

# MESSIAHS

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RICHARDSON

FC2

TUSCALOOSA

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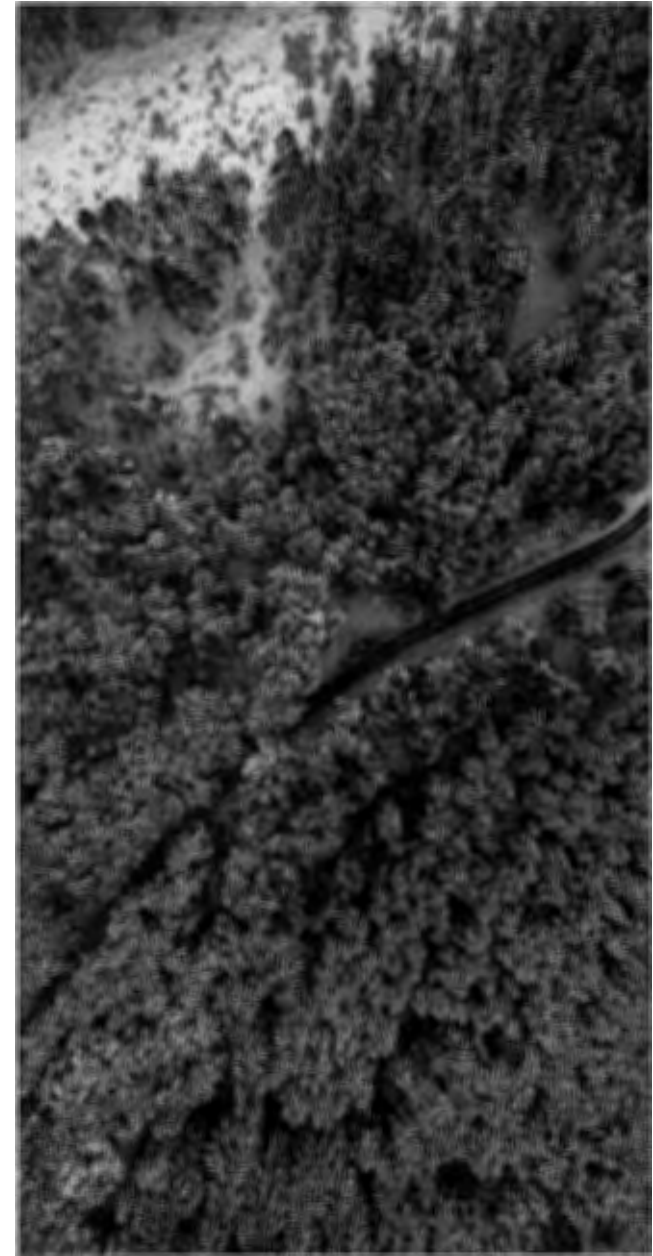
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*What is this gypsy passion for separation, this  
readiness to rush off when we've just met?  
My head rests in my hands as I  
realize, looking into the night*

*that no one turning over our letters has yet  
understood how completely and how  
deeply faithless we are, which is  
to say: how true we are  
to ourselves.*

*Marina Tsvetaeva*



Once a man becomes a wife they are a new creature and should be addressed as such, he says to her, whispers, for women listen for whispering men, for their fathers with the force of a folktale in the black of their beds at night in the cabins of north country—a northeasterly tryst for this woman of Asian and this man of African antecedents, both birthed in this modern American state, one of the five that has embraced the proxy initiative—whispers with those coywolves crying outside now in the snow, after conjuring the couple of men on the row with him who had just severed their scrota: anathemas for the death house. No, she does not know why he's thinking about this, she thinks. Yes, she knows why he's thinking about this, she thinks: the quail eggs at supper, the white plate, the spilled wine upon them—and the astonishing effect of red on white—and then the way the scrota lay there outside the feed slots of the men's single white cells at dawn: not like shaven little skin sacs, with their testes attached to their tunicae, but like bloody

little newborn rats—but before this the screaming the adrenaline and the quiet stench of iron in the air with this fortitude it took to stay standing, just long enough to sever and to shove yourself through a slot (their spermatoc cords sawed through by blades extracted from daily safety razors? by miscellaneous bits of metal? by pork chop bones or the plastic handles of toothbrushes ground down on the concrete for cutlery?)—for he saw all four rectangled two at a time in each sac all bloody and burgundy in his hand mirror after his forearm shot through the feed slot of his single white cell at dawn—the vertical bars in the square above the slot being too close together to squeeze a forearm through, akin to a cashier's window, with the more spaced-apart bars *around* the window sheeted with white metal mesh (as it was with *all* the cells and is still: white blood cells)—his acrylic shaving mirror angled downwardly and just right to reflect the reversed and inverted images onto his retinae to be righted by the brain, for first the mirror was facing the northeast then the southwest and then the northeast again with each time needing to be handled by the opposite hand, for they were on either side of him these men and he was between them—*testis* (witness); yet *testis unus, testis nullus* (for you would need another to corroborate this sight in your head, for the testimony of one is to be disregarded unless corroborated by the testimony of another, for there's no video surveillance in this ancient execution unit, no way to catch the guards doing what they're ordered to do,

only the other hand mirrors looking out on the row with you)—so then Fucking Christ! Fucking Christ! one of the guards cries, above a plash of footgear, for this guard still cries in his head as they must've lain there these two crimsoning men inside the leucocytes of their separate cells, a malady to society to either side of him, one white and one black and both outrageously stark naked, passed out from the shock or from the bloodlack, prostrate or faceup on the concrete, coolness against the red warmth rippling out and with their cocks now monstrously clitoral. But as he is saying again to her that once a man becomes a wife they are a new creature and should be addressed as such she is already in the kitchen in her mind and then later in her body because she can't stand to be in bed with him anymore, because there's this shitty kitchen in my belly, she thinks, the wine and the excuse for giving him my bed and I must need to organize this shit, she thinks, fueled by the burgundy while cutting on the lights, with hope and with scrubbing and holding my boy up high by the waist to wipe his lil' Buddha! I need to dunk my hands in water. I need to fill this fucking kitchen up with scalding hot water—this sink! I need to go outside and stoop in the snow and plunge them in hold them in and then rush them into this sink—oh God! the hum in my hands: the burn. So there is a scalding once she does it, after she rushes in, and she is calm and thinking of that sea again: *I need to think of the sea every now and again*, she once wrote to him, *for I am forgetting him*.

*I am not normal. I need to feel the warm warm seawater like bathwater, for I never want to forget how warm the seawater was, like bathwater, she wrote, to lead up to her, to explain her—for it had been over a year and a half then since she'd seen any ocean or her at all, her mother, and now over three years have passed—nor forget the clownfishes I saw swimming inside of it deep sea diving, those small orange bodies with their bold white vertical bars accented by black, how those protandrous tropical harlequins can engender both genders and live symbiotically among the death sting of the sea anemones, how the biggest fish the queen clownfish the only female fish in a school of male fish stresses the next biggest fish, the male mate, and stresses the male and stresses the male to keep the mate male, who then stresses the remaining males, for though being born males the decrease of cortisol will turn the males into females, but when she dies—she is bound to die—the male mate will become larger and rise to the rank of the female alpha stressor, whereas the next biggest will become larger and rise to the rank of the new male mate. But by and by as this cycle began afresh in this supermax, he wrote back, responding to her missive, redolent of her vaginal scent smeared across it, his spent semen smeared across his, the hierarchy is reversed: it is the least of the males who are turning female in their standard prison attire, orange accented by bars painted white while living among the sting of the death house for years; the administration and the warden and the guards have all stretched out those men those lovers so supremely those lovers who will never*

*touch each other from separate cells that I, who was centered between them like a muscular pump, could feel them both thrumming their deoxygenated desires through a heart that just had to oxygenate and deliver them respectively and readily and aided and abetted them unknowingly: the dawn of that double self-castration when the light is coming through the windows and stretching knifelike down the corridor to our row to my door is when we do it, he wrote back, he must've wrote back, the black lover to the white, or at least as I imagine him, because neither of them had a watch nor wanted one and he would've romanticized the moment as only a madman would do. I aided that note those notes—for there are no clocks no cameras no way to catch the guards doing what they're ordered to do, as guards are wont to do, to keep the quiet in here—I aided those notes, as did the man before me for as you know, as you know, I have been on this row now for over a year, but they, the black lover and the white, have both been here for over a decade and the dead man before me in this cell only did it for something from the commissary, aided their correspondence for a pack of gum a candy bar a couple of cigarettes, which could be passed along as well. I did it for free. Though I could've been caught—I should've been caught—and consigned to administrative segregation, thus losing my daily hour outside inside a kennel among other things and my good standing too, for returning to solitary requires less justification than when a man first entered it, that space with no sound no soul no sunlight, only the dimmed lights of an eerie florescent twilight as you lose some eyesight and your*

*perception of depth, the phenomenology of an alien world where the nimbuses of a lover's nipples hover above you and the shit beside you and the silence is often broken by cockroaches and mice scuttling around like the sound of the shells being peeled away from your hard-boiled eggs, where every little detail is constantly eating you alive: the smell of the aftershave of a trial witness, the bags under a mother's eyes, the smirk of an arresting officer, the smell of bacon, a corner you could've turned and the bedbugs a breath being the dinner bell: the carbon dioxide exhaled in sleep and the waking up to their Lilliputian shits smeared across the sheets, each having swiped a blood payment: everlasting vigilantes that can fit into a crack the slimness of a credit card—yes, he wrote this, the man, but not for the woman, for fear of the officials, for with a few sheets already written, for this reason, he had ended the missive after writing while living among the sting of the death house for years and just signed off with his disgust, disgusted at what wasn't inveighed against and never would be; yet throughout that night, on separate sheets, he continued to write and reread and rewrite, as writers are wont to do, words he would destroy soon after he was finished with them before falling asleep, only to rewrite them again the next night and on later nights, destroying them every day (though the writing was still a terrible risk, for his cell could've been tossed at anytime), but he had needed to write them so he wrote and destroyed and rewrote them after memorizing what he would have to always undo, as prison writers are wont*

*to do, kept writing from memory the administration and the warden and the guards have all stretched out those men and so on and so on and over and over these words that would never be sent, only torn up and flushed away again and again—and so, yes, I helped them. I helped them with those notes. I did it for myself. I did it for this solitude this schism of the heart and the week before they did it, during any one of our note-passing moments, they were always less than fifteen minutes away from being caught and kept whole men these men, the black lover and the white, who will now be removed to separate supermaxes once their bodies stabilize, having gone through their hemorrhagic shocks, with that black brain suffering the bloodlack the most, yes, less than fifteen minutes away from being caught and kept whole men these half men who didn't want to become whole men again but wives to each other, who would've severed their sexes entirely had they not fainted—or at least that's what the meme is, I hear, on that whole superhighway to half-truths, the gospel of the new world wide web, the gossip of that guard perhaps, the one who first found them and shouted They cut off their balls! They cut off their balls! The nigger and the redneck! (why are the men who are in love with men always and only news when they are deviant or aberrant?)—some think they're just trying to get off the row by feigning insanity, but only the incomprehension of the nature of your crime in connection to your punishment can do this—which, for a psychiatrist, can be damn near impossible to prove. I think they just want to be whole again. For they believe they were.*

*Yet when the white was fitted for a suit the linchpin was pulled: a guard would sashay down this row every fifteen minutes for every fifteen minutes is the standard, the watch before the deathwatch cell (the holding cell of the off-site facility serving signed warrants where the white was to be transported), but I still passed along those notes between those times sometimes, those watches (and maybe even once a packaged board of painkillers to prepare the other for the pain—or maybe that razor blade for the white? God knows how he got it), passed along those notes for the last week they were to be together, for no one can talk along the row and an echo can carry you away on a gurney if you want (the sounds of the standard televisions and radios inside the cells—for those who can afford them and are in fairly good standing—are suppressed by near-defunct headphones), so there are only footfalls and flushes and farts and snores and coughs and sloshes and trickles and drips, and after a guard would pass by and his footsteps had faded away one of the lovers would stick his acrylic shaving mirror through the feed slot to scan up along the row—for our arms are not only blocked by bars but by white metal mesh—and once the coast was clear he would take up a long piece of yarn wrapped around a weighted note and would wind the other end around a forefinger and whisper for me, then reach out to swing the weight over to my slot where I would snatch it and swing it to the other lover, after whispering for him, and then vice versa later (a pack of gum a candy bar a couple of cigarettes: all had passed along this way, possibly even permitted by the guards, the lax ones), but it has been a*

*week out and—though I've been asked about it—I have yet to be connected to it, nor do I believe I ever will be, for that guard is gone, the one who first found them, a lax one who had handed out to everyone other than the white lover that day those daily safety razors to be collected later—because maybe a few days before this the white had distracted the guard, and was not just cursing him without a care, from checking and seeing that that daily safety razor, the one the black was handing back to him, was missing its razor blade? Maybe he—not me—had helped them with those notes? For money, for money from a relative of theirs? Or maybe it was a trustee, an inmate in the warden's favor, who mopped the floors delivered the food retrieved the trays, for now one's been replaced by another. And of course they could've communicated in codes through the ventilation vents in the rear—though not so effectively—during the day when the guards would converse crassly or after they'd yell up Mail up! Chow up! Shower up! For a rower—for we are always undertaking this awful rowing toward God—is always alone in the dayroom or in a stall of the communal kennel outside for his one hour a day, six days a week. He eats alone. He sleeps alone. He fades away. But not before he would whisper. So I aided them, as did the man before me, with the bosom of a Jehovah! Jehovah! as I am called and always called by the guards here as jeer, Jehovah! Jehovah! one can call along the corridor, outside this row, and an echo can carry for a year—an echo can carry for a year. But now, standing over this cabin kitchen sink, drunk and cold and only hearing the cries of the coywolves*



outside, the woman only knows about the basics of this obliterated part of the letter, this ghostlike coda, from what the man wrote to her; she will never read any of its lines unless they are written once again by him, from memory, only to be destroyed once more, by her, burned inside her furnace—as *all* his missives had to be—so she could remain in the now and only the now and never be undone—for she *may* need to decathect from him: the phone call today made her remember. The phone call. It is late December now, and the promise she may soon have to keep would require a neutrality and surely, she thought with forethought, back in late June, when her lover was soon to be released, letters from a once-condemned man to a now-condemned woman could be more dangerous in the forest once he's released and reads them after I leave him and—what if his mind escapes, again? The coywolves have been crying ever since she left the bed—those wendigos in the snow—and once they get full on the howling you cannot tell one from another or how many they really are. She remembers him mentioning the madmen, but never until now his link to them, and the perfect penmanship of his hand and his body now lying on her bed as she stands before the sink, feeling that her hands have been slightly seared by this scalding water—as *his* conscience is momentarily cleared as he sleeps like a feather unburdened by flight, the slight snore and—will he be sleeping with you tonight, or below, that face of the cause célèbre? Even if he *were* a killer, she thinks,

asleep, he would be innocent. All killers are. *There is no discernible difference between killing a child and killing a sleeping man*—for what is a man other than a child who has not yet woken up? Yet *he* has, hasn't he? Yet some thought and still think, she thinks, he was a *fool* for taking the initiative, not just for a claimed killer, but for a person with so little promise. Yet since this person is—no, no, must not think of him and his tonight, but of *me* and *mine*. Though mine has never thought of me. Yet will he be sleeping with you tonight? Do you even want him to and—what is this taste in my mouth? She spits into the kitchen sink, and then looks above it into the black window mirror: another December snowstorm will be rearing its head tonight—the forecast called for it; soon the white winds will be roaring over the timber of this crazy, aging cabin, for since the man arrived here in mid-November—free for five months now—he has been working on several essays for the debut book, down below in her cabin that's not truly a cabin, for it has the depth of a house and the animus of a furnace and it sleeps and speaks like a crucible sometimes; it is lodged in a slope like an axe, a lonely two-level liminal house halved crosswise by the incline to dominate a skeletal snowy valley of larches and birches and ashes, of various evergreens—a bottomless abyss right now at night, the vale of the forest—with doors opening out back below on the bottom floor and above in the front. The woman has been sleeping with the man, most of the time, sometimes in her bed and

sometimes in his, for these lovers have separate rooms on separate floors and still appear to be beginning a new life sequestered together in this crystalline forest; she in her late thirties and he in his early forties, with many solitary years between them; she having begun hers even before moving here over three years ago and he before the two years and three months and three days *inside*: she in a lifeless wedlock and he with a writer's want—and should they be unneurotic for the eighty-eight more days here, a Mercurian year, the ice may begin to thaw, much too early these years, and it would be the first day of spring. The first day of spring. A ladybug alights on the faucet. The wine is waning. The phone call is fresh: that early morning message, that voice the woman hadn't heard in over three years, that voice from the old country in this country now seeking the *other* old country within her—for though the woman was neither born nor raised in it, the old country, she has been and is still being steered by it, the ways of it: the voice spoke for the way of it. So that standing over this sink, the kitchen lights so bright, she is still looking out of the black window mirror at the would-be-seen snow-covered evergreens encroaching on the would-be-seen snow-covered quarter-mile drive of dirt, those would-be-seen boughs and branches reaching toward it, as it in turn reaches toward the route: after finalizing her divorce, she had fled to the forest with only minimal stays in the university town for the winters—this being her first winter in the forest with her lover—leav-

ing her neighbor to tend to the cabin's upkeep and to clear the drive with his snowplow; while during the other seasons she would take in boarders most of the time, Bhikkunis, sisters between sojourns. But now that aftertaste again. Salty. So she swipes the ladybug from the faucet, draws a glass of water, drinks it, and then looking out again into the black window mirror becomes afraid and thinks that there's something dark about them, that there's something grotesque about them: mirrors—as if they are really one-way mirrors concealing insidious instruments; if only they could be portals between two possibilities, gateways to a reversed world where there aren't any religious sects of morality creeping into your personality, where there aren't any proxy initiatives to mutely pressure you, where the bereaved aren't the capital killers and the capital killers aren't the bereaved: Ah, she thinks, a chiasmus to be considered inside a court. So she cuts off the lights and in the dark can see the play of the humpbacked gibbous moon on the snow and says to herself—Oh! An epiphany on a tombstone, perhaps, an epitaph?—and then all at once she is tasting the amniotic salinity of the ocean in her mouth, drowning again, like before like always before and she must think of something *anything* else to oust this ocean from her mouth, this tiny body in her brain, for the aftertaste of his semen returns it, this goddamn ocean in my mouth, and then thinks of why she hasn't sucked a cock in years until now and doesn't miss it and then of her anus opening up like a mouth before

he stuffed it into my mouth then stuffed my shit into my mouth and so she walks right back into her room and plops down beside him and says You can't come in me anymore, as he starts and sits up in her bed, rubbing his eyes, the lamp the only thing. What? What? the man says, afraid—and yet is angered now: he thought he was still on the row. No longer is the woman naked as he is, for after rolling out of bed with the excuse of needing to do something in the kitchen, she had gathered up her thermals and slippers from the rug and just left, not even bothering to dress. *What? What?* But the woman is silent now, sitting on the side of her bed, looking ahead, and in the lamplight, with her back straight and her breasts scarcely defined, her frame lean and truculent, her eyelids pulled narrow at the corners by crow's-feet, the bones of her pyramidal cheeks, the square jaw and the jet-black buzz cut peppered with salt—like a Buddhist nun's—she looks quite handsome. She is focused now, yet unclear. Love, the man says, hanging his head without saying another syllable, just lumbering up to lighten the bed, leaving a warm depression, and standing nakedly over her—his ebon skin, his greying crown of kinks, his long curly eyelashes and that single eyebrow curled into a horn, his tall frame and thin girdle of fat protecting his insides and making his midriff fatherly, his sex now hanging like a lynching—before dropping to a knee. Let me see, he says. The past is two doors down. And so she blurts out You're too vile you're too much! I'm not you I'm

not normal! I should've never destroyed them, those faces—I forgot his face! How could I forget his face? It was a face only a mother must forget, only a mother must forego. I only see my father's now. The dark-skinned face of her lover is before her, his body below her, her *shadow* developed into the third dimension and she thinks: Why am I so solaced by the darkest of men? For she is only now hearing what he said: Let me see—and it is uncanny, for another had said the same thing to her over three years ago, a blue-black man in a morgue. The man is sitting on his heels as he lays his head in the woman's lap. Let me see, he says, and then her palm is on the back of his neck, pressing quietly, her thermal leggings and her heat is in his face, feeling the pressure at his base—and she can break it if she wants. If she wants. But her hips rise a bit after he lifts his head away. A mother's grief, she sighs, opening her thighs, becomes the door she walks through for the rest of her life—opens them, for he has slid off her leggings and slippers and is lowering his head again, her palm pressing his nape again—she can shut it, she says, eyes shut, but there will always be the temptation to touch it, to open it—and then she snaps his neck like a toothpick. The dream she had many years before and forgot about until now and she smiles and thinks about how *good* it is to be no longer lost and lulled and is *relieved* by this already-dreamt marker, as if there were no lapse between them, the then and the now, as though this route is the right route thus far for the moment, and then she forgets it

again and is lying again on her back, lifting her thermal undershirt to bare her small breasts, and then wetting her fingertips with her spittle: beyond the junction of her motherly thighs a blue-black basement is flooding and brimming and a bucket of water and a bucket of water and a bucket of water out a window would never be enough: a great voidance is needed, by way of a path of least resistance; so her knees spire above his head for her feet to perch on his shoulders, her feed slot to his mouth to receive the excess water, and soon she imagines a small skeleton flushing out with the rush and onto the coral reef of his oral cavity and begins to weep and moan as his tongue muscles and circles the crease between the glans and the hooded cloak, cinching the inner cape, tightening her sluice laterally, hugging it, this organ of taste turning intromittent organ, her pelvis grinding away at the precipice of her bed and his long, coarse beard, her eyes shut, rapt: a yellow eagle swoops down from a sun and seizes her, snatches her up from the river and back into the blurring orb, so that then: oblivion. Her feet alight on the rug, so he lies down beside them. Both, she and he, are still. She lying halfway on her bed, her thermal undershirt half-raised, her breasts and sex showing, and he lying naked on the rug, a three-dimensional shadow and so I had, she says, as though she's been speaking, what I believe to be the second visitation from my father: in the light he looked fantastic and wore a great suit, he was very energetic and joyful and kept saying and

saying let's go for a ride let's go for a ride, let's ride the wild horses, and I remember I remember saying to him that *everything* is so rapid-fire with him, as if to say he was being pushy and overbearing and I wanted to be left alone, then he sat down in a chair like a child, with a sad tranquility to him, so I leaned over and held his face in both hands and said, very tenderly: My God—you are so full of life—I forgot you are dead . . . .

The copper washbasin cups the sunbeam in the bathroom as nothing now, the buck head branches antlers across the apricot wall in shadow as nothing now, as the son of sovereigns and slaves, stepping from the shower stall, the ebon man of exigency, is nothing momentarily: in this interstice, when nothing is present, the principle is so infinitesimal that nothing *is* principle: the absolute end of knowledge. God cannot be the object of knowledge, just as a knife cannot cut itself, nor a fire be burnt. God is an enigma to God, an eternal I do not *know* what I am, nor what I am not. God is not a being but a state of being. God is love. And love cannot be the object of desire: desire is a prisoner, a prisoner who dreams that he can only see his lover in reflections (for when there is no reflection he is unable to see, and when there is no seeing he is unable to reflect), who views another prisoner's idyllic picture in his hand mirror outside his cell (for his hands are always apt to do what his body cannot), and who embellishes specific mentions from vaginally scented missives

(for the feeling began with the exchanging of bodily fluids in missives: *Hold me open*, she always opens, with a lingering almond odor or a particular piscine scent always present still even after it has long since passed from carrier to sorter to be postmarked then approved by some administrative censor): he sees the pale blue veins of her thighs as exquisite and sinuous as pine needle shadows on the sunlit snow outside, he sees the faint flush in her face as darkly romantic as smoke against glass, he sees her fallow sex as she vows to keep it without him asking or even expecting it, he sees her childlike expression of joy that would be difficult to counterfeit, and he sees the lone white stroller under the streetlights of her nights, stalking her slowly from spotlight to spotlight, as this scintillant trickle of water travels now down the window in broad daylight, from one cluster of condensation to another. But no. Love cannot be the object of desire: love is the absolute end of everything. The man returns and wipes away the condensation from the bathroom mirror, towels himself and puts on his robe. He starts his sets of deep breathing, taking air into his lungs, expanding them to capacity, and then holding for several seconds before slowly exhaling; three times he does this: three, deep, breaths. Thank you, he says, to her, alone. It has been a few days since the recent snowstorm and his lover has driven the twelve miles into town to be with the Buddhist nuns, who lecture at the university, run seminars: she is the administrator of the Religious Studies division, for she is not a

believer in any one religion, and neither is he. He is grateful for where he has landed, outside the city outside the cries, with only one man in this cabin for now with a forest for a father, a winter wonderland for sure, a metropolis of trees as far as the eye can see—in this last sentence of December: the month of transparency. Even this bathroom is bigger than his cell, he thinks, a cell the size of a parking space: the man before him in that cell had stood against the back wall and traced himself with a pencil and then shaded himself in so lightly that, after he first entered the cell, he didn't see it for a week, and when he *did* see it he couldn't *unsee* it and had to sleep in that dead man's bed and stare into his shade and shrink into his head for over two long years that could've been much much shorter—having forfeited the right to appeal, and without that stay, that stay of execution—with that shady figure developing into the third dimension at night in half-light sometimes to sit beside him in bed and attempt to converse with him in some sort of sinister sign language that he could never decipher, of which one sign *should've* been clear, but he couldn't know for sure if that shady hand was waving hello or goodbye, for as soon as it returned to the wall, as though it had forgotten something, it always finished with a few more flying signs; sometimes he would wonder if this recurring dream belonged to him or to the previous man, supersaturating the mattress, which was nothing more than a thin cotton cushion covering a shelflike metal frame protruding from a wall;

sometimes he would want to erase the shade altogether, from mind and matter, yet he hated the thought of erasing the rich remnants of a man. It could've been worse, he thinks, inside his cabin bathroom—he has thought the thought before, many times before, as though he were writing about it, as though he is writing about it now, for his thoughts are often orderly and essayistic before he sits down to write them, that practice he honed in prison—it wasn't as bad as it could've been: those white walls of bars with their white metal mesh, made all the more deplorable by the grime, were much better than those newer execution cells across the state—which are similar to the cells in that solitary unit, administrative segregation—small, seedy cinder block rooms with solid steel doors fixed with shatterproof window slits and feed slots locked from the outside, or filthy metal contraptions, like gas station deal drawers—so that passing a note or a pack of gum or a candy bar or a couple of cigarettes would be perfectly impossible—so I was fortunate, he thinks, and I wasn't inside for so long as most, though I still lost my mind, for what I was *in* there for was so supremely absurd that it made all the *other* absurdities seem quite sensible to me and that stay could've been taken away at any time—but my mind is *still* fucked up and my bowels are backed up and my shit is really killing me! And now his heart depresses his chest, for his robe is off and he is sitting over the commode. God thank God, he thinks: his stool is stable still, a good reading, an ouroboros in a

bowl—for it wasn't always like this before: there were the occasional periods of constipation for over two months, up until last week, perhaps brought on by the change of medication; but before this, five months ago, immediately after his release, for a few days he had suffered the antithesis, a frequent flow of diarrhea, for he was *liquefying* inside that cell before his release and that adulterated blast-chilled prison food—the same served in city schools—would also have him vomiting like an African god, creating a galaxy inside the commode; so he was lonely and sick, watching a lonely and sick world swirling away beneath him. Many men and women exonerated from capital cases suffer the same symptoms as veterans of war: post-traumatic stress, schizophrenia, severe depression, suicidal tendencies, and constant constipation from all the medications: the *ad hominem* attacks of death row syndrome. Only now—eleven years since the initiative's inception—is there a conversation about what a proxy must endure—after an exoneration: for there has never been one before. A proxy, as the man was known officially, is more similar to the war veteran than the common death row inmate of the past thirty years could ever be—because they were *both* volunteers, as was the proxy's executioner: the state, a debtor, would pay one volunteer after the other pays the debt for another debtor. But if an executioner wants to forfeit his duty, indeed, he may do so. But the proxy, even if he wishes to renege, is still committed to the injection chamber and the

worst thing to have to feel, he thinks, back in his robe, is the irreversible sting of your mercy. Goddamn. I drove to that court. I surrendered to it. After kissing my sister goodbye, by taking her son's place in handcuffs and leg-irons and a tether chain, for it must've been a calculated cruelty, he thinks, writing in his head for that future account, my God, the world one must see along the way on the way there could cause anyone to renege—for this would be the next to last chance to do it—and consequently the condemned—like a dog waiting to die in a kennel—whether falsely convicted or not, is forced to cook in a county jail with twisted mixed feelings and to sulk and see if their sacred family member would come and suffer for them or not; and even if the condemned is opposed to a proxy—out of guilt or grief or both—he has *no* right to refuse a proxy and so and so this quandary could create another kind of cruelty: the murder of oneself, now or later. Or perhaps he might eventually reform—which is the initiative's intent, this system of state-sanctioned sacrifice—through contrition and mortification, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that sect ought to say, that right-left religious sect, adherents to the initiative—washed in the blood of a lamb by way of a Paschal Pardon, a Blood Law: misnomers for the initiative, appropriated for political propaganda (the former based on an ancient Judaic law, freeing capital prisoners at Passover, and the latter on an indigenous belief that the souls of the slain require reprisal for peace). Only a first-degree mur-

derer convicted of *one* count of murder of an *adult* from a different family is open to the initiative—even if an aggravating factor is rape—and the family of the victim must approve the proxy option, for they are always of the faith, though they don't have to be, nor does the family of the offender; but almost all of the proxy-freed offenders, as they are known, and many of their family members, have fervently converted, for the executions are always attended by audiences and avid reporters, for the initiative conceals and has concealed from its conception an obsession *obliged* by mass communication: an unhealthy preoccupation with a rite of sacrifice as dark as the River Styx. The executioner, he thinks, in his robe, may have many weeks to decide whether or not to execute a sentence, and can refuse to do so even at the point of execution—though subjecting himself to legal penalties—yet I had only one week after my nephew's sentencing hearing to decide whether I would die for him or not—and I could never renege: after swearing before the court, after signing the documents, for all intents and purposes his capital case would become mine, his timeless time would become mine—for the condemned are always suspended between two times: conviction and execution—any process toward clemency would be undertaken for me in the form of a pardon, and *I* would have to sign the appeal waiver, not my nephew—*every* proxy has to sign an appeal waiver—but still, for all intents and purposes my nephew's court-appointed attorney would have to



prove *my* innocence, as I waited to get lucky or to be killed by people who wanted nothing from me, who were not angry with me, but who were authorized to kill me in a tranquil manner free of moral and legal liability—for unless the sentence was reversed or preceded by my natural death suicide or murder, it would have to be executed by that *other* volunteer: and then a debtor would pay him after *I* had paid the debt for *this* debtor. A chiasmus that would kill you every day, that would seep into your subconscious like a crime. Your nephew would become a virus. No matter how much you love him, before you're executed, you would come to loath him. No matter how innocent or deficient he is, believing him at fault, you would come to betray him—and then you would die and die and die! But *all* death row inmates die a slow and painful psychological death before the state ever executes them. Many will be broken beyond repair, after years and years of waiting—decades—their minds gone before their bodies are and their *lives* already forgotten, a Sisyphian warfare in which death is a fait accompli, a formality already accomplished in spirit, as the state concludes its premeditated murder by putting the dead to death a second time—or the dead might do it themselves: Time for seconds, they say, before hanging up. *Suicides have a special language*, he once wrote to her, his lover. *Like carpenters, they want to know which tools. They never ask why build. But you want to know about the unit. You want to know about where we live: this ancient execution unit is the two sides of a cell*

*block, three rows or tiers; each side of a row has twenty-one cells, the first cell being a shower cell, so that the unit can hold as many as one hundred and twenty condemned men—a capacity which has already been filled, so we will be spilling into another block soon; there is a cage that is only accessible from a corridor at the start of each row, from which three guards can control all one-hundred-and-twenty-six sliding doors, including those of the shower cells, as well as the doors from the corridors to the rows and everyone is quiet and at midnight the ceiling lights are the only thing left on: row three never gets completely dark, row two is dark in the back and light in the front, and row one sleeps the best—though row two and three can read and write throughout the night. I am on row two and half asleep and half awake. A liminal being. Last week I had a dream that the unit was filling up with water, that there was a great flood and we were all still locked in our cells and waiting to be drowned, for all the guards had evacuated the unit except for this one who was still running around and trying to free all one hundred and twenty of us with his one key, for the keys to the control cages had been taken, and while the water rose over the heads of the men on row one who were all asleep and couldn't be saved who couldn't be saved he ran up to row two and turned into a cockroach, and then half the men were trying to step on him while the rest remained asleep, and as the water rose higher and higher I could hear the cries of the men on row three, who were all awake, and could see the cockroach swimming in the water over my head. And in that moment, that breath, I was*

*flooded with so much affection for it, so much love, that I saw how precious all life is. And I wanted the cockroach to make it.* I wanted the cockroach to make. He shuts off the faucet. The sunbeam is broken: unilluminated water. In his bathroom, in his robe, his attention is fixed on the steaming water in the stoppered copper basin, but now he is razoring the perimeters of his beard, trimming it, clouding the water with shaving cream; he submerges his face in the water, reemerges to towel it, and witnesses a ladybug alighting on the faucet: there is an infestation of these half-spheres here, hibernating in the house, overwintering wherever there's a hint of humidity, as if a divine power were presiding over this place—for a numen summoned them here, the lovers, away from their respective corners in this state, for this crazy, aging cabin has such a powerful personality that it educes obedience. A numen presided over that supermax as well, in the country far west of here, a private for-profit prison that is too new to be old and too old to be new, for that ancient execution unit was once a general population unit until massive additions were constructed in the epoch of the narcotics war by the right-left front to accommodate the mass incarceration rate, so that this supermax—one of many—provides a steadily flowing revenue for one of the foremost correction corporations in the country; that ancient execution unit saw the old ways and the worst; the old ways when the rowers—for the man calls them rowers—could congregate in the dayroom or outside in the communal ken-

nel that was wide open and nine feet high so that they to play a low-ceilinged game of volleyball, even in the snow, with that chain-link ceiling graciously scraping their knuckles; the worst was when the kennel was used for fights, for gladiating, the guards arming two rival rowers for a face-off—usually a black and a white or a black and a brown—with pork chop bones ground down on the concrete for cutlery, where a rower was allowed to murder or maim or rape another rower and to carve *good pussy* into a buttock; but now a rower is always isolated in a divided dayroom or in the communal kennel outside, partitioned by walls and beams and painted cement, installed in a filthy little locked stall with an *eight*-foot-high ceiling-fence, or alone in the library adjacent to the two; when the unit was designated the execution unit, on both sides of the cell block, the warden had all six thousand, two hundred and twenty-two panes of clear glass—facing out onto the variable clouds in the sky—replaced by frosted panes, so that now a rower would never find himself surprised at how *meticulously* he would preoccupy himself with anything readily available, when there are no real moments worth remembering, for he has day and he has night, he has day and he has night: he would make beautiful artificial dentures from a plastic cigarette package if he had to, for maybe the four front teeth of one of his two mad neighbors are missing, and his upper lip keeps falling in when he sleeps, when he snores; of course visits would be the highlights, especially if

they're from the media, a way to get the word out, but if he has to undergo an arbitrary body-cavity strip search for every non-contact visit—Open your mouth, stick out your tongue, show me your hands, turn them over, pull your foreskin back, lift up your sac, turn around, show me your soles, bend over and spread 'em—if he has to undergo this for a few straight days, let alone a week, he would become somewhat mortified whenever the media arrives; but when the media visits taper off, when he is no longer as relevant to the moment, when he is rarely noted on a loved one's monthly calendar—for the long drives from the city along the state's rural roads would become too strenuous and too time-consuming to make between work weeks—he will essentially become a nonentity: for who are we but our relations and our relationships? About a year after he had entered that ancient execution unit, a woman wrote to his sister, an Asian woman from in-state, from north country—about a half a year after her *own* brother had been condemned, though not as a proxy—and soon after writing his sister this woman wrote to him. She had heard of him through a film that featured him and others like him as part of a publicity campaign, which was *possibly* keeping him alive because of the public outcry, for a stay of execution had been given. Both of their families, his and the Asian woman's, had been given proxy approval—for approval must be given by the family of the victim—and proxy cases are rare—which is why the media covers them so extensively—

commonly occurring in counties reflecting a dense majority of those who voted for the initiative, a right-left proposition introduced by a media mogul-politician. This Asian woman's family may have been permitted the proxy option—having her explicitly in mind—yet she just didn't feel any allegiance toward them, because they'd disowned her over a year and a half before, and still do, a year and a half later—for more than three years now. The woman's brother was sent to another supermax and installed in one of those new cinder block cells with its solid steel door and its sliding metal box—for though he is of the affluent, the fortunate, he is *unfortunate*: the *unofficial* aggravating factor of his offense would not allow for anything other than the harshest accommodations; his family's affluence could only procure the proxy option—for though the family of the victim are for holy reform, as a not-as-rich family, they have the upper hand. Only an immediate adult family member, as defined by law, can be given the *distinction* of taking the initiative: a spouse, a sibling, a parent, a grandparent, a child, a grandchild, a step-grandchild, a parent-in-law, a sibling-in-law, a child-in-law, an adopted family member; the woman's mother, the queen clownfish—for her animus is very strong—was understandably denied: since the victim wasn't old or disabled or sick, as decided by the family of the victim, the old or the disabled or the sick cannot be considered suitable as a substitute; there would be no equivalence, and the scale would be askew; the of-

fender's spouse has two juvenile daughters to tend to, and the only other adult family member who is a close equivalent to the victim failed to make herself available, a week after the sentencing hearing, despite a phone call from her family's attorney—for her mother couldn't call her herself: the woman imagined her mother making her absence about something else *other* than the disownment, imagined her saying in silence that my daughter who used to be my daughter does not want to submit to the genius of her brother, who has two daughters and a wife who can still produce a son, and *keep* him, unlike my daughter, who used to be my daughter—who's not *fit* to have another one. No, her mother might in silence, she let go of her son. I won't let go of mine. So that shame and desolation and also a mounting veneration for another's altruistic vow were the reasons why the woman wrote to the man, the proxy, but after two months of writing to him in prison, her veneration would turn into anger over the phone whenever she thought of her mother and brother, and then her anger would turn into shame and fester into mortification whenever she thought of her son—who had resembled her brother in the face—so, in truth, the man thinks, sitting in his robe on the lid of his commode, she *hasn't* forgotten her son's face—for she hasn't forgotten her brother's: he only means much less to her. He had often thought about it in his cell though, of the possibility of her becoming a proxy, for only after a sentencing or a resentencing hearing can a proxy come

forth—no other time—so, he thought, if the superior state court hears the appeal the attorneys are pursuing on her brother's behalf, earning a resentencing hearing based on some legal errors in the trial, if, instead of life, he were to receive another capital sentence—for the verdict would still stand—one week after the resentencing hearing, indeed, she would have another opportunity to prove her loyalty to the family—never mind the holy reform; in his cell, in the shadow of a doubt, he would wonder if she was writing to him to learn what it was like for him, in order to learn what it *could* be like for herself, but after she'd spoken to him over the phone about it, about his concern, he was wretchedly relieved, and would later recall the red words of her adamant reserve: I would *never* sacrifice myself for someone who has never even loved me, who almost ruined me, who had never even seen nor spoke nor wrote to me after the tragedy—besides, she said, the fight for *your* life is much more important to me, as well as the fight for a life with you afterward. I deserve you, she said. You belong to me. You belong to me. The man leaves his bathroom to clothe himself in the guest room, his room adjacent to the rec room, and is now moving from his room through the small hall and into the furnace room, where only red embers are burning, glowing red winks inside the black-grey ash, so he throws a newspaper page onto them and several pine cones as well, which leave sap on his fingers, lays two split logs of larch wood lengthwise, in parallel and on

either side of the newspaper and pine cones, and then lays another one over them; he lights the paper with a lighter, adds some small sticks, and once the kindling catches fire he turns on the internal electric fan and soon sees the pine cones sparkle and pop, releasing a lively scent, the air oxygenating the fire, and then he closes the black metal door. He moves into the rec room and sits down at his desk and starts jotting down all his thoughts from the beginning: *Even this bathroom is bigger than my cell*, he writes, *a cell the size of a parking space*, and so on and so on and soon, once he's added more wood to the fire, the flames will be so strong and steady that they will heat every room, the eight red chambers of a double heart. For this cabin is not truly a cabin, being composed of four rooms on each floor; the top floor is her heart: the kitchen, the living-dining room, the bedroom and bath; and the bottom is his: the furnace room, the rec room, the guest room and bath. Mostly they couple and sleep in each other's beds, but sometimes they sleep alone in their own, like two separate pillars of a temple, standing together yet standing apart, sleeping directly above or below one another, while hearing the other's dreams or wanderings or water—and there can never be any wounds. For before bed, they are to be sealed with a kiss, by the wounded: After dark, my love. For the wonder to say: After dark, my sweet . . .

On the day of deliverance, this summer past, the woman who had aided with her selfless assistance the man and his defense during the last year of his imprisonment, whose own home would soon subsume him, had deliriously received him with his sister in the lobby of the state prison—and the first touch the first kiss they shared held a vim and vigor unrivaled, their closeness no longer interrupted by the shatterproof glass of a visiting booth, through whose small circular vent only a warm breath could trace a face—and then they walked him outside with his one cardboard box of belongings, his sister and her, to welcome him back into a world of greater stimulation with a few family and friends waiting for him, having driven many miles from their cities on interstates and rural back roads, the paparazzi now dazzling him with flashing cameras and pushy questions, for proxy cases are rare—especially *male* proxies—even more those resulting in a reversal: his is the first and only case in the five states—of the thirty death penalty states, of the fifty states—that had ad-