

Interregnum: Fifteenth Week's Summary

Tant'è amara che poco e piu morte;
ma per trattar del ben ch'i'vi trovai,
diro de altre cose ch'i'v'ho scorte.

(It is so bitter death is hardly more so.
But to set forth the good I found
I will recount the other things I saw.)

Canto I

La lena m'ara del polmon si munta
quand'io fui su, ch'i'non potea piu oltre,
anzi m'assisi ne la prima giunta.

And there I felt my lungs so sucked of breath
that I could go no farther,
but sat down as quickly as I could.

Canto XXIV

Dante Aligheiri, trans. Robert and
Jean Hollander
The Divine Comedy, Inferno

I should perhaps confess to at least one of the methodologies that I use to provoke these prodigious Rock Gazing Texts. I offer only a provisional explanation, since it is by no means certain that any of my oddball gyrations are even tangentially causal. Perhaps they are something akin to obsessive coincidences, chaotic coincidings of resonant madness pirouetting in a maddened envelope of time and flame. But one fecund technique works as follows: I imagine two of the stones placed side by side, sort of like a dead or sleeping figure-eight. Imagination is the key, since the actual stones are not involved. But insofar as I have looked at each stone so often, I can easily conjure up a mental image of any of the seven, and I then use my intuition — OK, whim — to decide which two stones I will select for the exercise. The choice, in retrospect, is always important. But only in retrospect. Then, with the mental picture of the two stones hovering before me like two eyes, I slowly, ever so slowly, start to slide them together in my mind. What happens at this point is that where the stones overlap they become crystallized, transparent, with a transparency that is, however, boiling with activity. When the two stones are completely merged into this cauldron, I mentally scoop a small hole in the center of my forehead, sort of like those old-fashioned lead molds for fishing shots or bullets, and I pour the bubbling *prima materia* into the cavity. While this procedure is taking place, I think of a target date and time, and just as the last drop of opalescence descends into my skull, I mentally say the word “Please.” What happens then? Words pour out. Thus the Rock Gazing Texts are born. The technique is easy. Anyone can do it — or perhaps not. The 19th century Dada humorist Alfred Jarry

invented something that he called “pataphysics,” which he defined as follows. “Pataphysics is the science of that which is superinduced upon metaphysics, whether within or beyond the latter’s limitations, extending as far beyond metaphysics as the latter extends beyond physics. Example: an epiphenomenon being often accidental, pataphysics will be, above all, the science of the particular, despite the common opinion that the only science is that of the general.” Jarry’s ridiculous field of study is conceived as being entirely comprised of exceptions and accidents, it’s one rule: anything that follows a rule or a pattern is either not part of the field or has not been fully understood. Pataphysics is “the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments.” If in some conceivable future, an archeologist of the insane should unearth the lead box where this manuscript will have been preserved, and he or she attempts this technique successfully, than my whole theorem of a supernumerary science and cosmos will collapse. When this occurs, even the most outlandish histories of the characters and events of the Rock Gazing Texts will be seen as belonging to the same universe which contains such absurdities as a George W. Bush presidency, fundamentalist Christian and Capitalist belief systems and peacekeeping with nuclear bombs. There is a trick of thought or of words here that is not easy to catch, but by the time the reader or listener discovers it, it will be too late. He or she will be trapped eternally in the world of the pataphysicist and will have to both accept and tolerate its weirdnesses without recourse to escape. They will henceforth be consigned to a prison constructed entirely of windows and doors, which will all open out onto shifting irreplicable scenes. They will live, in short, as I now live, thrashing and fluttering about in their own essential freedom like a housefly in a hurricane.

So my life is a bit strange. Whose isn’t? But it’s not so bad. Consider this: suppose you could knit the raveled tartan of your frayed nerves into the softest of comforters by doing the simplest of things. No pills, all natural, totally safe, no salesman will call. Take care of an animal. Me, I cared for three: Diva, John Wayne and myself. John Wayne is starting to heal up now and fill out after a week of food, brushing and a little snip-snip at the vet to curb his hormonal distractions. He’s quite a lovely and adoring fellow, good company on my morning runs, gentle, eager to please. Although it took him a few days to stop fearfully hugging the walls whenever Diva nailed him sideways with her lightning bolt gaze. But he adds something, something that put me over a threshold and brought me to a quiet realization. This week I beheld the hypnotic jewel that in my former life was entirely chimerical and of which my poor, harried, suburban neighbors seem not to have the slightest hope of glimpsing: namely, the diamond “peace.” These last few days I have slipped into a comfortable routine comprised of the conscious breathing exercises, my sun-gazing, a morning jog, the sweeping and cleaning of my very barren and Zen-like living quarters, the taking of simple meals of fruits and vegetables, and a lot of sitting, Diva in my lap, John Wayne at my side, often settled before the armoire and its broken, but curiously healing mirror. For days it has seemed as if my only function were the gentle absorption of the passing minutes and hours. In the evenings, I devote myself to the Rock Gazing Exercises and the production of the Texts in the manner alluded to above. At night, I sleep and dream. The city’s din recedes in the background. While my own mind-chatter about money, about my former life with Maya, about my pending legal

confrontations, about my anxieties concerning the Crystal Skull coven, about my evil political and environmental premonitions, all of these bickerings on the surface of my supposedly tumor-ravaged brain, sink slowly, and with even a certain sense of floating gracefulness, down, down into the starry basin of my awareness, down where a scintillating satiny darkness exists, punctuated here and there by powdery constellations of slowly dancing stars. It is lovely. And the rooms of the house take on a kind of blue and silver softness, a sheen seen here and there in the clean hardwood floors, on the subtle irised walls, on the few small objects that I still possess — the little lacquerware bowl, the pot of iridescent soil with Esclarmonde's magic shard of quartz, and especially on the fur of my companions. The weather outside — the rain, the clearings, the mists, the fogs, the subtle changes of heavenly light, whether of the sun or of the moon, burnishing the unseen, upper stories of the clouds and the city's haze — all these delicate transmutations seep their luster across the rooms, broken by the wind-harped motions of the winter barren trees, by the dimming and brightening lights of the mercury street lamps, by the sudden, shimmering passages of the headlights of slow-moving neighborhood cars, searching for home, searching for darkness, searching for rest. These rhythms, like the irregular, but soothing, sounds of distant surf, sing the oddest and most touching duets with the beating of my heart, the two voices, outer and inner, making a single multivalent hush that says, minute by minute, hour after hour: "You are safe. You are safe. You are safe." And sometimes, immersed in this mantra, it seems as if it were really so: that the world, even my little chaotic corner of it, is a cushion of subtle delight, not dreamy, nor misty, but nevertheless soothing, a jewel that rests in the forehead of the dreadful basilisk of history and makes its hissing menace song. Never mind that the seven rocks have shown me massive earthquakes this week in India and El Salvador. Never mind the unheeded prayers of mothers whose children are buried beneath fallen stones. Never mind the deceit of the new crop of tars emerging in Washington, John Ashcroft pledging his liberal values to Justice and George Dubya's bumbling drivel being scrivined and blared in the country's mass media as if it were sense and not a warning siren of the hideousness to come. Never mind all that. The earth shares a pulse with the sun and the sun shares a pulse with the galaxy's calm heart, and we are a part of that music, forever and always a part. "The rest," to quote an eloquent insurance man, "is rot."

But towards the end of the week, as the moon rounded nearer to the full, that rot begin to creep around the edges of my tranquility and to summon me into its cess of civil stink. I got a call from the ever solicitous Frank Miller reminding me that I had still to contend with the charges pending from my altercation with my blood-and-saliva brother, the now distant and desert-dwelling Lamar. Frank had arranged a meeting for me with my lawyer, and all that I had to do was to position my poor body in the intersection of the appropriate place and time, and the wheels — or is it gears? — of Justice would do the rest. Whether I was to be carried to freedom like a rescued damsel in its saving car or crushed beneath its juggernaut-like passage was still an open question, and no attempts at prognostication on my part could seem to resolve the issue. Thus, once again, caught in the snares of contemporary, I submitted myself to the mystery of the times, and drove to downtown Houston, to meet with one Richard "Dick" F. Flamm, *Esq.*, my court-

appointed Virgilian guide through the sinking malebolge of the Texas Criminal Justice System.

I had no sooner gotten out of the car in the parking garage, and was picking the foam-crumbs of my heat-split car seats from my sweat pants, when the realization of my appearance harpooned me — my dandelion-seed hair and beard, my sweat pants and pink sweatshirt, which now, due to my continued exercise and pure diet, fit me like a potato sack on a toothpick, the pants no doubt destined to fall to earth as the stars in the apocalypse, if it were not for the bulge of my adult diapers — Good God! — ‘look around you, Roy, these are men driving BMWs, Mercedes, Porches. They dress in suits and carry briefcases. They are going to lock you up on sight, or shoot like a varmint for the bounty!’ And sure enough, the parking garage — with its cement oppressiveness, its fumes of burning ancient death, its dripping leaks around the rusty orifices of re-bar cavities, its echoing car-tire screeches — completely and hellishly endorsed the worst of my run-away terrors. I was already inside the belly of the beast, eaten alive, and now the only question that remained was how I would be digested. My appointment was on the eighth floor of the Court House Annex — but this was one of those boondoggles of modern design where you have to go down to go up — and the men descending with me in the garage elevator all had that preoccupied, predatory look of human beings that have transformed themselves into agendas. Their eyes were pointedly non-committal, open, but looking neither at the outer nor the inner world. They seemed rather more like signs posted on the concertina wire of some condemned piece of government property, whose sole purpose was to warn would-be intruders to ‘keep out.’ It occurred to me in a certain macabre moment of escalating angst that their briefcases were filled with instruments of restraint or torture — perhaps handcuffs, cattleprods, pepper spray, knouts, thumbscrews, maybe even human body parts! One false word or move, and you’re up against the wall, you non-conformist criminal bastard, tasting the business end of a blackjack or caving in to a rabbit punch to the kidney delivered by a ring of brass knuckles. As the elevator sunk, making that clicking, creaking sound that elevators make as they labor, all of us crowded together, studying our shoes, smelling each others smells, I decided to make a joke to break the tension. “I guess you are wondering why I’ve ask you all here today.” I quipped in an authoritative voice. A couple of nose-snorts snorted from the confined assemblage. Was it nervous laughter or indignation? I decided to keep my mouth shut for the rest of the ride down, and tried to think of Diva and John Wayne. No matter what happened, I kept reminding myself, I would be home this afternoon to feed them, and to be comforted by their divine, innate beneficence. Inside the Annex, on the elevator ride back up to the eighth floor — up? down? — it was all a descent to me — I decided to adopt the non-committal posture of my fellow passengers, and act as if I were an inanimate object, *i.e.*, as if I had a part in the play, at least as furniture for the stageset. I wanted to say, with my eyes, if not with my attire, “Nothing to fear here. I am a normal functionary of the system, an undercover agent dressed for a role. No need for alarm. This is only a costume.” The ruse seemed to work. No one took the slightest notice of me.

When I was spewed from the elevator on the 8th level, I could see why. The whole place was a freakshow, a menagerie of misfits whose troubled and bizarre constituents were

being herded about by uniformed deputies and more men in suits. I had finally found my place in society: untamable circus animal, one who would no longer be allowed to perform with the other “normal” animals and would henceforth be confined to the world of urine soaked stalls and surly, bored, perhaps even sadistic, keepers. I made my way down the corridor as innocuously as I could, trying to mimic that non-committal posture and gaze that I had seen so expertly performed by the elevator people. When I found the door whose frosted glass window was labeled “Richard F. Flamm, Esq.,” I was dismayed to find its pane dark and its latch locked. I was sure that I was on time — see, I can be a very good circus animal — but Mr. Flamm was late. I found a seat on one of the hallway benches near the office, and settled down to wait. The couple — the only really honest-looking people in the place — who were already seated there, seemed not too pleased to have me join them. I could sense them scrunching closer together and away from me. I smiled weakly in their direction to assure them, perhaps unsuccessfully, of my benign nature. They may have interpreted my smile as a sneer, or perhaps my grid face-writing was manifesting itself again. At any rate, my appearance, unfortunately, was speaking for itself. I thought about addressing them. But my previous failure at making a bon mot in the elevator convinced me that it was best to remain silent, to only discreetly observe, to only unobtrusively listen. And what did I see and hear? In the corridor, barely controlled mayhem, in the couple — well, I’ll reserve their story for its chronological place a little later in this narrative. First the corridor, a place that was soon to erupt in not so very surprising violence.

For me, in this instant, there came a painful meshing of outer and inner worlds, wherein the outer world, the one which everyone accepts, prompted grotesque imaginings. The long, brown corridor with its hapless, netherworld denizens became a coiled landscape, an amphitheater in ruins, riven by pits. Here, each person burrowed for a seditious solace or poisonous sustenance, each one finding his or her place in the pocky, downward-spiraling funnel and extracting from its contagion an appropriate appeasement, a punishment to fit the crime. Each one seemed a maggot devouring a precisely fitted channel in the decaying flesh of society for an inconceivable metamorphosis. There were, of course, diverse specimens of disintegration arranged within this sinkhole. But each one had practiced, and was still practicing, some malicious and corrupting fraud. Each one had twisted the true face of the soul into a distorted mask, hoping by this trickery to deceive both society and self and gain by deceit some coveted crust of bread. This was the compost of the Courts, where the Justice of wayward humans squirmed its foul roots and undermined its own foundations.

I saw the tatters of men and women whose faces seemed sticky with a kind of subcutaneous smegma, as if some libidinous cheese festered just below the surface of their flesh and lashed them on to pander and seduce. Whether these were pimps or prostitutes or couples being torn by the taws of divorce, I could only guess. But each had been flayed by some perverted act of sex, and as the whip cuts closed, abscesses had formed beneath the scars, roiling with unregenerate crudity. They all burned inwardly, and I could feel that burning, feel it in my own relationship with Maya, in my own losses and loneliness. The cries of their fury and dejection were my cries, too, and like them, I struggled deceptively to hide these outbursts, to choke them back to silence, to smother

their obscenities in some socially slick acceptable verbiage. Suddenly I understood that I was here for a reason, and not simply to answer the charges stemming from by brouhaha with Lamar. The corridor had opened its scatophagic jaws, and I, along with all of these others, be they defendants or functionaries, had become its loathsome food. The language in the hallway was a coarse babble of obscenities and blasphemies, vituperation and expletive, sharp orders and defiant refusals, smarmy legalese and smut. But it was honest, honesty here appearing as shit and not as the porcelain polished flattery that passes for discourse in civil society, where words are corrupt persuaders entirely camouflaged to lure, to deceive, to snare. It was ugly, but it was true, true in a way that the nose knows truth, reptilian, obvious and obscene. The words were appropriately disgorged with their accompanying odor. The place stunk. It reeked of body odor, of street-corner designer-perfume knock-offs, of cleaning fluid, of halitosis and of chemical breath-fresheners. It stunk of urine, of intestinal gas, of feces, of blood, of uterine slough. (I shifted my buttocks a little on the bench at this point to check for any dampness, and breathed into my hand to test the blowback — always the fearful question of the outcast: “Is it me?”) But it was not me, or not me alone. It was the whole place. The corridor stunk of other things, too. Things not so easily cataloged, but still palpably and materially present. It stunk of fear, rage, boredom, hopelessness, power, money, mendacity — all those distinctly human stenches which the oldest part of the brainstem cannot attach to things or animals or situations, but which nevertheless blares to the whole body: fight, run, kill, die. There were, like me, ragged people galore, some barefoot, some even on crutches or stumps, some in p-farm issued jump-suits, some in bargain store t-shirts and sweatclothes advertising the wares of their oppressors. But there were others too, not quite so obviously immersed in suffering, and yet their smells betrayed them. Some of these were the entities in uniform — the police, the deputies, the matrons, the bailiffs of the system. And, of course, there were those ubiquitous men in suits and also the emperors of suffering — those mantled in heavy black judge’s robes. (I could not help noticing that those in these latter two groups seemed to be running as if with burning feet, so eager or so driven were they to fulfill the ideals of justice, so alacritous in collecting the mites of the poor, and dispensing to them the blessings of extreme unction. It was touching to see these priests of the legal church turn themselves metaphorically upside down for their downtrodden clients, as if it were they who were soon to be drowned in tears.) Like bettors at the track before a race is run, these halls were filled with fortune tellers, those with their eyes fixed firmly on a vainly desired future. Lawyers, clients, defendants, plaintiffs — I could hear snippets of their talk and it was all the babble of diviners. “The Judge will never allow this motion.” “The defendant will be remanded to custody.” “The jury will never buy it.” “Will, will, will, will, will” . . . as if that litany of desperate volition could brighten the coming blackness of events. But for all their forward looking statements, even their postures, even the backs of their heads, their skulls tightening with fear and uncertainty, told a different story. While their turned-forward masks told bald-faced lies, behind them a whole visage of unspoken gestures was puckering into form. Sweat dabbled their hair and inched down the backs of their necks and trickled in their buttersacks, as if the tears denied their eyes had found other, more secret, but less perverted orifices. There were other litanies, too, phrases that stuck like hot pitch in the throats of so many, that no matter how often they spit them out, the words still clung to these painted people, forcing ungodly repetitions. “For a fee,”

being the phrase that seemed grafted on every tongue, not openly, but clandestinely, whispered in sniveling asides, just out of earshot of the angels, but embedded into the very floors and walls, so that the entire corridor, for all of its official-looking propriety, took on the leaden weight of hypocrisy, which made the very air laborious to breathe. I looked around, and saw that no matter how frenzied their activity, there remained in each person a tiredness, a pulling down of the muscles around the eyes, a hangdog expression around the mouth, as if each of them were not so much walking on the brown asphalt of the tile floor but had become a part of it, a fleck of dirty pattern that was to be trod upon by thousands, each crushed with a weight equivalent to several atmospheres of deceit. ‘What deal will you make?’ ‘What swap will bring you deliverance?’ ‘What innocence will you murder to be free?’ These were the thoughts that drove them round and round.

I had been so absorbed in the general atmosphere of this inferno that it was not until a specific group of three was standing almost on top of me that I began to take notice of them. In nests of vipers vipers hide themselves. But these three now, with their forked, but ear-poisoning arguments, commenced, as it were, to slither, into my undefended sphere of attention, and without trying to eavesdrop, I began, against my will, to be subjected to the convolutions of their insults. I gathered that what I was seeing was a couple, draped in his and hers outfits, whether a man and his wife, or co-conspirators, or co-defendants, I could not, from their spitting invective discern. The third one with them I guessed was their attorney. If I seem tentative in my speculations, ambiguous in my descriptions, it is because the action and the noise that hissed from these three plagues were so quick in their loathsome mutations that the entire sequence of events in the next few squirming moments became a blur of inner and outer perceptions in which clarity died in flame and flame expired in drifting, brownish ash. Even as I write this, the paper that tries to accurately depict what was is quickly consumed in a writhing holocaust. The man looked to be in his mid-thirties, Fubu-attired in one of those voluminous synthetic-fiber jump-suits which look as if they can hold two or three people and which serve their wearers so well as weapons closets. There was a lot of ambiguity concerning where the human was lurking inside this tent, which was black and blue and emblazoned with the logo of some sports team — specifically the Arizona Diamondbacks. Thus, it was difficult to tell just where the limbs of the person might be hiding within the reptilian folds, and even more critically, as it would shortly be made apparent, what might be hidden in there with him. Male Diamondback had tight “permed” hair that looked as if it had been coiled in a grease pit, His handsomely-toned ebony skin was unfortunately flaking off his forehead and cheeks in some kind of eczema, or perhaps they were scratch-tracks healing or trying to heal. It may be that he wore a beard, or it may be that his numerous razor bumps had only darkened his neck to give the impression of one. His eyes were horned-over by sunglasses, and his mouth was fixed in an unreadable expression that looked as if it were as inflexible as bone. Initially he seemed as imperturbable as a gator sunning itself on a sandbar, or rather the effigy of a gator, tricked out by some creative taxidermist to mimic something that had once been alive, but which had long since been hunted down and killed. Lady Diamondback was dressed identically, permed the same, even seemed subject to some of the same skin adhesions. But she was made-up in the feminine version of the outfit, with a scoop of rouge make-up dolloped on her high-cheek bones, a choker of fat fake pearls, and an expressive mouth

slicked over with a neon orange-pink lipstick. She was pretty, or had a shot at being pretty, before the advertisers had hawked her chem-fab and face-paint. But, unlike her cold, still mate, this one was hot and wild. I had been surveying the corridor with a curious eye, sweeping over the visual buildingscape as a way to pass time and judgements while waiting for my attorney. A few steps deeper in the corridor, beyond the Diamondbacks and their advocate, was a rather slovenly looking lawyer with a bulging briefcase and a load of dog-eared files under his free arm. This one, who looked as if he could dissolve any moment into a gravy of utter apathy, was having a laconic conversation with a police officer. And beyond these two, on the opposite side of the hallway, more of the damned were arranged along the benches, while the passageway itself was frenetic with the slitherings of messengers, bailiffs, juries, cops and scofflaws. But there was something in the Diamondback couple that made the little soft, blond hairs at the base of my tailbone tingle, something that prompted millennia-old ganglia to tense my muscles while forcing my vision and hearing into a tunnel. Lady Diamondback was giving the man hell, mostly utilizing the word “mothafucker.” But my growing focus and intensity, however, began to anxiously derive from this paucity of vocabulary a whole story of thievery and betrayal. In a fractured second, my lower brain stem had whirred into high gear and was flooding my body with super-sensate signals. Male Diamondback, although seemingly placid, was giving off subtle but very definite advisories of some coming hair-trigger hurricane. The shiny creases of his synthetic jump-suit began to assume more angular shapes, the pulse in his neck was quickening and his skin was starting to glisten. Outwardly he seemed oblivious to her tirade, but a whole repertoire of aggressive messages were racing through his capillaries as fires race pellmell down powdered fuses. Their lawyer must have felt it too, because he started to inchingly wedge his bulky body between them, trying to form a shield between her verbal provocations and her mate’s escalating yet mostly secreted fury. There were two or three ticks of the clock that seemed like eternities while her invective kept up its battering insistence, and in those few seconds my whole body coiled. The honest-looking woman on the bench next to me, who only a few minutes before had scrunched away, now moved nearer, and I could see in a blur of peripheral vision that her small white hands were clenched in fists with her thumbs taking cover inside them. The whole corridor seemed to freeze for an instant and a scent filled my nostrils that told me to kick-start my body. Acting instinctually even before the flash of his knife started its roundhouse orbit, I pulled the woman beside me back with a violent jerk, just as Male Diamondback’s arm, seeking to slash his mate around the body of the lawyer, whipped by us. Male Diamondback had crouched and coiled in a furious snap, and his mate, just as deft and lightning-reflexed, leapt back around the lawyer, as a prey animal might keep the trunk of a tree between itself and a predator. As the knife shot by me, I latched onto the arm that held it, and moving with great speed and force in the same direction that the blade was already darting, diverted its trajectory sideways away from its target, and rode the much larger body of Male Diamondback to the floor. I had the whole weight of my body on the man’s wrist and when we hit the tile floor, a bone snapping WHAP! launched the knife free to fly through the corridor. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the lawyer with the laconic manner decked by the cop who reflexively acted to save him, his briefcase and files shooting high into the air, its hundreds of sheets of documents crisscrossing on airwakes as they settled to the floor. The force of our crashing to earth jarred me free of

Male Diamondback and sent me rolling like a hedgehog down the corridor, while, Male Diamondback, weaponless, but still lethal, grabbed the leg of Lady Diamondback and brought her down with a large balloon-popping WHOOMP!, square on her buttocks. My whirling momentum had tossed me to my feet, and I swiveled and saw that Male Diamondback and his Lady were going at it so fiercely that it was impossible to tell where one of their bodies ended and the other began. By now both the cop and the Diamondback's lawyer had entered the fray and were trying to pull this single serpent apart, but for a few desperate moments, every time they tore a wound of daylight between the two, the couple's fury sealed it up again. Meanwhile the lawyer who had been knocked on his ass by the cop as the knife sailed by them, had stood up amidst the now settled paper ruins of his files and was repeating something slowly and monotonously, as if the violence had severed some connection between his head and the rest of his traumatized body, so that now, the disembodied head, like a flickering lantern swaying in a stormwind, kept speaking the most incongruous set of words. Suddenly the clarity of perception that had enabled me to act with such abrupt and uncharacteristic effectiveness was ramped up still another notch and the combatants, the corridor, and that honest-looking couple still sitting stunned on the bench, all shot ceilingward in a torrent of flame. It was as if the very molecules comprising all of these bodies had been atomized in a ball of red energy, making it impossible for me to distinguish what was happening in the next few seconds. By the time I had reconfigured my sensory apparatus, the cop and the Diamondback's lawyer, now joined by a few more cops, had managed to separate the pair, divorcing them from their marriage of violence and making the one two again, both steaming with undiminished fury.

Once I saw that the situation was under control, my first instinct was to return to the bench where the honest-looking couple was still trembling. I wanted to make sure that I had not inadvertently injured the slight woman in my reflexive act to save her. By this time, the honest-looking man, who had hitherto been silent, suddenly began talking a blue streak, as if the mayhem that had just occurred had broken some switch inside him and set loose a verbal torrent. In what could have not been more than 50 or 60 seconds, like one of those television infomercial announcers who pack a thousand bits of factoid into one swollen minute, he now rushed headlong into a variety of themes, thanking me for saving his mate, and telling me that they were just moving that day to begin a new life together in Arizona, where he had gotten a job promotion and that the moving trucks would be at their two houses in just a few hours and that they had only rushed down to the Courthouse to find a J.P. to tie the knot — saying all this in a blur, while his spouse to be sat quiet and serious and trembling as if she were freezing wet. This torrent was still flowing when the lawyer who had been retrieving his scattered papers in the corridor and talking with his disembodied head, bulled passed us, pushing us rather rudely aside. Then he unlocked and entered the door marked “Richard F. Flamm, *Esq.*” Seeing that the honest-looking couple was essentially uninjured, although considerably shaken, I excused myself, and followed my lawyer's lead. As soon as I entered the office, the world of the corridor behind me, with its falsifiers, impersonators, counterfeiterers and lying witnesses, each stewing in their own appropriate mental and physical punishments, began fading from my immediate perceptual field. Once in, I slowly looked around. I was out of the hallway now, and in a different dimension: the lair of Richard “Dick” F. Flamm, *Esq.*

“You the indecent exposure?” he said, and before I could really answer him, he tossed his shuffled files on a chair that was already full of more files exactly like them, the whole stack slopping onto the floor. For the first, but certainly not the last time, “Dick” Flamm turned his back on me. I stood there trying to orient myself to the office, which seemed no bigger than a mop closet, as “my lawyer” — Oh heavy phrase! — faced the cluttered bookshelf behind the desk and punched the play button of his answering machine. The little blue numbers on the machine were flickering furiously, and the machine’s mechanically derived feminine voice said: “You have 49 messages.” While the messages began their playback, I had ample time to look around.

The first thing I noticed was the large poster facing me above the bookshelf on the back wall of the tiny space. It was hard not to. The image was the fish-eye photo distortion of a gun barrel that nearly swallowed the viewer in its threatening cavern. Behind the gun was a mean-ass-looking face, toothless and puckered into a grotesque expression of “aiming,” one eye closed, the other bugging out, the tongue slipping out of one corner of the mouth and pointing up towards the scrunched eye. The caption read: “I shoot every other client, and the last guy just left unscathed.” My heart was still thumping from the incident in the corridor and the message did not seem all that funny to me. On the walls within arm’s-reach of the gun-metal gray utilitarian desk, and on the lower reaches of the poster itself, were hundreds of post-its, each scarred with the scrawl of an illegible script. Occasionally, even in the few minutes while I waited, one of these scraps would slip off the institutional green walls and flutter to the floor, which was littered with them. Thus, the room was molting, as if it were infected with some sort of dermatological disorder. The bookshelf, the top of the bookshelf, another chair in the corner, the top of the desk, were all stacked with files, exactly like those that were tossed and scrambled in the corridor, and there were totems of these files, slumping against the walls, against the corners, and against one another all over the office, so that only a single little narrow passageway existed to get behind the desk or to sit down in the “client’s” chair. The office was lit by those awful fluorescent tubes which blinked and hummed and were recessed into a sagging acoustical drop-ceiling whose tiles were water stained, chipped out at the corners and nicked by ink-dots, which were distributed in a shot-gun pattern directly over the chair behind the desk. These dots were created, as I soon surmised, by the man who now had his back to me, relentlessly dispensing with his unheard telephone messages. Whether in anger or in frustration or in boredom, he had lobbed bic-pens toward the ceiling, like darts, apparently in an effort to get them to stick. Some had stuck, and were still dangling from the perforated fiberboard tiles, like so many stalactites dripping from the roof of a cave. The ceiling and walls were also decorated with what I guessed from the smell of the room were food stains, and here and there in the hovels on the floor, on the desktop, on the bookshelf were Styrofoam containers of half-eaten fast-food commodities, now being feasted upon by unmolested roaches and ants. But besides the poster and the shedding post-its, also on the wall, just to my left, was a rather extensive collection of postcards, pinned like insect specimens to the peeling surface. I began to read these as the lawyer obliterated his messages, making a little annoyed pronouncement under his breath every time he cut off a new and invariably angry voice. Exactly what this little mantra was, I could not tell, but the short phrase had a salivation of sibilants stuck in it, and it seemed to end with the ticked-off sound of an “ed.” The

hum of the building's creaking air-conditioning system, the clipped-short expletives of the phone messages, the "sst," "sst" sputatives of the lawyer's mantra constituted the background music for my silent, but dramatic readings of the post cards that were skewered to the wall. There is a chapter at the beginning of *Moby Dick* where Ishmael visits a chapel in New Bedford before embarking on his ill-fated voyage aboard the *Pequod*. Masoned into the walls of this chapel were black-bordered marble tablets engraved with various names, but always commencing with the phrase "Sacred to the memory of . . ." A storm rages beyond the walls of the chapel and the people in the chapel, although many, all sit silent, as if alone, all grieving for some loved-one lost at sea. Richard "Dick" F. Flamm, *Esq.*'s, postcards brought these lugubrious tablets to my mind. Some were quite original and heart-rending, as a minor sampling below will testify.

Dear Cocksucker,

Greetings from Huntsville. Every time I have to eat the slop in this hellhole, I think of you, 'cuz the only way I can choke this crap down is by imagining that I'm eatin' your rotten, tiny, turd-hard heart. Hope to see you when I get out and repay the debt I owe.

Dear Mr. Flamm,

I try to be a good Christian woman and pray every day for my Latrell whose is locked up in that terrible place where he doesn't belong, and where your stinking lawyering put him. There are tears in my eyes and stones in my heart when I beg Jesus that your miserable body will burst into flames. May a Mother's grief and curses bring you torment,

Some cards were less verbal and more gestural. One had a brown gob of easily identified material in the middle of it, which was circled in a cartoon balloon, and labeled "eat this." Another, the most original of the collection, was a cleverly folded piece of origami, fashioned to resemble a human penis, and simply imprinted with the words: "To Dick."

From the monster's cave, I turned my attention to the monster. Richard "Dick" F. Flamm. *Esq.* fidgeted a bit as he cleared his messages, and as he was involved in these sardonic erasures, I had a good chance to study him from several fleeting angles. He was a middle-aged man, anywhere from his mid-forties to his mid-fifties, not obese, but typically fabiformed, and he wore a black suit tricked-out with a shiny blacker pin stripe. The suit was double-breasted and was cut from one of those vaguely iridescent materials that are impervious to wrinkles. His shirt was a deep purple color, also endowed with polyester smoothness, which had pilled more than a little at the crest of the collar where his face-stubble scraped it. His tie was gold with a purple paisley print which matched his shirt, whose teardrop pattern on closer examination turned out to be little imprints of the amorous cartoon skunk, Pepe LaPeau. The man was definitely what is known in the vernacular as a "character." He had a thick head of hair that veered in various locations

from wavy, to curly, to frizzy, and which he punished from time to time by running his nervous hand mercilessly through it. At some point in the past, I supposed that the hair was blond, but now it seemed a whitish, grayish, yellowish tone, like the color of the bilge-foam that floats on Houston's cemented-in bayous. His face I thought rather handsome, or was once so, but now its ashen skin was burnished here and there with little florets of exploded capillaries, and there were hard grimace lines embedded in his cheek pouches below his turned-down mouth. His hazy, hazel-colored eyes seemed as dead as bits of paper jitteringly afloat on yellow pools, which were starred here and there with broken blood vessels. He had started smoking as soon as his office door was closed, and the cigarette in the corner of his mouth, traced a familiar streak up one side of his face along a threadlike amber stain that no soap would ever wash white. There was something about this man that I did not hate, although it was obvious that he had made it his successful business in life to elicit everyone's hatred. I felt that he was someone like me, who had unfortunately discovered something about himself that would not allow him to successfully assimilate into the general Druid's cauldron of society. I wanted to talk to him, communicate with him, tell him, as one suffering outcast to another, the whole absurd farrago of my story. So, not waiting for any introductions or preliminaries, as soon as he turned around, I began spewing forth my version of the fight with Lamar. I blathered on and on about the provoking racket, the gun fire, the Country Western music, the torturing of John Wayne, my own unstable and tormented condition, and so forth and so on *ad nauseam*. That's when I discovered what Richard "Dick" F. Flamm, *Esq.* had been chanting in the corridor and to all those angry and instantaneously deleted phone callers: "Not interested." Our interview was brief, because no matter when I tried to speak, he would cut me off with that same phrase: "Not interested." After a very few minutes of this, I began to mentally compose a post card that would be worthy of Mr. Flamm's collection. Finally, in exhausted exasperation, he said, "Look. This is simple. We can plead out with some community service and thirty days served . . ." At the mention of "thirty days served," one of the bic pens shook loose and cracked me on the head. Suddenly my fluffy hair and beard were electrified and set their fretful follicles straight out from my noggin. "Thirty Days!" I screeched. "That's impossible, I have a dog and cat to feed . . ." But before I could finish, Flamm began his mantra again "Not inter . . ." But now it was my turn to cut him off. I grabbed his Pepe LaPeau tie and pulled him fiercely towards me, nose to nose, and said, quietly, but with utter sincerity and conviction "Well you better get interested because I have a brain tumor and thirty days could be a life sentence for me. So I might as well strangle you right here and get my money's worth." I had never spoken like that to anyone in my life, but Mr. Flamm had a way bringing out the beast in people. His face was turning a vermilion that was creeping towards the purple color of his shirt when he finally managed to blurt out "Brain tumor! Why didn't you say so!" I turned him loose and he sputteringly finished his thought. "Maybe we can get a dispensation on time served due to your extenuating physical condition." He then told me that I needed to bring him a doctor's certificate verifying my statement, and, satisfied, I prepared to leave the office. Then he added, almost tenderly: "Better get a haircut . . . and maybe wear a suit." I then wended my way through the cramped little labyrinth of files, and turning in the door before closing it behind me, I saw that Richard "Dick" F. Flamm, had apparently already forgotten about me, forgotten about the forty-nine furious messages, which the ringing phone was

accumulating again, forgotten about nearly being knifed in the corridor, forgotten about being strangled. As soon as I had stood up to leave, he had pawed through the debris on his desk and had extracted a little, tattered orange-covered paperback, which he was now, incredibly, rather calmly reading. I had another of those frozen moments, this one, not of terror, but of sympathy. The cover of the book had a face on it, presumably of the author, and that face, even from the distance I was from it, had eyes that melted me. I closed the door quietly behind me, just as another pen was dropping from the ceiling. The reader's absorption was so complete, I think he was not in the least bit distracted. I never got a good look at the book's title, having been so mesmerized by the cover photograph, but I think it had the word "Yogi" in it.

I was still swimming in the recollection of that face on the book and of all my experiences in the Court House that morning as I wandered about the parking garage in search of my car. Lost in that reverie, the Blake line: "God is everywhere, even in the midst of hell" kept lulling me with its music, a music that was suddenly interrupted by a familiar voice. I blinked myself back into the present and saw that it was the honest-looking man, addressing me, and thanking me again for saving his, as he put it, "new bride." While I was "discussing" my case with my lawyer, these two had found their Justice of the Peace and had been married. He was still gregarious and she was still quiet, but they both wore that rather stunned look of those who have been married before and who were now prepared to run the risk again. He talked with his mouth and she talked with her posture and it seemed to me that they were not necessarily saying the same things. He wanted to tell me, anyone really, about the marriage ceremony. "When we finally got into the office of the J.P., it was really nice, walnut furnishings, paneled walls, and all those orderly rows of law books with the same covers. And the Judge, who was quite nice, said, to us, you know, in a friendly manner, 'Would you like the long ceremony or the short one.' And we looked at each other, and thought, 'oh, well,' I guess, it had already been — as you know — an eventful morning. And we said: 'The short one.' And the judge said: 'I now pronounce you man and wife. Sign here.' And that was that." He laughed nervously at his own punch line, but she did not. And then he added, jokingly, "Well, at least we don't have to worry about betraying our vows . . ." And he paused for a three-count while the lead-line sunk in. "Because we didn't make any!" Once again he laughed. And laughed alone. By this time I had spotted my car, and after saying good-bye, I watched them, as hand in hand, they climbed the steep ramp of the parking garage in search of their own vehicle. I could hear the perpetual drops that always trickle through Houston's parking garages in the damp winters, and I knew that they were leaving a swamp to make a home in the desert. I could not say that I envied them, but I wished them well.