

# **LAWYERS & LITERATURE AS MY MOTHER LAY DYING SPRING, 1997**

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*Tuesday, January 7, 1997*

**First class seemed somewhat rambling, though entertaining. Question was asked whether our culture doesn't require a justification not only for a course like lawyers and literature, but for literature itself.**

American culture is a pragmatic culture, looking to ends & outcomes, valuing efficiency. Time management is elevated, wasting time abjured. Puritanism adds that fun for its own sake is time-wasting, if not downright dangerous (as in mood-altering drugs, alcohol). So it is not just literature per se which requires justification, but any end in itself, like reading just to read. American anti-intellectualism adds force: one who reads may be living the life of the mind, a scary and alien notion. (Isn't that something French intellectuals do—along with sex for fun and too much wine?) The life of the mind is a lonely, singular calling. For all our worship of the individual, Americans prize gregariousness and group popularity and fear the outsider, the reader, the loner.

Literature, stories, narrative can be turned to many purposes. The education establishment, at all levels, uses reading to education's narrowly limited ends. In elementary school, reading teaches reading. Even if a child enjoyed a story, the inevitable string of intrusive questions stifle pleasure. ("Give three reasons why Johnny kept the snake in the box." *Oh, give them yourself, and leave me read.*) In high school, reading teaches grammar, language arts, introductory criticism. Now students write an essay on three reasons for the snake in the box and the role of the snake in the story. Too often, college courses do all the above, plus introduce self-referential critical systems, which treat written works like symbol puzzles. ("The snake in the box represents evil confined by innocence.") Is this bad reading or bad teaching?

Law school is not much different from first grade, using case reading to learn yet another skill, case briefing, for another educational establishment's didactic ends. Issue, procedural history, facts, holding & do it all again. Read the case, get the rule, and move on. But there is

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more to it than that and the master teachers remind us, in many different ways that every text tells many stories.

For one teacher, Spieler, the cases become litigation handbooks: What was the proof? Who testified to it? What else might they have known? What could you have asked? If you got that fact where would you bring it out? Bastress adds the interplay of concurrences and dissents, which come to seem, though he never said this, like musical harmonies and dissonances, or the interplay of plot and character in a novel that requires literary critical technique to elucidate.

Cleckley can take two casebook pages from a 1938 personal injury case out of Texas, play every part, and read into every line the procedure followed, what counsel was thinking, where the appellate court went wrong, and what they were thinking, too. He creates this little drama: Q, A, objection. ("Of course, defense counsel doesn't object. He's heard the answer before, 2 and a half inches. He heard that. He's smiling, counting his fee, planning how he'll spend that money. No reason to object to that question. Smiling, smiling. A. 28 Inches! 'Objection, Your Honor, objection.'") Such nuances, lurking meanings, answers to unasked questions, unexplained discrepancies, unnoted underpinnings give cases their meaning.

We don't justify reading in the law school curriculum or in non-literary courses: we read what the book or the case has to teach. Most lawyers and too many professors don't realize how hard it is to read, really read, whether it's reading a case or a novel. The best readers bring all their knowledge of life, literature, courtrooms, cases, *and* language, plot, character, *and* culture, science, religion *and* their knowledge of every other kind and variety.

*Thursday. January 9. 1997*

**I'm sitting in a different seat than the one I usually take. I was late, the room is packed, and "my seat" was taken. No question my perspective is altered. Since this seems to be a favorite proposition of Elkins, the professor—that literature offers an altered perspective—and a central message of *To Kill a Mockingbird* that it's necessary to walk in another's shoes (if we take it that books teach the messages their power figures offer) —I accept my new seat as an invitation.**

**Elkins is the power figure in the classroom. Gets to stand up and talk whenever he wishes. Others do so only with permission. Overtly he denies that he has a lesson. But when he was listing the presuppositions of his assignment (propose a book that**

should be  
required for all  
law students)  
and I argued it  
presupposed  
there is

In the Beginning was the Word . . .

literature which should be required, Elkins never added it to his list. So the list remained throughout the class: 1-4 with presuppositions and 5, blank, saying to me that the rejected presupposition was invalid: there is (there must be?) required literature.

The point of all this is the Text. The Text of the course is written on the board: 5 presuppositions, 3 values of literature. The Texts of the course are the books, the syllabus, the readings. The Text is given in words. (We can elaborate the notion to include the non-verbal, all the way to unnamed reality itself—later). The Text presupposes a writer or teller, in most courses it is given by the power figure who sets the required reading, speaks the central propositions, chooses among the offerings of the class and lists the valuable ones on the board.

The Text of the course. As a reader/listener I can seek to understand it and I can criticize it (in both the social and the literary sense). In each activity there runs a subtext of all that informs my view and perspective, a law student of a certain time, place, class, school, gender, age and background. Any of that could be objectively determined explored, but what is not known, unless I tell it?

*Lit:*

*Alabama, ca. 1930*

*My mother was born in Alabama in 1923. Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Her family was from Alabama since the Indians too, just as the Finchs in Harper Lee's To Kill A Mockingbird but if there were plantations and river landings in our heritage, they were misplaced and lost from the telling. Town folk, really. Her grandfather, Pappaw, owned a hardware store. He was the best-loved man in town, a huge man, with hammer hands and a chest like a beef. That's the way the story comes down. But the only picture left shows him standing on a bridge in late afternoon, in black and white, of course, a huge black overcoat and his fedora throwing shadows across his small white face. Mammaw stands beside him in a huge feathered hat, but he is so imposing she might as well be an accoutrement. He died of a heart attack just as the Depression got underway.*

*There are no other men in this story for a long time. Not just no men like Atticus Finch, good, true and upstanding, who stand by their families and believe in their children and justice and equality. Just no men at all. Mammaw had the house, but no income. Pappaw had loaned all he had to everyone in town, trusting they would pay, knowing they were good for it. If there were notes, they were never found and no man owned up to his debts. My mother's mother Gladys lived with her mother, too, because the young gentleman she had married, my mother's father, was already gone, having ambled and drank and danced and played till there were no shoes for baby, and Gladys took Mother home to Mammaw and Pappaw.*

*Gladys was an only child, spoiled by her papa. Another baby girl had died of the fever and Gladys the only baby, was precious. To our detriment, perhaps, she was allowed to marry Rinky. No, she wasn't. Headstrong, she ran away with him and came back pregnant the next day, though that became evident only later. Still she was allowed what she wished. Raised with black maids, a cook, a nanny for my mother, washerwomen who came for the laundry, all her wants met. The child, my mother, was kept by the nanny and fed by the cook until she went to school with her cousins and the children of other gentlemen and ladies.*

*Pappaw was the man of the house, strong, funny, caring, money in his pocket, a big laugh, a big lap. Rinky was never there, never in memory. Many years later there was a death notice so we knew he had lived. But Pappaw was there. And the story starts because Pappaw died of a heart attack, one day at the store, maybe laughing at a good story. "He was dead before he hit the floor." That's the story. My story starts in Alabama, too, but it starts when all the men, half of whom couldn't be trusted even to exist, and the rest who couldn't be trusted to live past 50 disappeared and left a household of women: Mammaw, who sank into self-declared old age where she remained for 40 years, Gladys, beautiful, spoiled, but deaf—I didn't tell you that yet—and a six year old child who will have to be my mother. All the men are gone.*

Litcrit:

*To Kill a Mockingbird* portrays and probes the Southern code of honor for gentlemen. The story turns on the chivalric protection of (white) women, ladies. Mayella Ewell is a woman whose honor must be upheld. Even a white trash woman is protected, her word taken over that of an honest, hard-working, crippled black man. Yet, precious white womanhood, the protection of ladies, is at the center of what Atticus Finch denies

when he argues Tom Robinson's case. Atticus Finch says that Mayella Ewell is lying, and black Tom Robinson is telling the truth. In raising Scout, allowing her to wear overalls, encouraging her to think and to question, to admire whom she pleases and play as she will, Atticus has already subverted the code. In defending Tom Robinson, showing Mayella as a liar, Atticus attacks the code head-on. And what knight will uphold Mayella's honor? Her father, Bob Ewell.

Metacrit:

Okay, there is a start on a critical piece, an academic exercise, surely (culturally) legitimate. I could get it published, substantiate claims I deserve tenure, impress others with analysis and insight, maybe learn/teach something useful about how the story works. And how justify these theses I propose? The text.

- "Again, as I had often met it in my own church, I was confronted with the Impurity of Women doctrine that seemed to preoccupy all clergymen."
- [Atticus on Mrs. DuBose:] "She was the bravest person I ever knew."
- "Mayella looked from under lowered eyelids at Atticus, but she said to the judge: 'Long's he keeps callin' me ma'am an' saying Miss Mayella. I don't have to take his sass. I ain't called upon to take it.'"
- And Tom Robinson's worst mistake: "*You* felt sorry for *her*, you felt sorry for her?"

We have ironies here. Women are kept on a pedestal, yet women are impure. Women are less than men, but higher than Blacks. To be a gentleman is the highest calling. To be a woman, while necessary and elevated is—well, degrading.

Maybe it's just as Calpurnia tells Miss Rachel's cook: "*First thing you learn when you're in a lawin' family is that there ain't any definite answers to anything.*" Or maybe the best you can hope for is to keep the jury out longer than most.

Thursday, January 16, 1997

Interesting, this issue of the text came up in class today with Elkins talking about the opposition of text and self. I argued, not very artfully, that the text is immutable. Elkins says of course we prefer self over text. Maybe so, and the self may prefer justice over injustice, too, but in the text Tom Robinson is convicted and then murdered. The story does not prefer justice over injustice for Tom Robinson. Our preferences will never alter the text: every single time the jury will find for the State and every single time the guards will gun Tom down.

In the beginning was the World.

Metacrit: We read to take meaning from a text, but we

imbue reality with meaning and so derive a text. "What's the story here?" we ask and we look at the client or the case, assemble the evidence and tell the story which becomes the word. Or we look at the text, analyze it, supplement it with whatever knowledge we have, and so superimpose still another text.

Did the Word or the World come first? Or does the question matter? As humans we have no cognitive knowledge of the world without words—and vice versa. "Conceptual strictures on functional structures: Aunt Alexandra's morality and the World of Maycomb." Or "Functional strictures on conceptual structures: the place of family in the meaning of Maycomb." All deep and suggestive but not really helpful unless I turn back to the text, which is, of course, both words and world.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, there is an oddness in the social makeup of the characters' lives, an aloneness at the heart of the book. Atticus is alone; his wife died of a heart attack, so Scout and Jem have no mother. Dill has no parents except those he tells of/invents/remembers. Calpurnia had a family, but we learn of only a son. She is both maid and mother to Jem and Scout, a situation appalling to the fine social sensibilities of Aunt Alexandra. Miss Maudie Atkinson lives alone. Aunt Alexandra leaves her husband to live with Atticus. Entanglements of love and family are minimal. Yet family is at the center of the social order.

*My father was the opposite of Alabama, Maycomb, family, meaning, and down home. His father formed the first American CPA firm in New York City in 1921, but he died of the flu when my father was ten. Another dead man gone, leaving his wife, this one with three children, the last after-born. This grandmother was not interested in old age or mourning, however. She packed the younger two off to her sister in Minneapolis to raise. Six feet tall, a slender long-legged Dane, she modeled hosiery, partied, and played. She brought men home at night to the apartment where my father studied. Math, mostly. He had an excellent mind for orderly concepts, even the sort of youthful brilliance that too often leaves young mathematicians early.*

*Columbia thought much of his excellent mind and took him as a student at 15, just in time to relieve my grandmother of his care, for she was off to Chile with Mr. Gee, the South American business man she had met on business in New York. Off to the hacienda via the Panama Canal, wearing the jewels with which she was wooed. Mr. Gee is only glimpsed here, rich, a hard drinker, but kind, perhaps to compensate for his impotence. Rather than leave my father, a 15-year-old at Columbia, living alone in New York, my grandmother Jewel arranged that the son of Mr. Gee's friend, a dark, handsome worldly Chilean, who was at Columbia to polish his English, should be my father's roommate. The Chilean took my father under his wing, he took him as his lover. At 18 my father graduates from Columbia, at 19 he has a master's in math, at 20 he drives to Chile, practices Spanish, woos women — not men, many women—as he drinks with his mother's friends and daughters. DuPont hires him to do (find ways to avoid) its taxes. He marries, divorces, gets promotions, woos women. He is a tall, dark man with a reputation for intelligence, taxes, chess, and women. He smokes four packs of Camels a day lighting one off the other, blowing smoke rings when pleased with himself. Yet somewhere he is still a child and always alone, maybe back in that apartment in New York.*

*Monday. January 20. 1997*

**Do I start to see why I distrust Atticus? No man is this good. Atticus is a noble ideal, a representation of reason, as his name implies. One could argue that Scout, the child narrator, sees her father in this limited way, that Miss Maudie Atkinson or Uncle Jack might tell us more, but I argue that this is the text as we have it—every narrator is limited—and this is Atticus Finch of, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, complete for all time, and he is not a real**

man, but a fine cardboard prop of a character. In fact, I have more affinity with Boo Radley, still a child and always alone.

*Tuesday. January 21. 1997*

Talking about heroes today. Elkins wants to say that Atticus is a classic hero and reads from Campbell—is it Joseph Campbell's the *Golden Bough*? We are told about heroes' classic dimensions: they plunge into darkness. (I first typed "darkmess" which is better. "Darkness" is elevated symbolic stuff; dark-mess is shit.) "Ever wrapped in his invisible cloak, sacred in silence." All these high-minded hero antics. I propose Boo Radley as a hero and then others wanted to add other characters—Miss Maudie Atkinson and Calpurnia—and suddenly we're working on the thesis that "everyone can be a hero," which lawyers in training love. *Someday I'll be like Atticus, and the big case will come and I'll stand up to the challenge and defend right and freedom and my children will learn about truth.* Not likely folks. This is a story. Sorry. Or if you do, nobody will notice.

I greatly appreciated Steve Bagby getting us back to Boo, arguing that Boo Radley is a hero for leaving the house: think what it took for that man simply to go out, much less to save the children and stand in the light in Jem's bedroom. If this is a love story, it is the story of Boo Radley's love for Jem and Scout.

Boo Radley is the silent center of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. He is at the geographic heart of the Maycomb/Mockingbird world. There are the no-count rural dwellers, and the folks in town, and at the center of town is the Finch household, and at the center of the children's small world is Boo Radley. Boo Radley lives in the center of his clean swept yard, in the closed house to which the children reach, with poles and messages, drama and artifice. They seek to see Boo and long to understand. He is the imaginative center of Maycomb. What story do the children tell? The Boo Radley story. Boo Radley, "wrapped in his invisible cloak, sacred in silence." He is an enigma, one the children long to pierce. At the end of the novel, Scout understands all when she gains the vista of the Radley porch. The only words Boo Radley says in the entire book are "Will you take me home?" And Scout does so, though



she makes it look as though he is leading her "as any gentleman would do." Scout understands all when she gains the vista (the perspective) of Boo Radley's porch: "I had never seen our neighborhood from this angle."

Atticus Finch is a born hero, a hero born and bred. Family tells, and Atticus' family is born to lead, to legislate, to deliberate calmly, to be given the hard questions and hold steady through their consequences. Boo Radley, however, pulls himself up from empty depths, a mite tetched, stabbing his mother with the scissors—who knows what the boy will do next. Yet what are all Atticus' fine speeches and clever cross examination compared to that pair of mended trousers laying across the fence when Jem went back for them? The gifts in the tree? Who saves the children when they cry out, and no one else is there to hear? Boo Radley.

*To make ends meet, Mammaw ran a boarding house in Tuscaloosa, filled with boys from the University of Alabama. One of the boys had a friend named Ronnie Schwartzenbach, a semi-pro ballplayer, a sweet, gangly young man who fell in love with my grandmother. So Gladys left Alabama with Ronnie, left my mother behind, left Mammaw who couldn't run the boarding house alone. She had to close up shop and move in with the relatives. Gladys and Ronnie moved to New Jersey, and after a few years they called for my mother to come live with them up north and make a new family. But Ronnie had been spiked playing ball in Alabama, and the doctors said that led to the leukemia that killed him. He died on my mother's twelfth birthday, January 21, 1933. In the depths of the depression my mother and her mother are left alone again. Gladys called her own mother to come up from Alabama to Washington where there was said to be work and the three women, now cut off from home and family, background and breeding, made a living and a life for themselves.*

*Monday. January 27. 1997*

**Very early Monday mornings I have a few hours I can guarantee no disturbance while I work and think. I look forward to these morning hours as though they were not just time, but a separate place and I save thoughts and insights and half-glimpsed notions to bring here and explore. Like a child in a treehouse, I make world of my own materials, and it is above**

and separate from the official, adult world of law school, on which I spy. For law school doth make children of us all. Even one as old as I has not the ego to withstand the constant judgments with impunity. You are a 3.713. Competition separates us from our peers; everyone runs the race alone. By age and the grace of experience, the faculty should be my peers. In fact, they are, but we are separated by the great class gulf that yawns between professors and students, judges and the unbeknighted. A few revel in this power, but I don't believe most intend to produce loneliness, fear, depression or anxiety. (Yet, hey guys, do we not intend the natural and ordinary consequences of our actions?)

The theme of loneliness seems to have emerged. (A legal writing instructor: passive voice, rewrite.) No, themes emerge and this one has found its way, unsought, to the open air of words. Finally it's text, perhaps the warp in the texture of this tale. Camus helped, I finished *The Fall* last night. And Boo Radley, and my mother. I talked to her on her birthday last week and what she remembers, the story to which she returns, is having the measles in Washington, ca. 1934, lying in the dark in a small room off the parlor and hearing her mother ask her grandmother, "Whatever will we do with Elise? She is so fat and not very intelligent."

Lonely lawyers in literature. Atticus, our template of the literary lawyer, raises his children alone. Isn't it handy, literarily, of course, that his wife is dead, for she might soften his resolve to defend Tom Robinson. But Atticus' loneliness is larger than marital, larger than social, and not just due to his quiet manner or taciturn ways.

Like an author who commits his private vision to public view, a lawyer *represents* his client; he puts before the world or its microcosm, the jury, a representation. The manner is odd, disjointed, back and forth, Q and A, direct and cross, redirect and recross, proposal and rebuttal. And then in the closing argument, the lawyer claims, "I *represent* to you, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, that this is the story of my client which you have heard here today." The tale is told and the jury is out; soon there will be a judgment.

[Atticus] must have wanted to go home the short way, because he walked quickly down the middle aisle toward the south exit. I followed the top of his head as he made his way to the door. He did not look up.

Someone was punching me, but I was reluctant to take my eyes from the people below us, and from the image of *Atticus's lonely walk down the aisle*.

Yes, just below is the chapter's eye-watering conclusion: "Miss Jean Louise, stand up. Your father's passin'." But the admiration of crowds, having multitudes rise as you pass, just intensifies the loneliness.

The loneliness of the trial is a dramatic, artistic loneliness, perhaps self-gratifying in its nobility of purpose, and the purpose always seems noble in these courtroom dramas. Compare *Snow Falling on Cedars* where truth actually triumphs and the judgment seems a momentary victory for order in the universe.

But lawyers face a further loneliness where there is no applause, no standing crowd. Lawyers know intimately the limits of justice and its systematic failure to provide order. When the children worry about Bob Ewell's threats, Jem proposes to Atticus that he do something. "Atticus smiled wryly. 'Do what? Put him under a peace bond?'" Even Atticus laughs, albeit wryly, at the pathetic limits of the law against violent intentions. The law produces paper: case law, judgments, transcripts. Nothing makes an angry man more violent than having a peace bond held up in his face. We might see this as the lawyer's lonely secret knowledge: like paper money and the Wizard of Oz, the law only works so far as we all believe in it.

*Sunday. February 2. 1997*

**The law is a story we tell each other  
and law school is where we learn to tell such tales.**

In class there has been a rejection movement against *Paris Trout*. "I hated this book. It's crap." "Pete Dexter doesn't understand women, so he shouldn't write about them." "This book is just an excuse to string together some good one-liners." Tanana hated both *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *Paris Trout* and the class so much, she left, quit, split. Other classes do not inspire such enmity. Occasionally there's muttering in the ranks, of course, but not this vehemence. Perhaps this anger is welling up because its expression is allowed. Or perhaps the hatred, violence, sadism, and misogyny in *Paris Trout* have

**cracked the controlled facade we erect in law school, and people allow themselves to scream, "I hate this."**

**Well, I loved *Paris Trout* and I need to say why, but first I need to talk about learning to read and reading (a first pass, unintellectual, unadorned).**

*One morning in the second grade I could not get out of bed, could not move my leg without pain stabbing through my hip joint. I was wrapped in a blanket and rushed to the hospital where blood must be drawn. In my memory, the blanket was white in a white room and the only color was the red blood scattered as I fought to keep their needles out of my arm. Finally, they held me down and I gave up the blood and the fight. Of course, the blanket must have been changed but as I remember I was wrapped in the blanket for the next nine months. I had rheumatic fever and could not walk or move on my own, but was carried, wrapped in a blanket from my bed at night to the couch in the morning and back again. I was a "good" child, then, and in my own view I receded to the small thing in the blanket, light enough to be no trouble. On the floor by the couch was a pile of books in their library bindings: pioneer stories, American heroes, child adventurers—boys in those days. I had a pile of Readers Digests, too, that went back to World War II. There was no difference to me between the stories of the Korean War and children's stories about the Revolution. I read and read until it became the easiest, most natural thing, as other children carry a tune or run a race, without training or preparation, I could read. The words slid by, their meanings self-apparent, and the meanings of unknown words posing no obstacle, the stories unrolling, like what we see on TV, effortlessly.*

Just at the moment when I should have woken to the world, recognized reality and other people, I began to read instead. I forgot my pain, left it behind, and dropped away. As long as I didn't move, it didn't hurt, and reading is a non-moving activity. I learned to slip into that other world, where the text controlled, and reality came out as the author planned. People who read inhabit two worlds: "this" world we share to the extent our perceptions of it are the same and the reading world where the text is always identical but we can share by running our fingers under the words.

*Paris Trout*. What could it mean? French fish? I read for relief and escape and comfort in the order of marching words. Someone else will manage my thoughts for a while. Only falseness will stop me, the forced narrative, unreal dialogue, ignorant authorial commentary, unbelievable characters . . . there are so many ways a book can be bad, most having

to do with the spurious and inauthentic. What could that mean? Of course, fiction is false. Thank God, too, for what kind of person wants to read the true story of an immoral Paris Trout, despicable, who blows his mother's head off, and takes two of the town's finest characters with him to death? How can I forgive this crudity and malevolence for the sake of a knowing author's honest prose?

Paris Trout would refuse to see it, that it was wrong to shoot a girl and a woman. There was a contract he'd made with himself a long time ago that overrode the law, and being the only interested party, he lived by it. He was principled in the truest way. His right and wrong were completely private.

*Paris Trout* is a book about deception and self-deception and their necessity to civilized life. The setting is Ether County, Georgia, where the sweet drug of appearance allows life to proceed with a modicum of pain. Hanna Trout deceives her husband, loaning him only \$4000 but letting him believe he has all her money. She deceives him with Harry Seagraves, her husband's lawyer, who deceives his own wife in return. Carl Bonner another lawyer in town distrusts everyone and seeks to deceive them all about his true nature, and that, especially, of his wife. The honest man is Paris Trout, "principled in the truest way." His honesty attracted Hanna to him:

There was a shape to his life, she was sure of that. He was direct and willful and honest, and there was a sureness about him that was missing in her own life. He did not lie.

And yes, at the bottom of it she sensed a darker side, and it had excited her.

Indeed, Paris is direct and willful and honest: he fucks her with a mineral water bottle, holds her head under bathwater, forces spoiled pork in her mouth. He floors his room with sheets of glass, lays lead beneath his bed. His truths are not the agreed-upon social and legal truths upon which civilized order depends. "Those ain't the real rules, and you know it." By Trout's social contract, the one he has with himself, shooting Rosie and Mary McNutt was "right as rain." They interfered with his business, and "If somebody got shot, they shot

themselves." In the end, Carl Bonner and Harry Seagraves will shoot themselves too.

Seagraves, our lawyer hero, is a man who favors the "appearance of normalcy." He will get a fine tombstone, be remembered as kind. Seagraves' view is the accepted view: "there is a certain amount of lying that goes on between people that live with each other. Polite lying, that makes cohabitation possible." Seagraves' legal profession sustains such appearances. Reality exists only once-filtered through judgment.

"That is a misperception," [Seagraves] said, "that an act is, of itself, a crime or a perversion. It becomes such only after it is judged." He had no idea why he was explaining this to her. [Hanna Trout].

*Friday. February 7. 1997*

**Now we must ask why the women in the class, the young feminists, at least, hated this book so much. Monica hated Harry Seagraves because Hanna told him that Paris had sexually assaulted her with a mineral water bottle, and it excited him. "Pete Dexter doesn't understand women; no woman could care about a man who felt that way."**

Seagraves was excited by the story of the bottle, but it was more that Hanna said it, acknowledged it outright, the bottle and the violation. There was a "sort of a connection" when she said the word "sodomy," "both of them knowing what it meant." Think of Seagraves' wife Lucy masked for sleep (she goes to bed with him with a mask on), worried about which women had—she can hardly speak of it—"affectionate inclinations." Lucy's own inclinations, Dexter tells us, were scarce. Seagraves' attraction to Hanna's sexual directness is not surprising; students' denial that Hanna could reciprocate is.

It is actually long after that drunken conversation about sodomy that Hanna sleeps with Harry Seagraves, and she does so, after more drinking, because he speaks with difficulty, about his darkest secret, that he thinks he has kept hidden, "The thing he did with the bottle. . .," he says. She waits. "I cannot get that out of my mind." Still no answer. "It aroused me." Finally she speaks, "That was hardly a secret, Mr. Seagraves." Truth, not rape, is the turn-on. "We are all flawed people," he says, the last thing before they make love.

*Drunkenness was a theme of the 50s, like drugs in the 60s, bad music in the 70s and money in the 80s. Social drunkenness, drunkenness sanctioned by the occasion, to slip off the weight of artifice, acting, and appearance, and let truth loose. My bedroom was on the first floor next to my father's den. The den had a wall of books, a deep leather chair and ottoman, large ashtrays which overflowed at night, and covering the wall above a couch, Odalisques, three of them, large women, pig pink and naked. (In the same years of big-finned cars, he drove a pink Oldsmobile with chrome-lined fins.) The women's pubic hair was bared, yet they lacked allure. Even to a child they were poorly painted, too flat and a bad color. What could they mean, these women sprawling on the wall of the den in a house otherwise decorated with prints from the Godey's Ladies Book and over the mantel an oil painting of a low-bodied ancestor, nonetheless without cleavage?*

*The den was a personal room, no one was really welcome. Lectures were delivered in the den, though spankings were given with a hairbrush, child leaned, pants pulled down, over the toilet. Strange. If he was in the den, the door was half closed. Knocking was required. One entered for a reason, then left. He would be sitting in the deep leather chair, his unmuscled forearms flaccid on its arms, his wrists drooping limply so the cigarette ash could fall into the ashtray unguided. He would cock a quizzical eyebrow at the interruption, not speak till spoken to which was also our directive.*

*The den was a silent place except when I would wake in the night and smell the smoke from their cigarettes next door, hear ice clinking in their glasses, even smell the sharp alcoholic edge of liquor, Scotch for both. The first sound might have been my mother's mocking laughter with an edge of disbelief and then the lower rumble of his voice, explaining, for even drunk he was reasonable and she was not. They would have come from a party, where all had drunk for hours, where he had flirted or someone had hinted or even said—and he would deny, so reasonably deny, and her voice would rise so the laughter was shrieking with disbelief, betrayal, while he would placate, and she would scream, smash glasses, accuse and cry or keen with sorrow and loss. Reasonably he would speak calmly on and on. Drunkenness forced her to see and allowed her to scream the truth. Even drunk he could lie logically, calmly. Appearances were with him. If it ever came to a judgment, who would believe a madwoman, a harridan, against his appearance of normalcy?*

*Tuesday. February 11. 1997*

The class has moved on to *Noon Wine* and I'm not ready to quit Paris Trout, though together they sound like a continental luncheon menu. Elkins asks about common themes and the discussion focuses on truth in the two works, though my initial thoughts were 1) truth & judgment and 2) marriage. No one mentioned marriage; the wife came up only as the reluctant witness who actually didn't see: "my wife will tell you . . . and she never lies." I thought more about how different this class must look to Elkins, who has certain tutorial obligations. I watched him push at that table on the dais twenty times. He walks to its corner, he's standing just below and in front of it, leans on its corner and pushes mightily, yet in mime, for mostly the table doesn't move. Occasionally he lifts it or pulls from the other end with the same intense, but unresultant motion. It's as if the table were the discussion, and he is silently leaning into it and willing it onward.

*Paris Trout* is full of horrible scenes. Blood is everywhere. Though Rosie doesn't bleed on Henry Ray's car seats, it shoots from a severed chicken neck to Cadillac seats; a dog stands and licks it. Two black women are shot; one dies. Though that comes to seem almost incidental. Blood pours from Hanna Trout's foot and tinges her bathwater. It pools from the dead dog the sheriff hit and finally flows down the courthouse steps. Food and glass are smashed together on the kitchen floor, while five of Paris Trout's safes hold not riches, but piss. Trout watches his aged, withered, stroke-ridden mother naked, being bathed. Dark-mess. Is it only facile irony that Paris's name is one for male beauty?

How can a book of horrors be not a horrible book?

Here is a wonderful, horrible image from *Paris Trout*: the copperhead, "thick as a man's arm, mashed where a tire had hit her, and stuck to the highway in her own gum."

Trout stayed where he was—a few yards away—and then the snake suddenly turned on herself and struck, three times, just in front of the spot where she was mashed.

Then she dropped against the asphalt and crawled without moving forward, stuck to the road and sliding from side to side, until some sense inside her was satisfied that she had crawled far enough, and she lay quietly against the road and waited.

Called back to the business of dying.

He saw it wasn't so bad—she just pulled further back from the world, into the safest, deepest places inside her.



Is it too outrageous to say that we all live, like the mashed snake, stuck with our own gum to the highway? We crawl without moving, sliding from side to side. But with our forked tongues, divining a direction, and in our limited brains, we are making progress, and are sometimes satisfied that we have crawled far enough. Maybe it's not so hard to see why so many law students hated this book. We like reality to be clean, and truth to be more than an innate sense that we've crawled far enough. A story progresses by accretion, ambiguity, suggestion, juxtaposition, repetition, so that the image is greater than its parts and there is a meaning never fully divined. The rational cuts away, paring down, discarding to the rule, the holding of a judicial opinion, a single sentence that we can lay against reality to see if it measures up. Legal thinking is a clean operation like boiling that snake, then choosing a single bone, but even that one clean white snake vertebra would mean more than any legal rule could state.

My law student colleagues claimed, though, men and women alike, that *Paris Trout* is somehow incomplete. It tells not too much, but too little. "We don't know why these characters are this way; we need to know more background," they argue. They disliked it for this alleged insufficiency. It's as if the novel should be a case history, some scientific analysis of Paris Trout, Hanna Trout—where did these people come from? There must be an explanation for their behavior. What if we knew that Paris's mother bathed naked before him? Or strapped him in the outhouse with his pants down? We can imagine endless scenarios which might "explain," under some theory of child development, character, society and meaning, Paris Trout. The explanation for Paris Trout is: too much truth at an early age. We explain, we control, we complete; this is that—end of story. This is the way law students want this story to go.

The students, you might say, just want to reach the correct verdict. But do we let a jury pose questions? Look at it like this. Counsel are the authors: dueling authors. Each offers a story.

"My client took a bottle of mineral water to her husband at his request and he took that bottle and forcibly emptied it inside her."

"You have heard the professor's wife testify that when Mrs. Trout came from the back room she said, 'My husband and I had a small emergency, but it's taken care of now.'"

The jury is the trier of fact. The facts are on trial and the parties are incident to the truth. But with this text we have only one author, one story, one textual reality. In such a situation, Mary McNutt, who was

shot by Paris Trout, offers jury instructions from an author's point of view, instructions the students should heed:

"I told the truth about it. You can make it look any which way now, but I told how it happened."

Seagraves said, "That's what we called the jury for, to decide."

[Mary] turned then, looking directly at them [the jury]. "They don't decide what happened," she said. "It's already done. All they decide is if they gone do something about it."

*Thursday. February 13. 1997*

I dreamed last night I was being slashed to ribbons with many swords and Justice Cleckley in a green super hero suit, looking like a child's sleeper with a cape of an old green bath towel, swung to my rescue. He was Superman, Tarzan and the Jolly Green Giant rolled together, shaped just like himself in this ridiculous suit, but he saved me from the swords and I fell in love with him. How can I explain this? Perhaps it is the seductive power of a large mind, an organic mind that can take the Rules of Evidence, re-imbue them with reality, and re-enact the courtroom drama in the classroom. But look at the absurd paucity of meaning of any possible explanation set next to the dream itself.

*Monday. February 17. 1997*

This class is taking on the harried law school sense tht there is much more to cover than we can ever reach and we must push ourselves to read more, so last week we read both *Noon Wine* and *The Death of Ivan Ilych*—or some of us did. Others tell me they've stopped doing the reading. They say this class is over-analytical and they can make nothing of this talk of meanings and themes.

*Noon Wine* and *The Death of Ivan Ilych* and now *Bartleby, the Scrivener* continue the depressing onward march of stories about bad marriages, incomplete people, failure, loss, pain and death. That's the required reading. Does this reveal literature's view of lawyers, or Elkins' view of the literature, or my take on Elkins' view? Each, I think, imperfectly. Required reading; we slog through it: another day, another great short story with a lawyer in it. Yes, yes, Tolstoy and his noble

peasant Gerasim with his strong white teeth and the emptiness of the monied classes, their self-centeredness exacerbated by death. Can you read Tolstoy without saying certain things? Apparently not. Before the fall, after the fall. "Death is no more." Required reading, required thinking, required saying.

I've read these texts before and I know how they come out. I start remembering, at least with trepidation if not with coherent memory, the drift and direction. Death is the end for Mr. Thompson in "Noon Wine", with his big toe on the shotgun trigger and for Ivan, inevitably, and for Bartleby, lying in the Tombs. Ah, Bartleby. Ah humanity. Of course, death is always the end, but is it helpful to be fixed on that from the beginning? As I reread these stories, I am not curious and hardly interested. I am so addicted to reading that, even through law school, I've had to have a good book going that I could read before bed. Something to loosen the analytic structures/strictures that bind my mind by day. I always liked the phrase "evoked potentials" which refers to brain waves—and sounds like something thoughtful reading does. For a while the readings for this course served, but with this span of required rereading, the pleasure is gone.

*Wednesday. February 19. 1997*

**Maybe force re-reading is a reminder that multitudes of the familiar surround the unexpected. To Ilych, dying, the world revolves around him in a smaller, and smaller circle until, as Brian Peterson said, he "collapsed in on himself." So nice, like a black hole.**

*My father's mother, Gamma Jewel, died in my bed. My bedroom was on the first floor and it was easier for my mother to care for her there, would have been impossible for Gamma Jewel to climb the stairs. While she lay dying I slept on a daybed in the playroom, a room built on a cement slab that was once a patio behind the garage. The playroom had windows all around like a sunroom, but it faced north, so while she died in the fall and into the winter the playroom got colder and grayer. I was cold and she was dying. I felt like I couldn't get warm, but when I went to my room she was there in my bed, a long narrow bony thing, reaching out her long arms and bony hands for what she wanted that she would call out for and I should bring: water, food, her comb. Once she had a good day and we looked at her jewelry, all of it real, but none of it good (my mother said). Jewel was a big woman, six feet tall and her jewels*

*were big pins and rings and chokers. She was not the sort for bangly, dangly necklaces; even when she was dying nothing dangled.*

*As Jewel lay dying Mother's business became nursing care. By that time we had "colored ladies" who came to clean, but they could not carry the trays in a way that satisfied Jewel, or comb her hair, or change her bed. Only my mother's care satisfied her. But with all her care, the dementia took her. She was dying of alcoholism and years of refusing to eat. She would lie in wait for my father to come home from work to complain that no one had fed her all day. She cried pitifully, yellow tears on her bony yellow cheeks, how she had to beg for food that never arrived, and no one cared if she lived or died, we wanted her to die, especially my mother so she could have her money and her jewelry, that's all that we were waiting for. My mother took to spoon feeding Jewel and saving the lunch dishes with the food dried on them, but what proof was that? My mother expected true belief, never understood probative value.*

*Jewel finally died of pneumonia, sent to a hospital where they force-fed her through tubes stuck in her arms and that didn't strengthen her either. Jewel's sister Margaret, who had raised Dad's brother and sister, the children Jewel had left behind, got a lawyer. The lawyer claimed my father had forced Jewel to sign a new will that left everything to him and for once—my mother says—your father was forced to acknowledge the truth. All the insurance money was split between Dad's brother and sister, and his sister got all her mother's jewelry. We got a basement full of mahogany furniture that lurked down there like black wooden birds on their massive claw and ball feet.*

Bartleby, the Scrivener, turns his face from life to a window which has "no view at all." Silent, pale, mechanical, Bartleby sits screened in his "hermitage." "I would prefer not," he says to every choice, every invitation, every order.

What miserable friendlessness and loneliness are here revealed. His poverty is great; but his solitude, how horrible?

The "pallid copyist" speaks to no one; his soul suffers; he is a "demented man," who turns the tongues, if not the heads of the narrator and his clerks. The more benevolent excuse him: "he don't mean anything." The narrator tries to escape him, then cannot stay away. He finds the Scrivener, confined to prison, "his face towards a high wall." "I know you," says Bartleby,

without looking around, "and I want nothing to say to you."

The narrator ostensibly prepares to tell Bartleby's story, but "introducing the scrivener,. . . some such description is indispensable to an adequate understanding of the chief character about to be presented. Imprimis: I . . . ."

Indeed, *Imprimis*: I. Always in the first place: I.

Thursday. February 26. 1997

In class, Bob who was a golf pro, before coming to law school listens to our discussion of *Noon Wine* and not living for appearances, and speaks admiringly of a famous golfer who taught the importance of "putting golf third"(after home and family). Mollie Riddle, has made only one comment all term: on the notion that we had seen no lawyers in happy marriages, she told a long story about her husband's visit when he said he couldn't talk to her anymore because she talked like a lawyer and over-analyzed every remark. Elkins tells the story of a friend whose luck turned when his wife unexpectedly left him, which leads Mary Nelson to describe her experience counseling people who don't want to get well. Before class Sandy Wilson was reading some of this journal and seemed shocked that I was naming names. Later she stopped me in the hall to ask, "Am I in there?"

Bartleby is a scrivener, a scribe, a writer. He only copies from the original. The scribe looks out a blank window, away from the world and life, marriage, family, "reality," away from appearances or what others will think, into "*what is always there.*" A singular honesty is required. I prefer not: not to say that with which others must agree, not to acknowledge their tacit stipulations.

If writers peer in on their personal air shafts and readers view all texts from the perspective of theirs, are we not all lost in illusory and unitary communion, where another tells a story and I am endlessly reminded of my own, with its characters, meaning, and my memory of a story I once read, which is now part of my own story? A story about how a Scrivener lay with his face to the wall, preferring not, preferring

death? Or about Mr. Helton, in *Noon Wine*, another pale soul, with "eyes that refused to see anything," like a "disembodied spirit," who played his single tune about the noon wine on one or another of his harmonicas, some lower and sweeter, "but the same changeless tune." Or Boo Radley's story "with his gray eyes so colorless I thought he was blind" and his "white hands, sickly white hands."

These are men of dis-appearance. They represent some wraithlike distillation of humanity down to its unseeing core. The I is blind. A Cartesian cavefish, self-absorbed, knowing nothing but it-self. Am I in here/there/where?

*When I was 12 I lived in a very nice brick house in a suburban neighborhood, a private cul-de-sac, with my father and mother, my sister Debbie and two brothers, David and Kevin. We had two cars, two new white matching Fairlane 500s, somehow related to a tax favor my father had done for the dealership. One beautiful spring afternoon when all the gardens around our yard bloomed with bulbs, dogwood, and miniature fruit, I walked down from the school bus and jumped over the border garden to the yard. I remember the large rock in the garden caught rain in a small pool and the pool was reflecting the sky and a single cloud.*

*In the driveway were the cars of my mother's best friends. Mrs. Lautz opened the door. "Are you having a teaparty?" I asked. I thought it was a sophisticated remark.*

*"No," she said. "Your mother is upstairs in her room and she wants to talk to you."*

*Here are four stories of what happened that day:*

***What Mother told me:*** "I was visiting Mrs. Kincaid and Kevin fell in a big hole they were digging for a septic tank next door and he drowned."

***What Mother told Debbie:*** "I had to go to Kincaid's to take back the sleeping bag that you never returned when you were supposed to and while I was there Kevin fell in a hole and drowned."

***What Mrs. Kincaid said years later:*** "Elise and I were sitting in the side yard having a beer and talking and Kevin ran around the side of the house. We got up to look for him, but you know how two-year-olds are. He was quick and he was gone. We couldn't see him anywhere. We thought he was hiding from us. We called and called. It never occurred to us he had gone as far as the yard next door and the hole for the septic tank was covered. You couldn't see it. They had finished it and covered it and left, but there was a space in the boards and he had fallen in there and when we found him he was lying face down in the water and he wasn't moving at all."

*What my father said before he left: "Elise never took decent care of the children and it was just a matter of time until something like this happened. She was drinking and she lost one of them. This was no surprise to anyone."*

*Friday, March 7, 1997*

Finally we leave Ilych, "Noon Wine" and "Bartleby" behind for a Kafka parable and a couple of very funny Lowell B. Komie stories. Elkins discusses the new works in terms of people living a lie, but who's to say? It's my life and my lie, after all. Or yours, or my mother's. The class is full of counseling talk, the need for frank & honest discussion until you know yourself. Monica is especially upset that the women in these stories are caricatures who don't "know themselves" and are, she says, "psychotic." As in all law school classes, communication among ourselves is hard because discussion is mediated through Elkins. A student speaks and he interprets. His final word is this: "To say no to despair is to say no to meaning."

In the *Divided Self*, R. D. Laing taught that schizophrenia could be healed only when the schizophrenic plummeted to the depths of being into the central core of self, shucking the denials, splits, and divisions that comprise the outward personality. Once centered in the core, which from the outside looks like a total breakdown of personal order, the lucky schizophrenic may turn outward and rise again into the world, no longer separate from the center, but proceeding from it, acknowledging it as one's central personal humanity, one's nucleus, one's soul. The unlucky schizophrenic takes the plunge, but never makes the turn.

In Lowell B. Komie's "The Interview," Susan (such an innocuous modern name) is a second year law student who has had 20 interviews and no summer job offer. She's in Baltimore with \$20, \$15 left on her Visa card, a boyfriend who doesn't answer the phone back home, and she has an evening to kill before another interview so she sits in the hotel bar for entertainment and meets an SEC lawyer from New Orleans. They get drunk on champagne and he takes her to the Baltimore Aquarium to see the lawyer fish.

The lawyer fish was huge. It looked prehistoric with a black body and fat gray mottled underbelly. It blinked at Susan and languidly moved one huge fin.

"Why do they call it the lawyer fish?" She looked at him.

"Because it looks like a lawyer. Can't you see it's wearing glasses and has a vest with a key chain?"

She pointed to the plaque, "Lawyer Americanus," and burped. She was very giddy and dizzy from the champagne. "What will you give me if I dive into the tank?"

"A hundred dollars."

So she does. Climbs in the tank, swims to the bottom, touches the lawyer fish. Back at the hotel she breaks the \$100 to buy them both a drink. "[E]xcept for her stringy wet hair, no one would have known she had been to the bottom of the tank to visit the lawyer fish."

The next day she is at the interviews, horrible interviews. "Why do you want to be a lawyer?" "What's your GPA?" "I didn't know we were interviewing under 3.0." Listening while the interviewers ignore her to spout their tough-man talk into the phones ("You'll crater that deal." "I'll soldier for you, but I won't be a litter-bearer."), she reaches on her neck and discovers a leech.

The leech was dormant, like a slug clinging to the underside of a lily pad. She prodded it once with her finger and it moved. She rinsed the Kleenex with water and closed it around the leech and carefully put it back into her pocket. For some reason she wanted to keep it alive.

The last interview is the worst. "If you could buy any kind of a car, what kind of a car would you buy?" He wants to know her GPA, then her LSAT, then her SAT. She doesn't remember, the interviewer's phone rings. He dismisses her while talking on the phone, turns away.

She reached in her pocket. His back was still turned. She unfolded the Kleenex and reached out to him and gently put the leech on the collar of



his immaculate gray pinstripe suit. The leech immediately began to undulate toward his neck, crawling toward the golden hairs at the back of his neck. The golden pollen. The white lily.

"Excuse me," she said, "Peter."

He turned back toward her impatiently.

"Thank you," she said.

**She took the plunge, reached the bottom, touched the fish, and brought back—an inestimable prize. We get to participate in the plunge without even having to hold our breath. Despair? Despair? To say no to *truth* is to say no to meaning. And the truth may be very funny—from the vantage point of a good story. Women laugh to keep from crying, but they also laugh to keep from lying. Laughter is like not being able to catch your breath. Laughter is a little like dying, sometimes you laugh so hard you pee your pants.**

*My mother went crazy then, first in a decorous manner, weeping through the funeral, the visits, flowers, and casseroles. Kevin was buried next to Gamma Jewel, a horrible place to lie. Something was wrong. Our family graveyard is in Alabama, she said. This is not the right grave. There is a graveyard at home where Pappaw is buried, she said, and that's where we all should be. But everyone else said, she's just distraught, poor thing.*

*After everyone left the moaning started. At times she would quietly talk to herself, but whatever she said set her moaning again. There was medicine for the moaning, but she didn't like it, didn't seem to like being battened down and would cry out from the sleep it created as if she were lost, a questioning cry, is anyone there? When she heard herself it scared her and then she would be very quiet, and it seemed like that quiet penetrated until she became quiet all the way through.*

*My father had come back for the duration, he said, and he took us to the convalescent center to visit her. It was a sprawling old Dupont mansion with a glass enclosed porch all along one side. The nurse wheeled her onto the porch where we waited and faced her outdoors, looking out the wall of windows, and there she stayed, her face, her whole body, not so much set as empty. We were supposed to talk about our week at school, but I lost my ability at small talk forever watching her look staring and straight across the rolling lawn past ancient trees to the parking lot where Dad's friend Charlotte sat in the car, now a white Lincoln, with her brassy hair, red nails, jangling jewelry, bright clothes, and coy laughter. But we were not to say. It would only upset your mother.*

*Thursday, March 13, 1997*

Oh, God, what a painful class. Two weeks of lawyering skills training concentrated into a week have left us feeling like we have hangovers and "can't quite remember what happened last night," or was that last semester, last year, last life? Everything seems fuzzy and out of sync, but in classes like Cleckley's where he lectures, the program chugs ahead with students towed along in his wake. In *Lawyers & Literature* though, where the stories were weeks old, everyone seemed hostile. It was like one of those daytime talk shows where the host attacks the guests who attack each other, and the audience goes after all of them. I had a nightmare feeling I had never read "Centaur's." I was in a class where I hadn't done the reading and no one would talk and the professor struggled onward, and when I tried to lessen the strain because I couldn't stand it, by asking why these women seemed so weak, that made Monica mad at Elkins, I guess for choosing these stories, and he defended himself by saying the women were strong—but they are not. The class ended in a flurry of accusations, by men and women both, that the narrator in "Weight" was a prostitute. "Well," they defended themselves, "she's having sex with this man to get a contribution." No, she's having sex with him to have sex with him while getting a contribution thrown in. Still it seemed appropriate that the class ended by attacking the characters, too: a woman can be a virgin, a wife, or a whore.

The women in "The Cornucopia of Julia K.," "Weight," and "Puttermesser" are all lonely and disturbed. Julia K. constantly touches the leaves of her plant to reassure herself. When she leaves an intolerable meeting, Nick, a lawyer colleague tells the others, "Julia isn't up to the rigors of a litigation practice." "Okay," she thinks, "so she was alone, divorced three years and still alone." She sits in her office telling herself to stop building a psychodrama, while cutting her hair all over her desk. "Certainly she was too innocent and she should be shorn of innocence." She refuses to let the young woman interviewing for a job in her firm apply, tells her not to be "beguiled," hands her a paper cone with her shorn hair as a "cornucopia of

sorts." She is a woman in a man's world and not, at this moment, taking it at all well.

Or the narrator in "Weight," tending the egos of married men, "a fading art, like scrimshaw or the making of woolen-rose mantelpiece decorations." She knows her victims better than they know themselves, reads their minds, picks their pockets. She has all the men she can use and throws them out when they get troublesome, "so fast they can't even remember where they left their boxer shorts." She's doing penance for her friend Molly whom she couldn't help when Molly's husband murdered her with a claw hammer, dismembered her, and hid her "arms and legs about the province, in culverts, in wooden glades, like Easter eggs or the clues in some grotesque treasure hunt." She is a clever, strong, funny, manipulative woman who once a month wakes in the night, "slippery with terror . . . afraid, not because there's someone in the room, in the dark, in the bed, but because there isn't." Afraid of the emptiness which lies beside her "like a corpse."

Nor is Puttermesser's an optimistic portrait.

Now if this were an optimistic portrait, exactly here is where Puttermesser's emotional life would begin to grind itself into evidence. Her biography would proceed romantically, the rich young Commissioner of the Department of Receipts and Disbursements would fall in love with her. . . . This is not to be. . . . She will not marry.

Instead Puttermesser's is an invented "romance," a romance of invented closeness with a fictive ethnic relative who is "all her ancestry." She lives in a dream relationship with a real uncle actually dead who "lies under the earth of Staten Island" and whose name she has expropriated to create the caring ancestor of her romance.

*So what's a woman to do? Falling apart or hacked to pieces, no longer a virgin, no longer a wife. My mother came back to try the usual expedients: an affair with her doctor who kept her on downers, then with the lawyer who got her divorce. She took her half of the property settlement, bought a little house in the suburbs, newly built on clean-shaved farmland, a split-level house that settled and cracked, a pink and*

*white house on Floral Drive, where trees died in the raw subsoil in front of all the identical houses. She stopped cooking and we enjoyed a kind of camping out adventure, foraging through the kitchen for food. I lived on oranges, vanilla ice cream, and honey. It was every man for himself. Except, of course, there were no men.*

*So was that the problem? Or was there a problem? Somehow it always seemed so. She brought home a man from church who sang bass in the choir while she sang soprano. That's a pretty picture, isn't it? Family songfests around the piano, him playing and singing, and my mother, brother and sister doing harmony, while I, tuneless, turned the pages. He came from an aristocratic family in northern New Jersey, there was old money and a big house at Tuxedo Park. This is a lovely tale for we shall have a new father, who is already skilled, having an ex-wife and four children, recently left behind. She is happy, she cooks, she cleans, she takes the train to Washington where her mother will buy her a trousseau. This was long ago when people took trains and bought trousseaux. He was to stay with us while she was away.*

*It was a gray, stormy afternoon when I came home from the school bus and the sidewalks ran in brown rivulets with loose wet earth from the new yards. His car wasn't in the driveway and the house stood unlocked and empty. It got dark early and Debbie and David were anxious, so we made hot dogs, roasted them over the electric stove, dripped grease on the burners, absolutely disallowed, and enjoyed our freedom. The call came about nine. The police in Pennsylvania had picked him up for DUI. He'd driven his car into a telephone pole and he was okay, but he was in jail. Did I want to come get him? I was fourteen. Perhaps I sounded older. I said, "No, you keep him, let him stay." It was easy to talk to the police. But I called my mother's best friend Mrs. Lautz to call Washington. I couldn't talk to my mother.*

*Does there come a time when you can't bear to watch any more? I know I stopped watching about then. She went ahead and married him, her need for marriage greater than any danger, any fear. He tormented all of us with his terrible temper untamed by alcohol, AA became a second household religion for both of them. They had a child, moved to Ohio, he had a good job, couldn't stand the pressure, took a hotel room, slit his wrists and called room service. She started drinking, broke down again and this time spoke in tongues they said. But now we're turning the pages of the years quickly. I'm not in these pictures. I don't care to imagine how it looked when she fell to the floor frothing with the phone still in her hand, babbling and shouting meaninglessly and their poor child had to find her and call a neighbor. A new generation of suffering, but I prefer not to watch. I don't think you should look either.*

Am I appropriating these books and stories to my own uses? Yes. Am I doing them a disservice, misrepresenting them? No. Am I misrepresenting myself? No. Is it like being in love, when you think you hear them playing "your song" everywhere? Or is there only one song?

What I choose, what I leave out, the text I point to, the text I create, and my vantage point as I survey the whole, it must mean something. The basis of human thought is analogy. That's scary. So much of human thought is out of control, like dreaming, ineluctable and irreducible. The only full and fair response is another story. All our critical talk of symbol, metaphor, meaning and truth is just an attempt to force these stories to submit to our intellect, but slicing, pounding or encapsulating them never gets them under control. A good story always oozes away and resumes its unblemished form.

*Wednesday. March 19. 1997*

**Yesterday Elkins played Camus for the class, or at least some rank & file existentialist, denying meaning or virtue to any human action. The phrase "devil's advocate" is seldom really appropriate, but in this case it was. In *The Fall* Clamence is in limbo, purgatory, or hell, or some version of a penitential place, where a judge-penitent does his time with little-ease. I didn't have any sense, however, that anyone in the class understood that, or if they did, they were keeping quiet, like me. The ones who were talking were angry at Elkins for his perverse resistance to any definition of good, virtue and morality they might offer. Some rare, peaceful person did comment that the teacher was like Clamence, trying to make us reveal our own stories. Clamence, of course, is consigned to tell his story and hear "yours," maybe for eternity.**

"The doctrine of the existence of hell is derived from the principle of the necessity for vindication of divine justice, combined with the human experience that evildoers do not always appear to be punished adequately in their lifetime."

-Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia

*Today, March of 1997, my mother is dying gradually but steadily of congestive heart failure from 50 years of smoking. One would expect her thoughts to turn to her own state of grace, but no, she's stuck on my father's fate. He was an atheist, which probably shocked her youthful Alabama Baptist soul. Now she delights in discussing with all of Christ's*

*ministers, who frequent her hospital rooms to pray with her, how surprised my father must have been, in his supreme arrogance, to find out that there was a hell, and he was in it. It's as easy to recognize Jean Baptiste Clamence in my story as to fit in the final piece of the puzzle. He wears my father's face, of course.*

Have you noticed that Amsterdam's concentric canals resemble the circles of hell? The middle-class hell, of course, peopled with bad dreams. When one comes from the outside, as one gradually goes through those circles, life—and hence its crimes—becomes denser, darker. **Here, we are in the last circle.**

That is Clamence, speaking endlessly to the unseen auditor who is, of necessity, the reader. Clamence loves the heights and his profession as a lawyer "satisfied most happily that vocation for summits." He sits in judgment upon all around him, the "apes" and prostitutes in the bar, the middle-class fools who surround him, and you, dear reader, and myself.

"Yes, hell must be like that: streets filled with shop signs and no way of explaining oneself." Yet endlessly, cleverly, self-absorbed, he explains what can never be explained away: his total endless self-absorption.

"I have to admit it humbly, *mon cher*, I was always bursting with vanity. I, I, I is the refrain of my life. . . . I always lived free and powerful. . . . I always considered myself more intelligent than anyone else.... I admitted only superiorities in me. . . . When I was concerned with others, I was so out of pure condescension."

As now. Clamence condescends to speak to us. We are an audience marginally better than the apes at the bar.

Do you know Dante? Really? The devil you say! Then you know that Dante accepts the idea of neutral angels in the quarrel between God and Satan. And he puts them in Limbo, a sort of vestibule of his Hell. We are in the vestibule, *cher ami*.

Amsterdam is a "soggy hell." One has no need for God. "God is not needed to create guilt or to punish. Our fellow men suffice, aided by

ourselves. . . . Don't wait for the Last Judgment. It takes place every day."

And if we no longer need God, with what shall we replace him? For he was the law-giver and "the keenest of human torments is to be judged without a law."

And don't all my stories, true or false, tend toward the same conclusion? Don't they all have the same meaning? So what does it matter whether they are true or false if, in both cases, they are significant of what I have been and of what I am?

*The Fall*

Jean-Baptiste Clamence is John the Baptist who was the precursor, and announced the coming of Christ: *Ecce Agnus Dei*, "Behold the Lamb of God." Hidden in his closet, Clamence has a panel from "The Adoration of the Lamb." But the coming Clamence announces is not Christ's, but his own.

Fortunately [says Clamence], I arrived! I am the end and the beginning; I announce the law, In short, I am a judge-penitent.

As a penitent, Clamence paints his own portrait as an arrogant, selfish sinner. And as the reader reads along, "I was the lowest of the low," of whom does the reader think, silently reading "I"? "When I get to 'This is what **we** are,'" says Clamence, "the trick has been played and I can tell them off."

**"The more I accuse myself, the more I have a right to judge you."**

"Once more I have found a height to which I am the only one to climb and from which I can judge everybody. . . . I sit enthroned among my bad angels at the summit of the Dutch heaven and I watch ascending toward me, as they issue from the fogs and the water, the multitude of the Last Judgment."

*At Easter a year ago, my mother had a Do Not Resuscitate Order signed, sealed, and in place at the hospital where she had worked for years, first as a married volunteer, and then, when she lost the marriage and needed the income, as a hospital worker: patient intake and autoclave operation. I'm telling you they knew her there, both the doctors and the nurses knew her name, her face, and later her diagnosis, as her emphysema worsened and the steroids turned her skin to pudding crust. They knew her too as a beautiful woman—not just as one's mother is beautiful, but gorgeous bones, and perfect clever hazel eyes. They knew who she was when the paramedics brought her in, blue, breathless, and unresponsive, they definitely did, but they could not find the Do Not Resuscitate order, they said, and so they brought her back for one more round.*

*My mother's always been a fighter. She fought back from madness twice, and many men, and her child's death, and now her own. And boy, that made her mad, once she got off the ventilator and out of two weeks in intensive care, that they had ignored her wishes. She filed formal complaints against the doctors and the hospital. So when they brought her in in the middle of the night this time, barely breathing, the doctors said, "Elise, what about that DNR?" And she said, "Take all heroic measures."*

*Tuesday. March 25. 1997*

**We near the end now, a novel, *The Second Coming*, and Elkins begins with Will Barrett, falling on the golf course. My colleague, Bill Pennington, said Barrett's problem was that his past was now too present, which made me think of my mother, whose present is all too present, too, and whose future may be not present at all. It was all Will Barrett for half an hour till finally I said that I found Barrett really tiresome, and it was Allison I loved, though she is certifiable and in fact, just escaped from the loony bin, she is canny and capable, her language bizarre and enlightening. Jill Washburn agreed and said she hated to turn the page and discover the story was going back to Will, and she would just put the book down. And everyone said, for the rest of the hour that they agreed with Jill and loved Allison and hated Will. I felt that I had disappeared and was just an idea of Allison that came through Jill. Are my ideas too strange, not normal? Like Allison in her white dwarf self, I require translation.**



*I must go visit my mother this weekend and I would like to take her a book. It's hard to give a parent anything meaningful: perfume or chocolate, a scarf or a pin. But if your mother reads, you can take a book. She has read all her life. We were raised to keep quiet and stay out of the way when someone was reading. She's always loved the better romances, best seller novels, nothing too literary. I think she would enjoy The Second Coming, if she didn't take Allison's craziness too personally. She liked to escape outward, into a good read, a good story, a good tale; not go inward, or down deep. She wouldn't want to go in and get lost where electroshock leaves you—she's been there, alone and unaided. A good book can protect you from doubts about yourself, your own thoughts; it can enable your ordinariness.*

All this time [Allison thought] she had made a mistake. She had thought (and her mother had expected) that she must do something extraordinary, be somebody extraordinary. Whereas the trick lay in leading the most ordinary life imaginable, get an ordinary job, in itself a joy in its very ordinariness, and then be as extraordinary or ordinary as one pleased. That was the secret.

Allison learns to construct ordinary reality, an onerous and joyous task. Moving a massive cookstove in temporary quarters she inhabits serves as a metaphor for the work: find the tools, first learn the names, conceive the principles. "Go to the library, get book on greenhouses, look up pulley in dictionary. There might be a picture of different kinds of pulleys with names." She's making a list:

1. Move stove.
2. How to live. How do you live? My life expectancy is approximately another fifty or sixty years. What to do?
3. Memory.... Why? Only because I have to know enough of where I've been to know which way I'm going.

This is not a bad plan. While Will is joyriding with suicide on his mind, undertaking a death trip through lost caves in search of the neolithic tiger, Allison moves the stove, cleans the greenhouse, brings in water, feeds her dog. She understands that she must do these chores herself. Will offers to have the stove moved:

"Oh, no."

"No? Why not?"

"Because there I will be with people having put the stove where I want it. And that's the old home fix-up which is being in a fix. Then what? The helping is not helping me."

"I see." After a while he said: "You mean you would rather do it yourself."

"The arrangement is the derangement. When the arrangement is arranged, then you know what the ensuement is."

"No, what is the ensuement?"

"The ensuement is: then I am with the arrangement."

Word by word she says what she knows and hears what she thinks. While Will, the lawyer, searches for meaning on the golf course, in caves, with his doctor and his friends, Allison constructs it with two found books in a room of her own. Clearly her task is more difficult, and clearly, too, I think, she succeeds and he fails. In the end, he finds meaning only by falling in love with her.

*In the end, I thought, the book to take my mother was not "The Second Coming," but this one, the one I'm telling you. It's her story, after all, a story she no longer has the energy to construct. It takes will & power to hold other peoples' stories together, to read, to hold the book up in your hands, to hold up your head, move your eyes. It takes energy to care: desire. Isn't that life? You're alive as long as you care to create your own meaning.*

*Here's a story to tell my mother on her deathbed. Once upon a time there was a little girl named Elise who was born in Alabama in 1923. And Elise was a beautiful little girl with a heart-shaped face. . . . But no, she would take it to mean something other than what I say. She would argue with the interpretation, choose other events, perhaps not even remember the years that are so important to me. It's my arrangement, not hers. She must arrange it to suit herself.*

Let's let Allison in *The Second Coming* have the last word, a woman who understands that in the beginning and in the end, you must come to yourself:

Treasure. Yes. . . .  
Find out where it is.

Walk there.

Move in.

Take possession. It is yours.

Live there. . . .

Don't tell anybody where you are.

Find a lawyer you can trust. This is a problem. . . .

Don't be angry at Father and Mother. They love you as well as they understand that word, or as well as most people love. . . .

There is one thing you must not forget. . . It is the discovery I made last week.

It took me (you? us?) all my life to make the discovery. Why so long? And then I (you, we) had to go crazy to do it. Because it is the very nature of the thing to be discovered and the very nature of the seeking that it could not be found by asking somebody or by reading a book.

What was my (your, our) discovery? That I could *act*. I was free to act.

At any rate, I acted for myself and here you are, we are, doing it.  
Good luck.

