

Our Work and Will: A Compilation

By Christopher Winn

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POETRY

I. Flesh and Flower

Expansive space, compacted matter, spark
Against one another, flint in the dark
Flesh and flower sow their seed and wither
Buffeted by forest-fire to cinder
Like anvil-hardened, grindstone-sharpened blades
Some accost this forge by which they are made
With plowshare-plague domesticating all
'Til by victory these combatants fall
Choosing re-convergence as cooling clay
To be made anew out of disarray
Expansive space, compacted matter, spark
Against one another, flint in the dark

II. Cyprian of Antioch to His Executioner

Pledged to gods, an inverse Samuel was I
 Escorted to the peak of Olympus
 There to meditate—attempt to espy
 The phantasmal world, and lo, a tempest!

Lucifer like a crowned rose I beheld
 A youth beguiled by beauty and compelled
 To serve Earth's god, the prince of air and Hell
 In return for knowledge of every spell.

Swiftly dubbed Antioch's highest of priests
 By proficient diabolism made
 Puppet-master o'er lowly men and beasts
 With countless women and trinkets arrayed.

Humbly to this vile shepherd pagan sheep
 Would bleat of lust unrequited and sleep
 Satisfied that night for my vile dispatch
 Of spirits could all reluctance detach.

That is until one maiden resisted
 Justina by name, a convert Christian
 For though I railed mine demons insisted
 'Gainst Christ no curse can achieve fruition.

Thus frantically I called up the crowned rose
 But found him all wilted as he arose
 I rent my cloak and whimpered 'Oh Devil
 Explain thine impotence and dishevel!'

My master sighed greatly, once perfumed breath
Now fetid like fumes from a swampy grave
'Alas servant—I am wounded to death
My head trod on, a blow nothing can lave.'

More serpent than rose his image as I
Abandoned his writhing visage to die
Leapt down temple steps, past the palace gate
Fleeing my master's inglorious fate.

Before Justina my forehead I laid
Inquiring how from sin one is saved
And sobbing together, we knelt and prayed
There first I felt love while in God's blood bathed.

Thus thy blade pricks my venerable neck
Unworthy steel that Justina's soul freed
I espy on its edge her crimson fleck
Like a priceless drop of angelic mead!

Tarry no longer, drive home to heaven
This the cost of trading six for seven
What a bargain—for professing God's name
To gain adoption and escape from flame.

III. Pan

Agonizing engine animates dust
Consigned to earthly squalor and time's rust
Starving and horny, otherwise selfless
To kill and eat and fuck and die, helpless
Our work and will, to suffer properly
Pain, sole order in cosmic anarchy
Patriotic salute to our nation
Of Flesh, to repeat this replication
Stick dangling a carrot—expectation
That our toil leads to beautification
But maw safely fastened 'round its own tail
Ouroboros smirks whilst haloing hell
Patting the scalps so soon balding and cold
Gazing into eyes fast clouded by mold
Squandering heartbeats already numbered
On thinking dread thoughts already pondered

IV. Holiness Shorn

I saw the man of sorrows wandering
Bereft of friends, yet lonely not at all
His brow was furrowed, richly pondering
'Til at the sight of me his tread did stall
He pointed at my feet as though to warn
As a danger rose up there in the dust
'Holy Bible' its name, holiness shorn
It wriggled like a serpent and was crushed
'Have no graven images nor idols'
His voice a blend of boundless love and grief
Then as one who must walk many miles
He left me to revisit my belief.

V. An Inner Grail

The days seem lengthy but the years seem short
Like watercolors intermixing hues
Or undried clay still able to contort
Memory lies vulnerable to ruse.
Our spider's web of association
Quivers with bias and seeks to ensnare
Events; subject to imagination
Those unpleasant truths we wish to forbear.
By sifting through time's sands in this fashion
The grains turn to glass in the nuclear heat
Forging a mirror of untamed passion
Where our ego may stare in rapt conceit.
Let us quest for an inner grail chalice
To drink life to the dregs without malice.

PROSE

I. Sweethearts

Mei ducked under overly burdened branches, crouching low to the handlebars of her rusty red bike. An incoming pile of cow dung forced her to swerve off path, the uneven ground rattling her whole body and making the loose bike parts sing. The party responsible lowed forlornly at her as she pedaled past and swerved back on-path. She clicked her tongue at his visible ribs and unenthused voice. He twitched his ragged ears in reply.

Diamonds of sunlight imprinted themselves in her eyes as she looked up day-dreamily from the seat of her bike. The sky darkened perceptibly as she continued, not with night but with pollution, more grey than blue. Wilderness transitioned abruptly into pavement and she sheered the roadside to avoid a truck. It honked maniacally, never tapping the brakes. She remained in the margin, cutting a rubbery skid mark through the shucked corn that had been placed in the street to dry.

She paused to exchange pleasantries with a congregation of ancients huddled around a game of sidewalk checkers. The onlookers stroked downy beards and kissed shriveled cigarettes. The players did nothing but stare at the board, black pupils glinting with concentration.

She rode on, past pool halls that smelled of warm beer and restaurants that were really just roadside grills. Her stomach complained at the latter, but the lightness in her pockets drove her onwards, towards endless vacant apartments that marred the horizon. In all likelihood, they would be allowed to stand for a few years and then be bulldozed to be built again. She listened to the hammer-blows which emanated from their interiors and wondered if one of them was struck by a certain muscular arm.

Home was a concrete cube divvied into three sections—an entrance, a sleeping quarters, and a kitchen.

She set her bike inside the front door and entered, careful to slip off her shoes and exchange them for a pair of worn plastic slippers. She cast an affectionate glance at Grandfather, napping in the corner on a cool surface of old newspapers, and collapsed on her mat, massaging her pregnant belly with just the fingertips. She felt reassured by movement within, and closed her eyes.

Mother woke her with a singsong voice as she passed through the sleeping quarters into the kitchen. She carried a gallon jug of water which swished and slushed pleasantly. This she placed on the countertop before bending down to select a large metallic bowl from beneath the sink. Situating it next to the jug, she turned to the opposite end of the kitchen and cracked open a makeshift freezer. She lifted a series of plastic bags to her far-sighted eyes, returning those that she did not desire to the ice while gripping those that suited her fancy between her fingers. Satisfied, she pushed the freezer door closed with her shin and returned to the metallic bowl. To it she added the contents of the plastic bags, various meats and vegetables, intermixing each ingredient before dousing them with the jug of water—glug, glug, glug.

Mei watched her from the floor, a faint smile playing on her lips. She removed her hands from her belly so that she might push herself into a sitting position. As soon as she had achieved this position, the hands returned of their own accord to form a fleshy protective cradle about the bulge. One of them eventually fluttered up to her eyes to rub away the recent sleep.

Seeing that Mei was awake, Mother began to talk as she prepared the meal.

“Mrs. Zhou was sick again today, so guess who worked a double-shift?” Mother shook her head. “I don’t know how much longer they will let me fill in for her. They

have threatened to cut back for months now, and the sick ones will be the first to go.”

“Eh?” said Grandfather drowsily from the corner.
“Mrs. Zhou?”

“An old flame,” Mother mouthed teasingly to Mei.

“Mrs. Zhou was a schoolmate of Grandmother’s.”
Grandfather pondered. “She is still alive?”

“Yes, Grandfather,” Mother said exasperatedly.
“You are not the only member of the old generation that still graces us with his presence.”

Grandfather pursed his lips.

“Were Mother and Mrs. Zhou friends?” Mei asked
Grandfather innocently.

“Quite the opposite!” Grandfather exclaimed. “They hated one another!”

“Well,” Mei said, glancing covertly at Mother,
“perhaps some handsome young rogue introduced jealousy into their friendship.”

Grandfather puffed out his chest proudly. “Perhaps, perhaps.”

“Speaking of handsome young rogues,” Mother interjected, “where is that impoverished impregnator of yours?”

“Mother!” Mei chided. “He is hard at work in the new apartment complex.”

“And I suppose he’ll be wanting dinner tonight?”
Mother asked rhetorically. “Well, he can have it when we see some of that money he promised.” She turned her back, placing the metallic bowl on an open flame.

Grandfather fished in his pocket for a pack of cigarettes. “You know,” he said, “Mother was born in similar circumstances. Believe it or not, there was a time when I was, well, not as respectable as I am today.”

“Oh?” asked Mei.

Grandfather shook his head. "I was just like your fiancée, better at making babies than money." He brought a cigarette to his lips and commenced the search for a match. "The first and only time I ever stole was to bring Mother there some scrawny apples. She looked like a little bird inhaling a worm." He discovered a match and struck it. "They went unnoticed, but I felt so bad, that's when I decided we were moving to the city. We hopped on the backboard of a truck and held on for dear life. Grandmother was sure the fumes from the exhaust would kill Mother. Sixty miles later we hopped off here in Tianjin."

Xiang tossed his hammer to the floor and wiped his face with his forearm. He accepted a canister of tea from Gen and drank vigorously. It was over-strong but still refreshing. Some of it ran into his beard, a young man's beard still wiry and unpleasant to the touch. He handed the canister back and began removing his gloves, tugging one finger at a time.

"Another long day," Gen commented.

"Like all the others," said Xiang. He dropped his gloves atop his hammer and set his hands in his face. "I finally have enough."

"Eh? Money?"

"Enough to buy formula. Her mother said the baby needs it."

"Really?" Gen scratched his nose. "How far along is it?"

"Seven months, one week," Xiang recited. He lowered his hands and smiled. "Soon I will hold him."

"Him?" Gen asked incredulously. "How do you know it's a him?"

"Call it a father's intuition."

"Good luck to have a boy for a first child."

“Very.” Xiang rose from his squat and stuffed his things into a knapsack.

Gen continued to reflect, legs dangling over the beam. “Want to go get drunk?”

“Didn’t you hear me? I’ve got to spend my pay on formula so my son will be strong.” Xiang slung the sack over his shoulder. “And get away from there! If you fall they will think I pushed you off.”

Gen waved a hand good-naturedly.

Xiang stopped by the humble flat he and Gen shared, carefully hiding his knapsack underneath a pile of dirty clothes in the corner. He then selected the last plum from the bottom of a bowl and popped it into his mouth, chewing happily and making it last as he made for the main road. He tried hitching a ride but was ignored. Shrugging, he resolved to walk, stretching his already aching legs and gritting his teeth.

He tugged a white flower from a forlorn little bush as he passed, rubbing its silky petals appreciatively between his thumb and forefinger as his hesitant walk developed a steady rhythm. He said an absent but polite greeting to those he recognized, which was everyone, and dropped a crumbled petal every few blocks. He shielded his eyes to better see the factory, imagining Mei behind one of its milky windows.

“Mother,” Mei said during dinner, setting down her chopsticks, “it hurts.” She motioned to her belly.

“No,” Mother said, “it is too early.” She motioned for Mei to continue eating. “Just ignore it.”

Xiang judiciously selected two bottles of formula, sweating a little at the price. He checked the glass of the bottles for leaks. He compared their weights and expiration

dates to a third carton to determine if they were equal. Satisfied, he placed them in a grocery basket and headed for the register, palming the precious paper bills in his free hand.

Mei screamed, knuckles white against Grandfather's arm. A series of pulsating contractions seared her lower body.

"I don't understand," Grandfather said, blank faced.

"It's premature," said Mother. "Grandfather." She looked him in the eyes. "I need to find the midwife. Keep her awake."

Grandfather nodded, blinking back tears as he lowered his face to Mei's and whispered reassurances.

"What happened?" asked Xiang from the doorway, wide-eyed and clutching the bottles. Grandfather shook his head defeatedly. Mother wiped sweat from her brow as she looked up from Mei's unconscious form. "Her water broke early. The midwife was away." She breathed deeply, looking haggard. "I did what I could, but there is..." Her glance flickered over to the bundle lying beside Mei, "...something wrong."

Xiang went to the floor, dropping the bottles, and made his way on hands and knees to his fiancé and child. He cupped Mei's cheek tenderly in his palm and shuddered at its coldness. Then, with trepidation, he took ahold with thumb and index finger the lip of the cloth which obstructed the child from view and gingerly drew it back.

The room swam before him as he slid closer to examine the deformities. The babe looked not quite human, with a hydrocephalic head and palsied limbs. "Oh my God," Xiang breathed, sitting back onto his heels. Grandfather clasped the young man by the shoulders as the color

drained from his face. "Will..." Xiang murmured to Mother, "...will he live?"

Mother shrugged, wiping the blood from her hands with a towel. "If he stays here, no. If he goes, maybe."

"Goes?" Xiang asked numbly.

"To the orphanage," Mother clarified. "They have a Western doctor there. Medicine."

Xiang cupped his mouth, momentarily sick. "Is this because of me?" he eventually asked, voice cracking. "Because I took too long to buy the formula?"

Mother bit her lip.

Grandfather shook Xiang consolingly. "Nonsense. Nonsense."

"He doesn't have much time," said Mother, beginning to rise.

Xiang looked up, eyes still vacant but with a hint of color returning to his face. "Tell me where to go."

Gen shrunk back as Xiang held out the bundle to him.

"It's just a few steps further. They'll see him from the gate."

Gen shook his head. "I don't think I can do this."

Xiang cursed. "And you think I can?"

"Alright," pronounced Gen, sounding unsure.

"Alright." He took the infant in his arms and peaked around the wall. Seeing no one, he carefully slipped the small bundle through the bars of the gate before hitting the buzzer.

"It's done!" Gen yelled. "Run!" He took off, only to pause a few paces later as he realized Xiang was not following. He ran back, seizing his friend by the shoulder. "Come! Right now!"

Xiang cast one last despairing look at the bundle lying just inside the orphanage gate, then flung himself in the opposite direction.

When Xiang returned he found Mei staring at the ceiling, stupefied. She did not stir as he entered and knelt beside Grandfather and Mother. "But how will we know..." she whispered again, "...that he is alright?"

Xiang leaned over her, wiping away the cold sweat from her brow. "We'll just know," he lied. "Parents always know."

II. Indistinguishable

The men huddled wordlessly around a flame which guttered in the breeze, seeing its reflected spark in the corners of one another's eyes and how it turned their irises translucent yellow like a jaundiced moon. A rusty can of beans and a single communal spoon passed hands, each spoonful judiciously measured for the sake of fairness. Once emptied it was not discarded but propped upright by several stones so as to catch the rain that would surely come. The exhaustion of one had forced all to make camp in the open. Thus they kept the fire small and sat shoulder to shoulder so as to block its light from any unlikely observers. As predicted, it was soon extinguished by thick droplets that slapped audibly against the clay. All except one closed their eyes and bowed their heads as though in prayer, lulled by weariness into an uneasy sleep under the freakishly expansive sky. The guard toed the smoking embers out of boredom. They hissed pleasantly, grayish vapors wafting upwards uncertainly like a drunken ghost.

They rose with the sun, shaking dust from their denim and leather garb. One checked the chamber of a rifle and slung it over his shoulder. Another sheathed a knife and hefted an axe. Still another rested a bloodstained baseball bat against the back of his neck like a yoke. They nodded and split into groups of two, all holding a straggling line and keeping within earshot of the others. The dilapidated remains of a highway in the distance kept their course true. Occasionally one would stop with a pair of binoculars and glass the signs that stood along it, indicating with his fingers how many dozens of miles were still to go. Every couple of hours they would whistle and converge under shade, passing around canteens and reporting any unusual sight. One of them had found a dog, a lab by the looks of him, who had been seated obstinately beside the days-dead

remains of his owner. At first he had growled, but a bit of jerky had proved irresistible. Now he followed at the heels of a new master, unsure of the rest of this two-legged pack until they also had shared a few scraps and empathetically patted his jutting ribs. The man who had found him kissed his velvet ears.

Their water had run out when the man with the binoculars raised a solitary finger. One of them climbed a tree to verify, his tired grin signaling a city in sight. Another fainted just a few hundred yards from the first building and was nonchalantly hefted over the shoulders of the largest man. They smashed the plexiglass entrance of a gas station and revived the fainted man with a lukewarm soda. All judiciously scrounged for bags of chips, almonds, even the occasional rarity of an oatmeal cookie. These things and more they pocketed before moving on.

They paused before a multi-storied building a few blocks from their destination. Some wanted to continue, but the eldest vetoed this simply by gesturing at the lowering sun. They shrugged and followed him in, spreading out so that every entrance was covered below and every vantage point was exploited above. Ragged decks of cards were brought forth and food was gambled until the losers were left with naught, at which point some of the spoils were returned to them. Once this grew tiresome those on the ground floor lent their ear to a man with a pleasant voice as he read aloud from books he had found along the way. When the light grew too dim he dog-eared a page and all retired.

At dawn the men gathered on the rooftop. The man with binoculars examined the nearby gun store, paying particular attention to the truck that blocked its entrance. They determined that it would have to be moved, for entering through the back would mean going one-by-one down a tight alleyway. Taking consideration for whom had

done their share of dangerous tasks, two newcomers were chosen to move the truck. They were preceded by the man with the rifle, moving only once he was in position directly across from the store.

The pair slunk down the sidewalk, hugging the walls. Once horizontal to the store they took to their bellies, crawling with knees and elbows until they reached the driver's side of the truck. The first man quietly cursed the locked door and peaked over to verify that the emergency brake was engaged. The men collectively cringed as a gunshot rang out from within the store, prostrating the first man and blinding the second with bone fragments from his partner's skull. The man with the rifle fired twice, first at where the muzzle flash had emanated and second at the blinded man who writhed on the asphalt. All was quiet, then an infant began to cry. The man with the rifle magnified on the store, espying what he took for a spatter of blood behind where he'd placed his first shot. He raised a thumb at the rooftop.

This time they opted for the alleyway, hacking the backdoor down with an axe and sending the dog in first. His paws faintly padded within, and they heard him whine in unison with the baby for a moment before reappearing and wagging his tail. The man with the rifle went next, whistling once he was sure. All crowded in, staring dumbfounded at the sight. The baby screamed ravenously from the floor, its mother unconscious a few paces hence, grazed on the side of her head. The man with the rifle retrieved her still-warm shotgun and gave it to the man with the dog. The eldest took several backpacks from the wall and busied himself by filling them with the discarded items strewn about the store—assorted boxes of ammunition, handguns, a cleaning kit. Some, but not all, leered icily at the woman, gradually congregating around her. The man with the rifle stepped gingerly aside and began to help the eldest. The man with

the dog strode forward and seized the youngest man by the shoulder, steering him towards the exit. The youth stopped his leering and followed, seeming somewhat relieved. The eldest, the man with the rifle, and several others were not far behind, hauling a bag apiece. These men sat on the curb at the far end of the alleyway and took stock of the goods. They paused for a moment when the infant's cry ceased, the dog looking back and furrowing its brow. The youth hugged him tightly to his chest.

The others came out with the key to the truck some minutes later, eyes downcast. The weapons were loaded and distributed according to seniority and competence, then all piled into the cab and the bed. They rejoiced at its three-fourths of a tank. When it ran out at last they found themselves surrounded, having attracted too much attention. All died, even the dog, though his master shoved him away and told him to run. And when their weapons, clothes, and food had changed hands, the killers were indistinguishable from those they had killed.

III. The Library of Sleep

Quite unexpectedly Melina found herself at the doorstep of a great library. How she knew it was a library was a mystery to her, excepting a rich smell evocative of yellowed pages which the place exuded, for in appearance it resembled a cathedral. Hideous gargoyles brooded overhead whilst sunlight glistened off stained-glass windowpanes affixed to gargantuan blocks of stone. Timidly she grasped the doorknocker before her—a snake eating its own tale—and knocked thrice. The wooden slabs parted as unseen hinges squealed, revealing a circular antechamber of polished marble which was starkly furnished except for a pearlescent throne in its center.

Upon this throne lounged a smirking sphinx, muscles rippling as it tilted its head to better observe the newcomer. Melina felt a shiver trickle down her spine as the beast licked its lips and rose to a proper posture. Upon clearing its throat the beast commenced to ask her a series of questions which Melina could never entirely recall, though she dimly recollected that they had to do with her motive for entering the library, of which she had none. This pleased the sphinx who, his questioning completed, instructed Melina to circumambulate the antechamber until she had returned to the door from which she had entered. She did so dubiously, keeping a wary eye on the sphinx as she went, and gasped almost audibly upon the completion of her circuit to find that the door was no longer there, but had been replaced by a burgundy-carpeted room full of tables and people, beyond which loomed the heavy-laden, sky-high shelves of the largest library she had ever seen.

One of the nearest seated strangers chimed his teacup to attract her attention. She faced him inquisitively, taking in the sight of an elderly Asian man in purple pinstripe trousers and a matching vest whose bronze

nametag garishly announced "HEAD LIBRARIAN." A jet-black pipe jutted from his like-colored beard, and one of his elbows rested upon a stack of books with eccentric titles such as *The Suicide Notes of Narcissists* and *Juvenilia of the Geriatric*. He smiled softly and asked her to take a seat. She thanked him and obliged, nodding affirmatively as he inquired whether or not she would like tea. Pleased, he selected a teacup from the tray before him and filled it, sliding it gingerly toward her.

"I trust the sphinx was civil?" he asked.

"More or less," she replied.

He nodded, puffing patiently at his pipe. "His job is a grave one. He must in a single interview determine whether or not a person can be entrusted with the information housed herein."

"Yours are no ordinary books, then."

The librarian shrugged. "Books are like chemicals. All are equally benign or volatile depending upon the substance with which they come into contact." Sucking to no avail upon his pipe stem, he reached for a match.

Melina took a sip of the tea and briefly perceived her surroundings not as composites but as individual particles all threading in and out of one another, one moment forming fractals of dizzying complexity, the next moment reduced to gibberish constellations. She put down the teacup and drank no more.

"Still," continued the librarian, "I must concede that we possess certain rarities considered unfit for mass production. They have been studied thoroughly and deemed possibly edifying to individuals but assuredly disastrous for collectives." He met her gaze and noted her confusion empathetically. "But forgive my want of decorum." He rose, dusting flecks of tobacco from his vest, and took a slight bow. "I am Corvus, Head Librarian, and this is the Library of Sleep."

Melina blinked. “Pardon, but where exactly *are* we, sir? I mean, where is this library located?”

Corvus chuckled, bringing the lit match to his pipe. “We have in our possession every book that was, is, and will be, yet none of them answer that question. Trust me, I’ve looked.”

Melina rose and curtsied to her host. “In that case I am entirely at your mercy. Pray tell me if you know my reason for being here, or how I might get back home?”

Tossing the spent match into his teacup, Corvus studied her with a gleam in his eye. “You’ve come for the same reason everyone enters a library—to find a book. And I expect you will return home immediately after doing so.”

“But I don’t know what book I’m looking for.”

“Ah,” said Corvus, “those are the best library visits. Follow me, please.” With that he turned abruptly and hastened to the horizon of bookshelves.

Melina matched his stride, casting a backwards glance at the other seated strangers. “Those others—who are they?”

Corvus motioned with his pipe. “My assistants; deceased bibliophiles. Those to whom heaven is a library.”

As they neared the labyrinth of shelves Melina became concerned. “How does one navigate this library? I see no labels on the shelves or books, nor even an indication of each row’s genre.”

“One must will to find the correct book without wanting to find a specific book. A similar principle applies to finding the library itself. As for genres, this library houses but one genre and thus does not feel the need to designate it.”

“Which genre is that?”

“The genre that contains all others—the Absurd and Surreal.”

Melina paused. “So I’ll know my book when I see it?”

Corvus nodded. “In the meantime, perhaps we can entertain ourselves by discussing other interesting specimens along the way. That is, if you would humor an old librarian.”

“I’d be delighted.”

Corvus began to puff his pipe vigorously as they continued, scanning the shelves and occasionally stopping to examine and usually reject a prospective conversation piece. Finally he stooped and selected a volume with satisfaction. “A fine collection. *Pacifistic Tracts by Forgotten Soldiers*. A distant ancestor of yours makes his prosaic debut on page eight hundred and thirty-seven—a reflection on the psychic trauma of being speared to death in the prehistoric savanna, as well as how he recovered from it over five subsequent lifetimes. In the final passage he reveals that he was eventually able to forgive the transgressing soul to such an extent that they became best childhood friends some twelve lifetimes hence. Quite touching.”

Melina thumbed through the pages. “I can’t read it.”

“Oh, forgive me,” said Corvus, “I had forgotten that your species hasn’t yet rediscovered that language. What about this one?” He stood on tiptoes to pluck another volume from overhead.

Melina examined the cover— *Treatises on Logic by the Utterly Insane*.

“Chock full of serial-killers-turned-authors, that one. Their arguments are disturbingly compelling.”

Melina raised an eyebrow.

“Never fear. If I internalized every compelling argument I’ve read, I would have abandoned corporeality long ago. That’s what’s wrong with most ghosts and gods—can’t compartmentalize. End up having to meditate for a

few eons just to recall their own names. Speaking of, we're just a few aisles over from a real treat."

They continued walking.

"So," Melina began nonchalantly, "You mean to say that you believe in ghosts and gods?"

"*Believe in?* No. That would be both an inadequate and awkward way of wording it."

"Alright—you *know* them to exist?"

"That, my dear, depends on your definition of 'know.' Take myself, for example. You are seeing me with your eyes right now, but surely you've also seen things in your peripheral vision only to turn and find they weren't, or aren't, there?"

Melina nodded.

"Well who is to say that I, or anyone who has ever stood before you is not just as fleeting or illusory as those phantasms? True, the censor of your brain more quickly disregards the sensory input that they consist of than the input which I consist of, but that could merely suggest that I am a better fake, a virus programmed to act like genuine software while under scrutiny."

Melina laughed. "Don't be ridiculous."

Corvus stared at her blankly. "I know of a text that would alter your current perception of patterns to such an extent that you could be in a crowd of people but believe—or know—yourself to be utterly alone."

Melina adjusted her dress nervously.

"But what would be the point of that?" Corvus continued. "We all feel that way, from time to time."

"Everything is a game of semantics to you, isn't it?"

"Of course. It's the same with you and everyone you know. Language is the game that precedes and makes possible all other games. Without 'om' or 'let there be light' there is naught but a spirit suspended above a void."

Melina felt suddenly dizzy, though she did not know why.

Corvus took the pipe from his mouth and scratched his beard. "Sorry. That's the trouble with readers. We like to sing others with the flames that have purified us. Here. Smoke some of this."

Melina drew lightly on the pipe. Unlike the tea that had made her see particles, the smoke made vibrations visible. Corvus held up his hand. "Watch." He snapped his fingers. The vibration radiated outwards like the ripple caused by a fallen droplet upon still water. As the sound faded, Melina was shocked to see the vibration rebound upon itself, returning and disappearing between Corvus' fingers. He snatched the pipe from her lips.

"What..." she began.

"No more freebies," said Corvus. "That one will give you plenty to think about."

They entered a new aisle of shelves. "Here," said Corvus. "I'll only be a moment." Taking his pipe firmly between his teeth, he climbed up one of the rolling ladders and returned moments later with an exceptionally heavy tome. "Forgive my forwardness, but am I correct that you recently miscarried your first child?"

Melina stiffened. "Yes. Why?"

He turned the book's spine so that Melina might read it. It read *Odes to Life by the Stillborn*.

Tears filled her eyes.

"I thought..." Corvus handed her the book. "Well. I'll be in the next aisle when you're finished."

Some minutes later Melina laid a hand on the seated librarian's shoulder. Corvus looked up from a book and closed it. "*The Collected Love Letters of Devil and Deity*. Dense, even for me." He produced a handkerchief for her eyes and commenced relighting his pipe. Melina knelt down to the librarian, stayed his nervous hands, and kissed him.

He returned her kiss meekly and withdrew. "You boy was quite the poet, wasn't he?" She nodded. "But that wasn't *the* book, was it?"

"No."

"Well. Let's keep searching."

Soon, arms around one another's shoulders, they found it. Corvus stooped and took it from the bottom shelf, a tattered volume almost small enough to fit into a breast pocket. He raised an eyebrow, handing it to her. The cover read *To Resuscitate a Dying World*.

Melina thumbed through the pages. "This is it."

Corvus shook his head. "Such books are sour in the mouth and sweet in the stomach, and mammalian digestion is oh so slow. Society will burn you as a witch and then burn offerings to you as a goddess."

Melina's eyes gleamed. "Will I see you again?"

"Of course. Every book must be returned." Corvus continued speaking, but his voice grew distant and distorted.

Melina awoke. She had an idea.

IV. Libertinage

The libertine reclined against a tree on the outskirts of the park, open paperback across his chest. His polished shoes were crossed, right foot over left ankle, and his checkered socks peaked modestly from the hems of his trousers. His top hat was nearby, as was his pipe and tobacco pouch. These latter two he reached for and commenced to prepare, measuring out some leaf on the cover of his paperback while teething at the pipe stem. Satisfied, he redid the clasp on his pouch and returned it to the same location as the top hat. Now he searched in his breast pocket for a matchbox and found it. A few unhurried steps of the ritual later he was smoking, rolling his cheeks in and out, working as a bellows to keep the flame alive.

This was an advantageous spot. It offered the shade and silence of the park while providing one thus angled with a good look at the tailor's storefront. In and out the Parisian ladies went, some with hair like separate entities that towered over and trailed behind them, others with feet so delicate and proportioned that they made one think of little loaves of bread, still others whose lipstick stained their lips succulent red like the juice of strawberries. He shivered a bit while watching all this, not leering like the peeping tom or glaring like the alley stalker but worshipping as an idolater does, with a covetousness tempered by a sense of unworthiness. He coughed a little bit, having lost his smoking rhythm while in deep thought, and moved his fingers towards his breast pocket again. Instead of reaching inside, he paused—froze, more like—to watch a new woman who the tailor's door had just divulged.

Her face was fair and bore a natural rosy blush, with plump lips hovering somewhere between seriousness and mischievousness. Her bosom, full and broad, was draped in brown locks nearly black that terminated at the first of her

ribs in tantalizing curls. As she turned to the side he could see these same locks stop just before her shoulder blades, which jutted from the material of her dress with unexpected strength, affixed to a cluster of lithe muscles which trickled down her spine even to the small of her back. Her hips were child bearing ones, her buttocks most likely spherical and soft, though the dress obscured this and she was more difficult to make out because she was—leaving!

He nearly dropped his pipe while snatching up his hat and had to return later for his forgotten paperback and tobacco pouch that miraculously hadn't been stolen. He gave chase and gained ground, catching a glimpse of her in the square and taking a shortcut through the apothecary in a bid to come out in front of her. He burst out the backdoor and sheltered his eyes before remembering the hat in his hand and screwing it on his head. He puffed a few times to regain his breath and was just about to indulge in despair when he realized that she might have seated herself on one of the benches just to the side of the apothecary. *Slim chance. Only chance*, he thought as he walked.

For a moment he did not see her, but when he did he quickly averted his gaze, experiencing a combination of nervousness and shame unbecoming a self-styled libertine such as himself. His heart indulged in a few unnecessary syncopations and then quieted, glowing once again with the dark anticipation of lust and the light giddiness of curiosity. He approached sure-footedly and took a seat beside her, leaving enough space between him and her to signify politeness but not disinterestedness.

“Good morning,” he said, studying his nails.

“Evening, actually,” she replied.

“Oh.” He cursed himself. “Right you are.”

“I know.”

He gulped. “I feel as though I have seen you before. Were you in the tailor’s shop, by chance?”

She met his gaze. "Indeed I was."

"And did you procure the lovely dress you are now wearing from there?"

"No."

His mouth turned to cotton at this curt response. He considered for a moment whether to hedge his bet and continue with the tailor strategy or go all in. *Well*, he reminded himself, *I AM a libertine*.

"Forgive me for my white lie. I do in fact *know* that I have seen you before. I was in the park by the tailor's. I...I saw you, and followed because...Well. Because I want to know you."

Her green eyes blinked. "Fine. Buy me supper."

They rose simultaneously.

"Where do you like to eat?" he managed.

She shrugged. "Surprise me."

It is you who surprises me, he thought, not without a little resentment. "I know a place. It is good for talking. Quiet."

She offered him her arm delicately, and he feigned a cough to hide his grin.

The two walked in silence, getting used to one another. The lakefront passed away and was replaced by a maze of concrete, heavy with plumes of smoke and food-smells that wafted from every doorway. Occasionally they would look at one another and smile, small upwards curvatures of the lips which communicated that this silence was not awkward and was in fact quite normal and even enjoyable. Once he pointed out a performer with a trained monkey, and twice she stopped to look at the cheap yet charming trinkets of cart vendors. They sidestepped into a deserted alleyway.

"It is just down here," he said.

She hesitated, then nodded.

The café was less of a building than a hut leaned against another building. It looked comically small from the outside but was surprisingly spacious within. It smelled of wormwood and dried leaves, the latter of which crackled underneath their feet as they entered. The ceiling was a rotten trellis which patterned the clay floor with diamonds of sunlight. He rapped his knuckles on the bar and peered over it.

“Wake up, Gustav. No wonder no one ever comes here.”

The barman snorted in his sleep.

“He likes to sample his wares,” said the Bohemian, “for the customers’ sakes, of course.”

She appraised a venomous green decanter. “What exactly are his wares?”

“Absinthe,” he said, handing her a glass.

“Doesn’t that rot the brain?”

“No, that’s just a rumor started by the wine makers.” He retrieved a vented spoon, a dish of sugar cubes, a pitcher of water, and two glasses from the unlocked cupboard. “First you pour the absinthe,” he said as he splashed her glass, “then you place the spoon on the lip of the glass, on that goes the sugar cube, and then you dribble the cube with water and let it slowly melt.” He tipped the pitcher delicately. “Eventually the green coloration goes milky. Then it is ready to drink.”

She crossed her fingers and observed.

“There. Tell me what you think while I start mine.”

She took the glass gingerly in both hands, holding the base in her left palm, controlling the neck with her right thumb and forefinger. She tilted it back and let the liquid come to her, testing it with her tongue before rolling it into her mouth. “Mmm,” she said appreciatively.

“What does it feel like?” he asked.

“Napping in bed when it’s cold outside.”

"I agree." He wiped off the spoon with a napkin and took a taste of his own. "To me," he said thoughtful, "it is not a drink to get drunk on. It should not saturate the mind," here he motioned to Gustav, "but *uncoil* it."

She considered him. "What do you do?"

"What do I do?" he repeated needlessly. "I am an artist, of course." He waited for her to ask what sort of artist, and when she didn't, said, "I write...mostly. I do a little sculpting as well." *Very little*, said his meager conscience.

"What sort of things do you write?" she asked.

"Oh, poetry and plays, mostly. I have a novel or two up here," motioning to his head, "but I haven't figured out how to extract them yet."

"Recite some of your poetry," she ordered.

"Well...I'm afraid it might offend."

She raised an eyebrow.

"It's rather blasphemous," he explained.

She waited.

"Very well. It goes, 'The truth of religion or lack thereof, Perceivable only to dead eyes' gaze, Tangible to a cadaver's caress, Is a Sphinx-riddle meant for the slain.'" He hesitated. "That is all I can remember."

She kept him waiting as she downed the last of her glass, saying, "I like it," before dabbing her lips with a napkin.

His cold sweat subsided and he suddenly felt very good. "I think the absinthe is working," he said headily. "Let's see what Gustav has for us to eat."

He slipped over the bar and stepped on one of Gustav's fingers as he ransacked the icebox. He placed a block of cheese, a cylinder of salami, a few slices of bread, and an apple atop the bar before surfacing. "Need a fork?" he asked.

She picked up the cheese and tore off a piece, winking at him as she did.

“What about you?” he asked as he selected a piece of bread, “How do you spend your time?”

“Eating my dinners with strangers, apparently.”

“But we aren’t strangers!” he insisted. “You know my profession...my favorite drink...my friend Gustav...”

“I don’t even know your name.”

He paused, thinking back. “Oh. How rude of me. I am Jean-Mark. And you are?”

“Evelyn.”

“Evelyn. *Evelyn*,” he mullied.

“Don’t tell me it is pretty sounding,” she insisted.

“As you like,” he said while taking a bite, “but it is.”

She giggled.

“Now, in all seriousness, it’s only fair that you tell me a little bit about yourself after my soul-baring disclosures concerning alcohol and blasphemy.”

She ran a hand through her hair. “I am fairly boring. That is why I did not give you a real answer. Mostly I spend my days in the library.”

“The library!” he exclaimed, “Never was there a more exciting place! Ah, you should see my childhood room. It has—did have—more books than furniture. Indeed, it had so many books that at times I resorted to using them as furniture! Tell me, do you have a favorite?”

“Well, I might be laughed at by an atheist such as yourself.”

“Ah, but I never called myself an atheist; I called myself blasphemous. There is a difference. The true atheist would not think to blaspheme because he knows it does no good and he’s just talking to himself. The blasphemous blasphemes because he is on such close terms with God that he can critique creation in the hopes of improving it.”

“Well,” she said hesitantly, “in that case...” She leaned in closer to whisper. “I really like Revelation.”

He stared at her disbelievingly. “Who rides the pale horse?”

“Death.”

“And the beast?”

“Babylon.”

He shook his head. “Forgive me for testing you. I could not believe it.”

“That a woman would like Revelation?” she frowned.

“Do you know any others?”

She bit her lip. “No.”

He took a bite out of the apple. “Ecclesiastes is my favorite.”

She took the apple from him. “I don’t like that one.”

He shrugged. “Neither did its author.”

Gustav began to stir. Jean-Mark stepped out of his way as the man slung a gorilla-like arm over the bar and heaved himself to near-standing position.

“Have some water,” said Jean-Mark.

Gustav grunted and drank straight from the pitcher, saying in between gulps, “I just had...the most wonderful dream...”

Jean-Mark patted Gustav on the back. “Well, do tell.”

Gustav belched and wiped off his lips. “I dreamed a lovely maiden was with me, reading me the scriptures and pouring me another glass of ‘green fairy’. The tone of her voice was very caring. It made my head tingle and go a little numb.”

Jean-Mark took the empty pitcher from his friend’s gargantuan hand. “Your dream was only half dream, dear Gustav.” He motioned to Evelyn. “See here the other half.”

The barman turned to Evelyn and went ruddy red. "I'm in no state to be seen by a lady."

"I disagree," said Evelyn, "you look very handsome, in a roguish sort of way."

His ruddiness increased. "Thank you kindly, ma'am." He elbowed Jean-Mark. "You should have warned me."

"Had I warned you," said Jean-Mark as he fished in his pocket, "you would have missed a high-quality dream, and that is a sad thought."

"Mm," Gustav agreed.

Jean-Mark produced a folding pocketknife and cut the salami three ways. One of these he handed to Gustav, who downed it as if it were a single bite.

Evelyn watched the pair. "How did you two meet?"

"We—," they started simultaneously.

Gustav shook his head. "You tell it."

"We were on the streets together when we were lads," said Jean-Mark. "He was born into the predicament; I was not. He showed me how to survive." Jean-Mark brushed a crumb from his mustache. "Through various means, some legitimate, others not, we came to acquire this place. It's not much of a crowd-drawer, as you can see, but it provides our food and clothes."

Evelyn nodded.

The trio fell silent for a moment.

"Well," said Gustav, "I'm off to the bath-house." He looked meaningfully at Jean-Mark. "You two be good."

"A excellent idea, based on the smell of you," Jean-Mark said as he looked away.

Gustav ignored him and gently took Evelyn's hand in his. "It was a pleasure to meet you, ma'am." He kissed the hand and returned it to its original resting place like one would handle a butterfly.

"And you," said Evelyn softly.

Gustav swaggered out of the door and into the alleyway.

“He may be a drunk,” Jean-Mark said as he watched him leave, “but he is one of the truest Christians I have ever met.”

Evelyn’s eyes teared and she moved quickly to wipe them.

“There, now.” Jean-Mark kissed her. “Let me lock the cupboard and we will go.”

“But I do not want to go.”

They kissed again, lingering this time.

“Gustav has a bed in the back...” he said.

“No...” she muttered.

He took her in his arms and set her on the bar, upsetting the decanter of absinthe and dish of ice cubes.

Gustav found them later, fast asleep beside the bar in a makeshift mattress of their intermixed clothes. He took another bottle of absinthe from the cupboard and drank it straight, wincing slightly as he did. He brought the bottle with him and stood over the two lovers, a weird expression flicking on his face between sips. He stooped and caught up Evelyn’s hand, setting the bottle aside so that he might trace the lines of her palm with his calloused finger. He wondered where the syphilitic blemishes would first appear, and thought for a moment of crushing Jean-Mark’s skull with his boot. He retreated, holding his face in his hands. The room turned sideways and he went with it, and he thought as he fell of his favorite book, the book of Psalms.

V. American Knight-Errant: A Portrait of Lance Mason

The boy sits in his backyard sandbox, wreathed by grassy green and haloed in sunlight, eyes and lips communicating a contagious zest for life. My face briefly and inadvertently mimicked his before I returned the picture frame to his mother's almost imperceptibly trembling hand. Her face was haggard but otherwise disconcertingly blank. His father sat slumped beside her with eyes averted towards the window, either scrying clouds or accusing heaven. Outside it was a day not unlike the one depicted by the photograph some twenty years before—warm but not too warm, just right, like Goldilocks' porridge. I blinked away this unaccountably juvenile metaphor until ascertaining its unconscious source—a stack of children's books lovingly displayed on the table before us.

"He was our little bookworm," she laughed, and it was a laugh like the dull drumming of rain on cardboard. "This one was his favorite." She pointed to the most colorful of the collection, a modern adaption of *Saint George and the Dragon*, seeming reluctant to touch it.

"May I?"

She nodded.

Though at first flipping pages with feigned interest, I eventually froze upon a penultimate spread where George and his dragon lie mutually slain and then it is revealed that George was merely wounded. Skipping the final page—Happily Ever After, no doubt—I closed it and returned it to its place. Knight-errantry and chivalry—a childlike world where moral dualities never intermix nor blur except during their glorious combat with one another—was an ideal that mesmerized children and adults alike for hundreds of years. We now call that time the Dark Ages.

Throughout the interview with Mr. and Mrs. Mason it became clear that young Lance's inner world was not irregularly morbid. If anything it was uncommonly rich. His mother describes entire afternoons and evenings of imaginary play grudgingly interrupted by dinner and bedtime. Indoors he needed only a cast of two or three action figures or stuffed animals to conjure up worlds of dizzying complexity. Outdoors a stick for a sword was sufficient. When these pursuits were exhausted it was back to the books. She admits, in hindsight, that his preference for imaginary friends to other children was odd, but it was easily excused as the eccentricity of genius.

She swears he was speaking full sentences some time in his 2nd year, and that often complete strangers would stop in grocery stores or restaurants to incredulously inquire how old he was, having overheard his fully-formed thoughts and vocabulary. At 6 he read *The Hobbit* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* without difficulty, though the racism depicted in the latter was a mystifying concept. Family and friends affirm these claims. "We knew he would be the world's greatest English professor before he could walk," says his aunt.

Indeed, Lance would grow up to display not only an English professor's linguistic aptitude but a professorial incompetence for all things material and practical. His shoelaces went untied until peer pressure forced him to learn how, and the several times his father attempted to explain such esoteric concepts as the difference between a Phillips-head and a flathead, the boy's face would twist up and redden with distress and uncomprehending exertion until both parents concluded that such life lessons could wait another year. The boy's father comments that the child never ran. Physical exertion could only be elicited by metaphysical desire—tearing into a package of recently

delivered Disney movies. Otherwise he was devoutly Daoist in his practice of inaction.

However, this separation from the mundane plane did not result in a sociopathic lack of empathy for the mortals that inhabit it. Quite the opposite—Lance felt deeply about most everything. At 4 the sight of a dead bird fallen from its nest made him inconsolable for the rest of the day. He worked through lunch and dinner to construct a coffin for the departed out of a shoebox, beautifying it with crosses and chi-rhos in crayon. Then, for the rest of the month, he spent his allowance upon birdseed to scatter about the tree for the chick's grieving parents. In his 12th year the running-over of the family dog, a cocker spaniel with a proclivity for escaping fences, required professional counselling. Said counsellor recalls nothing unusual about him.

Thus the difficulty in classifying Lance is clear. His ideal family life and overpowering empathy rule out the accusations levelled at him as a brazen sort of sociopath. Though a monster he certainly became, he was not conventional even in his monstrosity.

Perhaps the best one can do is to hazard that the superhuman strength of his convictions also indicated the inhuman will of his rage. If it was always there, it lied latent until the first day of 2nd grade when Lance was introduced to a new teacher whom we shall call Ms. Harris. It seems the boy took an instant disliking to her, describing to his mother how Ms. Harris' introduction to the class was brusque and boorish, that she unconvincingly insisted that schoolwork was fun but only displayed genuine enthusiasm when it came to explaining the demerit system that would result in more work being given. Shrewd as a serpent yet still innocent as a dove, as a question arose in the boy's mind so did his hand. Ms. Harris nodded condescendingly for him to speak.

“But if schoolwork is fun, why would giving more of it be a punishment?”

Thus the first demerit of the year was awarded.

At this injustice he seems to have learned, as all of us eventually do, what it feels like to hate. Yet, his mother clearly recalls, his greatest frustration was not the tyranny of the teacher but the servility of fellow students, who seemed even at that ripe young age to simply accept and brush off Ms. Harris’ wonton punishments as nothing whilst he reacted by impotently plotting her demise. “How can they just take it?” he sobbed, forming a fist, “from that—that pig!”

The complacency of his fellows led him to write them off as cowards who had no place in his chivalrous world. Though perfectly capable of socializing, he began to elect not to, intentionally taking a lunchroom seat or playground spot as far removed from the inferior as possible. A cafeteria employee recalls the affectation with which the boy would seek out solitude and sit with his back to the rest of society—“Like he had a chip on his shoulder.” Heavy lies the crown.

His parents thought little of it, thinking surely it was just a phase, that Lance would adapt like all children eventually do and learn the valuable lesson that we must put up with those we dislike. Yet no such conformity or surrender comes to mind—his self-imposed exile that first day of 2nd grade seems only to have strengthened with time. His brilliance, his father remarks bitterly, was only matched by his pride.

Leaving the cowards and Ms. Harris’s of the world behind, the family took a summer vacation that year which seems to have been particularly formative for the boy. Making a pilgrimage to sunny Florida, the family elected to forego Disney and Universal for something a bit more edifying—read: high-class. They lodged at Siesta Key in

Sarasota Florida, paying near-daily visits to the beach, Ringling Museum, and Mote Marine Aquarium. Here his father taught him to play chess, an obsessive hobby that would last him the rest of his life. There to, he would have the first of several encounters with what the family calls “His Ladies”—not, unfortunately, a love-interest. Rather, Lance became transfixed at the museum by a rather unappreciated Madonna by Carlo Dolci, called, appropriately enough, “Blue Madonna.” Lance stood before it for nearly 20 minutes, studying it from every angle, insisting that his parents go on rather than let him keep them waiting. Eventually he extricated himself, but only to use his vacation allowance to buy a print of her from the gift shop. Said print even now hangs framed in his familial bedroom alongside Bouguereau’s *Nut-Gatherers* and *Nymphs and Satyr*. To my eyes, there is nothing particularly striking about this Madonna as compared to others. Indeed, this particular portrayal does not even merit an appearance in the comprehensive *The World’s Great Madonnas* by Maus. Clearly, Lance looked at this painting, like everything else in life, through different eyes than the rest of us.

The boy also received his first real scare while on this vacation. Convinced he had glimpsed the friendly sheen of a manatee just yards away, Lance had torn down the beach and into the ocean before anyone could stop him. Moving at such an unaccustomed pace, he clearly missed the posted signs warning of riptide before diving in. Unable to find his manatee, he did find and become embroiled within the terrifying suction of the ocean, wrenching him from the safety of the sandbars. Crying for help, he managed to compose himself enough not to go under, watching at first with bewilderment and then with understanding as his father imitated swimming, not towards the shore, but horizontal to it from the edge of the beach. Lance complied and eventually broke free of the riptide,

prostrating himself upon the shore as though vowing never to leave it again. The boy was solemn for the rest of the day, doubtlessly meditating upon his newly discovered mortality.

In 3rd grade his social cynicism seemed to thaw somewhat, allowing him to take up acting and baseball though still preferring a solitary lunch. His mother notes that, while the boy was accepted within these social circles for his obvious talents, he was never really *included* by the other children. “I would say they respected him, but I’m not sure they ever liked him.” Lance’s father nods. “They wanted him on the stage or the diamond, but the minute those activities were over it was like he didn’t exist.” Neither parent can recall any invitations to birthday parties or sleepovers, though admitting it’s doubtful if Lance would have accepted anyway. He had socially matured, but only in the sense that now rather than manifesting contempt for those he disliked he had grown indifferent to them. If his fellow actors and teammates left Lance alone once their scheduled enterprises were at an end, perhaps it was because they could sense that’s how Lance wanted it to be. When I enquired if this dismissiveness towards others ever led to fisticuffs, his father replied that Lance never had any altercations. I pressed for more. “He wasn’t the kind of kid you’d pick a fight with. He just had a way about him, a way of looking at you.” This same look can be seen in the pictures he posted to social media just before achieving infamy.

4th grade ushered in a new challenge for the boy—learning that he was not as universally great as he perhaps thought himself to be. Math had long been Lance’s least favorite subject, but it was not until this grade that his learning disability was officially diagnosed. The full prognosis was that the boy was “twice-exceptional,” gifted in language and critical thinking but disabled in sequencing, with an ample IQ somewhere around 140. Despite being

confirmed as a possible genius and Mensa-candidate, Lance was crestfallen. A learning disability did not factor into his perfectionist self-image. Almost immediately he took to pondering the ramifications for his future—careers made unobtainable and college entrance exams rendered impossible by his mental flaw. Within a week, he had more or less convinced himself that this rough bit of luck would render his adult life abortive. Though his parents eventually talked him into admitting that he was being overdramatic, it's doubtful if he ever really shook the belief that he was a boy with no future. Nonetheless, middle-school came and went without any flunked math classes, though Lance apparently stayed up all night studying at times just to achieve Cs and Ds in math exams the following day. His mother recalls staying up with him and the look of bewildered agony upon his face as he attempted to understand the incomprehensible. Several times his distress brought her to tears, especially when he would cast a textbook against the wall and berate himself as an idiot, someone who didn't deserve to have been born.

By 6th grade Lance began refusing to attend church with his parents, even on Easter or Christmas Eve. Knowledge of his own fallibility seems to have caused him to doubt the infallibility of God, to the point that by high school he was the sort of militant atheist who, in a social media post about how to “save the country,” listed outlawing the Abrahamic religions as the first step towards utopia. When Christian relatives harangued his post, he replied that if their mediocre minds were the product of a creator they should immediately demand a refund. Clearly Lance was adept at social media and internet trolling, having at last found a medium where he could force others to hear his reason and crush any dissent. He achieved quite an online echo-chamber, garnering far more cyber friends and followers than he ever had in real life. These devotees

to his cult still lurk the internet today, reposting Lance's manifesto as quickly as authorities can take it down and making memes under the hashtag #lordlance that idealize him as he idealized himself—"a warrior in an age of pussies." Hence the numerous copycat acts of vandalism and assault that have occurred since his "martyrdom."

As his online presence increased his high school grades plummeted, and not just in math. Lance began to fail even his favorite subjects like English and History, explaining to his parents that succeeding in "this society" was not worth the effort since the collapse of Western civilization was imminent. In addition to the threat of Abrahamic believers—particularly Jews and Muslims—Lance pointed fingers at illegal immigration, multiculturalism, national debt, centralized banking, homosexuality, and overpopulation as reasons to be preparing for the apocalypse rather than college. In a rare moment of softness towards Christianity, Lance wrote in his manifesto that "America's Founding Fathers—even the deists among them— thought this country would only last as long as its Caucasian Protestant culture. They were aware that white protestants are the only persons cultured enough to bear the responsibility of almost limitless freedom, and that any significant mongrelizing of the American population would cause those freedoms to become counter-productive, allowing the uncultured whims of lesser races to dominate and eventually destroy our society. Their greatest mistake was not to outlaw slavery from the very start. Like the Spartans they grew economically dependent upon a Helot-class, and as the Helots continually menaced Sparta so too do our brown comparables now menace the United States." Strong words, but one wonders if they, like most of his high school activities and beyond, were a form of compensation. After all, how much racial or religious pride can a young man have who declared online that no smart person would

ever marry or have children and who did not belong to the very Protestant culture he championed?

His compensation was not limited merely to typed rants; as the boy entered his mid high school years he took up weightlifting, not just as a hobby, but as an obsession. It seems that he lifted for almost two hours most every day from the age of 16 onwards—a reckless amount according to professional lifters, who take days off to avoid muscle injury. Shortly before his heinous act, he boasted online that he could deadlift 350 pounds and bench-press 200. What remains to be seen is from whence the sudden interest in physique—hitherto disregarded—originated. Some speculate that he was committed to his “martyrdom” by the age of 16, and thus spent 6 years preparing for it physically. However, a quick glance at Lance’s bookshelf left me with a different theory. His collection of books did not show any inclination towards completionism in the sense that he rarely owned everything that a single author had written. However, he came very close with the now somewhat obscure author Yukio Mishima, a rightwing Japanese novelist and playwright who died by ritual suicide after attempting a military coup to restore Imperial Japan post-World War 2. Mishima’s biographies, and his own non-fiction work entitled *Sun and Steel*, reveal a fanatical devotion to weightlifting. Additionally, Mishima was a homosexual.

I mention the latter because, although Lance regaled online subscribers with tales of his heterosexual conquests, so far there is no evidence that any such interactions occurred. Indeed, attempts to find incidents of Lance showing any interest at all in females are suspiciously sparse, especially for a not unhandsome young man who by his late teenage years was muscle-bound and exceedingly confident—or so he presented himself. Hence many writers, myself not necessarily included, have placed the blame for

his actions partially upon homosexual repression and self-loathing.

Tangible evidence for his commitment to kill and die appeared shortly before his 20th birthday when he purchased the AR-15 rifle he would eventually utilize. His trips to the shooting range began to almost equal his trips to the gym—the owner of the range recalls him as a quiet, respectable young man. When I asked for an estimate of how often Lance would visit and how many rounds he would usually purchase, the range owner replied “roughly three times a week” for “several hours,” purchasing and then expending some “300 or 400 rounds” per visit. Others, including ballistics analysts, testify that he was very proficient after two years of this trigger-time regimen, eventually hitting the center-mass of his moving human targets roughly 86% of the time. Not bad for someone without military or law-enforcement instruction.

Ammunition, of course, is not cheap, so whence came the funding for his zealous gym and range hours? His parents accept the blame. Though they did not allow Lance to be a complete mooch—insisting that he find at least part-time work—his job bagging groceries hardly covered the gas to get to and from work, much less the thousands of dollars for his gym membership and ammunition expenditure. When I asked why they were unconcerned by his choices in hobbies, his parents replied that they were merely relieved that he had found some purpose or passion. If the gun fetish concerned them at first, their concern was suicide, not mass-murder. After all, this was the boy who buried fallen sparrows and was inconsolable over the death of a pet dog. To his mother and father, his violence seemed permanently internalized, perhaps guaranteeing self-destruction but certainly not suggesting the inclination to take others with him. They believed his conscience was too strong for that. “There’s a part of me that still doesn’t

believe it," his father says earnestly. "When I got the call I was sure he'd shot himself—not others."

So I asked them the question that media professionals and social media commentators alike have asked. If they saw warning signs, why didn't they insist he get help? They shake their heads, seemingly unable to answer. "Hindsight is 20/20," I offer. They nod appreciatively. From hearing their testimony firsthand, I can somewhat sympathize with their indecisiveness. Lance was an unstoppable force. The only thing that seemed capable of bringing him to heel was the immovable object he eventually sought out.

At 21 the Lance his parents had known seems to have disappeared completely, replaced by a sort of specter whose blank stare discomfited grocery shoppers and coworkers alike. With shift's end this look would morph into a wry smirk of demonic enthusiasm as he made his way to the range and then the gym, never speaking except when paying his tab and coming home smelling like hell itself—a musk of gunpowder and sweat. His father recalls one evening in particular when he caught sight of his now-grown son coming in through the doorway, haloed by the light of the moon. Muscles bulging and gun case looming, he had remarked to Lance that he should speak to a military recruiter. "They'd take you in a heartbeat," he said. "You'd be great at it." Lance just glared and pushed his way past, but not before muttering "fuck the government" with conviction.

After a shower and a loving ritual of rifle maintenance, Lance would conclude the day with several hours of social media, typing long past the witching hours. From 20 to 22 years of age, it's estimated that Lance posted over 10,000 times on various forums and groups, delivering multi-paragraph lectures on every topic imaginable so long as it related in some way to violence or discontent.

Eloquent and compelling though often contradictory, Lance accumulated an accolade-studded resume for the position of rightwing demagogue. Most telling though are not the praises of his sycophants but the prescience of his detractors. “You’re scary dude,” wrote one, “You should seek help.” Lance’s reply was uncharacteristically terse—“I know.”

By 22, Lance also knew the when and where of his murderous magnum opus, writing that “someone should give those towelheads a taste of their own medicine” by “lighting up a mosque.” He concluded this particular post with a nod to the chivalrous Catholic Crusades, sarcastically repeating “Deus Vult!”, Latin for “God Wills [it].” In his manifesto he would expound upon his plan, mentioning that once he was done with the “towelheads” he would shift to gunning down Jews. Considering the mosque he chose was only 3 blocks removed from a Jewish seminary, this may have been more than an idle threat.

Thus, on a chilly Friday morning in early November, Lance ran his father’s truck through the entrance of a local Mosque, killing half a dozen instantly, including the only posted security guard. From there he exited the pinned vehicle by kicking out the windshield, opening fire while still prone on the hood, reloading for the first of many times as he dropped to the ground and began more carefully placing his shots. He concentrated most of his fire towards the sanctuary’s emergency exit doors which he had blocked beforehand, shifting his aim only when desperate persons attempted to charge him. These he slew with more firepower than necessary, unloading entire magazines into them after they went down. Once so many bodies had accumulated about the exits that the remaining survivors gave up attempting to escape, Lance placed his rifle upon the hood of the car and drew a *wakizashi*, or Japanese short-sword, from his belt. He then stalked the sanctuary,

slashing and stabbing remaining survivors, usually at the throat or belly. His swordsmanship indicated some study of Japanese fencing, another arguable nod to his literary idol Mishima. By the time SWAT arrived only 5 souls out of 37 remained who were neither killed nor gravely wounded—most of them hidden from Lance’s view under the piles of corpses. Officers report that they only fired at Lance when he ignored their orders to drop his sword and stop attempting to decapitate the mosque’s already-slain imam. They hit him over a dozen times, but miraculously he remained standing for a few seconds with dripping sword held aloft. Officers knew immediately that he was not dead due to the sound their bullets made upon impact. “*Ping, ping, ping,*” one of them demonstrates, “metal on metal.” Unbelievably, Lance was wearing 110 pounds of steel plating under his magazine-laden trench coat—similar to the crude bulletproofing that Clint Eastwood’s character utilized in *Fistful of Dollars*. Unlike that movie, which sits upon Lance’s DVD shelf, the rig did not render him invincible, but it did save his life. He was taken unconscious to the hospital and treated for minor internal bleeding caused by blunt force trauma; the steel of his own rig had ballooned inwards under the pressure of the officers’ rounds, cracking several of his ribs.

By the time I was allowed to speak with Lance, he had made a full recovery. He sat across from me, chained to a floor-bolted chair, looking just as strong, if a bit paler, than the shirtless glamour shots he had posted online the night before his attack. I asked him how he was being treated in prison. He laughed. “Pretty good. They leave me be, which I like.” By “they” Lance meant the guards, for he is not a part of the general prison population. This is due to three factors—the likelihood of his being murdered by minority inmates, the equal likelihood of his being accepted by and empowering the white supremacist inmates, and

finally the plea bargain he struck, pleading guilty in return for guaranteed solitary confinement, access to the prison library, and a chess set. Lance is the first inmate in the nation's history to cut a deal which *requested* solitary confinement. When I mentioned this to him he shrugged. "I'm a private guy. I prefer books and my own thoughts." I asked him what he was reading at the moment. "*The Satanic Bible*." I saw that he was toying with me and called him on it. "Well, that's what your readers would expect, right?" I told him to give people more credit. "Hm," he intoned, leaning down towards his shackles so as to scratch his head. "The *other Bible*," he said as he straightened. I asked him which part. "I jump back and forth. Compare the Old Testament prophecies to their fulfillment in the Gospels." I enquired if he was considering conversion. He smirked. "No. I just find it fascinating that someone would devote their whole life to hoaxing the fulfillment of ancient texts. There are easier ways to get famous." Like his own way, I asked? "Am I famous?" he asked innocently. "I don't have internet access." I repaid his sarcasm by changing the subject, enquiring what was up with his bandaged knuckles. "Just sparring," he replied. With whom? "No one but myself." Later, my photographer was allowed to take a picture of Lance through the plexiglass pane of his solitary cell. He grins beside a cot laden with books and a busily configured chess-set, readying to strike the wall with bare fists. The intended panel is already hued with rust-colored blood. I shook my head while looking on. There in his 6x9' cell, safe from the rest of society, Lance seemed at peace.

AFTERWORD

Christopher is a humble student of lifting and literature. He is 23 years old and lives with his beloved grandparents, parents, brother and dogs in Texas.

Feedback?

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w/ "Work and Will" in Subject.