

## I

**A ROOM IN THE HOTEL VENDIG**

Seagull Beach just might squat on the rusted launch pad of my memory, a point from which to blast off, trace a history; but—when I look at this photograph of a boy for whom hope still bristles, there in the goose flesh of a windy lost Cape Cod afternoon—I have to wonder if the eyes with which he mocks the camera have anything to do with my own. So many incarnations lie between mine and the boy's silent face, stark and ironic in the murky rotogravure of childhood. It could be he's blond. Flushed cheeks round and smooth with puppy fat, there is, in his eyes, a suggestion of the latent haggard biding his time. Impatient and shivering in the Atlantic wind, towhead ruffled and wet with that brackish gust, he stands arms-folded on a Cape Cod beach the likes of which never bore the confused footprints of Kennedy's tragic touch football. Even now, so many years away, retired to the Hotel Vendig of my decrepitude, I feel for this boy a chill spreading over those early years, the ones I'm urged to dub "The Cape Cod of My Youth." The things some people will suggest.

Evidence, I suppose, this faded snapshot fluttering in the shaky pinch of my forefinger and thumb; unsure, forgetful fingers that nowadays even have trouble getting the buttons right on my cardigan. Without trying, I find myself a geriatric frump: misbuttoned, untucked, disheveled. It doesn't matter. Nobody sees me on nights like this, sitting on the edge of my bed, puzzling out the familiar in a loose collection of old snaps, wondering if this evidence adds up to a me. Memory's steam shovel is what I wish I had, its relentless spoon scooping out the strata of my life, dumping its contaminated ore onto a conveyer belt of language that might shake loose the dross on its way to my personal machinery of refinement. If only the task of refining history from memory were as simple as bringing a pot of water to boil for my tea, as in the gutted aluminum percolator I use and just now starting to rock on the electric coil of my Pullman stove. The steam wisps not only from its

pour spout, but from the hole in its lid meant to receive a long-gone glass knob. More often the task of memory is like my cooking: difficult and sloppy. Sure, I have no problem opening a can of Great Northern beans, dumping them in a pot, heating them up. But I always loose a few beans, or whatever canned goodie, in that transfer from tin to pot. They'll sit there for days and dry up beneath the electric coil, as will the uneaten contents of the pot. Daunting, for me, is the task of washing the implements of respite. Much better to let them crust over than find myself moved to mystifying tears at the sink, hands limp in soapy water. Funny, what will send you into a tailspin. I don't even bother to rinse out the mug I use for my tea, so its inside is now a rich comforting brown.

Not unlike the deepest shades dusking the photograph of Seagull Beach. Or the leather sheath of mother's Brownie camera, the instrument with which this snap most likely was made, its two lenses dead eyes stacked vertical on the hand-held box. One lens was the viewfinder, I suppose, one the arbiter of the image passed back to the wide strip of film. What you saw, with that Brownie, did not exactly match what you got: the two views were impossible to reconcile. So many chopped off heads there were. Or feet. Mother got used to it, I suppose: none of us in the Seagull Beach portrait were victims of a motherly photographic amputation. Claire, the sister, stands to my right; Francis, the brother, to my left, his arm around my shoulder. Big Jack, the father, crouches down in front of us, smiling wearily at the camera. Say "cheese."

From the soft click of photographic exposure runs Jackie flailing, squealing with childish amok right into the surf. Knees pumping high, he tumbles head first into the slicing, cold breakers. He being too young to do so, sister and brother, at once alarmed and annoyed, scramble after their little brother. Mother and father shout at all three as Jackie kicks and scratches against this sibling heroism. An ass-over-teakettle rescue on the beach, the slapstick belying its seriousness, it all comes down in a flying tackle by Francis (Claire flopping uselessly on top) which only drives Jackie down under the shallow waves and into a

new wonder: the seabed: alive, littered, and crawling with a million thingies. The boy glimpses a treasure in the polished green, amber, and purple stones; a witch's armpit hair in the tangled sea grass; a secret message forever lost in the severed neck of a 7-Up bottle; and an unhuggable pet in the crab raising its claw with a kind of peeved fearsomeness. Excited, he gulps brine and vomits it up, along with the half-digested peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich mother fed him only a few minutes before. Coughing as Francis and Claire hoist him out of the water, crying a bitter "No" before a plaintive "Please," he feels himself dragged from the surf to suffer Francis's painfully unnecessary pumping and puffing: a clumsy imitation, or cruel parody, of the first-aid filmstrip Francis was made to look at in the Health and Hygiene classroom of St. Anne's: *The Kiss of Life*.

To linger over this evidence of so remote and lost an incarnation is to kiss the ass of a morbid nostalgia, to limp away with that murky tide toward a horizon graffitied with the ideograms of my crippled memory. There, hermit crabs hump into the listless froth past stranded jellyfish quivering their epitaph.

More evidence, this but a few years later and far from any Cape Cod beach. Monogrammed parochial tie dangling in his loosened collar, the nine-year-old schoolboy tends a smoldering pile in a weedy back yard, and, when he looks up at the chunk of sky beyond the rotting slats once meant to keep the back yard private, there are still to be seen dirigibles and Skylabs, cosmonauts tethered on umbilical cords that trail limply back into popcorn thunderheads, and biplanes spelling out "MINUTES TO GO!" in giant, fragile letters that hang there for a moment then vanish. The kid pokes at the wet leaves with a garden rake, but the smoke only gets worse. Soon enough Antoniozzi, that grandpapa of a next-door neighbor, comes crashing through the raggedy hedgerow separating his property from the Ruineux's, hip waders flopping and smeared with thin mud. A fog of smelly steam rises off the old man's flannel shirt—he's been boiling dirt, sanitizing soil for the beds in his "greenhouse," that slapdash, boxy thing beaten together out of corrugated fiberglass, two-by-fours, bat guano, vitriolic Italian curses, rosary women's whispers, and a glue of recycled

shingles rendered in a special ingredient once known only to the folks who bring you the pause that refreshes. He's been sanitizing soil, a soil fertile with horse manure trucked in from the boondocks. "You got it all slantwise, Jackie," he says. "You gotta let them leaves dry." The kid looks up at me through the thick yellow smoke of sixty years, his expression of wistful bewilderment frozen in sepia on Kodak paper the scalloped edges of which have long ago fallen out of fashion. Only now does it occur to me that the smoke may simply have come from a Great Northern bean or a canned mushroom—the debris of cooking—aflame beneath the Pullman's electric coil, a coil growing ever more orange under the aluminum percolator in which water boils for my tea and from beneath which slips a ribbon of rich smoke. The smoke and steam rise with an aroma of damp leaves set alight with safety matches, wishes, and a can of my father's Zippo fluid smuggled from under the kitchen sink. It stains the ceiling directly above my Pullman with the color of a weak Jamaican coffee, and I say to myself: It's been a chilly, damp November.

Gravity is becoming a strident taunt. Inertia, years of sitting, the words: dreams turned to cold stars in a darkening universe I now cough up like miner's sputum, gritty with the black dust of recollection: the images I'm reluctant to call my own, whether the beach on Cape Cod or Antoniozzi's greenhouse or even the nights passed trading stories with Jasmine, reclining on her mattress, sipping Banker's Club on ice. Those I remember special, capsules of regret I choke down in my Vendig nights. Jasmine was my *amiga*, and perhaps because hers is a stubborn vision, a recalcitrant constellation burning my night, I can't entirely let go of the compulsion to manufacture a word hoard that once and for all might convince me the image we created together really was. A glossy photo from her days as an exotic dancer is the only evidence I possess of a connection with this Jasmine Belladonna; of some connection to anything, anyone. Period. Suspect evidence at best, I've no reason to believe it relates to the memories that surround her, that spring from her image, and I have to wonder, finally, if inertia and sham memory are the only legacy left to me. Must even my metaphors be mixed? At least my shoulder doesn't creak as I switch off the electric coil,

pour the boiled water, and dangle this teabag in my steaming mug. At least the banging radiator pipe, if nothing else, sets the rhythm of my day. At least, from time to time, I can manage to knock the dust off the keys of the old cast-iron Royal, that typer through which, to my great surprise, more and more words manage to filter. At the very least, I can sift through the shoebox of images that may or may not represent moments in a history I might call my own.

Old lonely man you are, Jack Ruineux. You better get it all down before the grand exit; maybe start by figuring, at age 69, just how the hell to pronounce your own name. No trusting a history you might spin if a thing as simple as how to label yourself is open to question. I suppose when you grow up with a difficult name, hear it spoken so many different ways, it's hard to settle on one that rings true. The kids always called you Little Jackie Ruin Ex and teased that you were some product deadbeats sprinkled on their carpets when they got an eviction notice from the landlord. Mother, who'd done her French lessons in grammar school, insisted the proper way was "Roo-eh-nuh," a valiant effort at Parisian inflection, but not quite on the mark. Father, Canuck enough, first generation born this side of the St. Lawrence, grew up with the Quebecified rendition, "Roo-new," and on that the Ruineux tribe settled. Still, there were times when you favored one over another, tried inventing some new pronunciation, sometimes switching at random or alternating between them according to some ridiculous pattern you'd concocted. Even Ruin Ex struck you as a suitable moniker for the teenage rebel Jackie. So round and round it goes, Jack Ruineux: *Roo-new*. At last.

Outside the door of my room, sharp heels click on tired hallway linoleum. A door is opened, creaking on geriatric hinges, and then slammed shut—happily slammed, without anger or malice. The young woman, my neighbor in the room adjacent, 18E, whom I only think I've seen, *surmise* I'd seen one night from my fifth-story window as she waited for her bus on Market Street—the young woman is *there*. Padding around her apartment on bare feet, chipped toenail polish suggesting an attempt to match the shade of her muddy red

lipstick, she eases into an evening languor. By now she's finished her cigarette and, as she does every once in a while, is lighting another off the butt. She paces a bit as she smokes, makes soft kissing sounds that signal the end of each drag, blows her smoke sibilant through pursed lips, hums along to the music coming from her Philco radio, mimics the disc jockey's hyperbolic mumbo jumbo. Perhaps bored, she picks up a brush and begins pulling it through the tangled static of her hair, bending down and to the right so that it falls loose and away from her shoulder, nearly sweeping the dusty hardwood floor. There's a Jasmine about her that won't be rationalized away. No doubt her lover is there, in her thoughts: The day will come, she's telling him, when you and I will march down Market Street like an Afrika Korps through Khyber Pass, and all the Montgomerys will doff their plumed desert hats in an attitude of restrained respect. No red carpet will cushion our steps because the dust of the city is plenty good enough for us and becomes for our feet a tonic the likes of which Dr. Scholl never dreamed.

It could be the lover is making his way to her from West Philly on the Market-Franklin El and his thoughts, likewise, are not of the work-heavy heads bobbing with resignation all around him, but of her: Jas, there will be midnight strolls along the Delaware and noon visits to Ben Franklin's grave; the Vietnamese restaurants will let us run a tab and the national anthem sung in Connie Mack Stadium will be sung for *us*. None of the trains of the Southeast Pennsylvania Transportation Authority could ever lead me away from you, and in them I course only and ever through the chambers of your heart.

Ciphering these arcane glyphs, she draws the brush through her hair until, after twenty or so lazy strokes, she's ready for another drag. She lets the smoke settle in her lungs before blowing it, almost reluctantly, out her nostrils. Then, bending down to the left, she again puts brush to hair. When finished, she glances into the oblong mirror on her closet door. "Penny for your thoughts?" she says. Her auburn waves and curls push beyond the mirror's glass, yet their image seems to continue in the complicated arabesques decorating the frame on which pale yellow gargoyles gape from Gothic niches. There's a baroque about

the frame, but it's been softened by the generations of inarticulate paint jobs that have muted the geometry of the entire apartment: not a ninety-degree angle in the place. Jasmine makes a face in the mirror, brow knit over squinting eyes, lips drawn back—not unlike those of the gargoyles—to reveal those sharp canines of hers, then sticks her tongue out at herself, grins a silent laugh, and shakes her head in pantomime wonder over just how silly she can sometimes be. Turning from the mirror, she butts out her cigarette in the fake scallop shell that rests on the milkcrate beside her mattress—her nightstand, she calls it—and as she does a flurry of ash dusts the clock radio, the box of tissues, the base of her reading lamp, and the color reproduction of Gustav Moreau's "*L'Apparition*" clipped carefully from *Look* magazine and mounted in a three-by-five inch frame. Let the trash pile up, she thinks. Right up to the flower boxes of the second-story windows. The sanitation workers can wage their strike for weeks, and with gusto. No stench today. No stink tomorrow, only the delicate fragrance of this delicious wait. At some point there will come that bratta-bump knock of his on the door, and then we'll move out into the day to make a tableau of trash, a dumpsterscape against which to pose him, and the photographs I make will be our very own flip-book of sticky nostalgic refuse.

On her radio, the Gun Club gives way to some other rock band and she begins to sway to its rhythm. As she does, she weaves the fingers of one hand into her hair while with the other she traces patterns of blue cigarette smoke, all the while growling a husky "grr-grr-grr" in imitation of the overdriven electric guitars until the growling becomes laughter, perhaps over the nits and tangles that have already returned to her hair its "serendipitous fugitive aspect." Which hairdresser came up with that one? This must be a serious dance because, right in the middle of her apartment, she executes a pirouette. As if delighted by memory, her green eyes shine and as she glides laughing across the room I do, after all, begin to feel a dull ache in my shoulder as the last rich drops of Earl Gray splash into my mug.

A tea-making vision in my Vendig night, this Jasmine I conjured seems to have hoodooed me into something of a trance, a pathetic reverie long enough to stiffen the joints

in my arm and cool my Earl Grey to a tepidity just this side of drinkable. It happens. Still warm enough to dissolve a couple teaspoons of sugar, I add those first to the brew before pouring a careful drop of skim milk. Then, leaning against the Pullman, I take a sip. I'm beginning to warm up again, tune in to the spectral voices of impending senile dementia. At times I even think with an inflection strange enough to surprise me. What are we here for? the man says. We're here to go.

My silent Royal, the same page blank on its platen for weeks, no longer accuses me. I can feel it now, responding like the precision instrument it is, bending to my will and whim, to my burgeoning centrifugal bombast, to my so-called protean imagoes and imagines. No regrets now for time lost; no remorse. And, when I *do* fill a page, having overcome, to some degree, the forces of inertia, I shove it with a flourish into the manila folder I keep with the others down there, in a bulging cardboard box beneath the wooden table I call my desk. I'm down with a good case of the bombasts again, and the pages are beginning to pile up—my *meisterwerk*, I call it. Why the hell not? Often, I'll read the page aloud, pace around the room as I read and, sometimes, long after the page has fallen from my hand, I come to seated at the edge of my bed, *astounded* in the realization that already the page is fading into the electro-chemical tangle of synapses. Perhaps I *have* been pacing around, the page of manuscript creased down the middle to prevent it from curling in the radiator-driven humidity of my room. Perhaps the uneven type *does* confront me, faint on one letter heavy on the next, riddled with false starts and dead ends (parts of sentences and even entire paragraphs typed over with Xs or ampersands). Enough of a narrative remains, however, to convey that sense of movement for which we are said to long. If nothing else, there are images, a few of which don't entirely disappoint: like the way the light from the ceiling fixture combines with the moonless night to transform my window into a peculiar mirror. The effect is that of a photographic multiple exposure in which the diaphanous images of

my desk, my chest of drawers, the Pullman stove, myself, my bed, my nightstand, and the door behind me overlay the shadowy night towers of Philadelphia. The reflection transposes my room: the doorknob is to the *right* side of the door, my watch on my *left* wrist. But what to make of the lone lighted office window that appears to cut into my forehead? When I raise my hand, it's in my palm. And above my right temple flashes an aircraft warning light, a blinking red Mars in suspended orbit around the ceiling-fixture Sun. I make a game out of navigating around the room, eyes fixed on the reflected images in the windowpane. Taking care not to fall, I back toward the light switch I know is to the left of the door, but which in the window appears to its right. I watch my arm in the window as I raise it, *direct* it, toward the switch. I have to concentrate hard to get my fingers to the switchplate. There is a fingertip oiliness. I turn off the light.

In the darkness the reflections disappear and, as my eyes adjust, shadows beyond the window resolve into suggestions of architecture: lines and angles and depths fleshed out in a spectrum of schools and tastes and periods, from neo-classical French jobs with their copper mansard roofs to brittle monoliths that, during daylight, appear clumsy and self-conscious in a city whose skyline was for so long fixed by law to a height no greater than the Quaker hat crowning the statue of Billy Penn on top of City Hall Tower. In the darkness, I attune to the low, steady, gastro-intestinal murmur of Philadelphia. I like to think it resonates in my own abdominal cavity: a visceral amplifying node boosting murmur to bassy vibrato. It fills my room like the soundbox of an enormous spinet piano or Segovian guitar. Eventually, I come back to what passes for quiet, but the after-tone lingers in my ears.

Crossing to the window, I sit on the edge of the desk and look down onto Market Street. A few people stand waiting at the bus stop, hands shoved into deep coat pockets, shoulders hunched against the cold November night. There is a woman. Agitated, no doubt shivering in that short skirt of hers, that denim jacket, she steps to the curb and gazes down Market in the direction of City Hall. For some reason, a tear wells in my eye as she heaves a sigh so heavy I can see the cloud of her breath. Kicking her sharp heels along the sidewalk,

she returns to warm herself in the embrace of her lover. He draws her against his tartan wool jacket and she lifts her face to his. “With or without the potted pachysandra,” she tells him, “I can still find an essence of muted grace in all those photographs of the fire escape, the one leading from the apartment window of the slain Czechoslovakian porn star, the one they featured in last week’s issue of *Look*.”

The young man compassionately kisses the tip of her nose; a tender and melancholy touch of his cold, dry lips that whispers an essence oddly maternal. “Her name is Ootla,” he says. “She once dated a hockey player in Pittsburgh who found himself, one day, all alone in the management front office. When the phones started ringing, he took it upon himself to answer them, but all he said was: ‘There’s nobody here but a dumb Czecho.’ He didn’t know it was the police calling with the news of Ootla’s murder. He was being sought for questioning.” A middle-aged woman stares at the couple and absently fingers her nostrils while the others at the stop sway back and forth, slowly shifting their weight from one foot to the other, some clutching tokens in gloved palms.

Through my reflection in the window I gaze at these people, shove my own hands deep into my trousers pockets, hunch my shoulders as if against a chill wind, mimic their movements. The city complicates my reflection, but soon everything is clouded by my breath on the cold pane. This really is “a chilly mid-November night in Philadelphia.” I rest my fingers on the Royal’s keys and type: *A man at the bus stop cups his hands and places them over his nose and mouth. Breathing into them, he is amazed that there should be a feeling of warmth.* The words have nothing to do with the activity at the bus stop, nor with the sentence that precedes them on the page: *It was that time of year when the horse chestnut trees in Rittenhouse Square took on the red-blistered bulbousness of the gin blossoms on W. C. Fields’s nose.* Later, there just might be a logic to be excavated, a hypothesis to be manufactured, from the simple circumstance of their juxtaposition. But I don’t have time to think about such things right now, not in the middle of the raving bombasts. What’s certain is this: the young woman, still wrapped in the arms of her lover, jumps in place to keep warm and I can feel my eyelids

grow heavy as she says to her man: “Tell me the one about the harelip, the beer nuts, and the bartender with the gigantic proboscis.”

I wake up feeling lapidary and translucent in my vocabulary, but sinuous and formidably dense in my phrasing. In other words, my mouth is coated (the tea), and saliva is sticky in the corners of my mouth. Because of, or perhaps in spite of this, my first waking thought is that never was the idea of a black-faced Al Jolson rendition of “Swanee River” so icily enchanting as now, bathed as I am in my own sweat (having never turned down the bed and sleeping, as I did, fully clothed on the olive drab, wool army blanket that works so well as a bedspread). A shadow of moisture remains on the blanket: the Shroud of Turin, I think. When I wipe my nostrils with the back of my hand there’s a watery faint streak of blood left on the knuckles and this surprises me because it’s been nearly six full years since they made me give up cigarettes and that kind of thing isn’t supposed to happen anymore.

With an effort, I push myself up off the bed and shuffle over to the half-sink at the Pullman, my ankles, knees and hips all cracking and popping with every step, reminding me of the skeleton shifting around beneath the flesh so all I can think, as I do every morning (and it’s beginning to wear off on me at last), is: dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around. Mornings like this, synapses seemingly firing at random, making of me some kind of automatic conduit of conception and misconception, I catch myself up and consider, seriously, making peace with an awareness that I really am a daredevil walking the tightrope that separates sentience from senile dementia. What else is there to do but turn on the faucet and splash my face with handfuls of cold water? Gulping it and swirling it around my crusty mouth, I churn up a froth before spitting it out like a thin bubbly paste of snake venom, aspic, and the rarefied perspiration of the missing and presumed dead. The aftertaste is not entirely unlike Dr. Pepper. Face and hands dripping, I grab the ratty towel

slotted through the handle of the icebox door and dry off. Only now do I begin to feel; do I begin to feel *better*.

Stepping to the window I find it fogged with condensation and luminous with furry white light. Despite my cold-water attempt to refresh myself, I feel matted, over warm, uncomfortable, so I try placing my palms against the glass to enjoy the sensation of its cool moisture. It's so pleasant I lean forward to press first one cheek, then the other, against the pane. Soon, even this is not enough, so I tug at the window's handles. It's no good: the wooden frame has swollen into the sash on account of the little puffs of steam pulsing from the loose radiator valve. My god it's life in a terrarium sometimes in the Vendig when the boiler's stoked but, when it's not, you can't find enough blankets and the electric coils of the Pullman burn all night long.

From under the sink I fish out my screwdriver, use it to pry open the window. I manage a half-inch crack and the effort leaves me winded. In "welcome relief" the cool air rushes, along with the odor of boiling hot dogs that rises from hundreds of lunchcarts on hundreds of streetcorners. Once again handling the raggedy towel, I wipe the condensation from the window so I can see out onto Market Street. All along the sidewalk, people are walking with fists jammed deep into their coats, heads drawn into upturned collars like stoic, bipedal tortoises.

Down there, on the southeast corner of Eleventh and Market, a young mother pulls her child away from a vendor selling large inflatable crayons out of a stolen shopping cart. I can hear the child bawling. A sherrif's van glides west from the Roundhouse toward City Hall, shadowy forms swaying limply behind the heavy iron mesh separating prisoner from window. Nowhere to be seen is the guy who gets himself up like Ben Franklin, the guy who on some days passes along Market en route to the historic district for the edification of tourists, but an equally amusing substitute has appeared in his stead: on the southwest corner squats a plucky codger, plopped on an inverted milk crate. He makes the corner jump to his beat, playing the harmonica with one hand while with the other tapping out a

rhythm on his padded thigh with two bent stainless steel spoons. I can't hear the harmonica, but the clicking of his spoons is remarkably distinct. Names will come to me, now and then, but if I could lend that guy a name it would not be the one teetering on the tip of my mind.

It would not be Schubelmeyer Hannet. That's for sure. Nor would it be John Doe.

Harmonica Man is the only handle suitable for a gentleman like that, an iconoclast so offbeat and out of tune the riffing he seems to be inventing composes a heretofore undreamed of school of jazz. A few steps further down the walk, a toddler, entirely out of place in the English schoolboy outfit the mother's tweeded him up in, is the only passerby to take note of this harmonica man; the boy and the guy with the absurd name, an alias to be sure, Schubelmeyer Hannet. Look at him, fingering that signet ring of his—pretentious S. H.—just the way he did when he came to me with the proposition I undertake the writing of a memoir (for which he seems to think there is a market). I told him he was crazy, but new minds, it seems, are re-inscribing a fatigued exegesis for those books, *my* books, the ones that started lingering on the shelves thirty years ago, about the time my life entered its Hotel Vendig phase. Pushy type, this Hannet, straight out of Wharton with a double-breasted Armani, a tub of expensive pomade, and an attitude. Right off the bat he started pumping me for details about something I'd written about a muddy Cape Cod evening when the sun burned the horizon and my brother stood lanky in his horned-rimmed glasses, dangling a crab in his spidery fingers, teasing me with the struggling claws; about an incident some years later, when I crept up the stairs one afternoon at mother's distracted and red-eyed urging, boosting my bravado by linking arms with an imaginary brother I called "Zane," to find my father lying horrible and dead in the parents' room; about how the real brother had already vanished into the Sinister Midwest by then. Hannet knew more about my misspent years at Kent State than I could ever hope to remember, and how they ended with my headlong flight from boredom, anxiety, and failure to set up house in that West Philly dump of mine. I told him all I can really remember is what began in the projection booth of the Olympia, its dull yellow walls cracked and spilling the chalky plaster dust that brushed off on

my clothing and which I tried to paper over with old “1-sheets,” posters from movies like *Ladders to Fire*, *Perfect Dodge City* and *Fear Not the Green Loss*. The posters always peeled away and the dust was a constant menace—it can render a motion picture unwatchable. I was forever retaping the 1-sheets and wiping down the porthole glass with ammonia and a chamois to keep crisp the image on the screen. Meantime, I’d taken up my writerly avocation up there in the booth, a hobby which on good days, or so I told Schubelmeyer Hannet, promised a centripetal moment when the narrative “I” would be written right out of the Olympia. And it happened. The spigot flowed. There were titles: *Good Friday*, *The Machinery of Image*, *Paintwork*, but were these the titles of my stories? or were they movies I ran at the Olympia? How many gaps does the mind fill in? It makes no difference to me. It’s all there together: fiction, history, autobiography—too difficult to sort it all out (wasn’t it always?) and, finally, of no consequence whatever. At some point, the ability to connect eluded me (perhaps it always had) and as people began to slip from my plenum of relationships there began a descent in which the dust jackets yellowed and I moldered in the impassivity of my solitude. The writing became a neglected spigot, choked down to a rusty drip that left the taste of iron in my mouth. Then even the source of the drip went all but dry amid the steady grind of the Simplex 35 projectors to which, by that time, I had returned: the fusty booth above the balcony of the Olympia, Juniper and Spring Garden Streets. A noble profession, I insisted. Hannet, you can get away with anything if the changeover’s smooth enough, the jump from one reel to the next. He laughed, indulgent of my digression, but quick to bring our conversation back to the matter at hand.

*All* my work, I told Schubelmeyer, has been autobiographical. *All* has been fiction. It’s a good angle, he told me. *Work* it. Just like that you’re a public image. My god, the public doesn’t pick up on any of this, so why sweat it? Put a book on their shelf and give ’em something else to blah blah blah about: the latest hottest rediscovered writer, the grandfather of the punks, the Magical Re-inventor of the *nouveau roman*, Grand Poohbah of the Jack LaLaine *Sturmabteilung*, Grand Wizard of the Benevolent and Paternal Order of

Elks! It could be you, Jack, and why not? Hear me out, Jack. I'm not talkin' out my fly on this: It's all in the marketing. Get yourself outa this dump. Be a literary darling, my dear. Sell some Jack Ruineux and buy yourself a little cot in the 'burbs. *Think* about it, Jack . . . and on he went high-pressure salesman all the way. That character wore me out and I capitulated to his fruity two-bit Mickey Spillane con man rap just to get him the hell out of my room. It was not a pleasant encounter. But he *was* a character. He walked right in and assumed his place and left me wondering whether I'd warmed up to him or whether I'd warmed up *with* him. Whatever the case, he doesn't come around much anymore and I've gotten well beyond the point of flinching when I see him in the street: no need to bar the door and make like there's nobody home: he's not on his way to my room these days. Impressing himself on my conscious, or conscience, he did his job and did it hard and fast.

The damage was done, right here in the Vendig: my room, my *place* of thirty years; box of fuses on the shelf above the Pullman stove, bed and desk and chest of drawers, foggy mirror hanging from an eye hook screwed into the door, radiator hissing at the valve as I stand at the window looking out onto Market Street wondering how this Schubelmeyer Hannet found his way to me and why I paid any attention to his worn-out crackpot spiel. It's all autobiography. It's all fiction. The room *is* a dump. On that S. H. is right. The damage is done; must be done. Sell some Ruineux. It's a good angle. *Work* it. Just like that you're an image. Don't worry over the distinctions. I'm not even sure the guy's name was Schubelmeyer Hannet. I may be thinking of Gunter August Wilhelm Schwagermann, Goebbels' aide-de-camp and cremator not only of the Minister of Propaganda himself, but of Frau Goebbels and the six Goebbels children in what could only have been euphemistically referred to as the "courtyard" of *der Fÿhrerbunker* with Russian bazooka shells churning Berlin. There was a film about it, as I recall. Maybe I reversed the names: Hannet Schubelmeyer? It could just as easily have been Tom Jones, but I seem to remember a lot of syllables; something like Engelbert Humperdinck. Perhaps another tea-making vision, another Zane, conjured for no other purpose than to hoodwink myself into really

having at it with the Royal typer. Then again, I may just be remembering my attempts to fit a name to the exterminator who stopped by yesterday to perform his monthly service. I can't tell the difference anymore and, truth be told, I'm not sure if it truly matters. This kid, the exterminator, he was a young guy, new on the job, found it necessary to wear a thing over his nose and mouth, a cotton mask that looked more like an athletic cup, in a surgical sort of way, than a filter to protect him from the insecticide vapors. He'd never worked the Vendig, had never seen a Pullman stove. Yes, I told him. Goes back to the Pullman rail cars. He told me he'd never been on a train, though one day he'd like to fly to Seattle. He could have any name, but I don't think it's Schubelmeyer Hannet. *That* name I reserve for the guy with the signet ring. Why not? It's a good angle. *Work* it. Just sit down at the Royal, open the spigot, and the words will pour. As I begin to type, I'll hear the click of sharp heels in the hallway. A door will creak on old hinges and slam closed without malice. No voices will animate the hallway, no conversations or after-work self-mutterings. Getting up from my desk, I'll go to the door and open it, but there will be no one. A spectral cloud of cigarette smoke will hang in the air and when I take a breath the smoke will feel good in my lungs.