn,” they called her as she shut off her hearing aid, trying to block out their soft, placating pleas, but it was they who were “stubborn.” They refused to see that she could not possibly leave her apartment. For fifty years it had been hers, containing her life and almost everything that mattered to her. Each object in this house had a memory attached to it, an impression, a feeling, a seedling spirit connecting it with her and the person she had always been. Each was a strand of her life, a string tethering her to consciousness; each helped her remember who she is. Without these strings there would be nothing to keep her from being

swept away by the too-fast momentum of seconds becoming days becoming years.

She ignores the ringing of the oven timer, just one more reminder of stolen moments. Let the apples burn, their peels shriveled, their flesh bursting with blackened sugar. Let her children come and find her here as she is, her skin withered and body bloated.

She takes a breath, gulping in the water, surrendering to its soothing, smothering absolution, as a blast of noise, like the trumpets of Heaven, reverberates in liquid haloes around her submerged head.

Spitz shrieks, his voice raspy yet strident, as he declares an end to a somber old soul:

**Lonely, loveless she lies
The mirror reflects her world-weary eyes
No more jiltings, no more cries.**

His screech, defiant against flesh and time, echoes throughout the nightclub, rattling against the building next door, home of our dreamer, as we exit.

Invited by the dream, we approach the threshold of the ramshackle grey-brick apartment building. Since there are no open windows or doors, we must become like mist in order to penetrate the physical barriers. My Awakener caresses my hair, his fingertips making me quiver as if I were prickled with electric threads, little jolts of lightning turning my bones into droplets of sizzling steam. I am dissolving into a bubble of vapor, my consciousness a prism within that tiny bubble. My Awakener floats by my side, a humid orb of liquid light. Together, we filter through a crack of the heavy wooden outside door and then through a wider, splintered crack in the woman's apartment door. Once we are inside the stuffy, cramped apartment, my Awakener's orb rubs against mine. I tingle, feeling the stir of hidden nerves, a pulsation of desire invoking form. The friction causes our vapor bubbles to

burst, and we spill out upon the threshold in our pseudo-human forms.

Magazines and newspapers lurch in teetering piles on each side of the doorway and against the walls. Some are bundled with rubber bands or twine, some breaking free from their eroding constraints spew onto the floor. One stack of yellowing newspapers leans against a fingerprint-smearred glass case filled with porcelain figurines—smiling green-capped elf, pink pig Cupid, slyly leering Siamese cat milk pitcher, and other familiar thrift shop favorites. Another stack huddles between the glass case and a mahogany bookshelf containing a dog-eared hardcover collection of children’s nursery rhymes, a spiral-bound Betty Crocker cookbook, and numerous mildewed paperbacks. On top of the bookshelf, overseeing the chaotic archives, a grinning crew-cut young man and his shyly adoring bride stare, glaze-eyed, from a silver-framed black and white photo. Their youthful glances, frozen in a moment of joy and hope, now seem infused with a subtle desperation, as if the newlyweds, looking upon the mementoes of their shared life, cling all the more tightly to each other amidst the flood of years.

Walking past the photo couple’s smirking scrutiny, we make our way towards the bedroom, our path impeded by rustling pages of loose newspaper and crunching slivers of glass. The slivers lead us to their source—a shattered snow globe. Flakes of “snow” sift out like crystallized sugar upon the dark green linoleum. While a portion of the globe hovers on the edge of a dresser table beside the bed, the remainder lies in sharp, glistening fragments upon the floor and pillow. One small wedge of glass shimmers from within the dreamer’s unkempt white hair. The old woman stares at us, her faded green eyes hopeful.

“Take me to my Danny, my husband,” she pleads. “I know this is a sign.” She holds up a piece of the snow globe, a thin spear of glass impaling a red-suited caroler as his fellows look on, open-mouthed to the now-silent

strains of a Noel serenade. “He gave this to me our first Christmas together. It has never broken all of these years, but now, see, it is my Danny calling to me.”

A blast of sound from Spitz’s guitar rattles against the walls of the old woman’s apartment, causing the dresser table to shake and the hovering piece of remaining snow globe to fall. Amidst the “snow” and glass covered debris a tiny steeple-topped church lies on the floor, a shimmering sliver piercing its roof like a ray of heavenly light.

The old woman cries, her voice a wail of timeless grief, as Spitz lets loose a climactic guttural scream. “Please, please,” she sobs. “Take me to Danny.”

My Awakener stands beside the bed, gently touching the woman’s white hair. He caresses her face, her wrinkles the velvety creases of a woman who, despite her advanced years, had kept her love and essential innocence intact. She had not let herself grow hard, callous, unfeeling, and her skin, though amply covered with lines and folds, seemed to reflect some of that softness within her soul. The face she had seen in the mirror of her dream was a monstrous, mocking distortion of her true appearance. Her dream, however, did not lie about her deepest yearning. She longed to join her husband. The shattering of her snow globe was like a crushing of her body, a release.

She closes her eyes, and my Awakener places a pillow over her face. With a tremulous sigh, she breathes in her last gasp of air, quivers for a few moments, and lies still. While her pulse is still beating, we drink in her memories, the moments that define her—white and red roses in her hands, fingers entwined with her husband’s in a white church, red-suited children sledding down prism-sparkling hills of white powder.

“Good night,” my Awakener whispers and kisses her serenely smiling lips, snow globe fragments crunching under his boots as he walks away from her bedside.

***Addict-eyed,
I follow the lure
Desire's cure.
Obsess me
Possess me.***

When we re-enter the nightclub, squeezing in up front by the stage, Spitz is performing his new song, "Addict Eyed Lover." The narcoleptic thrall of the beat and the sluggishly perverse twang of the guitar emphasize the downward lure, love's fatal fix.

As if invoked by that song, two spirits—a shirtless man, tall, skinny with dark spiked hair, and a blonde woman with garish red lips—are bickering. Unseen by the crowd, they continue their angry conversation. Their voices crackle like dry leaves shuffled by an autumn wind, the sound too faint to be perceived by human ears.

"Sid," the woman yelps, her whiny, nasal voice stretching out the name in a multi-syllabic plaint. "Where's our blaze of glory? You promised me a blaze of glory, you asshole!"

"Shut the fuck up, Nancy!" Sid snarls in a coarse British accent.

Sid and Nancy wrangle, blood streaming from picked-open scabs. The scars coalesce and ooze again.

Within the low rumble of discontent, I hear, piercing as a siren's alarm, the screech of a final scream, the blast of cold metal mortality piercing a brittle junkie-jaded armor. I hear the teakettle whistle of death at night, the smothered gasp of dreams cut short. I smell the blood staining the knife, the blood traveling up the needle's dropper, the blood offering sweet exit from the traffic-jammed demands of the body and the jumbled switchboard messages of the mind.

"We see them as if they exist in our imagination, as if they were in a movie version of themselves," my Awakener whispers while Spitz and his band continue playing the

new song. “They, like us, are mythic in a sense. But they cannot escape the interpretations projected upon them. They lack our free will, our ability to sustain physical form and consciously feed on those who summon us. In comparison to us, they are kind of like amoebas. If they suck up enough energy, they show themselves, but they have no volition, no real consciousness.”

Sid and Nancy linger in the background, but we have lost interest in their rather redundant antics. We turn our attention back to Spitz, who has suddenly launched into an impromptu rant, chanting the words “Take me, take me, take me,” while his band flailingly follows. The tempo slows to a heavy, hypnotic dirge, the drumbeats becoming louder and hollower.

Take me. Take me . . .
Take me where the dream ends
Where Kali rends.
There’s one drop left
One moment of bliss
One suicidal penetration
One self-erasing kiss.

Staring at my Awakener, Spitz purses his lips as if he were kissing someone, and his pelvis rubs against the microphone stand. Then, with a sudden staccato guitar blast, he collapses onto the floor, his hands jerking at his groin. “Ssssss,” he croons, slithering across the floor, and the stage lights darken to a crescendo of encore-demanding howls.

Concealed by the darkness, Spitz leans over from the stage and, pulling a piece of paper from his pants pocket, hands it to me. “Later,” he whispers. “Hope to see you both there.”

Not waiting to see if there are encores, my Awakener and I make our way through the crowd and walk out the door. Underneath a streetlight I pause to read the note

announcing Spitz's CD release party at his room in the Chelsea Hotel. "Come celebrate the launch of Spitz Nevus' 'Addict-eyed Lover,'" the note urges. "Follow the lure, desire's cure."

Darkness shimmies out beneath the headlight-illuminated crevices of ownerless buildings left to fester with rodent droppings and vagabond vomit. A siren screeches in demented triumph as another blood-soaked passenger is delivered unto the ambulance's reckless protection. From within the club I hear the roars and yelps of the insatiable crowd still demanding more. Spitz has not yet decided whether or not to appease them. Keep them waiting. Keep them hungry.

The hot July night sizzles with suicidal fervor, calling to foam-slobbering dogs in estrus trail pursuit. Seize it, savor it, remember it. Life energy is at its most intense now, the sweat slithering down scantily clothed thighs of newly-fertile adolescent girls, the siren scent of ovum musk.

As my Awakener and I walk around amidst the night-time revelers at a street festival, I breathe in that heady aroma of arousal, picking out its lure from the competing odors of smoke, grilled meat, and sweet, greasy oil. The people walk by in their garish summer clothes, celebrating flesh and hunger, life and lust. Unseen, except by us, are the fog-grey shadows of the dead trailing their descendants, the perpetuators of their legacy. They resemble smoke or vapor, these memento mori wisps pervading the merriment with bittersweet yearning. Amongst the sizzling sausages and greasy, bloated zeppoles, a pig's head stares with seared-black eyes at the gluttonous crowd. In a nearby store window, a barren neon light sputters cold and blue. Cacti, grimly thorned, guard the empty shop that used to belong to a florist. The dead and the soon-to-be dead hope for a resurrection, while the living, as well as us undead, cling to the ever-elusive present.

At this moment we were only observers, having fed a few hours earlier. Our host, an emaciated middle-aged man bleeding to death in an alley, put up no fight as we drank from his ebbing veins. His dreams, of a young sister with honey-blonde hair and tinsel-glittering braces on her teeth, were blurry and brief, as if he were in a rush to free his joyless, leaking body. He barely noticed our presence, merely stroking my hair and murmuring "Suzie," probably the name of his sister. The kill, like the victim, was uninspiring. Every drop of vital essence seemed used up, stale, tasting of sodden leaves and musty potatoes. I felt nauseated, depressed, disillusioned even with my new life.

An old man at the fair stands behind a counter serving gelato. His cataract-coated eyes seem to be looking past the crowd, past this location and present time, to a city long ago in Italy. Although his thoughts are in Italian and, therefore, incomprehensible to me, I see the visions of the city he remembers—tall white buildings with red-tiled roofs, narrow cobblestone streets, skinny boys on bicycles, stout women carrying baskets of produce—classic scenes, as if from a Fellini movie, but to this man, they are real and ever-present. They are essential to him. Without them, he would lose his identity, be no one, nothing.

I know now why legends say that vampires must always carry around with them a bit of their native soil. Although this is not true in a literal sense, it has a metaphorical truth, for without that symbolic particle of dirt containing our origins, that reminder of our past, we will eventually wither and die, overcome by the continual assault of new blood and technological advances. We need our umbilical connection to our history in order to remain whole amidst the rapidly encroaching otherness. Humans, like us immortals, need that sustaining connection with their past also, hence their preoccupation with holidays and seasonal celebrations, such as this.

Seeing that old man and the ubiquitous signs of time's passage, I lose whatever interest I had in the fair. I need to be alone with my Awakener, nestled in the darkened haven of our hotel room.

Once snugly inside our room, my Awakener browses through his small stash of DVDs. Since we have limited space, he has only brought his favorite films with him. Looking over his collection (*Requiem for a Dream*, *Sid and Nancy*, *Naked Lunch*, etc.) he selects two vampire films we both like—*The Hunger* and *The Addiction*. We begin with *The Hunger*.

The opening music video-style sequence of this film powerfully introduces the contrast between a vampire's fierce animality and its seductive, almost ethereal, elegance as scenes featuring the beautiful, genteel undead couple Miriam and John (portrayed by Catherine Deneuve and David Bowie) are juxtaposed with imagery of monkeys fighting in a cage. Miriam and John, sunglass-shielded, scan the cramped, crowded dance floor of a raucous nightclub, seeking their prey while Bauhaus' Peter Murphy, caged like the monkeys, performs his Goth classic "Bela Lugosi's Dead." His long, graceful hands grasp the cage bars, the song's sinuously repeated bass line and pounding, fibrillating drums evoking the mood of imprisoning dread. Selecting an attractive punkish young couple, Miriam and John take them back to a luxurious Manhattan apartment. As Miriam and John gently kiss the young man and woman they have brought home, the scene shifts to the caged monkeys, fangs bared, tearing at each other's flesh. The scene culminates with Miriam's ankh dagger plunging into the male and female victims, throats slashed, and a caged monkey being torn apart, bloody sinews throbbing. Like the aftermath of a murderous orgy, the next scene is deadly calm. The apartment, as white and solemnly majestic as a marble mortuary, is bathed in light, white curtains billowing as soft, melancholy classical music plays in the background. Tenderly, John and Miriam caress each other in the shower, while John murmurs the words "Forever. Forever and ever," wistfully, nostalgically.

The film, losing momentum after this opening sequence, then begins to show the connection between the caged monkeys and the two elegant vampires. Apparently, the monkeys' sudden vicious rage is triggered by insomnia, which, in turn, leads to rapid aging, dementia, and death. These symptoms eerily correlate with those of Miriam's doomed lovers—inability to sleep, followed by accelerated aging as well as physical and mental

deterioration. Miriam, unlike the traditional vampires of lore, cannot bestow the immortality she alone possesses. She can only give a shoddy semblance of it—a few centuries of youthful beauty as a blood-drinking murderer—then a sudden, irreversible decline into a state of perpetual putrefaction, the mind, still sentient but trapped in a rotting, entombed body that can never die. This ultimate horror—the mind locked inside a decomposing body—is a theme underlying many horror films, but here it is evoked in all its gruesome yet poignantly sad implications. Forever denied sleep and oblivion, Miriam’s ex-lovers remain in their sealed coffins, cloistered as if in a living dead dormitory, within Miriam’s light-filled attic. She has promised them an eternity of youthful delight but given them a hell as tortuous as it is timeless. Yet monstrous as her actions are, Miriam is a strangely sympathetic heroine. She truly loves the male and female partners she has unwisely, unethically selected to keep her company during their limited counterfeit “immortality.” Doomed to an eternity they cannot share, she lies to her lovers, gives them a beautiful, romantic fairytale fiction she is unable to make true. She watches as John, like all the rest of her loved ones, eventually turns old and decrepit, fiercely craving the blood that can no longer sustain his youth and beauty. Cradling him in her arms in a scene reminiscent of a Pieta, she kisses him “goodbye,” easing him gently into the casket that will be his place of eternal unrest. Up in her attic, the dead lie, flesh peeling, minds endlessly spinning in futile desperation, as white doves, like angels, look down on them with impotent pity.

Unlike the pastel-tinted grisliness of *The Hunger*, *The Addiction* presents its interpretation of the vampire myth in gritty, raw-edged, film noir black and white. Although it also takes place in New York City, its Manhattan is far removed from the upscale neoclassical luxuriousness of Miriam’s oasis. The heroine of *The Addiction*, Kathleen

(portrayed by Lili Taylor) is thrust into her undead existence one night when she is bitten by a female vampire in a subway tunnel. After being taken to the hospital and treated for her wounds, Kathleen begins developing the thirst for blood. Unable to eat or sleep because of her incessant craving, she attacks a homeless man, whom she stabs with a needle, and then injects herself with his blood. Swooning with euphoria as she plunges the needle into her arm, she realizes that she is trapped by her addiction to blood. She needs the fix and will do anything to attain it, even attacking her philosophy instructor and her best friend. Since she is a philosophy student working on her graduate degree, she struggles to find philosophical meaning in her addiction, relating it to her thesis on the nature of original sin, predestination, and complicity in evil. According to Kathleen, she, as well as the other victims, did not actively resist their victimization but merely submitted; therefore, they are complicit in the curse they, in turn, end up transmitting to others. She realizes that the addiction is self-perpetuating. It is an escape from one's "hunger" and yearning, as well as an escape from the truth of one's own addiction. This escape, ironically, is an imprisonment. Eventually, while stalking what she thinks is a potential victim, she is abducted by her prey, who is actually a very ancient vampire (played by Christopher Walken). Stoically, citing the Tibetan sages, this ancient one, Peina, informs Kathleen that he has managed to survive for centuries by learning how to control his cravings; no longer enslaved to them, he can choose when to feed. He forces her to confront her addiction by starving her and draining her blood until she is reduced to trying to slash her wrists for a few drops of blood; then he releases her to face her downward spiral of addiction to its disastrous, mayhem-filled conclusion.

The film's pessimistic philosophical emphasis, starkly haunting cinematography, and absence of supernatural

clichés make it unique in vampire-themed cinema. As I ponder *The Addiction's* grim message and the gruesome interpretation of immortality offered in *The Hunger*, I worry about the secrets not yet told to me by my Awakener. What is this metaphorical clod of native soil that we must carry with us, like a curse and a fix, to keep us as we are? How do we survive the avalanche of years, the piles of corpses, the rotting residue of nightmares?

As I try to sleep, I hear Spitz downstairs, practicing again his new song.

***Afraid of the time,
Afraid of the words which bombard my mind,
I pack my thoughts into tight little boxes
And add more bricks
To build a wall
Which traps me in
So I cannot escape.***

He stops and then starts pacing, nervous perhaps because of his upcoming party. He is throwing something against a wall, wanting to break through a barrier, wanting to escape what cannot be evaded.

Lye-soaked olives glisten upon silver trays, red pimento eyes bulging from jaundiced green sockets, while lead-sweet laughter peals from flaking walls. The guests, nibbling at delicacies, exchange insincere greetings of affection. In greed and gluttony they swoop down upon the artfully designed hors-d'oeuvres, gobbling the foie gras, caviar and escargot canapés. So expensive and prestigious are the fancy confections; so clever and witty are the malice alibis. The kisses slip off Spitz's cheek like Vaseline, leaving greasy slime. Famished endearments and cloying embraces trickle into the brimming punchbowl, champagne and Chambord bubbling together red and clear in a mirror of bloody ambition.

My Awakener and I, though invited to the party, remain invisible observers. Needless interaction with mortals, particularly of the shallow but pretentious variety, saps our energy.

"I just adore your new songs," a tipsy white-haired woman with a scarab brooch gushes as she clutches Spitz's veiny hand within her gelatinous grip. The foie gras stains her lips a fecal brown, and her breath reeks of cirrhotic decay.

"You are what you eat," I think to myself, imagining all the tortured geese whose livers were forcibly fattened to produce the delicacy adorning her dainty canapé.

A paunchy middle-aged man in a tweed suit hovers a short distance away, as if getting up his nerve to approach Spitz. From his mouth, a whitish string of spittle dangles, like the "love dart" of a snail. Beads of sweat trickle from his greasy forehead, and the swampy odor of mollusks pervades his corpulence.

Nearby an elderly socialite in a silver dress waits to address the guest of honor. Her minnowy eyes dart beneath dark-rimmed glasses as she munches on a caviar-spread water cracker. A faint scent of aquariums engulfs her.

The more I watch the people gathered around me, the more they remind me of the unappetizing substances they consume. Sickened by the sight and smell of them, I wander around the room, trying to make contact with the ghostly residents who lurk unseen within the hotel's walls.

Dylan Thomas, William Burroughs, and Janis Joplin, among others, all wrestled demons at the Chelsea, pinning them down and ensnaring them onto manuscripts and recordings, battling tantalizing new phantoms night after night. I sense the residue of their labor pains, the long, agonized gestation and the sharp, searing separation, as thought, taking form, is severed from its host.

This residue remains, casting a sarcastically gloomy pall only my Awakener and I seem to notice. Spitz seems to be aware of it also, but he is so busy with his guests that he is blocking its presence, for now, anyway. Soon it will be overwhelming, and he will not be able to deny it. Like our hunger, it will manifest, possess, transfigure.

Spitz is getting restless, irritable. The bond we shared as performers with kindred attitudes and beliefs still unites us despite my transformation. His mind reaches out to me in spidery spasms, tentative jolts seeking resonance along invisible webs. "Sycophants," he is thinking as he stares in disappointment at the people around him. They were not the kind of guests he had expected or wanted. Maybe the kind he wanted was already dead.

Spitz, after all, idolized the dead, especially those who had once lived or spent time at the Chelsea. He had hoped to find a similar intensity of artistic desperation amongst the living, but so far had only seen traces of it in a few of his fellow musicians and other friends.

Spitz strays away from his guests, who remain gobbling and chattering, as contented and oblivious as the bloated cartoon insects in a Raid commercial. They don't know they are in the presence of death and could very well become the next course if my Awakener and I decide we

don't want to wait for a dream summons to begin our killing spree.

I follow Spitz, seeing what he sees, perceiving fragments of his thoughts and impressions. As he walks down the corridors of the hotel, Spitz senses the presences of those who have abandoned their confining flesh for the freedom to wander and infest. A door opens, and two arguing spirits walk out into the hall. They are filmy, holographic, but as their shapes gradually grow more distinct, I recognize them.

"Sid, you promised!" Nancy squalls, her red-lipped mouth twisted in a surly pout.

"I told you to shut the fuck up!" Sid mutters, apparently tired of rehashing the same argument that he and Nancy had at the club. "Just go back to sleep." Sighing, he steps back into the room, pulling Nancy along with him, and shuts the door.

Although stunned by the sight of these famous ghosts, Spitz is much more intrigued than frightened. He opens the unlocked door and steps inside the room which, except for the spirits, is currently unoccupied.

Sid and Nancy lie in bed, still quarreling. Their eyes are glazed, their voices a slow-motion whine. Roaches roam sluggishly amidst the discarded pizza boxed, congealed grease sticking to their antennae and legs as they probe their way through the fast food refuse.

"Where's our blaze of glory?" Nancy whines, tearing at her tattered nightshirt. "You promised me that. You owe me."

"I don't know. I don't know," Sid mutters, grabbing the mustard-stained sheets and turning his back to her. A few minutes later it is quiet, and the spirits appear to be asleep.

As they sleep, another presence, shadowy, unidentifiable, enters the room. The shadow covers the bed, like a theatre curtain closing. The whole room is

plunged into darkness, the suspension of activity, light, and substance.

Gradually, the darkness fades, and we can see a bit of grey light, like that from a TV screen. Nancy stirs, moaning slightly. From her head a humid mist emerges, a dream forming, the last dream she ever had. As if watching an old black and white film reel projecting images in a smoky theatre, I see the dream figures spill out into the mist. She is dreaming of Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd. Elmer is stuttering, brandishing his gun, and she is running with Bugs towards a steep cliff.

Across the sheets a reddish-black stain crawls. Awakened by the oozing discomfort, Nancy opens her eyes, and the dream figures dissolve. She stands in front of the mirror, the glaring neon light turning her sleep-puffy flesh a greyish-green. She feels a syrupy wetness, slippery as mayonnaise, seeping down her legs and stares in disbelief at her nightshirt's deepening stain, which spreads, like a self-satisfied smile of glory and release, across her stomach. The blood-lipped, belly-convulsive laugh echoes within her intestines, and its smile continues to grow.

Her ears are buzzing, as if she is at a great height. The floor is growing further away. "This is just part of the dream," she tells herself. "I'm still on the cliff with Bugs. Don't look down," "she remembers. It's only when you look down that you get dizzy and fall. But the sickly glare of the light hurts her eyes, and she glances down at the red smile which continues to drip onto the black and white tiles. A pool is forming, seeping between her toes. She sees the floor lunging towards her and feels the cold linoleum crash into her skull as she collapses, no longer dreaming, no longer living.

With Nancy's rerun demise concluded, we walk out of the room. Sid is still sleeping, the slippery sheets encasing him, a soggy pupa waiting to be transformed. The roaches cling to rafts of cardboard as the dripping blood engulfs them. One, however, dares escape, following us out the

door and scurrying as fast as its grease-encrusted legs will take it away from the deluge.

Up and down the corridors Spitz roams, from floor to floor. Doors open and close, people laughing, moaning, crying, gasping. Some are spirits, some are flesh, but after awhile everything begins to look equally unreal.

From one room is a loud clicking of typewriter keys and a whirring of tape recorder reels, ghostly vestiges of outdated technology. Attached to the door with a sort of viscous goo and gleaming neon green is some sort of alien chrysalid on the verge of metamorphosis. It is rattling within its enveloping sac, resonating in rhythm to the clicking typewriter keys. Fascinated by this creature and the noises within the room, Spitz opens the door.

Inside the room, illuminated by a similar neon green light, William Burroughs sits at the typewriter. His thin, hollow-cheeked face is grim but ascetically serene. Faded black letters strike the yellowing paper, the scent of ink, oil and resin, evoking impressions of ancient kingdoms where incestuous siblings drink centipede poisons and mate with mutant finesse. On the off-white walls grey-blue mold, wet as soap scum, proliferates. When I blink my eyes, I seem to perceive its microscopically measurable movement. Like bacteria in a wound, it multiplies, incrementally extending its domain. Gazing at the words on the page, Burroughs scrutinizes his evolving creation. He scowls, tearing out the page, another aborted rough draft offspring spawned and discarded. Syringe-filled salvation awaits him, but first there is work to complete, viral atavisms to resurrect. He pauses, listening to faint, indistinct sounds on the tape recorder, tiny hums and whispers, low-pitched drones and muffled hisses. They are like the voices of dreams my Awakener and I hear every night, but these have been captured on tape, looping back and recombining in playback sorcery.

One of the voices, buzzing like a hungry mosquito, breaks free from its audio prison. Its buzzing surrounds

Spitz, slipping through his ears and invading his tympanic canal. Spitz groans and clutches his head. He cannot escape the parasite that chose him as the host. In a panic, he closes the door to the room, leaving Burroughs to calmly type away as the voices chatter and sigh, warding off intruders.

Spitz staggers away from the door, the voice whispering with insistent demands. "Go ahead," it urges. "Don't be afraid. You know you always wanted to be the next so-called 'rock and roll suicide.' Bowie just sang about it, but Sid succeeded in doing it. You're not getting any younger, and you're not getting the recognition you deserve. Hardly anyone is even listening to rock music anymore, at least not the kind you're playing, and certainly not the kind your heroes created. It's all just shitty pop and hip hop these days. Or that *American Idol* sell-out crap."

The longer the voice rants, the more familiar it sounds to Spitz. It's that voice he called the Bony Bogeyman, the one who had tormented him, off and on, ever since childhood. He hadn't heard it in awhile, not since he had kicked his heroin habit, but now it had decided to latch onto him again.

The voice begins shrieking. With every shrill yet hoarse outburst, it sends tremors through Spitz's head, as if a dentist were drilling with electric ice picks. If only he could stop the pain and the noise, but there's only one way he knows that might work. Find the number, make the call, then wait for the fix.

Reeling dizzily, he collapses in the middle of the corridor, vomiting up a black-green pool of caviar and bile.

There lies his future, all pretense and disgust. There is nothing for him now in this gross, ridiculous game he no longer wants to play. He slowly rises to a crouch and lurches towards the stairs, hanging onto the rail as if it were the only thing preventing him from falling into a ceaselessly spinning abyss.

Back at the hotel room with my Awakener, I hear Spitz throwing things against the wall again while singing a loud, off-key lament:

***I close the gaps
As stack by stack
I layer my retreat.
I scramble for mortar
To pack into cracks
And add more bricks
To strengthen the wall
Which traps me in
So I cannot escape.
But once it is built
I cannot breathe.
My anger seethes.
The shell-tight shelter
Becomes my grave.
I claw and flail
Within my jail.
But I cannot escape
Never escape
The walls I build.***

The walls against which Spitz hurls his objects echo stoically. Placid, unresisting, they have withstood the violent outbursts of numerous room guests and are not about to be weakened by the futile frenzy of this puny musician. Eventually Spitz acknowledges his defeat. For a few moments his room is quiet. Then he speaks, as if in a conversation with someone I cannot hear, probably a person on the phone.

“Yes, you heard me right,” Spitz says, sighing. “Yes, same place. . . . Yes, I have the money. . . . In about an hour? . . . OK, see you then.”

His talking stops, and there is quiet again. Soon his sacrifice will begin, and we will be invited.

As my Awakener and I wait for the summons, we rewatch our favorite scenes from *The Hunger* and *The Addiction*. Like the addict vampires in those films, we feel the compulsive need to repeat and replay what has passed. No matter how many times the scenes are rewound, they are just as ephemeral as before. Always they will be superseded by other moments within the cinematic illusion. I see again the moldering yet sentient cadavers in Miriam's attic, cast off forever from their source of vitality, neither living nor dead, forever in a timeless, claustrophobic, insanity-inducing limbo. Considerably better off but still entrapped are Kathleen and the undead characters in *The Addiction*, who endlessly seek the fix that never completely appeases the ache.

These hauntingly bleak films paradoxically brighten my mood, temporarily taking my mind off from the upcoming martyrdom of my friend, but the gloom returns when, midway through one of our favorite scenes, we hear a knock on Spitz's door. Seconds later Spitz's voice instructs the visitor to leave the package and take the money. The visitor mutters "bye," and the door closes.

Once the needle enters, the dream will begin to form. I listen for the cues, the sounds of sleep burrowing cozy holes into his awareness.

Moments linger, never to be regained or undone. I wonder if Spitz has changed his mind. Maybe he has ignored that voice and resisted the fate offered to him. Dare I hope? No, do I hope? If he resists, then what will become of my Awakener's plan and our sacrificial feast? What will become of Spitz's deepest desire? He can suppress that desire for years, but it will never go away. The voice that escaped into Spitz's head was just a messenger, a revenant fragment assuming a familiar voice to deliver that familiar "what if" temptation. Sooner or later Spitz would succumb.

Sooner, it is to be. In a few more minutes I hear the gentle whirring of his slowing thoughts as he surrenders all resistance. The dreams are coming, and we will be there with him.

The whirring sounds grow louder, more dissonant as Spitz steps over the threshold of a nightmare. Its frenetic urgency summons us, and we enter the dream with Spitz.

My Awakener and I stand at the back of a line, waiting with Spitz and hundreds of others who have gathered in Times Square for the chance to win an audition at the American Reality Television and Unexpected Demise (ARTAUD) show. Although no one there seems to know what the ARTAUD show is about, the opportunity to be on television with theatre, film, and TV stars and perhaps become celebrities themselves intoxicates the crowd with a writhing delirium similar to accounts of the possessed nuns at Loudon. They hope to be seen, copied, cloned, assimilating through counterfeit immortality a semblance of significance.

Spitz frowns, picking at a scab at his neck. "What am I doing here?" he asks himself, but he seems unable to leave. Hemmed in by all of the others, he can barely move or breathe. With disgust he stares at the gaudy pink and green poster advertising the event. "Be who you were meant to be!" the poster proclaims in circus-style font. "Find your inner celebrity." Smiling photos of Kelly Clarkson, Scotty McCreery and other currently popular reality show musicians adorn the borders, coyly inviting the guests to join them in the quest for fame. Everything Spitz most detests about the contemporary music scene is represented in that invitation and its premise that artistic talent can be manufactured, marketed, consumed, yet here he is, an unwilling participant.

Next to Spitz, a venerable white-haired matron with a yellow print purse and matching dress squirms with anticipation. "Scotty McCreery!" she screams. "I want to see Scotty!" Nearby, a somewhat older, much frailer woman grasps her cane, supporting herself amidst the swaying excitement afflicting the crowd. She reels back and forth, straddling the cane, as she seems to soar from her body, upswept by the hysteria. Umber-tan college boys

sneer at the old woman with the cane. They pump their fists and laugh, apparently happy to be the young and cartoonish stereotypes inhabiting Spitz's dream. The dreamer, however, remains aloof from his imaginary creations. They are background walk-on characters, products of his disdain. Sullen, nervous, yet strangely intrigued by the frenzy engulfing him, Spitz continues picking at his scab, digging deeper and deeper. He unearths his treasure, and as the first droplet of blood emerges, he is awarded the much-anticipated audition ticket.

Angry screeches and hateful sighs defile the moon-illuminated night as the final audition ticket is granted. Police sirens and ambulances soon echo in response. Hopes deflated, bodies bruised and tired, the unlucky throng retreats, some with defiance, some with tears.

Spitz and the forty other winners arrive at the audition center, a small gymnasium-type room with flimsy folding chairs and a red velvet-curtained stage. Onto the stage, Morbidy Graham (aka the Bony Bogeyman), hobbles, and with a flamboyant bow, addresses the meager audience as if he were speaking before a stadium of spectators.

"Welcome to tonight's ARTAUD audition," Morbidy announces in a sepulchral monotone as he waves his cane. "Who will win? Who will lose? Who will achieve fame? Who will kiss the dirt?"

The audience fidgets and applauds. Lured there by the opportunity to meet famous people and appear on a TV show, they know and care nothing about what the show or contest involves.

"You don't understand me," Morbidy continues. "I am to you as a wailing goat in a meadow of bleating sheep. You hear and comprehend only what fulfills your fantasy of happiness. You do not smell the danger."

The people smile and nod, hearing only what they wish had been said. Blah, blah, blah, ha ha. His words

are submerged in a drizzle of whispers. “Ah! Yes! Oh!” they gasp. Some stifle yawns or coughs. Some sigh. Some laugh. Giggle, giggle, choke, croak. They clear their throats. They sit and wait. They don’t even care that the iron door of the gymnasium is clamping shut, like a steel trap claiming its doomed prey. But this prey does not struggle or shriek. It is happily expectant. The show starring their favorite stars and themselves is about to begin, and nothing is more thrilling than that.

Spitz, however, knows his doom but cannot prevent it. The only thing he can do is to try and make his martyrdom meaningful. “Do it for the music,” he tells himself. Redeem it through your sacrifice.”

Waving his cane, Morbidy points it at a pudgy man, probably in his thirties, wearing a beige business suit with a pink polka dot tie. The man’s ash blond hair is combed to the side and lightly slicked with gel or sweat.

“You, there, Sir, will be our first contestant and potential star. Come here, please, Mr. . . .?”

“Symons,” the man answers in a scratchy voice.

“Yes, Symons, please step up here onto the stage and sit in that chair,” Morbidy directs.

With a taut smile, Symons goes up to the stage and settles his ample bulk onto the fragile aluminum folding chair.

“Now, then, Symons, please close your eyes as I wave my cane above you. There, that’s it,” he soothes, his cane poised over Symons’ head. “I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream,” he intones. “Ice cream and cake, bacon and eggs, fame and glory. What is one without the other? Only half a treat, leaving you hungry for more. Are you hungry, Symons?” he asks the man, whose eyes remain shut.

“Yes,” Symons answers, his voice slow, entranced by the silly but compelling stage banter.

“Good, that’s a very good start,” Morbidy says encouragingly, waving his cane, like a baton, in a circular

motion above Symons. “Ice cream and cake, bacon and eggs, fame and glory, let’s get on with this man’s story.”

His cane wavers, making a crackling hiss, like a bolt of lightning touching rain-soaked earth. Symons starts to sweat. Droplets of water trickle down his forehead. Tears stream from his eyes. Clear mucus oozes from his nose and spills, along with the sweat and tears, onto his beige jacket.

Symons is gasping, his breath coming in sputters and wheezes. His face and body are seeping, sizzling, liquefying. From beneath the chair a puddle is forming, frothy and yellow with buttery globs of melting fat.

Into this rancid pond of bodily fluids, Morbidy dips his long, white, elegant hands. He grabs one of the buttery globs, and patting Symons’ head with it, applies it like wet clay onto a partially-finished sculpture. He then scoops up more globs and begins applying them to Symons’ arms. The sculpture is nearing completion, and the emerging result looks very different from the man who had been invited onto the stage and first sat in the chair.

What had once been Symons’ face now resembles the death mask of a slaughtered pig. Pale pink, blue-tinged jowls quiver as Morbidy’s recycled creation snuffles with ebbing life. Dark eyes cloud as visions, unrecognized, dim. Arms, stumpy and fingerless, twitch to the erratic rhythm of a mindless, partnerless samba.

“Here’s your next *Dancing with the Stars* contestant,” Morbidy chuckles. “Or maybe he’s just a *Hell’s Kitchen* entrée. Who can tell the difference anyway? Either way, he’s a reality show star. Does anyone here want to share his dance? Is anyone here willing to achieve glory?”

Spitz, who had been watching all of this with dazed disinterest, focusing on his own secret agenda, raises his hand.

“You there, young man? Do you want your turn?” Morbidy asks, waving his cane.

“Yes,” Spitz replies in a grim, determined voice.

“Ah, yes, I think I recognize you,” Morbidity purrs, winking at Spitz. “Sorry, but I’ve forgotten the name, though. Hmm, it was another name that began with ‘S,’ if I recall.”

“Right,” Spitz scowls. “Spitz is my name. I remember you.”

“OK, then, Spitz, please step up here onto the stage and sit in that chair,” Morbidity again directs.

With a sneer of derision at his spectators, Spitz goes up to the stage. As he makes his way to the chair, however, it begins to change shape. Black scales rupture from formerly featureless aluminum, metal barnacles with pointed needle-barbed tips covering the seat and legs of the chair. Massive green wings, like those of a dragon, sprout from the chair’s back, enfolding Spitz in their grasp.

Embraced by the chair, Spitz screams as the needles pierce through his denim jeans. They penetrate the flesh of his thighs, his buttocks, his scrotum. The needles probe and puncture, seizing at arteries and veins.

“Now, then, Spitz, please close your eyes as I wave my cane above you,” Morbidity instructs, gently patting Spitz’s head. “There, that’s it,” he soothes while Spitz continues to howl in pain. “I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream,” he intones. “Ice cream and cake, bacon and eggs, fame and glory. What is one without the other? Only half a treat, leaving you hungry for more. Are you hungry, Spitz?” he asks.

“No!” Spitz shrieks.

“Is that the extent of your answer?” Morbidity chides. “Oh, well. Not the answer I would have preferred,” Morbidity says, waving his cane, like a baton, in a circular motion above Spitz, “but it will have to do. Ice cream and cake, bacon and eggs, fame and glory, let’s get on with this man’s story.” His incantation completed, Morbidity taps the wings of the chair.

The needles erupt, releasing a clear, warm, fragrant nectar-like fluid which slowly trickles into Spitz's vein. With each lethargic drip of the nectar, the agony of Spitz's bleeding wounds gradually subsides. He breathes in the scent of lilacs and lavender. His head, nestled in the wings, droops to one side as he closes his eyes. Purple flowers are everywhere, purple mist. "Purple haze," he murmurs with an ironic smile. "Take me now."

As if from a great height within the mist, he sees glimpses of the stage below and his peaceful, motionless body upon the chair. Passively, he watches as Morbidy turns to the audience, who gape with drop-jawed stupidity at this macabre spectacle. "How about you?" Morbidy shouts with his carnival barker zeal. "Do you want this opportunity? Do you still hunger for it? You, who have come for the celebrities— there are no celebrities here. You who have come for fame and glory—there is nothing, only dreams and hunger. So many dreams, so many kinds of hunger. The hunger never ends. It never dies. It just mutates, takes other forms. So what is it to be then? Should this dream continue?"

The crowd is silent. No one in the audience seems to care one way or the other anymore now that there are no more contests to win.

“I now declare this dream concluded,” Morbidy exclaims. Waving his cane in a vaudevillian salute, Morbidy dances into the flickering red curtains as Spitz awakens with a stifled gasp.

Spitz stares at me, trying to remember where he is. His pupils are tiny, about the size of a dotted “i,” and his breathing is very shallow.

Grasping his bluish-grey wrist, I check his pulse. It is weak, erratic.

Spitz struggles to speak, but the words sluggishly rebel. It’s too late for words anyway. Nothing can change what Spitz had wanted to happen. Whatever the catalyst—the hideously obnoxious people at his party, the vision of Nancy’s absurdly theatrical demise, the mosquito-like voice infesting his ears, the ambient playback sorcery of the hotel ghosts and memories, the nagging insistence of his addiction demanding to be obeyed, or our subtle yet essentially passive presence in the last few days of his life—the end result was destined to be this way, and we are merely here to fulfill what has already been set in motion.

“Dream other dreams, and better,” I whisper to him, echoing the solipsistic advice given at the chilling conclusion of Mark Twain’s “Mysterious Stranger.” “Just close your eyes and surrender to the ebbing of your blood, the slowing of your heart, the hushing of your brain.”

Limply, he clutches my hand, his fingers like cold strands of spaghetti.

“Goodbye, Spitz,” I murmur, kissing his forehead.

My Awakener moves closer. “Now,” he urges.

As if knowing what I am about to do, Spitz lets his head dangle to one side, exposing his throat. Gently, I move back his hair and press my lips to the slowly thudding artery.

Spitz groans once as my fangs penetrate his skin, but then he is silent, a nonresistant martyr welcoming his death.

I drink in his memories, sweet, sad, poignant revelations of the friend I wished I had known better. The collage of images from his past spins on a horseless carousel, all mirrors and glittering lights. I see a little boy, probably Spitz as a toddler, gazing at a fireplace, the flames shimmering red, orange, yellow. "Tigers!" he yells proudly, pointing at the blazing stripes of color. The grown-ups in the room, a young brunette woman in an ice-blue nightgown and a slightly older man in dark green pajamas, smile at him lovingly. "Yes, Son," the man replies. "Tiger, tiger burning bright. Be careful, though, the fire's hot. You can watch the pretty pictures, but don't get too close. That's my boy."

The little boy is older now, perhaps about eight, and he is playing an acoustic guitar. "Tiger, tiger," he sings as he strums a simple minor-key melody. "I see you in the flame. Tiger, tiger, I'll never be the same." He pouts and practices a grimace, admiring himself in the large bedroom mirror.

As he continues strumming the guitar, the melody and lyrics change. He is a teenager, sitting in his bedroom as he sings another song. "You stare at me as if you know. That hunger I cannot deny. I try to sleep. I try to eat. But I can't shake that yearning. It's in me too deep. One way glitters. One way shrouds. I seek a dark sky with iron-grey clouds. I seek the stars whose light confounds." His voice is low, solemn, expressive, lacking the raspy cynicism of later years.

The boy, now a young man, is in what appears to be a small, cluttered apartment. He lies on a dark grey couch, his sleeves rolled up, a syringe tossed on the floor beside a *Spin* magazine and a crumpled bag of potato chips. Near him a CD player emits a barely audible song featuring his voice, slightly deeper and much more

abrasive than it was in his teen years. “The light sears and burns, flames sizzling, then growing deadly cold,” he sings slowly, accompanied only by an acoustic guitar. “I fear growing old as that charred, blackened tree, limbs broken, branches empty. I’ll be the ash, the embers blazing bright until darkness reigns and we say ‘good night.’” From posters on the wall behind the couch, Jim Morrison and Kurt Cobain keep their watchful eyes on him as the light in the room fades.

There is a moment of darkness, and then a soft reddish speck of light appears, growing larger and brighter. It fills his dying field of vision, bleeding him out into a realm where we cannot enter.

What happens to him now I don’t know. Will the light change colors? Will it turn hotter or colder? Will he be given a choice, like that presented to my Awakener? Will he join Sid and Nancy and the other ghosts of the Chelsea Hotel? Or will he just be an ember simmering in limbo, waiting for another spark, another fiery transfiguring fix?

These futile speculations threaten to detract from the fiercely invigorating afterglow I always have when the newly seized blood, rescued from its dying host, surges with reckless abandon within my eagerly receptive veins.

“Not now,” my Awakener reminds me. “This is not the time for such thoughts. Savor this moment. You have given him what he wanted. Honor his blood by enjoying it, giving thanks for it.”

Taking my hand, my Awakener leads me to the door. I gaze at Spitz one last time, his face haggard but weirdly hopeful, and then close the door.

Back in our room, I close the curtains even though it is still night. A wild craving for darkness, the sepulchral shelter of a cave unlit, throbs within me. It is convulsive, primal, this sudden lust Spitz's death seems to have aroused.

My Awakener feels it also. I clutch his long dark hair and whisper his secret name like a mantra as his tongue circlingly entices moans of animal ecstasy.

Collapsing, panting, into each other's arms, we listen to the ghosts disturbed by our passion. Sid and Nancy bicker unintelligibly, hisses of "fuck" and "glory" sputtering like termites within the walls. William Burroughs mutters and types as whirring, droning captive voices guard his mildewed sanctuary.

Outside the hotel, a cat yowls, and a lonely woman whimpers. Sounds of hunger, desolation, and fear straggle amidst the gorged gaiety of Manhattan nightlife. Somewhere another loveless "Ida" looks grimly within the mirror, watching wrinkles usurp her sad, vanquished flesh. Somewhere "Dorian" screams as the portrait of his soul sprouts blue-grey fungus and thoughts of knives scrape away at his sanity.

I fall asleep, surrounded by these wails and whispers. In my dreams I envision Spitz as he will appear in the newspaper the next day. Never attaining celebrity status and never wanting it in life, he will briefly achieve it after death. His photo, sneering and triumphant, will mock those who stare upon it as his mythically sensationalistic demise provides the gory scandal they crave. I imagine his ironic laughter ringing through these walls. He has broken through them after all, escaped, and yet chooses to remain here, with us and his dead idols as we trespass through eternity.

**I hope you enjoyed Revenance. Keep reading for
an excerpt of [Toxicosis: Feral Rebirth book 2](#)**

Excerpt of Toxicosis: Feral Rebirth, Book 2

Serenade

I listen to the cats outside our window, the ancient sounds tingling inside me, stirring memories mammalian but not yet human. My ears pound, waves crashing, blood gurgling. I envy them, my fellow fanged cousins, wishing to share their wordless grace.

Ever since I was a child, I had wanted to be an animal, particularly a cat. Lying awake at night, I would imagine myself changing shape, prickles of bristled hair sprouting from my cheeks to form whiskers, upper lip narrowing and curling towards my nose in a perpetual feline rictus, teeth sharpening and stabbing the soft tissue inside my mouth. My fingers would claw into my pillow, tearing the cotton casing as I smelled the feather remains of some long-dead fattened fowl. Eyes closed, I would savor the phantom transfiguration, believing that the longer I remained in my self-curtained darkness, the stronger and more enduring the magic would become. Even at that young age, I hated being human, hated the schism dividing body and mind, sensory experience and consciousness. The human body in all its mutinous mortality continually humiliated the arrogant cerebral

despot assuming dominion, while the mind, censorious, subjugating, yearned to abandon its rebellious, untrustworthy servant.

Words, buzzing, whispering words intrude, prissy, gossipy narrators. I try to ignore them, but once they enter, these guests cannot be uninvited. Unlike us, they do not have to ask permission to infect. Through this veneer of words, I eavesdrop on the cats' primeval courtship, feeling, with language-blunted echoes, their sensations.

The song and musk entice her, low, rumbling snarls, scent dark and pulsing as her blood, making her haunches rise. She screams her song, high, yearning, trilling.

His teeth pierce her neck, his claws grab her hips, as something stabs her deep inside. She shrieks, a song of pain and aching, craving life.

Someone from the apartment next door bellows at our serenaders, demanding their silence. "Shut the fuck up, you damned cats!" the male voice roars, and his shout is followed soon after by a clinking of glass.

The cat duet pauses briefly but then resumes. Nothing can deter the frenzied impulse that is stronger than shouts or curses or even flung glass.

There is a final screech, guttural, tormented, triumphant, a release as sublime in its impaled ecstasy as St. Teresa's mystical rapture. The screech slowly grows fainter, disappearing with a

soft, melodic sigh, like the whisper of an angel bestowing benediction.

Her womb has been filled. Blessed with the fecundity of her feline forebears, the soon-to-be mother cat ceases her song. I turn away from the window, saddened by the silence as my mind, inundated with words, babbles ceaselessly.

Dream Performance

White wings, powdered like an 18th century wig, flutter by my motionless eyelids and then lift the moth's fragile, ethereal form towards the flickering fluorescent tube overhead. A sizzle and a fragrance of singed lace are all that remains of her glory-driven ascent.

I get up from the lumpy hotel bed and turn off the light, welcoming the last fleeting hour or so of darkness before the dawn brings torpor and paralyzing sleep. Unlike the moth, fluorescence holds no allure for me. Having temporarily sated my thirst and hunger, I banish thoughts of my sacrificial meal, surrendering to the sleep-foreshadowing visions that lurk in the corners of my sight, the dusky revenant shapes of memories transformed and surreally refashioned.

Sinking wearily into the scratchy, over-bleached sheets, I hear as if from an echoing theatre the song "Sweet Dreams" slowed to a funereal pace. The singer, neither Annie Lennox nor Marilyn Manson but some banshee-wailing vocalist hidden behind blood-red curtains, summons the ceremony to begin. Sluggishly, as if stirred from slumber by a chanteuse snake charmer, the curtains slither, parting to reveal a white screen.

A performance, part-movie, part stage show, begins with a melodramatic film documentary

featuring myself in a starring role. Bandages conceal most of my face and head except for narrow slits for my eyes and ears and a small portion of my mouth, making me resemble a mummy or the horrific gauze-wrapped patient, Simone Choule, in the movie *The Tenant*. My mouth, like Simone's, remains a dark void amidst the whiteness, a black hole of gruesome expressionistic horror, Munch's "The Scream" stifled by a surgical shroud. Tubes connect me to fluids of various sorts and machines monitoring vital functions. I watch myself in the film as I lie in a hospital bed within the theatre.

The red curtains close, blocking the film screen, and onto the stage my childhood nightmare creation Morbidy Graham appears, dressed as a magician. Removing a black top hat from his bone white hair, he places it on a red-clothed table, and, with limp, cyanotic fingers, reaches inside. From the velvet caverns of the hat, he retrieves a squirming, squealing white rabbit with amputated ears.

"There's more where he came from," Morbidy proclaims. His emaciated face, the color of chicken gristle, grimaces. "All the what-ifs, everything that can be imagined is within that boundless hat. Do you dare to reach inside?" Morbidy cups a hand to his ear, as if straining to hear an affirmative reply.

"What, no answer?" he taunts. "Cat got your tongue? or are you just a scaredy cat? No

matter. I'll be back, and the show will go on and on and on."

He then waves a silver wand and disappears.

The curtains rustle, slithering again like serpents, and the "Sweet Dreams" requiem version resumes. From the right side of the stage a thin, beautiful but somewhat eerie woman emerges, naked except for a diaphanous body-length scarf, a shimmering pearlescent belt and a matching necklace from which the small, whitish kernel-shaped forms of children's teeth, mine among them, glisten. Her lustrous black hair, long and twisted into seaweed strands, falls almost to the floor as she dances. The necklace clinks softly, accompanying the lullaby lamentation with the sound of faraway wind chimes, the Tooth Fairy's requiem for innocence lost, seduced away, never to be reclaimed.

Still dancing, she drifts back into the red curtain, cloaking her nakedness within its velvet softness, then disappearing within its billowing folds.

The song begins again, repeating like an automated recording on a "help desk" phone line when all the operators are busy. I watch the curtains billow slightly, as if they are breathing impatiently also, waiting for the show to continue.

Suddenly, just as I feel my vision darkening, my dream eyes closing behind the narrow-slitted, bandage-wrapped shrouds, the red

curtains are pulled back violently, and a glaring, snow-blinding, razor-sharp light sears my eyes. It is so bright that I cannot glimpse anything for a moment except the sight-shattering whiteness. Gradually, though, a shape breaks away from the annihilating albinic field—a tall, slender man with long, dark hair and eyes the color of a seductively engulfing sea, the one I now know as my Awakener.

Drawn into his gaze, I feel as if I am hovering on an oceanside precipice, ready to plunge into the wave-tossed abyss. The tubes connecting me to hospital-imprisoned existence have been severed, and the threads connecting me to my immobile body are being stretched, pulled by him ever closer to the edge. The threads dangle and fray, casting me unresistingly into the devouring depths. I feel the sharp, gouging rocks and the ravenous sucking of a whirlpool, taste the salt and brine that seeps into my throat.

I awaken to the sound of a gurgling drain, last night's bath water still resisting the clog-weakened suction. Beside me, my Awakener stirs restlessly.

The gurgling noises arouse his thirst. Last night's host, an emphysemic taxi driver craving one last smoke, had been uninspiring, the blood sawdust-dry, the dying dreams mere smoke-ringed delusions of nicotine banality.

From the room where my musician friend Spitz Nevus used to live, the new hotel guest,

having arrived back for the night, blasts his stereo. Accompanied by a nerve-deadening upbeat hip hop tempo, chipmunk-modulated vocals chirrup about booties, boobs, and bling with all the passion and sensuality of an embalmed sex slave. Spitz, if not already deceased, would have welcomed death rather than hear another moment of this abominable ditty.

I can feel the sad, defeated whoosh of departing spirits—the artists, muses, and dope-infused dreamers of the Chelsea Hotel. They are flying away in disgust, tattered spore-dusted wings carrying them towards another haven to infest. We, too, can stay here no longer.

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