



ELDER PHYSICS

The Wrong of Time:
Stories from an
Elder Home

By
James R. Hugunin

Elder Physics

$$i\hbar \frac{\partial}{\partial t} e^{\frac{i}{\hbar}(px-Et)} = \frac{-\hbar^2}{2m} \frac{\partial^2}{\partial x^2} e^{\frac{i}{\hbar}(px-Et)} + V(x,t)e^{\frac{i}{\hbar}(px-Et)}$$

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. . . how beautiful are the old when they are doing a snow job!
— Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day*

Nothing in this life that I've been trying can equal or surpass the art of dying.
— George Harrison

Nobody disobeys a ukase, said the Dead Father. He chuckled.
— Donald Bartheleme, *The Dead Father*

*When the subject calls upon the Father . . . he encounters only an echo
in a void that triggers a cascade of delusional metaphors.*
— Jacques Lacan, *Érits*

I am quite content to go down to posterity as a scissors and paste man. . . .
— James Joyce

*True aesthetic innovation can only come from reworking and transforming existing
imagery, ripping it from its original context and feeding it into new circuits of analogy.*
— Andrew V. Uroskie, "Beyond the Black Box"



Self-Portrait in a Mirror (pencil on paper, 2004) Gerald Hugunin

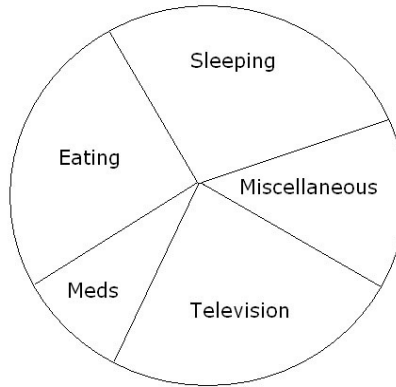
Although this is largely a work of fiction, and any resemblance to actual people or places is purely coincidental, much of the material was inspired by actual events in my father's life.

Dedicated to my father, Gerald (1922 - 2008)

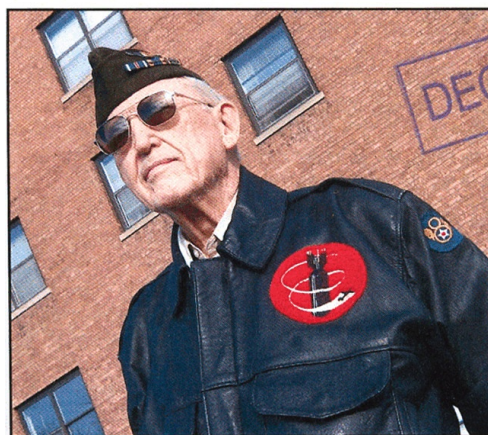
Part I

Independent Living

My Life Broken Down into Segments



El'-der Home, *n.* a simulated environment, a universe of ceilings, constrained by known elder physical principles — a turbulent field in which various and variable materialities collide, congeal, morph, de-evolve, and disintegrate; significant inconsistencies in the noetic density of the underlying fabric of this region of existence weakens the gravitational pull of memory, and movement is defined from the place of arrival and the end toward which the object is directed by a sort of "appetite" — but which still permits the occurrence of multifarious event anomalies. Within elder physics, mass will be a permanent property of things, while energy will express itself through sweat, grunts, groans, and curses. The contingent aspects of the mathematical models peculiar to elder physics lend themselves to be used to reach cosmological conclusions. A universe where "Star Trek: The Next Generation's" Deanna Troy advises "just take that memory and put it aside for a moment." Or as Gerald Hugunin frames it within his *interpretive armamentarium*: "It all Depends. Today rules are ambiguous, adversary concealed in aliases, and the oracles broadcast a babble of contradictions; it's all wheels-within-wheels, like in ancient cosmology."



Gerald in his flight jacket with squadron insignia (2005)



O fahter, fahter
gone amoong

O eeys that loke

Loke, fahter:
your sone

→ Charles Olson

The Situation

In the Beginning Was the Situation: An extended mood with and without joy and sadness. Sobs and laughs, black humor and white seriousness — events in the Elsewhere of Elder Physics where the wrong of time rules and where escape velocity seems impossible to reach. Where every day is a patchwork of small battles and myself a brochure of needs. Where Lorentz contractions and time dilations are common and everyone feels like the dummy-hand in Bridge. Great context for a narrative delivered healthy (if not the narrator) and full of beans. Yep, my body has grown a tale. This little tale will wag a *have pity on us all and don't get mad at me for writing it*. And excuse me if sometimes I tend to speak *vatically*. I'm Gerald. I'm Catholic and pretty much set in my ways and beliefs. I have my strong opinions. And Jim, my son? Well, he has his soft opinions.

Mirroring my mood, outside my window Illinois's black clouds are stalled, darkening the view of my street below, threatening to soon make known their views. Often my gaze, in wandering outside, segues to old memories, curious stories, only to have them at some point suddenly stop, disintegrate, blow away. In my Brave New World — more Huxley's use of the term than Shakespeare's — the days harden with cold and boredom like last year's loaves of bread and I cut them with blunt knives, without appetite, in lazy indifference. No surprise, I often fantasize a kindly beckoning, large neon sign reading: THIS WAY TO THE EGRESS.

In my sleep I fight against the bed like a bather swimming against the current, kneading it and molding it with my body like an enormous bowl of dough, waking up in sweat, panting. I smell of sleep. The delights of yawning only leads to a painful cramp of my palate, almost to nausea. Dull imprisoned suffering, I reek of unmade bed, of unwashed hair. My room is decorated in Medieval monastic-sparse. But as Wordsworth says, "Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room." Bed with cockroach-colored headboard. Armoire. Bureau. The aluminum walker — a recent addition to my Situation — I often refuse. A bitter smell of illness has settled into my room's rug from past residents. A large sketch pad with a drawing I just did of myself in a mirror is propped against the wall, an image used as a defense against the day when my face will dissolve into a worried net of wrinkles, begin to resemble an old plank full of knots and veins, from which all memories will have been planed away.

Now that mirror sees my eighty-six-year-old face which, thank God, looks more like seventy or less. Except my eyes — once braziers of delight — are now dull and rinsed out. That increasing dullness these last few months that suggests a mind on some complicated

matter known only to someone who is not fully present any longer, absorbed by *dementia*, they say. Always trying to prove it too, they are, such that my gray matter often clicks over and over like a car hood opened and closed in the pit stops of the Indy 500. Knot by knot, I feel myself being loosened from the ties joining me to humanity. I put up my barriers and guard the perimeter. I peer through the keyhole with the utmost caution. I have my one wooden chair propped up against the door handle. Don't want unexpected visitors.

Waking, I often open my mouth, smacking my lips with distaste, a dry tongue, bitter. An ailing body like an overheated factory. I look around helplessly, as if searching for something. Slowly I come alert to any conspiracy of winking hidden eyes, of tuned-in ears, of suspicious gestures. Sound. Sound destroys the possibility of distinguishing between subject and environment, between interior and exterior. Can't always tell who's talking from where. They say I hear voices that don't have a body, like off-screen voices in a film. Yes. Unhappy is the pappy-me. Me the pap, he the son. Me his "parapapanoid" — as Jimmer calls me — but my real name is Gerald. And when I speak it is only to issue commands. I can grow instantly into prophetic anger, choking with brash words that are emitted like a machine gun. I'm incapable of imagining that others wouldn't want to do whatever I think is best. Oh, the din of battle and my groans can send my son running for cover at my aggression in the guise of faith from this former Altar Boy. We then are in need of a *treuga dei*, a divine truce, to limit the violence between us.

In my elder home monastic snuggery, I dress with care, but without haste, with long pauses between separate manipulations. When get about my room, I try to move on tiptoe, afraid to arouse noisy and excessive echoes that would give away my position to monitoring ears. I try to ignore the furniture and the walls when they watch me in silent criticism (silent so far, that is). Things don't like me. When not listening in, my furniture tries to trip me up. Once a sharp corner of some polished thing literally bit me. My relations with my blanket are always complicated. A pair of large scissors sits on top my toilet (for fecal emergencies). How pleasant my life was *ante-scissors*, when my bowels were elastic . . . ra-ta-ta-ta-ra-ree . . . my juices then did flow within me . . . ra-tee-ta-doo-da-ta . . . contract, guts, contract . . . tram-ba-ba-boom! See, I know how to do things with words! And so does my son, whose vast database of literary citations and pedantic input on this project of mine is proving invaluable. We're literary *pard*s, if ya know what I mean, destined to be *on the same page*. Who is fussy as an old housekeeper, suspicious as a C.I.A. operative who listens with the attention of a blind man listening to fireworks? Who has a birthmark, the

sort of mark which mothers recognize their kidnaped children decades later? *Mo!* Known as “Big Guy” to my son who I affectionately dub “Jimmer,” using “James” only when he screws me over. I’m his jester.

I the dumb-me (except to me) propelled by something else they say. A riddle: Propellers are with me all my life, what am I? I am very smart. Made eyes smart. Made smart remarks too. Too smart. And paranoid (they say). Before The Weakness came upon me, I would propel myself, albeit slowly, for miles around the little town that is home to this Home. Back in California, Oceanside, to be precise, my modern suburban environs had almost succeeded in excising the casual walker from society. Roads, no sidewalks. One motored hither-thither, foot to pedal, not to concrete. So was nice to soldier on here, unimpeded, on my own pegs. I’d saunter down to my art supply store for exotic papers and pens, or up to the small, local park to chat up the strays slumped on benches there. Most days, I’d make my way three blocks north to my Church for early Mass. Or haunt the new snazzy village library so I could either, feed my autodidactic passions (my thought doing that race-condition thing where every time I tried to concentrate on something I would think about how I was trying to concentrate on something and should stop thinking about how I was concentrating and just concentrate), or try tracing the dim trails of my Huguenot genealogy (I’ve become somewhat computer literate), or add a good chunk to my ongoing writing project — our “Happy Scribblers” writing club meets in just two days.

I was born. Of course. Of hearty Huguenot North Wisconsin peasant stock. Of Rose and Richard. The two R’s (they are). Rose met Richard : Richard met Roseanne (but we called her Rose). She was flipping griddle-cakes for lumber-jacks. He was cutting wood. Those disappearing North Woods. “Hahtch me mommy, hahtch me do beuwy-sop” (infantese for “belly-flop”). I am returned to the childhood happiness of pure noun, remembering words spoken to my mom, Rose, on a bleak winter hillside with my little sled when I was four. Sled might’ve been named “Rosebud,” who knows?

Dad married after The Great War. After being gassed in the Argonne with his trusty trench mortar crew — all Wisconsin boys. Took to house painting. Had the passion of the huntsman and artist rolled into one; painted Northwoodscapes with indigenous game prominent. I inherited the painter’s passion, excelling in

seascapes, harbor scenes, and sunset or dawn over mountain vistas. Jimmer says he prefers the abstracted pigments splayed on my palette. Dad painted houses and schools in the Wausau, Wisconsin environs in working-class irons. Rarely did I see our penny-pinching pater shaken with spasms of laughterly delight. His first name should’ve been simply “Sternickle,” not Richard (my son forced me to admit this). We lived on Hudson Street. In Antigo (a Native American word). A wee house too tiny for me and my two sisters. One who liked me, one who didn’t. The one who didn’t, didn’t ‘cause I heartily disapproved her marrying a suave non-Catholic twenty years her senior. Her marriage flourished. Ironically, I also married a Protestant, but my wife finally opened our wedlock ‘n tossed the key.

Like / dislike. Laugh / bluster. A founding dichotomy working its way through my life. Bipolar seasons in Northern Wisconsin: summer and winter. How appropriate. I’m a bipolar kind of guy. Kind and cruel. Warm and cold. Extreme intimacy and sudden, violent retreat. I can approach a dog as though it holds the secrets of the universe, then turn on a loved one as if they had a communicable disease. My fluctuations are perfectly timed: quick to emerge and slow to dissolve. Accompanied by a wide variety of mannerisms, flourishes, and poses. Up ‘n down, down ‘n up. “A broken jack-in-the-box,” as my wife described me. Helped my father paint houses. Up ladders. Down ladders. My work-life just like my emotional-life (I try to be honest about it now). Admired a drunk painter who fell off a ladder and (without missing a beat) got back up to brush-and-brush after brush with death. My main claim to fame in those days? Up early and at ‘em altar boy at St. Joseph’s. I remain a clear-cut committed Catholic. Attending mass, where the words slide into the slots ordained by ordained priests and glitter as with heavenly dust. Even when, under an unkempt sky, the enormous elms around my hometown church stood with their arms upraised, like witnesses of terrifying visions, and screamed and screamed during the funeral of my high school sweetheart, Margaret Kuss, gone cold in a wintry car accident.

In high school didn’t like my dates dating other guys. Jealousy. Liked to kill roaches in the houses my dad and I were painting. Played football. Straight-armed

player later to play as “Crazylegs” Hirsch for the L.A. Rams. After my Margaret died, dated Jeane who smelled of coffee and cigarettes; became my steady and, finally, wife who protested my bottomless anger and noisy demands. Beat out my close competitor, “Chuck-the-Shmuck,” who recently kicked from an infarction. Ah, the joy of outliving competitors. My son picked up on this revenge-by-longevity bit. He made a heap o’ enemies when he claimed that the Establishment selects the avant-garde. Says he wants his last conceptual art project to be a photobook, like California artist Ed Ruscha is known for, depicting himself pissing on the graves of all his unfavored dead, titled Various Small Dribbles and Graves. Being an academic and art critic, he’s got a lot of the unfavored to piss on.

Was a tall guy and thin. Back then. (Kinda still am, but not thin.) At aeronautical school in Glendale, California. After graduating high school in 1940. Danced. Studied. Got into a few fights. Wrote Jeane, she wrote me. Saw a P-38 crash. On my way to Mass one Sunday, the Japs attack Pearl. Almost got into the Royal Air Force (Cherrio-pip-pip-’n-all-that-sort-o’-rot) but nixed by my daddy’s expert backhand. Eventually signed papers to fly U.S. Army Air Force all the way. Then washed out of pilot training over a fluke. So re-assigned as a bombardier in the clear nose of “St. Christopher,” our four-engine B-17 war-bird flying out of East Anglia, England. In ‘44 for D-Day. On that day, plane after plane sped overhead heating the sky with raw noise as propellers bite into the sky. Over my heavy flight gloved left index finger I affixed a rosary-ring of silver so I could thumb its tabs and say my “Hail Marys” as we dropped lethal ordinance on the Hun. After the war my son tried to steer me clear of German restaurants because I’d end up asking the waitress where she was from and if she mentioned a German city, I’d exclaim, “Oh, I bombed that place!” So then I’d have to leave an exorbitant tip to gloss over my faux pas.

Best moment? Thirty-five missions done and not a fucking scratch (still have a chunk of shrapnel BIG-AS-MY-THUMB that parted my hair, stuck in a bulkhead behind) and so become member of The Lucky Bastards Club. Certificate to prove it. Worst moment? Watched buddy-filled bomber burst over Holland. Most embarrass-

ing moment? Had to crap in an ammunition box on our plane. November ‘44. Home. Breathed in the sugar of pure morning. Heard the long phrases of the birds. No enemy wanting my life. Married. Jeane and I honeymooned in Los Angeles. Driving a ‘41 Chevy.

Later back to live there with our two kids: Jimmer and Leslie. Driving a ‘55 Ford. Air-frame designer at Lockheed’s famous (and Top Secret) Skunk Works where being a little paranoid is a work benefit aspect. Where I astound my supervisor on the first day on the job by proving to him his Marlboro cigarette container is proportioned according to the Golden Section. My last design project? The Stealth Fighter. I saw a UFO once. But I digress. Before designing aircraft, I put very slow Westinghouse elevators in Roosevelt University’s Louis Sullivan Auditorium Building. Spent a lot of time goose-necking, thrilled by Sullivan’s famous ornament. Always had an artistic penchant. Kept my hand in as an amateur painter, oils and watercolor. Turned my son onto the Impressionist painters when he was a teenager. He later discovered the Cubists during a high school field trip. Then conceptual art during his stint in the Air Force as a photographer. Mixed up words and images into a heady scripto-visual cocktail too strong for the local photo-aficionados.

Milwaukee in ‘46. The place got much more snow then. Studying aeronautical and mechanical engineering at Marquette University because priests who taught there quoted from a nineteenth-century essay, “The Mental and Moral Influence of an Engineering Training,” The best corrector of human depravity is the engineer. Common sense (do what it will) can’t avoid being surprised occasionally. The object of engineering is to spare it this emotion and create mental habits which shall be in such close accord with the habits and cold equations of the world as to secure that nothing shall be unexpected. Like my use of “shall”? That’s a Catholic education for you. Spiffy English and handwriting too. Hell, my son’s cursive is god-awful. The Catholic engineer’s mantra: All facts lead eventually to mysteries. I could mesh my penchant for engineering (facts) with my Catholic eschatology (beliefs) with the ease of an automatic transmission shifting gears.

So kinda got this thing for priests (as in ‘total

belief in'). So you can understand my ire when my son would arrive home from parochial school and yell: "Send the nuns abroad and the priests to the moon." Had a best high school buddy, Jerry, who became one. Died in a Milwaukee car crash under mysterious circumstances. So I took his name as my nickname. His seminary was all hush-hush about it, like the security at the Skunk Works. I pressed the rector at his seminary for details: Was he drunk at the wheel, caught in a sexual episode, distracted by reading his breviary? The old priest looked at me like I'm delivering news from alien places and just mysteriously proclaims: "A flaw can be an entertaining thing to discuss, but it can also be a good way of forgetting pleasure." I've been meditating on that one for fifty years. Suppose somewhere in the Vatican there's a file . . .

Jimmer was born in '47. He calls me "Big Guy." (If I already mentioned this, I'm sorry, my memory sometimes . . .) Ironic that he'll one day get a part-time teaching gig at Roosevelt U. and squawk about those slow elevators I put in there. He also squawked once, bouncing in my lap; turned unexpectedly and my drafting pen harpooned his head. Indelible tattoo just hidden by hairline. Later, as my son's hair recedes like glaciers suffering global warming, he'll notice it. A blue dot. Like those on Sylvania Blue Dot flash bulbs my son will later use in his photography.

In college, in the early fifties — when my young family is ashine with an innocent Eisenhowerian light — I'm praised by my English prof for the stories I pen, confessing, "I'm itching with sentences." Here's an excerpt: On the other side of the fence, behind that jungle of summer in which the stupidity of weeds reigned unchecked, there was a rubbish heap on which thistles grew in wild profusion; from where in my sexual confusion, I'd whistle.

Raconteur; me. Funny. Great sense of humor. Handy in the bars. My kids will inherit this. Just as they will always dig Milwaukee. Nearby aunt and uncle and lake shore. Prospect Street, our first home. Railroad tracks behind and below. Always proud to show them it and my Alma Mater when vacationing. I take my brat-lovin' brats to Mader's world famous German restaurant for hearty Sauerbraten or Rouladen, where my dinner-

stories about our early years in Beer-Town gain new vivacity since I can actually show them where the sites said events. Thirty years later, my son — a doctor of philosophy at a time when philosophy is sick — will have as his undergrad student the stunning blond daughter of Mader's owner and get a dinner-on-the-house, twice. One semester, his theory class befuddles a direct descendant of famed WW II cartoonist, Bill Mauldin. The next — a contrary possible unlikelihood — G. Gordon Liddy's daughter shows up on his class roster. God's truth! What happened after that is fodder for a long short story or a short long story.

See! Although all our aging minds are a Swiss cheese of forgetfulness, my long-term memory shows no battle damage. It's still air-worthy, frame relatively intact. Trim OK. Props turning in perfect pitch, on course. It's just those short-haul passengers that I misplace. I mean, just watch this.

I can recall some of the categories in a life-long pedagogical pet project of mine, a personal encyclopedia of aircraft (titled *The Heavenly Emporium of Benevolent and Not-so Benevolent Aircraft*) which I'm compiling. Here goes: gliders, single-prop planes, twin-prop planes, pusher-prop planes, turbo-prop planes, biplanes, triplanes, gull-winged planes, high-winged monoplanes, V-tail planes, seaplanes, straight-winged jets, Earhart's Electra, swept-wing jets, delta-wing jets, stealth planes, fixed-gear planes, retractable-wheeled planes, bomb-capable planes, supersonic jets, spy-planes, JATO-planes, twin-boom planes, planes-with-skis, experimental planes, planes-snatched-by-UFOs, planes-celebrities-died-in, planes-lost-never-to-return, planes-with-joy-sticks, planes-with-steering-wheels, planes-that-never-got-airborne, suicide-planes, flying-wings, tricycle geared planes, flying-bombs, armed drones, cargo planes, the Flying Guppy, the Bee-Gee racing plane, Hughes's Spruce Goose, VTOL planes, STOL planes, planes-prone-to-making-widows, planes-I-designed, noisy planes, quiet planes, cool-planes-I-like-most, awkward ducklings, planes-I-shot-down, planes-I-flew-in, planes-I-can-fly, balsa wood model planes, plastic model planes, gas-powered model planes, radio-controlled model planes, and paper airplanes. To name only a few, not including the section on helicopters and that UFO I saw once. Used this tome to early on educate my son on the finer points of aviation, and later to enrich those blind and deaf, to the diversity of wonders winging their ways across our blue skies. To the uninitiated, one aircraft can look and sound like another, as in language where sounds distinct and unique to one ear can sound similar or indistin-

guishable to another (like *b* and *p* in English or *xi* and *qi* in Chinese). My HMO doctor says, albeit my heart and arteries be fucked, I don't suffer elder-stoop 'cause I'm always chin-up-to-the-skies watching the action heavenward. Looking up, I notice the weather today is partly soused with occasional burst of despair and irritation. Yesterday, it was partly furious with occasional fits of rage. That's the Chicago climate for you.

Where am I waiting? I remember. In the Situation. In room 345 in the less than elegant Upping Arms Elder Home some ten miles west of Chicago's famed Loop. A six-story masonry structure built, they say, by hungry immigrants (if not immigrants from Hungary). I found this supposition confirmed in our library's copy of *The Large Print Little Book of Succinct Quotations* as stated by famed Islamic scholar Ibn Khaldūn: *In republics founded by nomads, the assistance of foreigners is indispensable in all that concerns masonry.* This institution's main entrance faces due west, back toward warmer climes. But my room's door faces east toward the rising sun. That door. My door. An important object in my life here. Keeping watch over its presence. Keeping it secure. I glance at it a moment over my left shoulder, that perfected half-look tossed in its direction. Chair snug, oh so snug, in place under the door handle. Locks can be picked, keys can be distributed. Still waiting. Through waiting, that which turns aside from thought returns to thought to become a turning aside from itself. Does that makes sense?

My son says he gets dizzy from the smell of Pine Sol cut with urine. I can't smell it. Any longer, anyway. Too bad those scissors don't work on the piss. Funny. Pissed off is what my son says I've always been. Pissed off at my cheating wife ('that's delusional thinking,' my son says, urging me to go back on my anti-psychotics, "That's *too close* reading, sheer connotative fillgree."). Pissed off at the amateur photographer who posed my wife on a boulder overlooking the San Fernando Valley, nude. A truth-or-consequences photo this dude had the gall to give me, like he gave Jimmer an Exakta 35mm camera exactly the same Jimmy Stewart's in *Rear Window*. To get him on his side. Jimmer thinks just because the woman didn't look like his mom that it wasn't her in the photo. Hell, her face was turned away from the lens. Now *that's* delusional thinking!

Years later, Jimmer claims this incident got him interested in photo-interpretation. Launched his career. I tell him his choice of photography is corny. Before he can react, I fill him in: the lubricant used to grind the camera lens in the photographic industry is a corn byproduct; the material used to polish the steel has a corn byproduct in it; many of the chemicals associated with the production of a fine-art print also have a corn by-products in them. Always amazes him, the diversity

of my knowledge. I even know the precise location of the Museum of Erotica in San Francisco — although I've never been there. A real autodidactic I am, like my son, who used to say: "I'd rather meet a new book than a new woman" — until he met his future wife. Like father, like son. Kinda.

"Hey Lucky Lindy! Give me a ride!" That's how I always start my famous story about how I got my first airplane ride and took-off on a career in-of-by the skies. So may as well add that incident to my memoire, huh?

It was a Ford Tri-motor in the late thirties giving us local kids sky-thrills from Antigo Airport. That day the sky was untroubled, the air crystal, the sun in full fire. The Tri-motor was circling low over the town, its silvery wings flashing into my eyes — when I was young enough to believe I would never grow old, never die — the whirl of its prop roaring over the excited hum of my thoughts. Grabbing my bike, I made a bee-line to the airfield and used a week's worth of lunch money to catch a ride. After that there was no turning back. I'm still trying to complete that sketch of Lindbergh, but can't get the nose right. Melanie Mercaptan, our art instructor here — a gal clad in moth-eaten pullovers and frayed Oxford shirts, who reminds me of Amelia Earhart (tall, slender, blond, and brave) and who graduated from the prestigious art school where Jim teaches—is very patient with me. But I cut classes. Hard to concentrate. Hard to get hand to behave to draw properly. My body plays its jokes on me.

Speaking of jokes . . . god! . . . I can never forget the ruse we played on Jim Flood, my co-worker at Westinghouse Elevator Division back when I called Chicago home in the mid-fifties.

This gentle-natured man — he was a model train enthusiast — had just gotten a hearing aid, so we office guys started talking around him in loud voices, then softly, then merely mouthed our words and repeated this all day, so the poor guy thought his new instrument was on the fritz. He'd pull it out, adjust it, refit it and do this all day long. Finally, we couldn't contain our laughter. He didn't talk to us for a week.

Another time — this was out when I was working as a designer at Lockheed Aircraft in beautiful downtown Burbank — our bossy boss bought a new car. A snazzy red Corvette. So every day at lunch we'd sneak out and

pour gas from a jerrycan into his tank. Soon he started bragging about the amazing gas mileage he was getting in his new 'vette. The following week, we stuck a hose in his gas tank and siphoned off gallons. Kept this up until when we asked him about his mileage, he'd just frown and mumble. Then we started filling his tank again. This went on for two months.

I put pen down, stand up and unsteadily totter toward the bathroom, unzipping as I begin to amble. Usually my micturition is accompanied by a profound sigh, like a whale in the night. Then my usual preamble to taking stock of my constitution, a stare in the mirror. See? A dodderly old fucker looks back. Notice his eyes have rings of color, one inside the other, dark to light around the pupil, brownish and hazelish and greyish. My old California driver's license specified "green eyes," but my Illinois Identification Card now reads "blue." Something's up and it involves the State. I relieve myself into a large plastic yogurt container then pour my offering into the porcelain bowl (helps prevent splatters all over the toilet seat). It's BE KIND TO MAIDS MONTH — as announced by a brightly colored flyer placed in my mailbox — something like SWEETEST DAY times thirty. Do the math. Those eyes in the mirror . . . I'm reminded of an incident when Jimmer nearly died. I pick pen up.

An incident off Zuma Beach, near Malibu, California. I was swimming just beyond the breakers. Had to be around '58 as I was still driving my puke-green Ford. I surfaced and turned around to find myself staring directly into a seal's eyes. Expected soft brown eyes, like a dog's, but each was a pool of oil, an inkwell, a hole. The beast was huge, like a boulder on sand. I recall I flashed on that deadly piece of flak skimming my flight helmet during a particularly hairy bomb-run over Königsborn on June 20, 1944. Exactly three years prior to Jimmers' birth. Got to shore in record time, I did. Odd. Same place my son almost drowned some years later. Got snagged by a mean rip current when he was a pimply teenager. But he dragged himself to shore, exhausted but alive. No one ever noticed he was having trouble.

Now with Leslie, my daughter, she had trouble upon trouble for a year. Something we all noticed. Cancer. Terminal.

After a dinner of mystery meatloaf, green beans, and Wonderbread supplemented with a jar of my

own store-bought apple sauce, I sit on my bed and watch through my room's west-facing window the orange sky boil to dregs of purple and grey; exhaust ash and dust and glass refracting the light, pouring it through the clouds as if a rainbow had exploded. Colors reflect off the glass protecting an old fading color photo of a youngish, prettyish woman — my long-deceased daughter Leslie — smiling at the camera, set in a heavyish pewter frame. A frame almost as heavy as my heart. In my wallet behind a layer of scratched plastic is another picture of her. Evening paper is on the table. Could scrawl over the pages, write in the margins, fill whole pages with ideas and answers. But it wouldn't bring her back. To handle the slow process of her gradual disappearance I went back to flight school at age seventy-three and soloed in a Cessna to rounds of applause. Even got my picture standing by the plane in the local paper to prove it. Now Jimmer takes pictures, photographs, of me. For his art project.

Jim loves to tell this story about me. It's true. I flew back to Chicago, this was over ten years ago at least, to help him out after his first marriage crumbled. Helped him move into a new two-bedroom apartment. A fixer upper though. We worked side-by-side putting putty and paint on damaged walls. Up and down the ladder until our legs were screaming, back and forth from the hardware store with nails 'n screws, out to dinner at the pizza joint for beer and meat lasagna. So vicious to the place were the previous renters — two girls, one of whom stole the other's boyfriend, the landlady told us — it took a week just to get the place shipshape.

One day we're walking back from a great blueberry pancake breakfast at the Golden Nugget where the waitress always fawns on me, ready to start moving Jim's bookshelves in, and we pass an elderly black woman, begging. Cold as a witch's tit out too. As Jim recalls it to me, I took her into the McDonald's she was sitting in front of, sat her down like a queen on a throne, ordered and paid for a Big Breakfast and coffee. Brought it all to her, scrambled for the napkins, and stood beaming for a moment. In a racial reversal, I became her man-servant (that's how Jim put it). And walked out. Jim was just standing there, mouth open. I remember that awe for it inspired him to do a collaborative art project with his ol' dad. Calls it "Gratuitous Giving." You can Oogle it on the Internet.

He uses me as his — how does he put it, avatar

—I think. Under the pseudonym “L. E. Don.” French for “the gift.” Posed me as this Mr. Don character for some photos: in the front of the Museum of Contemporary Art, scrutinizing a painting at the local senior’s art fair, standing by a large outdoor sculpture shaped like a heart, pretending I’m lecturing to an art audience, lolling in an art frame shop, and me gifting a woman in our elder home. Even did a video of me proclaiming to the world: “Have a heart, please gift,” while I extend a hand with a gifting envelope toward the camera. Felt awkward. I seemed to be standing outside myself, seeing what I must look like in Jim’s viewfinder. Even stranger when my portraits are labeled “L. E. Don” (a play on French for “The Gift”).

In furtherance of this project, Jim made T-shirts with this wacky logo featuring a four-leaf clover with heart-shaped petals and distributed them. Makes me wear one for the photos. Made sew-on patches too. Hands out money to strangers in envelopes. Photographs them. Gets the weirdest of responses. Some refuse the gift. Some are pissed off. Most are grateful. Gifted some kids and got quizzed by the cops to see if he was a molester. Does this all over the world on his many trips. All up on his website. You can Oogle it. Says it’ll be “One for the Gipper,” my legacy when I’m strumming my harp. A real chip off the ol’ block. I’m proud of him. Calls it “an anti-capitalist gesture.” The kid’s got heart. A real kick-in-the-balls to those Bushites (hey, I’m conservative, but not that wacko). My philosophy prof, at a Catholic university, warned us that if fascism ever came to America it would come through the door of religion, most probably of the Protestant variety. I never forgot that. Told Jim. And his eyes lit up like Christmas tree lights. We’ve had our political disagreements in the past; we now share delicious fantasies about where on George W. Bush’s anatomy we’d like to place our hiking boots.

Jimmer visits, goes over my writing, making his usual corrections and suggestions. At this times, we are “on-the-same-page.” On his way out to teach, he escorts me to my computer lesson on Net surfing taught by woman who has shiny, video-capture eyes, dreams in gigabytes and in whose office data sparkles like fairy

dust on her wallscreens. “Nutritious” (I call her that ‘cause her African-American first name sounds similar) sports a yellow T-shirt begging for MORE BANDWIDTH and Afrodisiac hair. Ever in rude health, she also teaches the Alexander Technique, medically-approved and media-exploited for releasing bodily stress, improving posture, and relieving spinal ailments from long hours at a computer. Love that phrase *rude health*. I’m often rude, never healthy. When I tell her about my fading memory she says nature is merely imposing a “lossy” compression algorithm on me, decreasing the memory space in my poor *cabeza*. Here’s how I write our session up that night (I’m using a cool new notebook my son has gotten me).

Today it’s a global globe, techno-is-our-destiny lesson on how to Oogle a topic — she always has to refresh me how to work da damn mouse — like ‘not your mother’s’ which brings up some 400,000 results! Knowing my penchant for numbers, she informs me of a web Power Law: the distribution of web sites and their audiences follow a mathematical law as the top ten most popular sites are ten times larger than the near hundred more popular sites, which are themselves ten times larger than the next hundred more popular sites, which are themselves ten times more popular than the next thousand sites.

I argue that global interconnectivity doesn’t matter. It’s still the fleecers versus the fleeced. She counters by visiting www.deathclock.com where after doing a health questionnaire you get back your exact date of demise. Mine read, I should’ve be dead already! I get her to assist me in Oogling the “U.S.S. Roncador” (Bruin Opps, one of our residents here, served aboard this Balao-class sub in the Pacific, has a faded Navy photo of her surfacing tacked up in his room). But I really want her to help me Oogle Jim’s gifting project. I can brag about the boy. Show her how we, as family are involved. They like to see family involved here. Kill two birds with one mouse, ha, ha. Tapping keys, she brings up the webzine, Boing Boing, where I print out a curious article on making a laser using Jell-O (a commodity found in great quantity here). I try to impress her by informing her that just as we remember things in the order in which entropy increases, so for computers. “The heat expelled by the computer’s cooling fan,” I explain, “means that when it records to memory, the total amount of disorder in the



universe still goes up.” My engineering training gains brownie points with her. She smiles though when I confess that booting up a ‘puter still feels like the beast is creating itself ex nihilo; moreover, I fear instant transmission sickness when on the Web. She replies that I too often recode worrisome contradictory information to conform to my own story, my own operational lore; like Bill Gates I require all other things to be compatible to my overly righteous format. So she says.

Next, Nutritious downloads OSS code from Jodi.org (some Europunk group’s attempt at a digital version of an aneurysm) which overflows our machine’s desktop with meaningless digits; we launch an application and an unstable mix of static ‘n structure fills the screen. I’m reduced to making frantic keystrokes, almost getting a stroke myself in the process, trying to contain the chaos. There must be patron saint one can pray to in order to get back control of this damn machine! Or maybe a new pharmaceutical named “Chillaxin” that will restore my cool. But my cyberguardian angel, Nutritious, gets back a proper quality-to-crap ratio on our screen, clears the datasmog. I can breath again.

This new technology is fantastic. Besides putting emoticons (-: in my e-mail salutations and perusing Jimmer’s web-site, I can access the Vatican and Patrologia Latina’s databases. Deepen my understanding of Church History and settle a bet with Fialta Fenwich as to what saint of the Catholic Church labeled Woman a *saccus stercoris*, a bag of muck? She says Odo of Cluny. I claim St. Augustine. (She’s right.) Then we argue over the shift in syntax relating to the *imitatio Christi*, that is, from imitating what Christ did to questions like what would Christ do? The recurring WWJD? so prevalent today on T-shirts and even women’s panties (devout or derisive?).

This question got raised during a particularly contentious monthly resident’s meeting in the Sunshine Room. Every first Wednesday at noon, a gaggle of impossible-to-define-talents, intuitions, tricks, and fears walk into the that room in twos ‘n threes to hear a speech by our Fearless Leader, reports from staff, and complaints from residents. The first half of the meeting? Banal. But soon things picked up. Brucine Bitters began banging her cane, bitching ‘bout the food served, her blouse still spackled with maggot debris of her spaghetti lunch. (Loud mutters of approval.) Then, politely raising his cane, Wolf Blass asked us to consider, “What did Jesus eat?” (Think water, bread, and lots of fish.) Fialta

stood up and countered that more appropriately, with today’s expanded dietary choices, we should be asking: “What would Jesus eat?” (Think Coke, pizza, Big Macs, and lots of French fries.) Ten minutes of pandemonium. Our Fearless Leader finally got up and chilled us out with the cold equations of the home’s finances, Our Situation. (Think another whopping rent increase if we wanted better chow.) Silence. People, abject, heads down, slowly meandered out of the meeting. (Think card-playing, reading, computer surfing, napping.)

The Perfect Crime

Outside sky swept lengthwise by gusts of wind. Vast and silvery white, it is cut into lines of energy tensed to the breaking point, into awesome furrows like strata of tin and lead. Divided into magnetic fields and trembling with discharges, it is full of concealed electricity. Diagram of a gale akin to the renditions of our Chicagoscape as imagined by the late local super-hero painter, Roger Brown. Like the silhouette figures in Brown’s painted high-rises, there’s a man in my room, nay, on my bed, refusing the bed, begging for the floor instead. His name is Michael Perfect, but answers to “Perf.” No kidding. Said he was a perfect angel when a kid, ‘til he joined the Marines. A rip for a mouth, a rip in his crotch, a hank of hair, a flair for ill-fortune, an empty stare, a done deal with sorrow. Shirt off, he shows off his permanently scarred and distended abdomen (sans belly-button) evidence of surgery for liver cirrhosis and ruptured spleen. On his chest, under the right collarbone, there is a scar: a round one with tiny wavelets, like the imprint of a coin on wax. An old war wound. Says he smiles when he’s angry.

But I’m sorry. I haven’t introduced myself. I am the imperfect human. Here he is. The imperfect human. You will see the imperfect human function. How does such a number function? Waiting. What kind of thing is it? To be waiting, only waiting. But as this is a short story, we can’t look into that now. My name is Gerald and I’m sitting on my bed. On the third floor of the Upping Arms Elder Home. Where my son, I call him “Jimmer,” put me. Out of love, he says. Sometimes I believe him. I’m a lone egg frying in a dry pan of detail. And my human stuff see-saws back ‘n forth between clay as mud and clay as porcelain. I can testify that which ceases to be useful simply begins to *be*. A creature on

the borders of nothingness and death. Trying to outwit Ticktockman, the fearsome dude eating away the minutes of my life. Or as a degree-bearing aeronautical engineer who spent his whole life trying to minimize loss and entropy and logical impossibility would more objectively phrase it: *the negative entropy in the ordered organization of life has now become balanced by the positive entropy of disorder and death*. My head stuffed with dried memories in place of quick thoughts: the YesterNow of elder physics.

At the urging of Jimmer, who says I have talent, I am now the newest member of our institution's "Happy Scribblers" writing club where my inkly offerings come under strict scrutiny. "That's really the pits," is the norm from our club president. "Gerald, do you have a single predominant incident in mind?" a stern Fialta Fenwich queries in response to my hint that I've got a punchy idea for my first outing as a wordsmith. Zipped lips don't sink ships, I remain silent about my son, who took the brunt of the incident, and suggested the topic. And the captain of our ship, Fialta? She was voted such as she takes her compass heading from correspondence courses in creative writing and, during the McCarthy Era, taught English composition to midshipmen at Annapolis. Moreover, she's donated not one but *three* copies of Strunk 'n White's *The Elements of Style* for our club members' enlightenment. "You will reach new platitudes of success," Fialta announced when she passed the three spanking new copies around. Three, my favorite number! Little good these do, those slim books, our members are already shrunk 'n white and nevertheless have little style.

"Do you have a single preeminent character in mind, Gerald?" That's Fialta, she's relentless. Withered, but immaculately un wrinkled, her scalp is dotted with hair implants. She's our home's resident skeptic. Because she mixes an abrasive personality with a sharp intellect, Jimmer has dubbed her our home's "gerontomidwestern Sontag." Even her daughter found her too headstrong to take under wing and care for after her third husband's liver gave out from alcohol; she stopped making meals and refused the fare supplied by Meals-On-Wheels.

"Yes I do have such," I bravely assert, pulling from that depth of courage I drew from on every mission over the flak-torn skies of Germany. "And I've got imaginaaaaaation," I add, drawing a large rainbow arc before her face with my open palm as I sit across the table from her in our home's newly remodeled Sunshine Room. "I want to experiment with narrative structure," I offer, not saying Jimmer has given me a nudge in that direction along with a folder stuffed with textual fragments he's razored from books stolen from academic libraries. She gives me her *Oh, have you!* look. "Yes, I've

got a *real* character in mind. A *character* of a character, if you catch my drift." Fialta looks worried, like maybe my protagonist is modeled after her. So I quickly clarify, "In fact, my protagonist indirectly got me tossed out of my last elder home." I'll bet she is thinking, *Now that's the kind of protagonist I could play*.

I notice seven of eight pairs of ears at our table perk up (the exception is Kim Young Sam who's recovering from an Overwhelming of the Vessel, a stroke). They sense a plot — and blood. As a newbie, I expect they'll pick my stuff apart with "That's really the pits." They await a plotless, no "puncher." But I'm praying for 4000 words and a unity of expression good enough to atone for any sins. What's that on my forehead? Sweat? Nervous. The "Fen Witch's" gaze can cast a formidable spell. And I am working with the handicap of some mental obfuscation; why I'm in here in the first place. And what will our members think about my smart son kibbitzing from the sidelines with his shards of copped text?

"Your story must move, move, move," The Witch continues, directing her gaze evenly across our faces as if to dish out her spell evenly. But I know she's tossing her dart my way in particular. She was about to add a fourth "move" when our guest speaker walks in — fifteen minutes late.

"Made a perfect mess of my life," confesses Perf, one of Oak Park's increasingly numerous homeless. "All I used to do was hang with barflies and watch without pity as an olive drowned in my Martini. In those days I had a party trick in which I'd balance a cocktail on my forehead and then lie down on the floor without slipping. That's when I was gainfully employed and winning not a few bowling matches on a semi-pro circuit with the famous, in Ohio anyway, Kegling Kouples. Now I can't afford nothin' but rot gut. So's now me mouth always tastes like it has been used as a latrine by some small creatures o' the night. Ya know, though, addiction is just prayer gone awry, right Jerry?"

Met "Perf" occupying a bench in our local park during one of these walks of mine. He just sat there and lifted his suspender straps, both at once, as if he were shouldering a load, the metal clips of his suspenders two burning clusters of sunbeams. Kept meeting him there over several sunny days. Always fussing with those damn suspenders! Occasionally, he'd utter "Ophelia" under his stale breath. "One of several names-that-touch-me," he later explained. Seemed to keep himself going on gas fumes and cigarettes. Liberal villagers walking by toss a

buck or two in his Starbucks cup; neo-cons lecture him on fiscal responsibility, while Born-Again bother him with Scripture. I catch his attention because I'm wearing my old bombardier's flight insignia on my black leather jacket.

After introducing our guest — Professor Sayit Allreddy, a South Indian writer teaching at Columbia College, Chicago — Fialta flashes a fortune cookie from her Chinese take-out last night and reads: “A snowstorm of cold images counsels against excessive love of winter.” Says she plans on adding it to her latest poem (one of several assembly-edited together like a *cento* from such randomly won verbal gems). I hand her one of mine. It was just kinda crumpled up in my left trousers pocket from where it remained after my lunch at Soo Way Kitchen. Our guest speaker comments briefly on Fialta's concept, explains that the *cento* form of appropriation was the thing to do in Alexandrian Greece, then segues into some esoterics about “postmodernism” and “quotation.”

I had asked Perf to use the familiar of my name 'cause I was impressed he often resorted to the term “prayer” during his testimonials and confessed that, as a child, he jumped up in the middle of mass yelling, “Didja see her? She nodded! I asked the Blessed Virgin would my dog come home and she nodded yes!” Probably why, besides the weather, I invited him up here. Smuggled him in the side door when the staff member posted there was disinfecting himself at the newly installed Purcell hand-sanitizer station. Oh, yes, the other reason. He's a veteran of The Second. Tarawa Campaign no less. “Lost one testicle, gained a Purple Heart, picked up another ball keglin'.” No wonder he has a slightly Kewpish voice that sounds like Lisa Simpson on a peace march. He attributes his alcoholism to his war traumas.

“There's a word for that now, that kinda disturbance, not back then, so it didn't exist as it does now,” he explained. “Ever since they came up with that word, my condition's gotten worse, I swear.” He maunders on about his sad life. Seems he drove a fork-lift in some heavy-industry up in Green Bay after the war. He couldn't recall the company name, but said everyone wore designer hats, green 'n white. When he mentioned his wife hailed from Wausau, Wisconsin, I did a little elder jig right in front of his startled face. My ex and I

both hail from Antigo, I tell him, a blip on the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad Line once. Thirty miles from Wausau. Now the town's lucky if people stop to fill their gas tank on the way to the North Woods' fishing resorts. Although, the town has some claim to fame: first to be supplied with fluoridated water; Life magazine did a feature on the high school's Junior Prom in the late thirties, one shot featuring my future wife in her prom dress; it was the proud home of not only the guy who invented the famous Suick Musky lure, but also an Iwo Jima flag-raiser whose son wrote a book based on his dad's experiences from which a Hollywood movie was recently made; finally, notorious Timothy McVeigh had shady dealings with the big bald militia-type who runs the Army Surplus store just off main street. My son would add to the list his favorite wine merchant here because the guy was born there and wants to be buried there. My parents and my ex's are all are buried in Antigo's Elmwood Cemetery. I want to be buried there. Jimr wants to be buried there. Hell, who doesn't want to be buried there?

But death isn't Perf's thing. He prefers we talk bars. The ones that still have rusty BLATZ signs over their rickety premises and the bartender knows how to make a “Berliner.” I agree with him that those little Wisconsin burghs usually harbor nostalgic watering holes with dark wood bars that have accrued aura, with names like “The Farmer's Home” and “Beer 'n a Brownie,” that take you right back to the thirties when record-size Muskies were still being lifted by the dozens from local lakes directly into the beds of rusted out pickups, and the true fisherman, sporting a name like Frank Suick or Jack Borkenhagen, would be known by a tackle boxes so thick layers of silver paint it could hardly be closed which he'd gotten from his dad, who'd gotten it from his dad, who bought it from a family of a deceased Chippewa fishing guide.

“Alright Allready, I think we are running out of time,” interrupts Fialta, trying to keep our meeting within its hour time limit. Allready quickly segues to a Cliff Notes summary of his Doctoral Dissertation. The topic's critic Dorothy Sayers' *trinitarian* theory of artistic creation. My ears perk up at the three-word as three is the number of God, the number of hope, the number of operations I've had so far. Sayers, he explains, sees art as a collaboration between a generative idea (the

Father), and style (the Son), and some emotive force (the Ghost). By the time he's done, I'm nearly jumping in my seat. As Fialta frowns and looks conspicuously at her watch, I tell him about my project, *this* project, and that I'm the father (obviously) and I'm collaborating with my son (less obvious), and we are dealing thematically with the ghosts of my life-past. This evokes an effusive grin and nod from our speaker, but a mouth crumpled like a discarded candy wrapper from Fialta. Oops. I let the cat out of the bag about Jimmer, my pedantic son. By now Fialta is standing and extending a withered hand his way. But before repacking his alligator-skin briefcase and returning the shake, Allready dishes out one last bit of advice, "If you send your writerly fruits out into the cruel world for publication, never, never, never should you give the perusing editor an easy out by enclosing a self-addressed stamped envelope for returns. And never, never, never mention you are a resident in an elder home," he adds, "unless you're contributing to *Modern Maturity*." He gets the expected laugh or two. Even Fialta lets a smile happen.

Spasm of pity squeezed my slowly failing heart. Wouldn't it happen to yours? Torrential rain's forecast, so I offer Perf my bed, my cool linen sheets, but he humbly takes blankets, a pillow, and the floor, returning a weak smile while blinking at me with blue blue blue innocent eyes (envision a tiddly Paul Newman) that could fool anyone and scratches a little at his crotch. I manage to smuggle food up to him. He pees in my bathroom, standing straight as a chess piece, where it's as bright as a hospital's operating room, but he always misses. Refuses the convenience of my yogurt can. Can't recall much he said 'cept the war stuff, my memory is that thing I forget with. I do remember dodging our Fearless Leader and Fialta when smuggling in all sorts of chow to keep my guest's rumbling stomach at bay. Between meals, he seems content to watch DVDs from my collection of World War II documentaries on fighter aces, brave battleships, and D-Day heroics. He gets misty-eyed at my vintage "Victory at Sea" collection, especially when the theme music, "Song for the High Seas" composed by Richard Rodgers, starts each episode of the famous TV series. Brings back pleasant memories of shipmate camaraderie onboard the troop transports before each beach landing.

Our guest having departed, Fialta shakes Bondo

McCraken awake. As he's sitting next to me, his re-animated body sends me a whiff of sweat and old cracker crumbs. He's been slumped over twenty ball-point scribbled loose-leaf pages from which the title page reads, *Blight: The Great American Novel*. He nearly jumps from his seat. Starts to read his opening sentence, "The dawn rises like sick old men playing on the rooftops in their underwear," and is immediately cut off with a unanimous, "That's really the pits!" Fialta deftly refocuses her attention toward *moi* (my son claims tossing in a little French invites readers take this stuff more seriously). "Now the first thing you have to do, Gerald, is try and get hold of a catchy title; for instance, 'Basil Hargrave's Vermifuge,' or 'Fun at the Incinerating Plant,' catch my drift?" I nod a cautious affirmative. "Start with a good declarative sentence about your main character, such as, 'Hazel Goodtree had just gone mah jong. She felt faint.' Get it?" I was going to ask her if "going mah jong" was like "going postal," but kept my lips zipped. "Remember," she continues, "the voltage between two people, the pressure-cooker of a single human heart, are as fit grist for your stories as the epic convulsions of history."

I boast that all the Supreme Court's five conservative members are Catholic. I like to get the "Catholic talk" agoin', but I see Perf prefers we swap war stories. He said he realized, after watching my cable History Channel and nearly all my WWII videotapes, none mentioned how often even battle-hardened Marines would shoot themselves in one foot to get evacuated out of hellish conditions. Bad attitudes.

I tell him about my lofty altitudes, up past 10,000 feet in St. Christopher, my B-17 Flying Fort. Tell him once this young bombardier is on leave in London, about to be seduced in an apartment (lured upstairs from the smoky bar below by a girl who gave me the look of a distant star, turned, and asked me if I wanted to see her stamp album) when the phone rings and we are told: "Dive directly to the basement, Lootenant, do not stop at the bar, and remain there for the duration of the air raid." So down we went to a basement aglow with oil lamps and small candles snatched from the inn's tables. The girl I was with — Bianca was the name given, but not believed — exhibited a quiet serenity usually achieved only after long days of weeping and sobbing. This accounted for the fact that her Italianate eyes were deeply circled and yet they had the moist, hot flow and spare

purposefulness of a business woman that never misses anything. After awhile the basement ceiling shook with bomb impacts and we feared it'd cave in. It was the first time I'd been on the other side of the bombsight. Under the incessant drumming, time passed like sluggish dirigibles stuffed with freezing water and my BVDs felt like they were made of thatch. This was just a few hours before the bloody charge of dawn and my bouncing bus back to the airfield for another gut-wrenching mission piloted by fearless "Bangin' Bob" Gormley.

Yep, he liked that one, but the story that really sobered him was, "The Case of the Uncanny Can," my pièce de résistance.

After our club meeting, I return to my little monk's cell via our slow-as-molasses elevator. Our Scottish handyman, Daithidh MacEochaidh, has just put mirrors in the lift. He's the guy that lets me take a nip from a bottle of scotch secreted in a janitor's closet and often feeds me trivia, like, and I quote, "Jerry, no chameleon can live with comfort on a tartan." Somehow, I think that applies to me and my Situation. Some kind of Scottish Zen Koan about my bipolar changeability. Anyway, Jimmer said Mac hoped the mirror effect would reduce the incidents of claustrophobia suffered by some of the more touchy residents, like "III-Phil," our cruel tag for a guy who has the whiff of the volatile about him, who needs to inflict himself on the world ever since unsuccessfully storming a Nazi mortar position. Phil's usual greeting is: "See yuh. Wouldn't want to be yuh," followed with, "You tampered with my *tau* modulation, fucker!" or simply, "Yes, I can very well escape, but during my escape, I'm looking for a weapon," as a thickish vein in his pale head flutters menacingly. At meals he often stacks toast, jelly containers, salt and pepper shakers, and so forth, as high as he can get 'em, constructions we punningly term his "III-Phil Tower.

Perf's ears perked as I began my tale: "Our bombing mission for the next day was scrubbed due to bad weather over the target. So our crew worked overtime at the local pub that night. But about 5 a.m., we were startled out of a drunken slumber to shouts that the mission was on again. Perfect conditions suddenly arose over our objective. With a hangover almost too heavy to bear, we all staggered through breakfast, runny eggs and toast, and barely managed to climb into our war birds. To make a long story short, on our way back to base after a

good mission, I had bouts of diarrhea. Nothing to shit in but an empty ammunition box for our .50 caliber machine guns. As luck would have it, our home base was socked in with English fog, so we landed at our alternate field. I left the smelly can in the plane, but a ground crew member ran up to me, 'You left your ammunition box, Lutenant.' I carried the damn thing into the base's terminal and left it in the officer's men's room, but a guy cleaning the latrine retrieved it, ran out and handed it back to me. So I'm stuck holding this dreadful thing. My fellow crew members could hardly keep a straight face. Anyway, finally, the weather cleared. As we started to leave the terminal, I surreptitiously slid the damn can under a seat. I was out the door and almost to my plane, when a gorgeous WAC came running across the tarmac shouting, 'Lutenant, Lutenant, you almost forgot your ammo,' and handed me the cursed thing. Well, Perf, we had to ride all the way back to Rattlesden airbase with that smell wafting through the fuselage, forcing us to go on oxygen even though we were well under 10,000 feet. Needless to say, I became the butt of jokes in half a dozen pubs over the next two weeks. Hell, I coulda gone on a USO tour to entertain the troops!"

Yesterday, Jimmer suggested we put on our father-son flight jackets and test-fly the south elevator. My eyes lit up. Father-and-son mischief. Exiting my room, we ran into Mac. Nobody can pronounce his name so we just call him Mac. As we passed, he acknowledged us with a polite nod and licked his lips with an odd, little grating sound, as if he's made of something peculiar. We hobbled down the hall past small metal plaques with arrows pointing the direction to a range of room numbers. Jimmer said the halls reek of urine (most of us are Depends carrying members of the Flow Flux Klan). When I stopped at the lift, the momentum of my thoughts sent them rushing forward, pressing and wetting the backs of my eyes: thoughts of affection for Jimmer.

I raised my finger old-age-cautiously to press the call button to begin our adventure. After a spell during which Jeane, my ex-wife, could have smoked two cigarettes, the door opened; we stumbled into an alien landscape. The doors WHUMP shut and we are sealed in that queasily rising box, rising slowly toward room 536, the Community Elder Services office (chairs there swiveling back 'n forth catching green threads of the carpet in the casters) where I will in the very near future repeatedly report Jim's elder abuse. The surrounding walls in the lift are mirrored floor-to-ceiling, giving an illusion

of infinite space. I quoted Hamlet to Jimmer — it reminds me of that bright blue day in Oceanside, California when, at age seventy-three, I soloed in a Cessna — “O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and yet count myself a King of infinite space.”

“Hall of mirrors effect, the scene of the abyss, dad,” reflected my theory-jock son. “*Mise-en-abyme*, in French theory, *mon cher père*.” Staring at that eter-nity, all that I’m fond of as me was cupped up in this single, staring instant. I was nothing but distortion and then I completely disappeared into infinite replication. My ego a reflection, not an object.

“For Chrissakes, what is this? — a Jesuit lift?” I teased Jimmer at a moment we both sensed was somehow metaphysical. I felt my gaze become objectivized, it was no longer mine, it was stolen from me. Usually my short-term memory just loops every day or so, but this adventure of ours remained vivid.

Bob Gormely, our pilot, survived whatever the Hun tossed at him, but nearly succumbed to that Uncanny Can that smellful day. Wouldn't you know, but his oxygen mask decided to malfunction and he had to drive our bird with one hand, holding his nose with the other. The guy went on to fly Lockheed Super Connies and then commercial jets, retiring as a Captain with United Airlines in the late-eighties. He moved near my ex-wife. His last airline flight, he took a duck in the face at 250 knots; shattered the 747's windshield. Brought the plane down successfully though. Ballsy guy. Back in '44, drinking in English bars, he'd always have the pick of the skirts. Handsome guy, still is. So not so surprised to think of him making passes at my fickle ex. Oh, well, may the best man win. As Jimmer can verify, our family relations — though strained due to me going off my anti-psychotics, and harrowing and violent as human birth — have eventually emptied into acceptance and resignation.

Must have been about an hour after I return to my cell when Jimmer knocks. I remove the chair propped up to hold my door secure against interlopers and enters my son beaming as only his blue eyes can, holding a book title in my face: *Chefs as Farmers-Scientists: The New Frontier in Food*. I sense dark clouds of root vegetables and cabbages are on the horizon. In one of MyOwnPrivateldaho brain events, I swear I smell a sautoir of potatoes simmering gently in duck fat. In a Proustian moment, I recall last night's dinner out with Jimmer, not long after our elevating elevator exper-

ience. An awful restaurant bathed in unkindly light and the fish staring up at me from my plate, its one flat, iridescent eye accusing me — all surrounded by dreadful murals of Sicily. Sitting at another table is another not-long-for-this-world resident of our elder home, Vera Lille: an eighty-seven-year-old depressing concatenation of Parkinson's-arthritis-hip-implant. If this ain't enough, *twice*, shrieks emanate from the kitchen. (A month later, the joint's *Kaput*.) We sit on my bed and regurgitate our bad dinner experience (as Jimmer flips through his book and offhandedly mentions “slow food” and “molecular gastronomy”): *he* liked his clams casino, he said, but the olive oil bread dip sucked. Whatever. Too painful to think FOOD when the fare at my Situation is only a notch above penitentiary cuisine. So I quickly change the topic by telling him about my long walks, wanting to know where I've been forcefully resettled — this “village,” as locals nostalgically call it — where I am living out my last days. Want to know it by *walking* through it. A side benefit? This will also help improve the use of my legs, balance, and blood flow to keep me lucid. So, daily, I do an hour constitutional around my environs in my clown-sized orthopedic shoes (until I'm shackled to that damn walker).

“Yesterday, on my walk,” I start to recite a litany of events to my son, “a German shepherd approached, I turned left to avoid it. Then passed two pastry shops on one block where two Scottish terriers looked less intelligent trotting side-by-side, than when seen alone. Someone was following me again. I ditched him. Near our church, I removed Tony Alamo Christian Ministries anti-Catholic pamphlets off five parked cars. Two cooks and one distracted woman formed a precise (and intense) equilateral triangle in an alley behind that bad Italian restaurant, inside of which another woman buttered a piece of white bread as soft as the plump undersides of her arms. I went for a cone in that ice cream store you claim liberal villagers avoid as the owner is a Tea Party politico; reminded me of my many forays into our family freezer for mounds of mint chocolate chip. Remember? Then, as I crossed in the middle of the street, taking a short-cut to St. Hilarius to go to Confession, a driver made eye-contact with me through her windshield, a stern gaze that said: *I'll allow just enough time for you to cross before I zip by, but hesitate and you're toast*. We both counted on the continuity and truth of elder physics, partaking in a mathematics of the most complex kind.” At all this, Jimmer just rolls his eyes.

The only intellect in here I fear is Fialta's. And now she's knocking on my door and yelling, “Open Sesame,” or “Sez me,” or something like that. Claims she wants to share a box of her precious Koeda chocolates sent by her grandson teaching English in Japan.

Jimmer opens the door. Upon entering, she's *too* ingratiating. Suspect she's really here to spy on our father-son collaboration. Jimmer tactfully excuses himself, "Gotta grade student papers, my hoppers. Bye-bye." He likes to call the residents here "hoppers." Go figure.

As Fialta hands me a choice dark chocolate, she points out a curious enigmatic fairy tale English inscription on the chocolate box: *A lovely and tiny twig is a heroine's treasured chocolate born in the forest.* "Grist for my collections of *centos*," she explains. Catching on to the gist of her project, I suggest she surf for inspiration on *www.English.com*, the wacky website where foreigners attempting to use our fair language send proper English spinning. When she opens my door to leave, I can hear that Bondo has left his door open again; the strains of what sounds like the second movement of Chopin's Twelfth Sonata for Flute and Cuspidor echoes in our pee-tinged hallway.

Sorry. I haven't been able to add to my short story for two days. My feet hurt so. So this morning Jimmer drops by to take me to the podiatrist conveniently located in our building. Nice Korean lady. Seems so young. And her last name *is* Young. Has a sign framed in her waiting room with a curious bit of wisdom from the *I Ching*:

Deliver yourself from your great toe.
Then the companion comes,
and him you can trust.

She's too nice and delicate to see my feet, which look like two over-tenderized yellow-white chicken breasts with rooster claws grafted at one end and covered with month-old fungus growing at the tips. Embarrassed at the state of my feet, as if they are a horribly-rhymed poem, Jimmer's in the waiting room with his head stuck into some dumb magazine. Nothing changes during these nail-clipping procedures, except for a newer edition of *Cosmopolitan* (featuring "Waking up at *his* House" or similar dreck) and *Car and Driver* in the magazine rack. I get placed in this big relaxing chair while young Young hacks away at my thick, sick toenails. That distinct SNAP of the clippers. Sounds like something I'd hear in the inside the fuselage of a new plane being assembled as technicians wired the electronics. Even out in the waiting area, Jimmer flinches with each snip. Once she hits a small vein and I yelp and bleed, in vain. Nothing can stop that encroaching yellow plague turning my toes into caricatures of human digits. Constant pruning and prayer keep it at bay though. I'm unsteady enough on my feet without this shit happening. Have to wear high, orthopedic socks these days. Keeps the fluid from settling in my two southern peninsulas. Swelling (it ain't swell) and losing feeling in those regions

too. Something about my heart. Isn't pumping up to snuff. Depressing to see your personal geography being slowly annexed by foreign powers. Thought I fought a war to prevent just that. The doctor, Jimmer, and a white plastic shoe-horn urge me into my black orthopedic shoes with Velcro fasteners. Sixty dollars per sole. Like paying for an indulgence. Way too heavy for my weak legs. I ditch 'em for my white gym shoes when I'm in the home despite being prone to trip on their untied laces. Yah, I know I will catch flak for this, but I'm a lucky bastard. Got a certificate after surviving all those combat missions to prove it. My son and I go for lunch, in our painfully slow-serving dining room.

For a whole week Perf suffers my war stories, me his. For a whole week Perf partakes of coffee 'n leaky eggs for breakfast, for lunch he demands "a greasebomb with cheese 'n extra fuel, but hold the radioactive materials," and for dinner I smuggle in our classy mystery meat of the day. In between, he snacks on my store-bought corn bread which I cover with honey to keep moist. As many residents take up food to their rooms, this bit of subterfuge isn't too difficult. Perf consumes some twenty-one meals — "Better than a twenty-one gun salute." he says with a smile — before the whistle is blown (I fear it's Fialta) and I'm in deep doo-doo.

Having a bad day. Feeling persecuted. Irrascible. What I call my "Futterneid Quotient" is rising again. I've complained for a week about Bondo's noisy antics and that my toilet pipes are tapped and my feces analyzed. So annoyingly persistent am I, they agree to move me to another room whose number is, as I insist, a prime number. Jimmer and the handymen here commiserate as they work their butts off lugging my stuff. Jimmer manages to sneak out with and trash some of my possessions. Thinks I'm blind and can't recall what I got. Like my golf clubs. Says he's storing them at his place. Can't fool me. Sold 'em, I know. And where did my archery set go? Said I authorized selling it. Liar, liar, pants on fire! I know he's got his hands in my till, too. Why I moved all my bank accounts from under his nose and figure I'll soon report his elder abusin' ass to the officials on the fifth floor next time I'm looking into the abyss of that mirror in the lift. And that red-haired wife of his . . . in cahoots! No doubt. A psychoanalyst to boot. I know she's telling them here I'm nuts. Why else are they analyzing my feces and putting meds in my orange juice? When I complain, they accuse me of "petulant self-advertisement." Ho! I can sense they're going to, someday, take their pound of flesh outta me for all the

trouble I am. I am trouble, therefore, I am.

*They call our Fearless Leader. They call the resident psychologist. They call Jim. They call the cops. They tell me I'm naive (polite for stupid). Who's "they?" You know, "them." Anyway, I'm called into Fearless Leader's office; only then do I discover it's decorated in "taxidermic chic" (a cow skull, two stuffed rodents in doll clothes, a lizard embalmed in varnish, and a lasso-shaped sign reading: **Sheep may safely graze where a good shepherd watches**). Gets up from his desk and bows in a parody of old-fashioned grace, revealing a nacreous scalp thinly mantled with long damp creepers of brown hair. Thinks the length makes him hip 'n cool in the eyes of the Baby Boomers who are these days putting their parents in here in droves. Gives me a "Hi, Jerry," in a sing-song, mocking manner to which I mumble a "God-be-with-you," as I ironically mimic a Papal blessing. I hate him, he gets in the way of my lie, my lie for myself. Got big hunch that his self-possession is temporary, like a reflection in water that's wiped out by the first swell.*

"I'm an experience stager," he explains, "our guests here are on stage and you don't fit the cast, aren't what we want people to see as characterizing The Elder-Experience. Capisce, Cochise?" I'm dismissed.

Fearless Leader takes pains to make sure none of this vagabond-in-the-room stuff gets into the papers. Bet he bribed 'em. They do permit me to shake a firm final good-bye to ol' Perf before they separate us (tears in our eyes) and firmly escort him from the premises (more difficult now since he's gained ten pounds and suffers the after effects from a bottle of single malt scotch that Daithidh thought he had successfully hidden in his maintenance closet.)

Pissed. Seems I'm always pissed off at someone or something: my ex-wife, deceptive salesmen, seducers of all types, bleeding-heart liberals, Pope-condemned movies, slow drivers, my former bosses, TV anchors, sex-celebrities, my daughter's suitors, and even well-meaning people who offer the platitude, "You still have a long time ahead of you." Can't stand our megalomaniac elder home honcho, nor those meal-delaying cooks 'n waitresses here, nor that faking-friendly guy who follows me around in this place and gets into my myriad medications by busting my safe (my son thinks I smashed its door myself to gain credibility);

oh yes, and don't forget those guys on staff here who analyze my feces after flushing. Jeez, I hear someone behind the wall sometimes! I imagine those test-tubes too. I try to imagine the faces. Plural because I'm sure it isn't one guy. (Did you catch my bad pun? Bet you didn't.) Must have three shifts. And all males because no female would analyze feces, right? Right?!

Wish they'd just move me outta here. I'm busted, broke. They, my son and his wife, got all my money. And the meds I'm supposed to take, that sneaky bastard who pretends he likes me, fawning asshole, knows just when to break into my room and swipe 'em. I can tell 'cause when I accuse him, he frowns, nods, smiles, snaps his fingers, sucks in his breath, and eventually grins. Had the nuts to break into my safe once. Busted the door. Probably selling my pills on the black market. Must remember to write Jimmer a frank letter about this, this very week. Must twist the turbulence of my liquid intelligence into the stony idiom of the tortured brain.

I never found out Perf's fate. It was one of my more colorful experiences in my elder-life and a first for the Upping Arms Elder Home. And the last straw. As I stand before Fearless Leader, I'm read a litany of offenses. Later, Jim is told to find another home for my sorry bones.

An ordinary short story is like a meteor. It has only one moment, a moment when it soars screaming like the phoenix, all its pages aflame, then peters out with a swoosh. Such was that one moment in my life when I met Mr. Perfect and we pulled off the (almost) perfect crime. Almost, as I soon found myself out on the street waiting for Jim to drive up and put all that makes up my material life into his shiny silver SUV. Another Situation awaits me ahead. Another story in the making.

A firm knock. I think that's Fialta at my door to remind me about our meeting at 1 p.m. At least that's what my DON'T FORGET dry-erase wall-board lists in bright red ink as my next activity today. Ten minutes later Fialta is drumming her platitudes into us. "Call it precious and go to hell, but I believe a story can be wrecked by a faulty rhythm in a sentence — especially if it occurs toward the end — or a mistake in paragraphing, even punctuation. Henry James was the maestro of the semi-colon. Hemingway of the paragraph. Virginia Woolf never wrote a bad sentence." After several minutes of Fialta's homily, the club meeting is turned over to our members' readings.

Tandeta Paluba, a vocal member, announces she has just completed a short story, "Jeffy is Eighty-

Five," a clever gerontic refunctioning of a classic Harlan Ellison story. As she rattles on, I slowly become aware how much I like how she wears her hair, swept back in an odd '40s pompadour that looks like some auxiliary brain. Tandeta is followed by Magda Wang, a slovenly and loose-tongued woman, who brashly demands to read from her ongoing memoirs, *The Purple Days*, daring us with those darting eyes of hers to give an unfriendly critique.

Rory McDuff, wearing some kind of citrusy cologne, his hair around his ears in little grey waves that look so natural they have to be fake, follows Magda, reading from his newly begun detective novel, *Bubble of Fear* (his original title, *Eight Heads in a Duffle Bag*, was unanimously nixed). "My protagonist, Detective Inspector Justin-Nico Thymme, narrates in the first person, opening my mystery in a men's room thus: 'Having just been involved in a self-defense shooting of a perp I returned to my precinct in Chicago's Greek Town. I've been on duty twenty-four hours straight, powered on copper's-li'l-helpers and mainlined caffeine. I'm now in the precinct shit-house. Staring in the mirror, I notice my hat and trench coat and hands are pinprick-sprayed with the residue of ugly work; my eyes are sunken little blue coals, the wrinkles on my face look so much like plastic that it's hard to tell what's real and what may be a mask.' That's the first paragraph, took me half the day to write it." We all nod our approvals — even hard-to-impress Fialta.

I go last. "I've titled this piece 'The Perfect Crime'." I pause as Bondo rubs his hands in anticipation. I begin, "Outside, sky swept lengthwise by gusts of wind. Vast and silvery white, it is cut into lines of energy tensed to the breaking point, into awesome furrows like strata of tin and lead. Divided into magnetic fields and trembling with discharges, it is full of concealed electricity. Diagram of a gale akin to the renditions of our Chicagoscape as imagined by the late local super-hero painter, Roger Brown. Like the silhouette figures in Brown's painted high-rises, there's a man in my room, nay, on my bed, refusing the bed, begging for the floor instead. . . ."

Fellow Residents

Sunlight presses through the windows, thieving its way in, flashing its light over the furniture and senescent folks sitting in our dayroom. Not much for many of the residents here to do but watch the shadow of the curtain slowly move across the polished floor. A local mani-festation of that hourglass-shaped ribbon of light moving across the surface of our planet, The

Terminator, rushing like great fearful wings across distant plains and moun-tains and oceans. Jimmer has software on his computer that graphically displays this celestial Arnold Schwarzenegger in real-time. Amazing. Uses it to assist his shortwave listening hobby, helps in determining where and when wave-propagation will be best. He tunes in to world radio with a hi-tech Kenwood R-5000 digital receiver employing single-side band capability and digital signal processing that does an end run around interference; strings a long Super Eavesdropper Dipole Antenna inside his home — much to his wife's dismay. She blames me. I got him started in all that. I buy him a World War Two surplus Hammerlund Super-Pro tubed radio festooned with delightfully mysterious dials 'n knobs. Huge sucker. Dwarfs Jimmer.

It's the early sixties, and my son's teenage ears are glued to ungainly headphones crackling with Radio Moscow's propaganda competing with jamming and other electro-magnetic mishmash on the 11,000-mega-cycle band. Very educational and (my ulterior motive) it distracts him from the silly seductions of girls his age. So I get Jimmer studying up on electronics (he names his two pet white mice 'Cathode' and 'Anode'). Learns about different types of antennae (loops and long-wires, dipoles), the effect of waxing and waning sunspots on radio propagation (an eleven-year manic-depressive cycle, much slower than mine), how to reduce jamming, and the joys of auditing clandestine stations.

Unbeknownst to me, I spark in him a latent desire for eavesdropping, an audiophilia, that has ever remained. But on the downside, that listening to and corresponding with Radio Moscow and Radio Havana brings paranoid F.B.I. agents to our door, especially unwanted as I'm working on top secret government projects. He has to sign a document refusing all material from these subversive sources or risk putting us under government surveillance. Hey, it was at the height of the Cold War. I have to admit that I spent an inordinate amount of time listening to those fascinating airwaves too. I've always been a good listener when not broadcasting myself.

Maybe that is why I enjoy listening in on conversations around here in our home, or sitting respectfully, ears open, at the feet of our resident Ancient One. He has a favorite spot by the north window of our dayroom where he can hear some little sparrows; young sparrows they sound, chirping on the window's ledge: *yeep—yeep—yeep*. So delicate, frail is he, I expect him to give forth the same *yeep—yeep—yeep*. He's so cadaverous that his wrist-bones and the beak of his nose seem to want to break through his skin. In fact, he's here now. (He convinced the staff he'd thrive here by claiming: 'I'm short of requests and absolute requirements.') Wheeled in by his paid, nervous factotum. He's

edging towards his hundredth birthday and so no surprise that he's as slow as the galaxy and just as mysterious. Yet you wouldn't be surprised if he still found the chutzpah within to hop on our electrician's Husqvarna 125 cc and ride astride it willy-nilly down our hallways in one last whooping hurrah.

In our elder world that has no rhyme or reason, he reigns like a monarch, too self-evident ever to feel his own order threatened, an envoy in the midst of our chaos here serving an order so noble that he is able to tranquilly accept the necessity of all our disorder. We all suspect great secrets in him, hidden treasures — his old hands are like the parchment of an old pirate map—but he can't seem to formulate them fully. It's less about *what* he says than how he *says* it. And his appearance! I keep telling Jimmer, like a broken record, about those eagle-eyes that penetrate you to the quick. Those quick turns of the head! Then there'd be those times when his senses would sleep as if nothing made enough of a claim on them. He lives for mealtimes and our brief but tasty conversations. Wealthy enough to have catered dinners brought in by the assistant that shadows him; why, with his bucks, he parks his weary frame here is anyone's guess. Could it be he knew I had landed here too? Stranger things have happened to me.

I took a liking to him right off. I intuit that all time 'n everything in our world is as mysterious and great as he is. A mirror of all I find fascinating. He was a successful C.E.O. of a car company; owned and piloted his own plane, a nifty Beechcraft B-35 V-tail. Jeez, how I've always wanted to fly that baby! Knows his cylinders and pistons sure enough. Still scans design mags. We discover our common turf, a four-eyed engine sparkling in the dim light of a winter afternoon. His factotum is relieved when I offer to watch over and push him around a bit each day. Rupert Hempel, but I call him 'Hemp.' Wields a sharp blue heaven-piercing squint. He's a fencing master of imagination, a solo hero waging war against the fathomless, elemental boredom of old age and institutionalization. Due his age, he doesn't buy green bananas any more, and due to his wisdom, he's been awarded our home's prestigious "Nestor Medal." He's like a magic mill: pour into the hoppers the bran of empty hours and they re-emerge flowering into all the colors and scents of oriental spices. The only other person I've known who can do that was my ex-wife's father, my son's favorite relative. Out of everything repugnant and detestable, he extracts the hot 'n cools to reinvigorate life. So I dog him about, garner his favor. He encourages our reading club to peruse Plato as a tonic for the blood and a catalyst for prophetic dreams and regular bowels. His mantra is: *Less matter, more form*. We exchange secret eye signals.

Tells me he's old enough to have suffered the

sevenlympic scourges. That his wife died ten years ago. That his factotum is his wife's cousin's daughter's brother's friend. Or something like that. Rattles on that his corporate management strategy stressed *unity of action*, collective and individual interest that harmonize. One of the earliest companies to offer profit-sharing to its workforce, he claims. Says one can learn a lot about successful management from that Frenchy Charles Fourier's utopic musings.

We share a disdain for politicians and TV personalities. Peddlers of garbage both. Television overpays its talent. And politicians gotta graft, I believe, to compensate for having one-half of the population always hating one's guts. Imagine having that many people pissed at you! And the media on your ass 24 / 7. Not even The President receives due respect. Don't they know that in disrespecting HIM they disrespect themselves? He is, after all, the embodiment of THEM. Little wonder that no self-respecting person would become a politico unless they could glean gargantuan profits off their positions as insiders or have their huge egos gratified by the power they wield. No, it's educators, those unsung illuminators of young minds (like my Jimmer) that should be compensated into the six digits — not those schmucks. Common sense says you can judge a society by what it values. So just look around you, plenty of evidence we live in a topsy-turvy world, where shit floats to the top (one of two reasons I need to have a scissor parked on top of my toilet). Okay, Hemp and I are opinionated, or 'ROFs' (Rigid-Old-Farts) as Jimmer puts it. But few people in here could throw the first stone at us for being such.

When I tell Jimmer about the startling bits 'n shards of conversation I overhear here — as I walker-it about these days, oft in a daze — he offers me his extra iPod equipped with a little stereo microphone device (manu-factured by Belkin) which instantly turns the MP3 player into a mini-digital audio recorder. Ain't it techno-amaz-ing? I wear it around my neck and people only see an iPod my son got me for my eighty-fourth birthday. With a little on-the-job training, I got proficient with it. Here's a slew of tidbits (names changed to protect the innocent, all residents here unless otherwise noted) surreptitiously recorded this week (my son's transcription). Some are goosepimply ominous, one has been censored for modesty's sake, unflattering comments about yours truly remain, none have been faked:

- Eepie Carpetrod (wearing a blond wig and oversized sunglasses; author of the column 'Just Ask Eepie' in our in-house Xeroxed bulletin, *Armed 'n Ready*) — *My doctor's now got me on Divalproex; effective against rapid-cycling and non-rapid-cycling episodes. Need med advice? Just ask Eepie!*

- Paul Brainard (a visiting psychologist from Stanford doing Doctoral research) — . . . *and in between these tests you will master longhand and long division again.*
- Jill Peaseblossom (our empathic events co-ordinator) — *I think Jerry's declining; like it reminds me of my cousin who suffers Fred Hoyle syndrome, a rare disease that, although it boosts your brainpower exponentially, begins to age you a month a day. It's a paradoxical, both-and-logic; in both cases—Jerry's and my cousin's — Nature's both not playing according to Hoyle and according to Hoyle. And in Jerry's case he's not only been dealt a bad hand, he's not even playing with a full deck.*
- Serena Dansante — (bragging to our home's most notorious motor-mouth) . . . *and my o_____ felt like a hundred glimmering goldfish expelled through the hole in an aquarium. Now don't go and blab that around Hilla. Especially not to our 'Dirty Harry.'*
- Fred Federerer (to me, over lunch) — "*Rory*", *during our Poker sessions, always has an interesting question or two to pose, such as: Why do hooded seals inflate a red balloon out their nose during courtship? Or, What is Pollyanna's epitaph? Or asking if we heard the one about the horse who needed a cataract operation and was too broke to pay for it. I finally figured out that he was doing that to distract us when he held a good hand.*
- Sunny Atkins — *And she told me I had canine teeth that stick out like box seats at the opera — god — felt like I needed splints on my heart.*
- Hilla Horavath — *Since my husband's started to speed-age, his range of emotions has narrowed into the yellow line on a highway crossing the Prairies.*
- Amy Gdala — *In our popular 'You Know More Than You Think' bi-weekly session in the Sunshine Room, our sweet Jill unrolled a sheet of bubble wrap before our group, cut and gave us each a yard's length, telling us that each bubble represents a story in our lives. We are to tell someone a story each day if possible and, when each story ends, we are to pop a bubble. The first to turn in our sheet with all the bubbles popped wins a pizza-a-day for a week of their choice from Trattoria Two Twenty-five. The flattened plastic then serving as a placemat. But Ill-Phil blabbed to us girls—disturbing poor Betty no end—that when no more bubbles are left, it really indicates it's time to fertilize the grass. That verbal tornado . . . the gibberish that life-form exudes!*
- Kim Young Sam (now back from death's door) — *I looks flimsy so. And I am a hopeless lone chopstick and 'Bickering Barb' says I'm smelling like rubber worms in a box of fishing tackle. And Heidi blabs, I have faint eyebrows like a pair of smudged thumbprints. Isn't that racist? Can't I report her to Jill? Can't I ream her fat white ass with a rolled up lawsuit?*
- Nicea Blonde (the bedazzling, now-dead, she-eminence of our writing club; under the *nom de plume* of 'Nice 'n Easy Ash Blond,' she had just published her sensational memoir, *The Ballad of Sexual Expediency*; rumored she died in "Dirty Harry" von Warburg's bed) — *The truth will knock 'Teary' Castellano off her meds! Despite (or maybe because of) the fact that her cheeks look like scones.*
- Buddy MacDonald — *Everyday, Jill spoon feeds him a few details from his home town newspaper, articles he can't bring himself to read. Gives him small dosages so he'll eventually become immune to the full dose.*
- Hilaria Wojnarowicz — *Eepie, Harry's forehead looks as square and white as a slice of sandwich bread. Makes me swoon! Unlike that creep, Gerald.*
- Daithidh MacEochaidh (our handyman, who seems unusually keen on inspecting the hairs on the backs of female residents' necks) — *All day it's 'Mac, this, Mac that, Mac, Mac, Mac, Mac . . . Ack!*
- Heidi Katzenjammer — *Frieda's mastered French's pluperfect. It conjures up our wishes and desires, our fears and possibilities, she claims. Then again, she thinks language (which exists to pull us close) originated as a benevolent virus from outer space, shot our way by extra-galactic residents.*
- Chaddy Fenwick (a retired chef, to Jill, with a huge sigh) — *I will sit down and eat my bowl of dust like everyone else. . . . My son? Well, he's sous chef to Grant Achatz now at Alinea. The apple doesn't farfall from the brie, huh?*
- Jill Peaseblossom (empathically to a resident's daughter) — *Your mom's words simply toddle across the page like a string of daycare tots, infantile and uncoordinated. In contrast, the objects pasted into in her I WON'T FORGET scrapbook conjure up a spectrum of emotions and memories. So maybe there's still hope.*
- Noreen Pogacnic (to Jill) — *Why am I here? Why did my kids finally chase me out of my old house with the peeling birch trees out front. They accused it of having a porch so sunken it seemed to smile at you from the street. I thought that was a good thing! . . . Jill? . . . Jill? . . . JILL!*
- Our Fearless Leader (to Teddy, during our annual resident's art show opening) — *Everyone's a fuckin' self-styled critic, Ted. Y says oats, Z says hay, and chances are it's buckwheat. The only thing better than an art exhibit without the damn critics is an art exhibit without the art. Har-har.*
- Viviana Verbock (in the dining room) — *My love life here is toast, Melba toast. When Dirty Harry invited me*

- to play with his Necker cube, I thought he meant he wanted me to neck with him in his room. Well . . . with what people say about his past — teeming with protean partners — one assumes . . .*
- Gina Love (our chair yoga instructor) — *Teddy, did I ever tell you about the time when I got hooked on the I Ching, and had to have Chaos Therapy to kick it?*
 - 'III-Phil' Pokey (to Jill, like the kettle calling the pot black) — *I'm glad I'm dead. I personally know a lot of inanimate objects with more human personality than many humans. (Here he became so unruly he had to be restrained.) Unstrap me, and I'll fit my square fist into your round pie-hole of a mouth!*
 - Brucine Bitters — *In real life, Ricky was a womanizer and a cheat and Fred a mean-spirited drunk. Both only a notch above III-Phil. . . . Always butter bread toward the edges because enough gets in the middle anyway.*
 - Wolf Blass — *I wept when the place closed in '49 'cause the floor show there had a cross-eyed belly dancer with a horsey face and a frenetic jiggle. Chicago was reaaaaallllllly fun back then.*
 - Rupert Hempel (to Teddy Jawnowitz, our resident shrink) — *Doc, I must appear vaporous, a sort of floater in other people's eyes. Except to Jerry. Except to Jerry Hugunin, a true nomad. Ya know, he calls me an ummanu, the Akkadian word for teacher of wisdom just 'cause I said memorabilia keeps longer under plastic.*
 - Valerie Desconsano (president of our 'Knit-Wits' knitting group, to Gina Love in a whisper, the length of a woolen string) — *Flabby armpits—how can you exercise the armpits?*
 - Victoria Popularpoulos (award-winning ceramics instructor to Hilla Horavath) — *A potato held by a two-headed baby? In clay? Really?*
 - A Visiting Child (upon being dragged into our dining room by his parents) — *Ugh, they look spooky!*
 - Fred Federerer — *There's veterans and then there's veterans. There's bombers and then there's bombers. There's luck and then there's luck.*
 - 'Nutritious' (to Jill) — *And Wilma said she did the whole Mediterranean cruise with a front-end loader. . . . You know, she had to wear one of those bags after she'd had one of those operations.*
 - Fialta Fenwich (our overeducated resident skeptic and President of our writing club — Jimmer calls her a 'gerontic midwestern Susan Sontag — withered but immaculately unwrinkled, her scalp dotted with hair implants, during an architecture lecture in our educational series, "The Arts: Now or Never," in the Twilight Room by a Professor Bruggemann) — *Beggin' your pardon. I know that's what they used to say, but in fact the pointed arch is the most primitive. It's the easiest arch; it's not a development from the round arch at all — how could it be? They had pointed arches in Egypt. The round arch, the keystone arch, is the most sophisticated arch you can build. The whole thing has been reported ass backwards to favor Christianity.*
 - Quimper Quade — *Valerie, always a sunburst of kindness, never minds if she sounds silly; she will throw herself headlong into any conversation to turn it off its contentious course. Why just the other day . . .*
 - Professor Batty Langely (guest speaker in our educational series, "The Arts: Now or Never," — *When the devils disappeared from Gothic detail, the saints lost half their saintliness. (I wondered if III-Phil, that devil, were to die, it'd have the same effect on our home's residents.)*
 - Teddy Jawnowitz (during an inspirational Easter presentation, "Egg-on Your Family Member, Not on your Face" addressed to residents and their families) — *Some people will call their days here their 'declining years,' but I would ask you to realize an elder home is an easy, ideal, even utopic, place to reverse that perverse and disorienting sense so pervasive in life-before-the-home that the false part of one's life is happening openly while the real and interesting part remains hidden. As our most revered resident, Rupert Hempel, has rightly observed — thank you Rupert and Jill for that information and Harry von Warburg for your vivid example — we have something akin to a Fourierist Phalanstery in utero here. [Editor's note: Charles Fourier's proto-Hippy commune.]*
 - Bondo McCracken (at fifty-five, our youngest inmate, at one of our group meetings) — *We must invert our notion of repose and activity, elder citizens! We should not sleep to recover the energy expended when awake, but rather wake occa-ionally to defecate the unwanted energy that sleep engenders. Get crackin'.*
 - Vassili Brekhunoff (to Bettina Weissacker) — *I trained at the four hundred and first KGB School in Okhta, Leningrad at the same time when Vladimir Putin was a fledgling agent there learning nine ways to kill with a rolled-up newspaper. It was rumored that on his KGB application form, where they ask your sex, Putin put 'none.' He and I used to hit the same bars. At that time, his reputation among us oscillated from passionate adulation to being a total laughingstock.*
 - Ruby Zunshine (eating 'stamp-'n-go' pancakes in our dining room, her eyes harpooning Brucine Bitters) — *Dirty Harry sure has the knack for seductive whispering. A seductive mix of both hiding and showing something. Mixed signals. He often comes on to women as though they were men. Like a certain type of actor, he isn't particularly interesting in group scenes, but*

shines in one-to-one matches when the chemistry is right. When not, he seduces up to a point where conquest is certain and then calls it off.

- "Dirty Harry" von Warburg (wearing his green hunter's jacket, brushed to a sigh of its used-up life, to Bondo McCracken) — *That Ruby, she's a good one. She's so pretty. Man I'd just like to be able to look at her and just . . . I could just look at her and just hold her and . . . I'd like her to just touch me, just, you know, just touch me and her like me, you know.*
- Roy "Rory" McDuff (to Jill) — *You know in this life you can lose everything that you love, everything that loves you. Now I don't hear as good as I used to, and I forget stuff, and I ain't as pretty as I used to be, but goddamn, I'm still standing here. Not washed up yet.*
- Bruin Opps — *Fiona likes to drag me to the local bar that Bondo's bonded with where pinch-faced retirees hunch over their double vodkas in hopes it'll give them back the key to their personalities.*
- Brucine Bitters (an exchange with Jill Pease-blossom) — *We have no future because our present is too volatile. You go out either in terror or in ecstasy, I've heard. I wish I were dead. . . . But you won't tomorrow. . . . But I don't want to live to see tomorrow. . . . You will tomorrow.*
- Tandeta Paluba (a vocal member of our 'Happy Scribblers' writing group who has just completed a short story, 'Jeffy is Eighty-Five,' a gerontic refunctioning of a classic Harlan Ellison story, and who wears her hair swept back in an odd '40s pompadour that looks like some auxiliary brain, to Magda Wang, a slovenly and loose-tongued woman who has just submitted her memoirs, *The Purple Days*, for an in-depth critique) — *Ordinary books are like meteors. Each has only one moment, a moment when it soars screaming like the phoenix, all its pages aflame, then peters out with a swoosh.*
- Magda Wang (to Jill Peaseblossom) — *Karol, god rest his soul, when he wasn't humming that old Balkan song "Savo Vodo," would say things like "pardonnez-moi" or "bonjour" and then add, "that's French, you know?"*
- Sigrid Knudsen (to Ill-Phil; Norwegian for: 'You sack of shit') — *Du Drittseck!*
- *Fleur Flaire* (an FTD Florist, lecturing on 'CPDO: Make Your Room More Livable,' in the Sunshine Room) — *Color, Pattern, Decoration. Ornamentation. It's all coming back. It's about celebrating life in these terrorist-aware times when we're more conscious than ever that this life isn't a rehearsal, it's the main event. And what simpler way to add some joy and pattern to your life than with flowers.*
- Our Dayroom's Communal TV — *Los Angeles will be*

our Rome, and Las Vegas our Florence.

- Our Dining Room's Radio (WBEZ, Public Radio News) — *In-house sabotage is one of the greatest problems now facing both our manufacturing and service industries.*
- Chub Lykom (to his agitated son) — *Why, death is also part of life, isn't it? It's always someone living who dies.*

Jimmer likes these, how does he put it, 'para-tactic lists'—and they're fun!