

## WEINSTOCK AMONG THE DYING\*

### Prologue

Somewhere in the middle of his life's journey, Martin Weinstock lost his way and found himself Burke-Howland Lecturer in Poetry at Harvard University.

He didn't really know how he had gotten there, having grown up in that German-speaking refugee family whose few syllables of spoken English were as stilted and awkward as Kennedy's famous "*Ich bin ein Berliner*" of 1963. But there he was, surrounded by what were touted to be "the best minds" in this dear country of his—the Green Berets of the American intellect. And, as this citadel of intelligence and Brahmin restraint, he felt irrevocably out of place.

Before coming to Harvard in the summer of 1983, fresh from three years as a television cameraman for West German television network DDT (an initialism that seemed to him not entirely accidental), Weinstock had done the best he could to prepare for his sudden—and it seemed to him entirely unmerited—entrance into the world of higher intelligence. While waiting for his various *echt Deutsche* colleagues to create the prerequisite "atmo" into which to poke their zoom lenses and mini-Nagras, he would poke his rather unrefined gaze into volumes of Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare and Pope in such picturesque American cities as Duluth, Ames, Gary, Cleveland, Milwaukee and Amarillo. He even tried reading Goethe and Rilke in the original German. "*Wie soll ich meine Seele binden,*" he implore one of the cameramen during a shoot in Bismark, North Dakota, "*dass sie nicht an Deine ruhrt?*"

Desperate for what he assumed to be a greater intelligence than his own, Weinstock even ventured into the terrain of what he was told were the "in" texts of an enterprise called Critical Theory (LitCrit, as the initiated called it)—writers with European names like Barthes and Derrida, Blanchot and de Man (the last whom he couldn't help but think as some hip version of former St. Louis Cardinal slugger Stan Musial). But their attempts as something resembling prose so bored him that he quickly found himself regressing to his adolescent pastimes of excessive masturbation and random sexual desire. Hardly was the word "Derrida" out of someone's mouth that he had to hastily seat himself in order to hide that formidable revelation of his loosely tethered unconscious that once went by the horrific name "boner."

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By the time he arrived in Cambridge that first summer of 1983, Weinstock had already assembled all the natural prerequisites of academic life—a crumbling marriage, a case of the intellectual heebie-jeebies, an inexorable preejaculatory lust for what he imagined would be his beautiful, brilliant, talented female students (brains by Virginia Woolf, bodies by Sonia Braga, glands by Georges Simenon) and the onset of that stifled *joie de vivre* that views the utterance of such phrases as “the iconicity of mimesis” as a cause for celebration.

But there would also, he was certain, be compensations. His poetry—so long relegated to the lustful stolen hours and interstices of his life—could now be embraced in the open, at center stage, without the artificial embellishments of secrecy and sinfulness. There would, he realized, be no more secret rendezvous by the river, no more stolen kisses along the railway trestles, no more lingering, dry-humped afternoons beneath the magnolias and Japanese maples.

So, on that fuzzy July morning when he first entered the white clapboard building at 24 Burdick Place and saw the words MARTIN WEINSTOCK, BURKE-HOWLAND LECTURER IN ENGLISH plastered to the door of Room 26, Weinstock felt the potential joy of having finally arrived at the pinnacle of intellectual life and the onset of a brilliant career. This joy, however, was mingled with anticipation, this sense of success with a certain guilt as his own fraudulent occupation of it. And as he—the second-generation son of uneducated German-Jewish refugees who suddenly found himself a professor at the world’s greatest university—opened the door to his Harvard office for the first time, Martin Weinstock also felt a deep, ineluctable sadness, as if he had just been dropped down a black hole from which it would be a long, long time before he would be able to rise again into the living grace of light and air.

## The Shallows

*What does it mean to be in pain?*  
No more than that the rain is rain,  
And flood flood. Deep we are, and deep  
Is where we have to go. As seed goes deep.  
As rain goes deep to bring forth the flower.

As the worm must go deep to take us dustwards.

—Martin Weinstock, *Laps*

## Abstract Minds

People not quite knowing what to say,  
Smiling, shaking, turning up their faces,  
Wondering: *how did I ever get this way?*  
With form and content having traded places.

Frosted cubes all floating in the punch,  
Glittered cookies looming near the dip,  
Colleagues promising: *We must* have lunch,  
Like guests embracing on a sinking ship.

Fearful, trembling, elbows near their wives,  
Men in perfect shoes patrol the cheer,  
Wondering—*Where did they go, our lives?*  
And wishing that a younger girl were near.

Affable as pirates, holding forth like saints,  
We cruise in galleons of the Christmas spirit,  
Each pretending to be what he ain't  
For the fear the real thing might dissolve when near it.

Now the wicks grow dim, the carols finish.  
We've all grown putrid with our sense of cheer.  
We entered full, then watched ourselves diminish  
As we slid snakily into the year.

—Martin Weinstock, *Christmas Party*

WEINSTOCK HAD ALWAYS BEEN POSSESSED of a profound sense that to penetrate too deeply into anything had something vaguely to do with death. Even as a college student, he had been drawn to the 101 course in every discipline, as if to delve more deeply into any subject guaranteed the onset of boredom and indifference. Exactly where this idea came from he didn't know, but whenever anything approaching expertise began to threaten—whenever, for example, he felt himself growing too close to a woman or a profession—a vague, prethanatic trembling overtook him, a kind of weakness in the knees and shortness of breath which signaled the onset of prolonged periods of sleeplessness and anxiety.

Weinstock didn't exactly know the source of this sensation, but he *did* know that—as a results of several years of what he thought of as merely a kind of sophisticated fiddling in the parentheses of an other-

wise fully occupied day—he suddenly found himself possessed of a “vocation.” He had, he was astonished to discover (as part of what he initially thought of only as a brief reprieve from “real” life), arrived at the first stepping-stone to a brilliant career: He was on his way to becoming one of America’s “serious” living poets.

But there was something that absolutely befuddled Weinstock from virtually the moment of his arrival at Harvard. Having lived on the outside of “the academy” (that terrible, military-sounding term) for so long during his vocationally lost years as a cameraman, journalist and lawyer, he had been encouraged in his first, tentative ventures into the world of “letters” by the fact that his work seemed to move the ordinary, intelligent people he considered his friends. “Martin,” more than an occasional Washington lawyer or bureaucrat confided to him, “what I so admire about your work is that I actually *understand* what it’s about.” And Weinstock somehow felt an obligation to keep doing this thing that seemed to provide pleasure to those he liked.

Now, in the well-endowed and perpetually sanctified courtyards of Harvard, having arrived at the supposed heights of what he had rather innocently set out to do merely to unburden himself to his own life, Weinstock found that the simplicity and directness he had so arduously cultivated earned him little but disdain. In fact, it seemed to him that he was now a man entirely bereft of friendships and surrounded only by those neutered, dispassionate associations known as “colleagues.”

There was something about the word “colleague,” it seemed, that implied a license to slander, insult, berate and (in any way short of actual homicide) *undo* others in ways which “friendship” could never have tolerated. During his first year in Cambridge, when Weinstock’s second slim volume, *The Possibilities of Human Existence*, was published, the reaction made him feel like an animal lured into a beautiful meadow by a sweet-smelling piece of bait, only to find itself strafed by rifle and shotgun fire when it entered.

“Intellectually banal,” roared one of the colleagues who had most cordially welcomed him in the pages of the *Harvard Crimson*. “Insipidly erotic,” proclaimed an unsuccessful rival for his job in the *Boston Phoenix*. “A well-intentioned failure,” chimed in a member of the Composition faculty who after fifteen years as an uninspired and unpublished fiction writer in Fairbanks, Alaska, had reemerged at Harvard as an up-and-coming young critic. “The rhythmic equivalent of the mountains of Holland,” wrote Harold Blumberg, Charles Emery Eagan Visiting Professor of Deconstructionist Countertextualism, in the pages of Harvard’s literacy magazine, *Veritas*.

Weinstock wasn’t so much hurt as confused by the negative reception his work received among the Harvard intelligentsia. What he

couldn't understand, above all, was why, at the very same time, his mailbox at Burdick Place was crammed with letter from intelligent heathens like the young folklorist from Santa Fe, from whom he received the following epistle:

Dear Martin Weinstock:

I am former Harvard student myself (I transferred to Reed College after a nervous breakdown at the end of my sophomore year) and am writing to encourage you to not let them destroy you, though they will do their damndest.

Your work is incredibly moving and beautiful, and I know they will do their best to make you feel stupid and fraudulent and grateful and unwanted. They will make you feel as though, if you haven't read *Beowulf* twice a year since you were sixteen and know at least the first 200 lines of *The Waste Land* by heart, you have no right to live. They will try and convince you that being a living writer who is not himself a fourth-generation Harvard graduate or a direct descendant of Henry IV (or married to one) is about as worthwhile as being a Band-Aid on a seam of the space shuttle. They will try and make you into yet another piece of dead flesh with feet just like the rest of them.

But, dear Martin Weinstock, don't let them! Your work is gorgeous and important and full of soul, and a source of strength to those of us who—as it says in the Book of Job (if you'll pardon my sounding like a Harvard graduate)—“alone have escaped to tell thee.”

So—*please, please, Martin Weinstock*—hang in there. And if things get really rough—which I can't help but believe they will as long as you insist on retaining the rich and life-affirming nature of your soul—you might just try doing what I did during my two abysmal, life-threatening years in the Harvard English Department: Remind yourself that it is not your living better you are among, but the vengeful dead, who have returned to earth in the guise of the powerful to avenge themselves against those who still insist on the world as a place of joy and hope and affirmation and love.

A devoted admirer,  
Jennifer Cerny

This disparity—between his reception at the hands of those he thought of as spiritual and human brethren, and the animus of those with whom he was suddenly encased in what increasingly seemed like an oxymoron: *academic life*—convinced Weinstock that he now sate, Januslike, on the cusp between life and death, between the passionate, rosy-cheeked relations of his pre-Harvard life and the increasing bereavement of his present condition.

He felt, in a way that Jennifer Cerny's letter only seemed to confirm, as though he had suddenly descended into a dusty, archival tomb, in

which the collected letters, papers, manuscripts and miseries of the dead were far more significant than the real, passionate, life-giving triumphs and tribulations of the living.

All of his life in Cambridge, in fact, seemed summed up by the inscription he had seen on a T-shirt during his very first foray into Harvard Square. "LIVE FOREVER." it read, "DIE YOUNG."

TO MEMBERS OF THE FACULTY AND STAFF.

With regret I inform you of the death of

ARCHIBALD H. MURRAY

Professor of Renaissance Literature, Emeritus, which occurred on the twenty-sixth ultimo, in the eighty-seventh year of age. His thirty-seven years of service to this community, and to academic and intellectual life in general, will ensure that his memory will be etched permanently into the walls of this institution, as well as in the hearts and minds of all who knew and shared in the pleasure of his advice mind and generous spirit.

A memorial service will be announced at a later date.

Your obedient servant,  
DONALD W. ATTERTON

"One of this institution's more remarkable redundancies," Weinstock's fiction colleague Geoffrey Armitage, who had arrived at Harvard two years earlier, commented wryly as he watched Weinstock tear open the black-bordered announcement in the university mail.

"What's that?" Weinstock asked.

"A death announcement for a member of this faculty. Why, after you've been at *this* place for thirty-seven years, death is a mere formality."

Announcements like this one, their black-bordered card stock easily identifiable through the pale white envelopes and familiar mailing labels, appeared in Weinstock's mailbox daily, along with memoranda from English Department Chairman Lawrence Gentry bearing such headings as: ADDRESSES OF WIDOWS OF DECEASED EMERITUS PROFESSORS, which let Weinstock to suspect that the diminishing

ranks of the living would soon leave him and his junior colleagues alone at Burdick Place in the company of their dour secretary, Priscilla Brimmer.

Priscilla, a forty-five-year-old Berkeley graduate, had been living with her older brother in Duxbury since her husband left her for a twenty-three-year-old wife of the Sanskrit Department chairman in 1967. Stringbean shaped and inappropriately stylish for her daily rounds between Xerox machine and the telephone, she had been taking classes in entomological drawing at the Harvard Extension School for some fifteen years, in the hope of eventually establishing herself as an illustrator of beetles for scientific textbook companies. Thus far, however, she had succeeded only in exacting the price of her humdrum and loveless existence from the lives of the English Department junior faculty in ways so convoluted and subliminally concocted that it would have taken an expert in the intimate workings of the neurotic personality to decipher them.

On many a Thursday and Friday, when he didn't have class or office hours, Weinstock found himself gazing at the reflection of oncoming traffic in one of Priscilla's postmodern earrings as he drove her to psychiatric appointments in towns with names like Revere, Billerica, Dedham (which he pronounced *Dead Ham*) and Woburn (pronounced *Wooburn* by the locals). "I don't think I can face the human race again today," she'd keep repeating, fastening and unfastening her earrings as they drove.

It wasn't merely the fact of being surrounded by the dead, the dying and those who aspired to those conditions that began to depress and confuse Weinstock upon arriving at Harvard. It was also the fact that they were, for the most part, so hard to tell from the pasty, expressionless faces of the living.

This realization grew particularly vivid whenever he met a colleague for lunch at the Faculty Club, know to most of the junior faculty and nonacademic staff as Club Dead. In the center of the Club's main dining room, beneath eighteenth- and nineteenth-century portraits of various deceased Harvard presidents and high Anglicans, was a long table around which many of the University's least decorous and most decorated chair holders, often in the company of President Atterton, convened for lunch. To get almost anywhere in the dining hall, one had to walk past this pasty-faced battalion of blue and gray suits, many of them sporting the Harvard crest on their dark burgundy ties. Passing them, Weinstock inevitably experienced a sensation vaguely related, yet somehow erotically opposed, to what he'd been told beautiful women felt when walking a gauntlet of construction workers. All eyes, he sensed, were upon him. But they were more like the eyes of turkey vultures in



search of road kill than like those of lustful young men looking for some anonymous piece of meat to poke their members into.

And Harvard was certainly thick with members. Clubs and societies, centers and institutes, journals and committees, proliferated like krill in the waters of the northern whaling grounds. "I sing of myself and celebrate myself," Harvard ceaselessly intoned with Walt Whitman. Wending his way between the death notices and health benefits announcements in his university mailbox each day, Weinstock was certain to come upon at least one invitation to a reception, opening, luncheon, cocktail party, lecture or publication party, addressed to him or addressed to Dean of Australian Studies Melvin Wennstock and misdelivered.

Never much of a joiner, Weinstock found this chaotic circuit of self-celebration and conviviality, with its endless demands of scheduling, RSVPs, and refusals, more than he could manage. Finding himself, one night, mistakenly attending a reception in honor of W. S. Frazier Professor of Australian Studies Christopher Crabbe's new book, *Sacred Cauldron: Familial Bonding and Transgression in Aboriginal Culture*, he could do little but stammer his way through an endless series of toasts and vodka tonics while a brigade of faculty spouses and chair holders with Australian accents bombarded him with snippets of conversation like "Don't you think Hopgood's theory of the social reinforcement of group incest triangles is terribly controversial?"

One evening, however, Weinstock found himself at an occasion he *had* been invited to—a reception (which just happened to coincide with T.S. Eliot's ninety-fifth birthday) for new members of the literature faculty at the home of one of Harvard's most prestigious and tradition-bound private clubs, the Pink Rose. Most of the great figures in what was simply known in Cambridge as American "letters" had been members of the Rose, one of whose many Byzantine customs was to require each member to mail in a pink rose, which was, upon publication of his first book, framed and mounted above an inscription from the author. (There were, Weinstock couldn't help notice, apparently no female alumnae of the Pink Rose.) This created a veritable museum of luminaries such as Eliot himself, John Masefield, Somerset Maugham and, yes, even nasty old Robert Frost, their framed and deracinated petals threatening to rain down onto the fading blue encomiums of their collective gratitude.

Weinstock had been invited to the reception by a particularly sallow-faced undergraduate poet who introduced himself on the phones as "Anderson Whitfield III, secretary of the Pink Rose." Having not yet mastered the art of the premeditated excuse, Weinstock could do no better than to mumble a quick, unenthusiastic "Why . . . sure, I'll be glad to," and so found himself, on the evening of the reception, both sartori-

ally and psychologically unprepared for the elite company into which he had miraculously entered.

Nor had he yet entirely appreciated the convention among Harvard faculty of being paid and treated like academics in private while conducting themselves like aristocrats in public. Dressed in his usual brown corduroy sports coat, washed-out jeans and burgundy cowboy boots, Weinstock found, literally, all eyes upon him as he entered the Pink Rose's ornate, antique-ridden living room.

"Gentlemen," young Anderson Whitfield III announced to the gather of large, pudgy men with cigars seated around the fireplace, "I'd like to introduce Professor Martin Weinstock. Dr. Weinstock—"

"Mister," Weinstock corrected him.

"Pardon me." A cloud of irritation drifted across Whitfield's face. "Mr. Weinstock is our new Burke-Howland Professor of Poetry."

"Lecturer," Weinstock corrected Whitfield again.

"Ah, yes, lecturer . . . I beg your pardon." Hundreds of pupils suddenly moved in unison from Weinstock's toes to his midsection, as—in what seemed the direct physical expression of a collective wish to mold a suit and tie out of the air around him—a small circle of wing-tipped men slowly rose to greet the usurper of their sartorial symmetry. There was what seemed like an endless silence, during which everyone seemed to be waiting for the wished-for garments to materialize. Finally, the last to rise from his seat, a balding, elephantine gentlemen who introduced himself simply as "Barton Haxton, Bank of Boston," broke the silence.

"A poet," Haxton boomed into the smoky living room. "Well, well." Convinced that his hostly duties had been successfully accomplished, he reseated himself in the thick, leathery chair in front of the fireplace. "Ahhhh," he boomed, exhaling a long flotilla of pipe smoke into the midst of their small circle, "poets . . . Do you gentlemen know what I heard John Masefield read in this very room in 1928?"

An inescapable sense of reverse peristalsis entered Weinstock's body. Never had he been so aware of wearing the wrong shoes. Dinner was served—rack of lamb, filigreed green beans, Chateaufort 1981, *mousse au chocolat*. Only Dorothy, the pallid undergraduate seated on Weinstock's right, made even the slightest attempt to engage him in conversation.

"Did your father go here?" she asked as the assembled dignitaries of the Pink Rose raised their glasses in honor of T. S. Eliot's ninety-fifth birthday.

■

Juli 3 '84  
Pine Hill, N.Y.

Dear son Martin!

We arrived here at 9:00 in the evening on Tuesday the 28th of June; we left N.Y. at 5:00. also 4 hours. We have here cold, cold weather, so that is why my cold. Just now we are coming from the Doctor Sunday 7.3. he decided it is bronchitis (acute) blood pressure 140/80 ist good—He gave me right away a prescription to take but the Drugstores are closed—Sunday. I think in few days it will be gone. When will you come up? Our phone number is I-254-4937.

Ilse Metzger has bad news. She wanted on 7/13 to go to Switzerland and Germany for some weeks—now some bad news, she is total broken COLON TUMOR MALIGNANT also part on the PANCREASE very very sad we were outside ourselves—so everybody has that what they get—who has it has it—Do you understand dear Martin what that means? Whatever you don't get in the old years is profit!!

Our neigh Jack Greenberg is Dying . . . The Golden Age!!—thank the LORD—We are feeling fine . . . except for the sudden cold and AIR CONDITIONING DRAFT—PLEASE TAKE YOU ALSO GOOD CARE of yourself—precaution is always better than healing—TUESDAY the 5th of July our good Betzele remembrance of her 82nd Birthday. May her good Soul rest in Sholem and the good LORD reward the good Deeds in the other WORLD.

Today 7/5.84

DEAR SON. Please forgive me that I write you delayed due to my sickness. I am again a little bit better. Today is Mama selig's Birthday the 82nd. So dear son the letter must go away—the box will soon be emptied.

Love,  
Dady

Weinstock had always loved reading his father's letters to friends and lovers. Doing so seemed to relieve the boredom of the repetitive events they described, and others seemed to find them far more entertaining than he did.

"Well, here's Issue 236 of *The Morbidity and Mortality Newsletter*," he'd say, and then go on to recite the inevitable list of deaths, illnesses and diagnoses described in his father's heavily misspelled, comical

“Gerglish.” It had always seemed to Weinstock that some psychoanalyst with an abiding interest in such matters could have made an interesting diagnosis based on his father’s graphics alone. But her personally had lost interest, the diagnosis having long ago ceased to matter.

Yet this latest epistle from his father, coming directly after a two hour staff meeting with Director of Creative Writing Morton Gamson, somehow depressed Weinstock more than usual. And now—off to lunch with Siegfried Marikovski, Samuel W. Worthy Professor of American Literature and his one real friend in the English Department—Weinstock resolved to try even harder to get to the bottom of his malaise.

“I don’t know what it is, Siggy,” he said over an iced cappuccino and raspberry croissant, “but I’ve kind of had a case of the *blahs* ever since coming here . . . everyone and their mother keeps telling me how blessed I should feel.”

“Well, what do you think’s the problem?” Marikovski, despite his senior standing and international eminence as an expert on Thoreau and Henry James, had always taken a sincere interest in Weinstock’s well-being. “Do you think it’s the insecurity about your future here?”

“Well, yeah.” Weinstock rotated the wooden stirrer in his cappuccino as he pondered the question. “At least in part. But I think it’s something more . . . I can’t seem to stop thinking about death. It’s as if there’s something about this place that reminds me too much of home—too much of my father.”

“Your father?” Marikovski didn’t seem to get the connection. “I thought he was an uneducated man who doesn’t even speak English.”

“He is. But he’s so damned preoccupied with death and the dead—and he himself simply won’t die.”

“What’s so terrible about that? You seem very attached to him.”

“Well I am, in a way. Why, when I was a kid, after my mother died and I really needed him, he was always having heart attacks and the like, and I was sure he was going to keel over any minute. I used to wake up every morning and first thing I’d do was run into his bedroom just to make sure he was still alive.”

Marikovski seemed moved. Albeit puzzled. “Yes,” he murmured as if talking aloud to himself, “I can certainly see how that must have been upsetting . . . But what’s the problem with his being alive *now*?”

“Well, you see, back then—when I wanted so badly for him to live—he was always dying. And now—when I’m really kind of ready to get him and all his death and dying the hell out of my life—he simply refuses to die. It kind of makes me feel like poor Watson waiting around for Wellberry to kick off.” Marc Watson, for seven years the junior medievalist in the English Department, has been encourage in the belief

he would be granted tenure after the death of emphysemic Atherton Professor of Medieval Literature Simon Wellberry.

“Yes,”—Marikovski spoke as if from direct experience—“they never *do* die when you’re ready for them to, do they?”

“I’ll say,” Weinstock agree. “I’m sick as hell of running my life as if it’s this fragile little chrysalis hanging from a thread right in front of me and I’m about to sneeze.”

“That’s not the way to go about it.” Marikovski’s tone shifted to one of well-intentioned sternness. “Besides, *every* son wants to kill his father sooner or later . . . You’ve read Oedipus. The best thing to do is exactly what you want—that’ll kill him faster than anything else.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right. But what *I* want to do most of the time is just get my ass the hell out of this thanatic, life-denying place.”

“People like you and me”—Marikovski smiled knowingly—“simply *can’t* leave this place.”

“Oh? Why’s that?” Weinstock’s tone betrayed a sense of disbelief.

“Because it’s our one chance in life to become the thing every Jew, deep in his heart of hearts, most wants to be.”

“And what’s that?”

“The Great Goldberg.”

“The Great Goldberg?” Weinstock couldn’t help laughing as he pronounced the words. “What the hell is that?”

“It’s you and me,” Marikovski replied with utter seriousness. “Right here. Right now. *We’re* the Great Goldberg—merely because we’re Jewish and we’re here.”

“Oh yeah? What does that mean I’ll be when I get kicked out? The ‘Formerly Great Golberg?’”

Marikovski paused for a moment as though seriously pondering the answer. “You will be”—he inhaled deeply—“though I think it’s unlikely that will happen, just like everyone else who gets kicked out of this place.”

“And what’s that?” Weinstock inched forward on his chair, suddenly oozing curiosity.

“A mere mortal, just another face among the living. But why don’t you forget about leaving here and about your father for a while and come over to this conference at the Center for Literary Studies this afternoon. I think you’ll find it right up your alley.”

“Oh, yeah? . . . What’s it about?”

“It’s called ‘Representations of Death: An Interdisciplinary Conference,’ I’m one of the sponsors.”

Weinstock must have blushed slightly, for Marikovski merely repeated the invitation. “If you’d like to, you’re perfectly welcome to walk over with me after lunch. You might even find it inspiring.”

Weinstock had been planning a drive to Crane's Beach on what seemed like it could well be the last warm afternoon of Indian summer. Yet for some reason he felt drawn to join Marikovski at the conference, and, after lunch, they headed across the Yard toward the Center for Literary Studies, where the meeting, chaired by Constantine Cavafy Professor of Modern Greek Studies Stella Zaradapoulous, was just coming to order.

Weinstock took a seat near the back of the room while Marikovski shuffled through the tightly knit gathering toward the front where Professor Margot Lightfoot and the other cosponsors were already seated.

"I want to welcome you all to this First Annual Conference on Representations of Death," Zaradapoulous—taking periodic puffs from a cigarette—began, "a topic of, alas, common interest to us all." Two seats to Weinstock's left, a no more than two-month-old infant, looking somewhat dead himself, was sleeping in his mother's arms.

"We have a full, but I hope not a killing, program ahead," Zaradapoulous continued, "as we discuss what has been described as 'life's one sure thing'—the subject of which Philip Larkin said: 'Most things may never happen: this one will.'"

"Above all, it is my hope that, by the end of the day, we will have succeeded in that noblest of enterprises—keeping the eloquent dead fully employed."

"As I would like to reserve ample time for discussion and questions following each paper, I would, without further ado, like to introduce Professor Loring Rogonnet of the University of Bridgeport, whose topic will be 'Blood-letting on Paper: Death of the Poet as a Literary Ambition.' Professor Rogonnet's presentation will be immediately followed by Professor David Donnelly of Bates College speaking on 'Dead Flesh, or the Smell of Literature,' following which there will be a question and answer period. Professor Rogonnet . . ."

Loring Rogonnet, a statuesque, sallow-looking woman with caved-in cheeks, wearing a dark green dress beneath a pearl-embroidered black sweater, rose and took a seat at the front of the room. Stopping to light a cigarette, she directed a penetrating gaze at the audience, pausing briefly as her eyes met Weinstock's.

"The prospect of death," she began, "as Samuel Johnson wrote, 'wonderfully concentrates the mind.' This in many ways echoes the sentiments of Giacometti, who—on being hit by a car while crossing the Place d'Italie—reported his first feeling, in the state of a lucid swoon, as 'Something has happened to me at last!'"

"The goal of my own brief remarks here today will be to present to you the thesis that in order for the poet—that ultimately childlike

figure—to do his or her best work, we must perpetually remind him of what Jean-Paul Sartre so well knew . . .”

Rogonnet now seemed to be staring directly at the young mother and child seated in Weinstock’s row. “We must remind him,” she continued, nearly shouting, “in Sartre’s words, that *‘all children are mirrors of death.’*”

The infant, perhaps intuitively aroused by the mention of his premature demise, stirred slightly in his mother’s lap, letting out a brief, scarcely audible cry. Weinstock looked up at Marikovski, who was lighting a cigarette.

“We must remind him,” Loring Rogonnet continued, “that—to paraphrase Emily Dickinson—*‘Tis dying he is doing, but he’s not afraid to know.’* We must remind him—as the Hungarians have quite literally testified to in their recent reburial of the body of Béla Bartók—that it is the artist’s task to die over and over again so that he may give life to the world of his readers. We must remind him that he must write, in the words of South African novelist Nadine Gordimer, *‘as if he were already dead.’*”

A familiar sense of ennui passed through Weinstock as Rogonnet spoke. He felt a sudden craving for light and air, a need to escape from this tightly packed room of cigarettes and dyings. Staring half apologetically and half angrily at Marikovski, he rose and tried to make his way inconspicuously toward the seminar room door. His movements, however, woke the infant, who began wailing as Weinstock slipped out into the aisle. Rogonnet paused, as all eyes directed themselves at Weinstock’s premature departure.

Flushed with embarrassment, Weinstock averted his gaze from the small gathering of onlookers and rushed down the stairs. Within seconds, he was out the door, running toward his car at 24 Burdick Place. A warm, near-summer breeze was furling a full spectrum of leaves into the fall air.

Weinstock quickly opened all the windows and started the engine. He wanted to head toward the North Shore as fast as he could, toward air and light, toward a place where none of the deaths being whispered about would be his own.

■

Even before coming to Harvard, Weinstock had never much liked the word “serious.” Seriousness was, in fact, something he had struggled hard to keep *out* of his life. Like truffles of expensive French wine, he had always found it a vastly overrated experience. As far as “art” went,

he agreed with the painter Ad Reinhardt: It was too serious a matter to be taken seriously.

But here at Harvard, to his naive astonishment, the word “serious” took on new and nearly religious dimensions. The highest compliment that could be paid was to append someone’s name to that ominous objective. “Dr. Havisham,” Department Chairman Lawrence Gentry said, introducing the University’s Getlin Lecturer in the Humanities, “is one of the nation’s most *serious* Chaucerians.” Weinstock hadn’t read much Chaucer, but the little he *had* read he had always found an absolute scream. He therefore found it particularly strange that seriousness in pursuit of such matter should suddenly seem so virtuous.

On the subject of seriousness, Weinstock preferred the attitude of former Assistant Professor Sidney Darn, who had left Harvard for a job at a state college in New Jersey: “We must take the somber out of the serious,” Darn wrote in an article many felt was directly responsible for his being denied tenure. Yet, in Cambridge, the somber and the serious were like Siamese twins connected at the scrotum: No one was interested in even *trying* to separate them. “Dr. Wicklow,” a colleague said, turning to Weinstock at a faculty luncheon, “is the most *serious* candidate we have for our Renaissance vacancy.” Weinstock’s response — “It seems to me we’d be better off trying to hire someone funny” — somehow failed to elicit the sympathetic resonance he had hoped for, and he suddenly found himself stricken from the monthly luncheon list.

Most serious among all those who roamed the somber, ivy-covered halls, however, was Acting Director of Creative Writing Morton Gamson, a short, melancholic Pirandello scholar and would-be novelist described by Armitage as “like six depressive characters in search of a smile,” the kind of man whose worship of the somber was surpassed only by the tenacity of his adulation for its practitioners.

Not without a certain twinge of sadness, Weinstock had to agree with Armitage’s assessment. Gamson, whose profoundly melancholic air seemed all too closely at times to mimic a certain melancholy of Weinstock’s own that he longed to disavow, epitomized the sense of “*la vie manquée*” that dominated the Department. About to retire after thirty-five years as an untenured Adjunct Professor, he had been named acting director following the retirement of Weinstock’s previous boss, a kindly, self-effacing, marginally talented novelist named Donald Radbush.

This past year, Gamson’s first novel—a massive, eight-hundred-page opus entitled *The Lost Years of Marvis O’Callahan*, which he had been working on since graduate school—had been published to such universal disapprobation by critics and writers that it was clear to everyone but Gamson himself that he’d been handed the Creative Writing job as a



consolation prize for the shattered hope of his late years, the novel he dreamt would vindicate his never-realized promise as a scholar.

To make matters worse, Gamson's wife, Penelope, a child psychologist and ceramicist of some repute, had recently published a wildly successful memoir entitled *There and Back*, recounting her supposed abduction by extraterrestrials during a sabbatical year in San Miguel de Aallende. Gamson had been going through a serious depression at the time, in so small part due to the harsh reception of his novel. Now, as Penelope moved like a starlet from talk show to talk show, her book flagrantly decorating the window of almost every bookstore in Cambridge, Morton's own long years of failure and ennui were cast in stark relief by his wife's seemingly effortless success.

Gannon himself had been a Harvard graduate student in the '40s and had, according to some, shown considerable promise as a scholar in those heady, robust years after World War II. Yet, for reasons known only to psychoanalysts and other students of the human spirit, he had been unable to extricate himself from the deep melancholy that now seemed to have entirely enveloped him. The author of six increasingly unsuccessful works of criticism since his first book, *Ravages of Darkness: The Dark Veil of Contemporary European Theatre*, had surfaced to only faint praise in 1951, he now patrolled the halls of Burdick Place, soaking up levity wherever he went, while the other writers, Weinstock among them, lived in a kind of terror lest they flunk Gamson's Monday morning "quiz" on the contents of *the New York Review of Books* and *The New York Times Book Review*.

Occasionally Weinstock would see Gamson crossing Harvard Square in midafternoon, looking like a disoriented patient who had strayed from a psychiatric ward. "Whenever I see him," Armitage would say, "I hear Peggy Lee in the background singing 'Is That All There Is?'" That, Weinstock had to admit, was much the same music *he* was starting to hear as he surveyed the rapidly closing portals of midlife in the rocky boat of the Harvard English Department.

Gamson also epitomized the odd predicament of the self-styled "rebel" at Harvard—"rhetoric by Camus, life-style by Donald Trump," as Weinstock's friend Claudia, who taught Latin American Studies at Brandeis, put it. Though vociferously proclaiming his alliance with the young, "creative" members of the Department against the Old Guard, who took him seriously neither as a scholar nor as a novelist, Gamson acted—whenever any of the writers proposed a minor change in the way things were done—as if some sacred rite were about to be violated. "I don't think it's a good idea" was his response to any such suggestion. When anyone asked, "Why not?" the answer was always "Because it's never *been* done."

"Scratch any one of these guys very hard," Weinstock mumbled to Armitage and their nonfiction colleague John Corliss after one such episode, "and you're sure to find another Old Boy."

"Yeah," Armitage countered, "and scratch any of the Old Boys and you're almost certain to come up with a corpse."

"Pure pornography" was Gamson's description of every book Weinstock had ever loved, until finally—in a gesture whose irony seemed to escape him totally—Weinstock, Corliss and Armitage presented their boss with what they privately referred to as "The Thanatos Quartet" for his sixty-fifth birthday—hardbound copies of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, and a book of Holocaust poetry entitled *The Death Mazurka*, wrapped in black and bearing the dedication: "For Mort, who brings such life to our writerly clutch."

It was not, of course, that Gamson was mean-spirited or ill-motivated. But nearly forty years of watching younger scholars and writers succeed in measures he no longer even dreamt of had exhausted even his soldierly resilience for Oedipal defeat. Along with the encroaching realization that he was a man entirely unsuited for the creative life, they had slowly and inexorably eroded his capacity for humor and self-mockery.

The truth was that Weinstock liked and felt sorry for Gamson. But he also—as his own supposedly brief tenure at Harvard began to take on the appearance of a life sentence—felt sorry for himself. He had, after all, never before lived in a place like Cambridge, "the only place in America," he told his old friend Trevor, "where you have to study for dinner." And there were times when, like a deranged, psychopathic geyser, Weinstock simply felt like running into Gamson's office, up and down Harvard Yard and into the Faculty Club, jumping into the midst of the blue-suited, ghoulish faces seated at the *Stammtisch* and screaming—in his loudest, most unserious voice—*cunt, prick, sphincter, rice pudding, fellatio*, just for the pleasure of uttering these early icons and his libidinal netherworld into the air once more.

"When do you think the last time old Gamson really put it to Penelope was?" Armitage asked Corliss one afternoon over at Burdick Place. "Probably at the John Donne tercentenary?"

"Nope," Corliss said. "I think it must have been right around the invasion of Normandy. But think of it this way—things could've been a helluva lot better for Mort if only he hadn't been so short."

Armitage looked up. "Short?—What the hell does *that* have to do with anything?"

"Well"—Corliss smiled—"just think of what they must've called him during that year he spent in Paris on a Fulbright."

"What's that?" Armitage seemed perplexed by this non sequitur in their conversation.

"They must have called him"—Corliss chuckled, closing the door behind him as he spoke—"le petit Mort."



"I feel like a fraud," Siegfried Marikovski confided to Weinstock in the basement of the Harvard Faculty Club. "I live in dread of the fact that I'll sooner or later be discovered as an ordinary nincompoop who stumbled into writing a couple of mediocre books that happened to get way too much attention from the fifteen or twenty people who bothered to read them."

Weinstock was incredulous. Marikovski, author of some twenty-seven books, more than 300 scholarly articles, the object of an intense and lucrative bidding war between Yale and Harvard, had always seemed to him to be sitting securely at the very pinnacle of American academic life. And now this incredible confession.

"That's funny," Weinstock offered collegially. "I feel like a fraud too—only I *am* one."

"You!" Marikovski seemed amazed. "One of the country's leading young poets?"

"Oh, sure." Weinstock couldn't help but be amused by Marikovski's sincere air of astonishment. "Why, I've never even read *Ulysses* . . . not to mention *The Divine Comedy*."

Even before coming to Harvard, Weinstock had been told that it was a place where the living had hardly any status, that his only hope for staying would be to exercise a nearly religious devotion to the lives of the dead. The facts seemed to bear this out: of the 394 cocktail parties, openings and receptions he had been invited to thus far—not counting the 114 in celebration of Harvard itself—86 had been to honor the dead, and almost all the remaining 94 were for the infirm or dying. He had counted.

"Ah, yes," admitted Marikovski. "But *you*, at least, are among the creators. It's people like *me* who are the true frauds."

Weinstock somehow couldn't muster the conviction to counter Marikovski's argument and simply continued swirling the olive in his vodka martini. "Yeah," he responded rather lamely. "It's tough here, isn't it?"

"It certainly is. Why, just this week I turned down an invitation to spend a month in South America so I could stay here and work . . . just because I felt too insecure about using part of my sabbatical for something that would seem so frivolous."

"You *what?*" Weinstock, who had been dreaming of a trip to Brazil and the Galápagos for years, was utterly incredulous.

"Yup—I turned down a trip to Rio to present a short paper and then take a two-week cruise down the Amazon. I felt I needed to stay here and finish my Thoreau book." Marikovski shook his head sadly as he spoke, like a man disappointed by the limited exercise of his own will.

"Siggy," Weinstock protested, "Thoreau's dead. And who, for that matter, would have been more in favor of your going than him? Meanwhile you—Siegfried Marikovski,, sitting right here before me in living flesh—why, you're alive."

"We're all dead," Marikovski took a sip of his diet Dr. Pepper. "You know what Borges said—'We are all dead men speaking to dead men.' Some of us are just here playing at this brief ellipse of living, trying to pretend it's not so."

"I'm not pretending." Weinstock felt he needed to make a small addendum to Marikovski's statement. "I'm *alive*. I don't see any reason in the world to start playing dead until I have to." Much as he liked his elder colleague, Weinstock had long been aware that Marikovski was at heart a deeply melancholic man. After losing both his parents at age eight, when they were abducted by the S.S. from the Vilna ghetto, he had hidden for three years in the forests and railcars of Poland and Austria before being taken in by an Austrian family near Salzburg at the end of the war. When his adoptive family was finally able to locate a pair of distant cousins in Palaestine, Marikovski, at age twelve, was sent to live with them in the small town of Afoulah. But the father was killed in the War of Independence, and his wife committed suicide shortly thereafter, and young Siggy soon found himself on a boat headed for America, sent to live with another set of cousins, who owned a dry-cleaning store in Valley city, North Dakota. There, as the one Jewish kid—a fragile, asthmatic boy—in a school full of Swedish and Norwegian Lutherans built like linebackers, Marikovski spent a painful adolescence, from which, given the other unenviable facts of his biography, he had never recovered.

"I had a worse childhood than you did" was a game Marikovski and Weinstock often found themselves engaged in—on Weinstock's older colleague always won hands down. Weinstock knew that, despite the decency and generosity of his conscious intentions, Marikovski, in the darkest corners of his merely human heart, was thrilled at the thought of Weinstock's winding up in the same lethal, tenured academic trap (chaired and chained, publishing and perishing) in which he now found himself.

"Did you hear the news?" Weinstock picked up the phone one Saturday night to the off-bright sound of Marikovski's voice.

"No . . . what news?"

"They've concluded that urban academics are the happiest of all professionals."

"Whaaat?" Weinstock was only half amused at being roused from his habitually early bedtime by such an unlikely piece of news. "Who the hell concluded *that*, Siggy?"

"It was in the morning's *New York Times*. They did a survey, and it shows that professors at urban universities think they have more satisfying lifestyles than any other group."

"Yeah," Weinstock grumbled sleepily, "but did anyone ask them if they have better *lives*? Who the hell else did they ask—undertakers and trash collectors?"

"Don't be so cynical, Martin," Marikovski cautioned. "I think there's a good chance it's going to work out for you here, you know . . . The Department needs someone like you . . . and Gamson's going to retire at the end of the year."

Images of the powdery faces at the Club Dead *Stammtisch* or the turdlike, lethargic body of Morton Gamson resurrected themselves before Weinstock's eyes whenever Marikovski mentioned the possibility of things "working out" at Harvard.

"That's great, Siggy." He yawned into the receiver. "I know you're doing everything you can to help."

"Believe me, Martin, I am . . . It's not a bad place, you know, Cambridge . . . You can get a lot of work done here."

The thought of Marikovski's passed-over trip down the Amazon raced through Weinstock's mind like a bevy of corpses heading for a funeral pyre in Benares.

"Yup," he agreed. "It's a great place to get work done."

■

The following afternoon, Weinstock found himself once again at the Faculty Club, walking by the pasty *Stammtisch* faces on his way to lunch with Leonard Hapgood, chief of psychiatry at Cambridge Hospital. Hapgood's research involved some of the same issues in the Oedipal struggle between fathers and sons that, according to the critics, Weinstock so exhaustively confronted in his poems.

"Sometimes Martin, I have to tell you," Hapgood confessed over his second glass of Pouilly Fumé, "I feel like a terrible fraud."

"A fraud?" Weinstock stared up from his Poland Springs in disbelief. "You?" How could *you* possibly feel like a fraud?"

"Oh, it's easy." The look of soporific sadness Weinstock had begun to associate with the Harvard senior faculty suddenly descended over

Hapgood's face. "Two of your colleagues down the hall win the Nobel Prize for Medicine, a student you once gave a B to gets a MacArthur and two people you voted against for tenure get the National Book Award and Pulitzer respectively, and you just start saying to yourself: 'Who am I?—Leonard Hapgood, author of fourteen measly books that no one but other psychiatrists and a few patients who are college professors have ever read, a chief of psychiatry whose only real distinction from his patients is that he's the one with the keys,' and you think to yourself: 'I'm nothing but a goddamned fraud.'"

Weinstock, the author of two slim blue volumes of poems and two articles in *Sports Illustrated*, could hardly believe his ears. "Leonard, Jesus Christ, if *you* feel like a fraud, how can *anyone* in this place feel good about themselves?" he blurted out. Several of the until then seemingly dead occupants of the *Stammtisch* interrupted their reveries of Chablis to glare angrily at the usurper of their collegial tranquillity.

"Don't you get it?" slobbered Hapgood from the cusp of his Pouilly Fumé. "That's the very idea of this place. No one's *supposed* to feel good about themselves . . . Do you think they'd keep driving themselves nuts if they were actually happy?"

Weinstock was momentarily stunned by Hapgood's logic. He gazed across the table at his friend, who seemed to have sprung to life by having so accurately described his predicament. "Yeah. . . . I suppose you're right. I sure haven't been feeling too good about *myself* since I got here.

"And *that*, my young friend"—Hapgood gazed over his shoulder in a kind of semicircle whose radius swept up virtually all the occupants of the dining room—"is why we all love and need so much to belong to clubs here at Harvard. Because a club, at least, gives you a way of feeling good about yourself. A club is one way of saying to all the world: 'Hey, I'm all right. I'm special. I belong.'"

A sudden shimmer of nausea ran through Weinstock's body as he watched Hapgood revel in his own entrapment, his own undeserved self-hatred. Somehow the chef's special of the day, Chicken Kiev, no longer interested him.

■

## Husks

Once there were twelve bodies  
where we now sit. I know it,  
because there are still husks  
where those bodies once were,  
empty carapaces  
overtaken during the mind's coup,  
begun as a benevolent  
dictatorship  
but now gone wild  
(as all power does)  
with its sense of itself,  
and so we are all seated here,  
captives  
of bad wine and too much to eat,  
and grow quietly to hate one  
another

for the pure tedium of what we  
have become—  
repeating the word *tenure*  
as if it were a mantra,  
while the body,  
that old anthropologist  
(the one true scholar among us)  
stirs restlessly  
in its prison of pomp and  
conceptions  
as if to remind us  
how brief its tenure is,  
how transient its publications.

—Martin Weinstock, *Academic Suppers*

To say that Weinstock's predecessors and colleagues at Harvard were an intimidating group was to understate the matter. The very folding chair which he, Martin Weinstock, now occupied, had previously been held by such great American poets as James Mendelberry, author of the famous 477 Sheep Songs, written in the voice of a Renaissance lamb, and Richard Lovell, who, only a decade earlier, had supposedly bedded hundreds of Harvard undergraduates on the same fleecy, discolored carpet on which Weinstock now held office hours.

Chair holders, in fact, surrounded Weinstock in flocks and droves. Not since his college summers as a waiter in the Catskills had he seen so many varieties and permutations of chairs—"folding chairs," "endowed chairs," "rotating chairs," "lifetime chairs," "interdepartmental chairs," "emeritus chairs," "distinguished chairs," and God knows how many other kinds of chairs just waiting to be filled by the serious buttocks of some scholar soon to be exiled from Seoul or Bialystok.

"Jesus Christ," Armitage exclaimed during Weinstock's first semester, "I haven't seen so many goddamned chairs since the Salvation Army came to a building demolition in Detroit in 1967."

"Yeah," Weinstock suddenly humorless, agreed. "Sometimes I have the uncomfortable feeling we already have."

■

Down the hall from Weinstock's office, in Room 22, sat that great icon of contemporary literature, exiled Polish poet Tadeusz Klavicki. Klavicki, an early associate of Lech Walesa, had recently been appointed to the long-vacant Cookston Professorship of Rhetoric, four of whose previous occupants had won the Nobel Prize. A rotund, convivial man of prodigious talents and equally prodigious appetites, he could imbibe vast quantities of Russian vodka without blinking an eyelash while Weinstock sat nursing a single Amstel light. Expelled from Poland during the suppressed Solidarity uprising of the late 1970's, Klavicki was immediately invited to Harvard by the Departments of English and Comparative Literature, who were well aware that, though a prophet might be unwelcome in his own country, he attracted extraordinary amounts of prestige—and dollars—to someone else's.

"Amanda Wayland, bless her heart, says he's The Best in the World," Armitage explained to Weinstock regarding the esteem in which Klavicki was held by Harvard's well-known critic of contemporary poetry. "An essential title to hold around here."

"What's that?" Weinstock wasn't exactly sure what title Armitage was referring to.

"Best in the World . . . If you want to stay around this fucking place your whole life, they've gotta be convinced that you're The Best in the World."

"Who, may I ask are 'they?'"

"Why, the other Best-in-the-Worlders—who else? That's what Wayland is, isn't she?—The Best Critic of Contemporary American Poetry in the Whole Fucking World. That's how it works around here, don't you know? Somebody *up there*"—Armitage pointed across the Yard to University Hall—"decides that you're The Best in the World, and then when—every once in a blue moon—someone from inside is brought up for tenure, all The Best-in-the-Worlders from everywhere are brought together in some dark room with a bunch of sherry and stale Brie and asked if that person, too, is enough of a Best-in-the-Worlder to join their elevated ranks . . . This *is*, after all, *the* Best Fucking University in the World, don't you know?"

"I suppose so."

"You have to realize," Armitage continued, "that, as far as dear old Harvard is concerned, there are only two kinds of people on the planet."

"Oh? And *who*, may I ask, are they?"

"There are the people *Harvard* needs—let's call them Type A's, like Klavicki—and then there are the people who need Harvard—Type B's, like you and me. If you're a Type A, people ask, speaking of Harvard, 'Hey, isn't that where Klavicki teaches?' But if you're a Type B—like you



and me, old buddy—well, then people are always saying, ‘Hey isn’t he the guy who teaches at Haaarvaaaard?’ What’s more, once they’ve decided you’re a type B, there’s no fucking way on earth you can every become a Type A—except, that is, by dying or by getting the hell out of here and getting famous somewhere else, so that they can finally ask you back when you’re too goddamned old and fucked up to enjoy it anyway, and can just be paraded around the country like a mascot to raise more bucks for deal old *Veritas*.

“And *that*, my dear friend,” Armitage droned on, “or, at least, the conviction on the party of wealthy alums—mainly Type B’s like us appended to the name Harvard for so long it’s become tattooed on them like a foreskin—is why this university is so goddamned loaded with shekels while every other university in the country spends all day scratching its balls looking for a way to keep the Xerox machines running.”

“All I know,” Weinstock replied, a sinking feeling settling into the pit of his stomach, “is that this whole damned conversation is making me long for dear old Roman Hruska.”

“Roman *who*?” Armitage looked up, a befuddled expression on his face.

“Roman Hruska . . . Don’t you remember him? He was that senator from Nebraska who, during the Carswell Supreme Court nomination hearings, said the Senate should confirm Carswell because mediocrity should be represented on the Court just like everything else. Well, that’s about how I feel about all this Best in the World shit. Why *can’t* they have a couple of plain old human beings who happen to have a little bit better than average talent or brains represented here too?”

“You don’t for a minute think they don’t, do you?” Armitage seemed somewhat amused by what he considered Weinstock’s innocence. “Why, there’s plenty of mediocrity around here, like anywhere else. The only difference between the mediocrities here and the mediocrities everywhere else is that the ones here devote their whole lives to making sure no one but themselves knows how truly mediocre they really are. I mean, let’s face it, how much more mediocre can a person *get* than dear old Gamson or some of our other colleagues? It’s just a matter of marketing, my friend.”

“Marketing?”

“Yeah, you know—Kleenex tissues, Heinz ketchup, Thomas’s English muffins, Coca-Cola, Harvard. Just keep telling everyone you’re The Best in the World and—whammo!—sooner or later everyone believes it. Who the fuck *knows* who’s The Best in the World, anyway? I mean, Jesus Christ, Martin all those fat alums don’t need to go

repossess their checkbooks just because a couple of guys like us happened to sneak in through the back door.”

Money, in fact, was a thing not much talked about openly at Harvard but clearly a fuel which silently and efficiently lubricated the ever-turning wheels and clanging pistons of the University’s machinery. With the exception of an occasional quote from Wallace Stevens to the effect that “money is a kind of poetry” (virtually the only kind of contemporary poetry Harvard embraced), the green stuff, like death itself, was never mentioned among the faculty and administration. Yet the place was crawling with legal and illicit tender, testified to by the periodic miniparades of mink and chinchilla into the Faculty Club and the ubiquitous presence of stretch limos parked just behind President Atterton’s office in Massachusetts Hall. The University’s alumni questionnaire, for that matter, listed no fewer than forty-seven titles by which alumni could choose to be addressed, by far the least regal of which were Mr. and Ms.

“Why, I can’t fucking believe it.” One of Weinstock’s favorite former students, a talented young writer now working as a disc jockey at an all-night rap music station in Pasadena, called after receiving the form. “They’ve got a box here you can check marked ‘Most Reverend Archbishop,’ right below another one that says ‘His Royal Highness!’ And if none of those quite fits, you can also check ‘Right Honorable Lord’ or ‘Chief Justice.’ Jesus Christ, it’s enough to make a fella downright ashamed of being a mere *magna cum laude!*”

Princes, princesses, kings, archbishops and lords, indeed, constituted a not-too-small pantheon among Harvard grads, and there were rumors galore about the vast infusions of wealth and priceless memorabilia that poured into the Harvard coffers from the bulging pockets and estates of friends and alumni. Corliss’s description of a Harvard diploma as “the most lucrative adjective sale in the world,” Weinstock was convinced, it was merely to call the largely economic exchange carried on in the language of euphemism and high-mindedness by its rightful name.

The fact was that, as in Weinstock’s own modest case, the adjective “Harvard” appended to one’s name could be worth real dollars on the open market of commerce and promotion. One could, in fact, dangle forever quite comfortable above the safety net of being “Harvard graduate so-and-so” or “Harvard Professor this-and-that,” and it seemed not at all illogical to Weinstock that, given the widely marketable aura which the adjective lent its bearer, humble citizens from all over the world would gladly fork out thousands of hard-earned shekels for a rectangle of forty-pound paper with the words “HARVARD UNIVERSITY” etched above their ornately calligraphed names. As it was, a popular T-shirt spotted around Cambridge eloquently addressed

the subject: The word "HARVARD" was printed in large block letters on the front, while the reverse side read, "This T-shirt cost my parents \$70,680."

In light of the odd and often subterranean nature of these prevailing currencies, someone like Klavicki, given that charm and sincere generosity with which he dispensed his literary and ambassadorial skills, quickly established himself as one of Harvard's best citizens. Moving from banquet to banquet "like"—as he himself put it—"a high-priced Polish whore," he had so endeared himself to the Harvard administration and the American literacy world that he seemed like a piece of carrion on whom all the vultures of literary ambition periodically descended to feast.

In the enormous shadow cast by Klavicki—a poet of profligate energies, a critic of dazzling intelligence and luminous prose, an imbibor of limitless capacities, a host of inexhaustible generosity—Weinstock quickly became the beneficiary of a lack of attention so resounding that he could move like a ghost through the hallowed halls of 24 Burdick Place. If he was ever sorely in need of attention and acclaim such as Klavicki received, he consoled himself, he could always move to Poland.

The other side of the equation was that, in comparison with so imposing, talented and likable a present as Klavicki, Weinstock felt . . . well, he felt—how else could he say it?—he felt like a fraud.



Weinstock was preparing to have lunch with Amanda Wayland, Norton Professor of English and, as previously mentioned, the country's most powerful critic of contemporary poetry. Wayland had also been a prime mover in Weinstock's coming to Harvard, having reviewed his first book, *Love's Tent*, in terms so glowing that he almost instantaneously went from being anonymous cameraman at West German television network DDT to the Burke-Howland Lectureship and the center (which he more accurately thought of as the armpit) of contemporary American Poetry. "With the appearance of Martin Weinstock's first book, *Love's Tent*," Wayland wrote, "a new and deeply melancholic voice has emerged on the American poetry scene, a voice both bleak and disconsolate, yet ravenously in search of the small happiness and erotic interstices which make this pain-and death-ridden life tolerable."

Weinstock remembered the unabated terror he felt when he was informed that not only Harold Blumberg and Gamson but Wayland herself—described as "the anointer and dethroner of the gods among American poets"—would be there for his interview at the Faculty Club that snowy February afternoon. Wayland's review of his book hadn't yet

been published, so he had anticipated with unrelenting dread and sleeplessness what he, a second-generation literary autodidact from Washington Heights, might possibly have to say to the woman who, according to one of his friends, “can recite *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* back to you word for word like a floppy disk.”

But Wayland turned out to be a consoling, almost maternal, presence at the luncheon. “You absolutely *must* have some soup” was the first thing she said to Weinstock, “or else you’ll catch cold in this terrible weather.” Weinstock had never understood, given the elevated and discerning nature of Wayland’s tastes, what it was in his own easily accessible and intellectually humble oeuvre that interested her to begin with, but he remained deeply grateful for her confidence and support. Though they had, since that first nervous, wintry afternoon, become friends of a sort, Weinstock remained secretly terrified of Wayland, dreading that she would discover that—like most everyone else at Harvard—he felt himself a fraud, an imposter from the libidinal netherworld who had somehow managed to “pass” into this world of higher intelligence.

Wayland herself had always remained a mystery to Weinstock. A woman of harsh, seemingly inflexible judgments and impeccable integrity, she nonetheless sometimes based her affections and dislikes on what seemed to him rather superficial criteria. “I detest his work,” she once said of a famous Czech poet mentioned for the Nobel Prize. “He never showers.” Wayland had once described a younger American poet—one whose poems frequently made mention of her children’s genitals and were permeated by none-too-oblique references to the Nazis—as “purely and simply, the worst poet in American,” a distinction Weinstock felt was open to a great deal of competition. “Besides,” Wayland added, “she looks like an ostrich.”

As inflexible as Wayland’s literary judgments sometimes were, she was even more adamant on matters such as family life, which she considered a form of unmitigated torment. Whenever Weinstock mentioned his desire to have children as a way of rectifying his own confused paternity, Wayland acted as if he’d suggested mating with a sea cucumber. “Why in the world do that?” she would ask, only to answer her own questions. “The family is a gulag.”

Wayland, who had grown up in a strictly Irish Catholic family in Boston (her maiden name was O’Callahan), was no less unequivocal on the subject of religion. “It has never brought so much as a *scintilla* of happiness into the world,” she told Weinstock one night after reading by an Israeli poet who described religious as “a good thing to have had . . . in the past.” “As far as I’m concerned, they should all be abolished—

*period*. Their only function in civilized life is to rationalize hatred and stupidly.”

“Don’t you think,” Weinstock ventured timidly, “religion contributes something to the texture of life?”

“Nonsense,” Wayland replied. “Religion contributes to the texture of life the way Hitler and Mussolini contributed to the texture of life . . . It adds nothing of aesthetic value, only death.”

Intimidating and unrelenting thought she could be, there was something Weinstock found genuinely likeable about Wayland, above and beyond his debt of gratitude. So he was looking forwards, albeit with the usual trepidation, to their lunch that day.

“Why, hello Martin,” she greeted him from a corner table at Casablanca, “you’re looking marvelously well . . . And how’s your work going?”

Weinstock always dreaded these inevitable questions about his “work,” having heretofore regarded writing as pure, unadulterated play. He gave his usual response. “Fine. I’m working on this villanelle I keep hearing a line from. I just can’t seem to get any further on it.”

“Oh. What is it?” Wayland, though she often chided him about his lack of discipline, was always interested in anything formal Weinstock was up to. (“It’s lovely,” she remarked about almost every poem he sent her, “but it doesn’t scan.”) Weinstock, by contrast, had trouble admitting to her (or to his students) that, before being hired, he had thought “prosody” was the name of some small-town contra dance.

“Oh . . . it’s nothing serious—just something that keeps flashing into my mind.”

“Well, why don’t you tell me? You know how interested I am in your formal experiments.”

“It goes, ‘The dead are dead and lovers love to kiss.’ Nothing very original, as you can see.”

“Not really.” Wayland, though often harshly critical of others, was always, Weinstock felt, unduly generous toward him. “I think it’s rather catchy, as a matter of fact—and even true.”

“What do you mean, true?” Weinstock hadn’t thought of the line as having any objective veracity.

“Simply that my friends are dropping all around me like flies, that’s all.” Wayland sighed. “Why, I just came from visiting my friend Eleanor, who’s racked with cancer, and yesterday we buried my former colleague at Brandeis, Morris Feinstein, and my sister Beverly in Braintree is sick with bronchia pneumonia, and everywhere I look someone is dead or dying or afflicted with some terrible illness.”

“How awful.” Weinstock was genuinely moved by Wayland’s air of beleaguerment. “I guess we’re lucky just to be here and in good health.”

"Well, *I* for one certainly don't intend to remain here any other way." Wayland spoke with the air of certainty that usually accompanies statements of fact.

"Well," Weinstock hesitated, "I guess it's not up to us to decide."

"Of course it's up to us." Wayland was virtually scolding him by now. "Why who in the world *else* should it be up to?"

"The gods, I suppose." Weinstock realized, too late, that he was barking up the wrong tree.

"The gods! Oh, Martin, I forgot what an innocent you are! Well, *you* may decide to leave such matters to the gods, but as for myself, I've got this small capsule hidden behind my *Concordance to the Complete Works of Shakespeare* that I won't hesitate to make use of when my time comes."

"Capsule?"

"Yes, capsule. Pure cyanide—it's quick, it's painless, and you don't have to hang around asking for help from those who would just as soon you were gone anyway . . . Why, as soon as I have the slightest inkling that I'm about to be dependent on anyone, I'm going to remove myself permanently from the human comedy."

Weinstock was taken aback, never having heard anyone speak so openly of their own suicide. "Why . . . Amanda, you're always so helpful to the people who need *you*—why in the world wouldn't you want to ask for the same thing?"

"Because I see how they suffer and how wretched they are for having to ask for help, and I'll be damned if I'm going to stick around just to wind up in the same position. Once you're on the way out and lucky enough to know it, why hang on?"

Weinstock had to admit there was something irrepressibly unsentimental about Wayland's reasoning. Yet the thought of this decent, warmhearted colleague removing her *Concordance to the Complete Works of Shakespeare* from one of her bookshelves and popping a capsule of poison into her mouth depressed and distracted him.

*The dead are dead and lovers love to kiss.* The line reverberated again through his mind as he munched silently on his Caesar salad . . .

"Well, I suppose I can understand your reasoning," he confessed, "but I think I'd prefer to go out like that baritone at the Met who dropped dead singing in *La Forza del Destino* . . . or like Nelson Rockefeller."

"Nelson Rockefeller?" Wayland seemed surprised to hear the late vice president's name brought up in a place where the only person publicly acknowledged as presidential was Atterton. "How in the world did *he* die?"

"Don't you remember?" Weinstock blushed at having brought up the subject. "The joke about him was that he came and went at the same time."

"Oh yes, now I remember." The thought of Rockefeller's rather poetic death brought a smile to Wayland's unusually somber expression. "With that young secretary of his, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Megan Marshack, bless her heart." Weinstock was astonished by the ease with which he remembered the prurient details.

"Well, Martin. I suppose there's more of a chance of *your* exit occurring in that manner than mine. I think I'll stick with the more reliable method, thank you."

Weinstock realized that he might have embarked on a somewhat sensitive subject. Wayland's amorous life, if one could call it that, seemed primarily occupied with the likes of Shakespeare, George Herbert, John Donne and Wallace Stevens. "The dead," she'd once confessed to him, "are more reliable company. One's heartbreak with them is only on paper."

The rest of the meal passed without further mention of suicide, Wayland having originally asked Weinstock to lunch to discuss who should be asked to read in next year's Morgan Watson Reading Series, whose committee she chaired. Although the force of Wayland's opinions allowed for little debate, her generosity toward Weinstock was such that she liked to provide him with at least the illusion of having some say in the matter. When he actually took the liberty of suggesting someone, however, as he did on this occasion, her dismissal of his candidate was usually uncategorical. "The most sentimental man in American," a title Weinstock felt he himself could lay claim to, she scoffed at the mention of the poet from Berkeley.

As they walked back toward the Yard, Weinstock couldn't help thinking of Wayland's pre-planned suicide. "I sure hope your friend Eleanor and your sister are better," he said, placing a hand tentatively on her shoulder as they crossed the street.

"Oh, they won't be—but thank you anyway, Martin. It's too late for such thoughts, so why get all sentimental? One does what's necessary and gets on with one's work."

There was no arguing with Wayland's position. So Weinstock simply shrugged his shoulders and waved once more as she rounded the corner onto Dunster Street.

■

“Amidst such plenty,” Weinstock’s old friend Trevor Johnson, visiting from D.C., remarked to him one afternoon as he sat listening to Weinstock bemoan his fate, “how could such ingratitude exist?”

And, as Weinstock reflected on the subject, the question seemed a good one: *Amidst such plenty, how could such ingratitude exist?*

Perhaps, in fact, this had become the central question of his life: *Amidst such plenty, how could such ingratitude exist?* How could a man with a great teaching job at a wonderful institution, with fantastic students in a beautiful city, with marvelous friends and a history of sweet, generous, interesting lovers, be so glum? How could someone like himself, Martin Weinstock—young, attractive, intelligent, desired—be filled with his own disdain? What was so *wrong* with a life which the vast majority of mankind would gladly have given the final sagging chromosome in their bored, uninspired bodies for even a small snippet of?

The answer, of course, was *nothing*. Nothing was wrong with this life that some small corner of Weinstock’s uninspired imagination could not have corrected, that some small relinquishment of greed and obsessive self-interest might not have rectified.

There was a long silence as Trevor’s question hung unanswered in the air, transmogrifying itself slowing into judgment. *Amidst such plenty, how could such ingratitude exist?*

Perhaps, Weinstock thought, as Trevor sat slowly pirouetting his plastic spoon around in his coffee cup, perhaps plenty itself was a heavy burden whose weight only grew when it wasn’t shared, dispersed, dissipated, *energized* by the joy of its own use? Perhaps such ingratitude couldn’t die until something living, something other than himself, had been born in its place?

“Well, what about it, Martin?” Trevor seemed to be growing impatient with the weight of his unanswered question. “Why isn’t someone like you happier, with all the great shit that’s come his way and that just keeps on coming while you sit there with your long face and sad poet’s eyes and spit in its face as if it were a turkey vulture coming after you like a piece of carrion?”

Again there was a long silence, filled with the heavy weight of Weinstock’s long-delayed reply.

“I don’t know, Trevor,” he mumbled, amazed at the depths of his own self-deception, “I just don’t know.”



There was, nonetheless, something amusing about life at Harvard which, in its better moments, offset the deathlike pallor that shrouded



Weinstock's existence. For example, an oddly consistent military vocabulary penetrated the place, as scholars in the English Department pursued with almost religious devotion an enterprise they referred to as "canon formation."

From what Weinstock could understand of it, canon formation involved a periodic sifting and resifting through the works of what Professor of Medieval Literature Warren Jessup Bolder called "the noble dead" to determine what the great "texts" (a word used as religiously by the Harvard faculty as "pussy" has once been by Weinstock) of Western literature were and save it from the follies of unenlightened mortals like Jennifer Cerny.

Weinstock was tremendously amused by the fervor and frequency with which this task was approached, and by the ease with which a sense of disarray and conflict could be injected into the enterprise. Recently, for example, when a Feminist Revisionist Medievalist Deconstructionist (more consecutive "-ists" than Weinstock thought the English language could safely accommodate), a hyperbolic young scholar from the University of Massachusetts name Katherine Sedgewick, delivered a series of lectures entitled "Chaucer as Rapist: Eroticism and Misogyny in The Canterbury Tales," a group of women graduate students in the Department, along with most of the faculty of the newly created Women's Studies Program, demanded the convening of an interdepartmental conference to consider "removing Chaucer from the cannon," an emotional predicament for the dead poet Weinstock considered vaguely analogous to being evicted from a rent-controlled Cambridge apartment.

It seemed there was always some crisis in the academy about the formation and re-formation of the cannon, the most recent of which had taken place the preceding spring, when a huge hoard of pro-Nazi propaganda was found by a Harvard professor on a Guggenheim Fellowship among the archives of recently canonized French scholar Henri Ronsignard. A high-level conference of Francophiles and Christian scholars was convened to decide "what to do about the Ronsignard problem" and to debate the issue of where a writer's moral and political beliefs should be considered in determining his eligibility to canonization.

Somehow this very idea of "canon formation," and the acrimonious debates doused in cream sherry and cheddar cheese fish crackers which engendered, made Weinstock think of a platoon of twitching, blinking and gesticulating men and women puttering around with some out-of-date military hardware. He himself had always sided with the third part of a Taoist maxim he was found of quoting: "The intelligent speak, the fools argue, the wise are silent." He had not (he reminded himself) fled

the acrimony of one profession—the law—just to get caught up in another whose pettiness was rivaled only by the depth of its insecurities.

So Weinstock coined for himself the following useful and, he thought, humorous maxim: “I’d rather be a spray gun than a canon,” and went on fiddling, as best he could, with the sound of things. There would be a price to pay for his frivolity in the end; it was, he also knew, one that would be collected from them all sooner or later anyway. But he didn’t, for the immediate present, want to be included in the broad sweep of a line by a young Irish poet he had recently seen quoted in a review by Klavicki.

“The dead,” the Irishman wrote, “have been seen alive.”



At Harvard, it seemed, the dead *had* been seen alive. Weinstock had recently read that the suicide rate among junior faculty who had fallen from the University Olympian heights was twenty-five times the national average. Among the saddest such documented cases was that a former assistant professor in the History Department, Askold Doxbinder. Doxbinder, after winning the Pulitzer Prize but being denied tenure by a narrow vote of his department, had chained himself to the steps of Widener Library on the coldest night of the year and died of exposure. Scrawled in the snow directly beside his partially frozen body the next morning were found the words “Give me Harvard or give me death.” Only after a full investigation by the Cambridge police (which the University tried to suppress) was it revealed that the two members of the Department who cast the deciding votes against the young scholar were historians whose own books had been unsuccessfully submitted for the same prize.

That such intense examples of personal unhappiness could be translated so artfully into professional success had baffled Weinstock almost from the moment of his arrival in Cambridge. He had always loved Theodore Roethke’s line “the right thing happens to the happy man,” yet it seemed that the only thing that happened to the happy man in Cambridge was six or eight years of economic and professional insecurity followed by a one-way ticket out of the place—wham bam, thank you, ma’am!

Rumor had it, in fact, that a full third of the *senior* faculty checked out of the exclusive psychiatric wards of McLean hospital in nearby Belmont every morning. Quite recently, one of Harvard’s most prestigious behavioral psychologists, Norman Kinsolver, whose professional life had been devoted to formulating what became known as The Kinsolver Index of Spiritual Development, had taken his own spiritual

development so far as to check out of McLean one sunny afternoon and plunge into the icy waters of Massachusetts Bay, leaving his car parked at nearby Logan Airport.

"This place," Weinstock's former lover Rae Beth Shintow, now a punk rock star in Cleveland, remarked when she came to Cambridge during his first semester, "feels like the academic equivalent of a Leonard Cohen album—most of the folks around here look like you'd have to check them twice to make sure they're still breathing! Why, Jesus Christ, Martin, you ought to get your sweet little poetic ass out of this place before you turn into one of them."

As Weinstock sat thinking of Rae Beth's words, there was a knock on his office door. It was Gamson, looking like a stale cheese with legs.

"Have you seen *The New York Review of Books*?" Gamson was clearly on the verge of tears. Weinstock had never in his read what Armitage called *The New York Review of Each Other's Books*, but, since coming to Harvard, he had bought a copy every two weeks and placed it on the edge of his desk to prepare for conversations like the one he sensed was about to take place.

"Why, I just this minute got it." He motioned to the untouched periodical neatly folded before. "What's the matters?"

"A godawful review of my book by yet another illiterate SOB from California." The nonacclaim which had greeted the publication of Gamson's novel had been so dramatic that both Armitage and Weinstock, along with their junior colleagues, had stopped reading even the daily papers for fear that yet another trashing of their colleague's late-life oeuvre would need to be confronted. Weinstock himself had tried on seven separate occasions to read the massive opus, each time retreating once again to the cheerier pages of Bukowski or Henry Miller, until he finally grew so bored and embarrassed by his inability to endure the book's unabating torpor that he paid one of his undergraduates seventy-five dollars to write a three-page plot summary.

Now, with Gamson's turgid, downward-sloping body standing beside him, he slowly opened the cover of *The New York Review*. On the first inside page was a headline reading "DEATH OF THE NOVEL: AN EXEMPLAR," followed by a review so scathingly negative that Weinstock couldn't even bring himself to utter his usual practiced attempt at consolation ("Don't take it too seriously, Mort . . . History will redeem you").

"Geez." Weinstock felt somehow relieved to be confronted by a situation that seemed beyond the remedies of feigned sympathy. "It's really pretty bad, isn't it?"

"That ignorant sonuvabitch obviously didn't understand the book at all . . . I have the growing sense that my kind of sensibility just isn't for

these times.” Gamson was a man who—enviably, it seemed to Weinstock—possessed a Miniver Cheevyesque ability to find the source of his failure everywhere but within his own passionless characters, most of whose idea of a fun afternoon was chancing upon a first edition of *Hard Times* in an antiquarian bookshop.

“Don’t take it too seriously, Mort.” Weinstock’s repugnance at his own mealy-mouthed duplicity was so intense he felt his entire body threaten to go into a state of rebellion. What he really wanted to say—wanted to *scream*, in fact—was “*Listen, Mort, your stupid book sucks and you know it and I know it and everybody who has read or tried to read it knows it, and the damned truth is the whole world, including you, would be better off if you left the goddamned trees standing and donated your word processor to the Salvation Army, and didn’t inflict any more of those tedious, peckerless characters of yours on us. Do you hear me, Mort? YOUR BOOK SUCKS! IT JUST PLAIN SUCKS!*”

But, after three years of waling among the dead and near-dead of the Harvard English Department, Weinstock felt nearly dead himself. So here merely looked up at Gamson once more, the lame expression of a lobotomized sheep passing over him, and repeated what had by now become, for better or worse, part of his own small litany.

“Don’t take it too seriously, Mort.” He heard the awful, transparently insincere, words coming from his mouth once again. “History will redeem you.”

■

“Hey, Martin,” Armitage announced at Weinstock’s door one afternoon not long after the Eliot Centenary, “the Dean’s Office called . . . Sounds important. Thought you might like to know.”

“Podolskiy’s office?” Weinstock could hardly disguise his amazement. “For me?”

“Yup. Professor Martin Weinstock, please. Dean Podolskiy would like to speak with him’ is how her secretary put it. Maybe they’re calling to offer you Gamson’s job. He’s retiring at the end of the year, you know . . . And you’re *soooo* much like him.”

“Thanks, pal.” Weinstock grinned at his smiling colleague. “I’ll make sure the first thing I do if they offer me the job is to offer you one-year renewable appointments until you rot . . . By the way, sport, there is at least *one* big difference between Gamson and me.”

“Oh yea.” Armitage paused on his way out. “What’s that?”

“I believe,” Weinstock said, in a tone of feigned gravity, “that God paused on the seventh day to get laid. Gamson thinks it was to catch up

on *The New York Review of Books* . . . Anyway, I think Gamson has had his heir apparent picked out for years.”

“You mean that little worm Pawley?” Armitage asked, referring to Gamson’s favorite former student, John Pawley, who had recently published a lugubrious but critically acclaimed novel entitled *The Secret Life of Ferdinand Pizarro*, written entirely in the voice of the 16th century Spanish explorer.

“Sure. After all, where else could Gamson possibly find a successor who would make him look almost cheerful?”

“You’ve got a point there,” Armitage admitted. “I couldn’t believe that shit of his about wanting to have an allergy to the sensual world he published in *The Globe’s* Christmas wish list. But I still think they’re going to offer it to you. After all, Gamson is the only person in the world, Pawley’s mother included, who can stand the little creep. Why, even Klavicki, who barely ever admits to hating anyone, turns purple when you mention his name. He says Pawley has the kind of personality that make General Jaruzelski seem like a matinee idol.”

“Yeah”—Weinstock couldn’t help but laugh at the thought of diminutive, grim-faced Pawley being compared to the former Polish dictator—“but personality has never exactly been the big prerequisite for staying on in the Harvard English Department.”

“True,” Armitage confessed. “Believe it or not, I think Pawley may even be too depressing for this place. They need someone like you around—kind of a little affirmative action program for the lighthearted.”

“And the light-minded, I think Gamson would say. But thanks for the thought anyway, though I’m sure what the dean really wants is to remind me to hand in my ID card at the end of the semester so I won’t sneak any books out of the library.”

“We’ll see,” Armitage rejoined. “Just don’t forget to ask for the Big T when she offers it to you, OK?”

“The Big T? What the hell is that?”

“Security. You know—tenure. Tell her you’ve been here for five fucking years, that you’ve published more than all the so-called serious scholars in the department put together, and that it’s time for the University to lay the Big T on you if they want you to stay.”

“Are you nuts?” Weinstock was genuinely amused by his colleague’s fantasies. “First of all, the dean isn’t going to offer me anything more than that new filing cabinet for my office I’ve requested for the past three years. Second of all, you know by now that this University gives out security the way a dog trainer gives out biscuits—enough to keep you perpetually hungry, and not enough to ever allow you to start misbehaving. Unless, of course, they decide you’re The Best in the

Fucking World, which, as we all know, they *never* decide about anyone who needs or wants them enough to already *be* here.

“Why don’t you say *that* to Podolskiy then? You know the old saying? “The truth will set you free.””

“Oh, sure.” Weinstock looked at Armitage incredulously. “The only way the truth sets you free around here is that you lose your job.”

Weinstock had, in fact, been looking for a permanent job, without success, throughout the first half of this last year of his no-longer-renewable appointment. Having spent the prime years of his academic “career” at Harvard, however, he now found himself both too far along to accept a tenure-track appointment somewhere else and not having put in the requisite time at another university to be considered for a permanent job.

“It’s the old psychological catch-22 of this place, I’m telling you,” Marikovski warned him one afternoon at lunch. “The perfect trap for a nice second-generation Jewish boy with a mother complex.”

“What do you mean by that?” Weinstock asked.

“Simple.” Marikovski’s insight into psychological matters always astounded him. “You can’t leave on your own, since it’s too cozy and prestigious and seemingly secure, but they won’t let you stay either . . . so your only solution is to fall in love with someone else who never quite matches up to that wonderful mother who won’t keep you, yet who makes it almost impossible for you to leave.”

So it was with mixed feelings, that afternoon, that Weinstock sat in the waiting room outside Dean Podolskiy’s office, wondering why—for the first time in five years—the dean had sent for him.

“Professor Weinstock”—the dean, wearing a dark lavender business suit with a large diamond brooch pinned to her lapel, emerged some ten minutes late for their scheduled appointment—“forgive me for being late . . . How nice to see you.” The dean, a statuesque, elegant woman whose maiden name was Sparks, had been married for over thirty years to Romanian psychoanalyst Anatol Podolskiy, whom she had met on a Fulbright to the northern Romanian province of Bukovina in 1956, while still a Harvard graduate student.

“Nice to see you too.” Weinstock echoed. “I don’t think we’ve ever actually been introduced.”

“No, I suppose not. I’m, of course, aware of your fine work, and you *did* get my note congratulating you on your Guggenheim, didn’t you?”

“Why, yes . . . I sure did. Thanks so much for that.” Weinstock felt an uncomfortable air of concordance beginning to settle over his personality.

“Well, Professor Weinstock, I suppose you must be wondering why I was wanting to talk with you.”

“Well, uh, yes . . . I *was* kind of wondering.” Weinstock felt a pronounced distaste for his own amenability as he sat demurely nodding at the dean.

“Well, the Department would like you to stay on as his replacement. We are prepared to offer you a promotion to associate professor if you’re interested.”

Something Weinstock’s predecessor Robert Wellingham had told him before leaving for Berkeley two years earlier suddenly came back to him as the dean spoke. “A promotion at Harvard,” Wellingham said when Weinstock asked him why he’d left before the end of his appointment, “isn’t a promotion—it’s a stay of execution.”

“Why, I’m tremendously flattered.” Weinstock was trying hard to hide his suspicions beneath a patina of gratitude. “But I’m not exactly certain what that would mean in terms of my future here . . . if you know what I mean.”

“Of course. I understand perfectly.” The dean uncrossed and crossed her legs on the large burgundy sofa and clasped her hands in her lap in a kind of neoclerical posture. “What it means is that the Department is willing to offer you a promotion to the associate level along with the directorship of the Program for three more years.”

“And then?” Weinstock felt a bit like someone who was having the card read to him when what he really wanted was the gift.

“Well, Professor Weinstock, then”—the dean drew out the last syllable—“depending, of course, on the Department’s recommendation and your work as director—a further decision will have to be made.”

“If you don’t mind my saying so, Dean Podolskiy, by then I’ll be forty-two and will have been here for eight year . . . What if that Department suddenly decides it doesn’t want me to stay on, or that it wants someone more famous to direct the Program? What am I supposed to do then, get an accounting degree?”

“I can perfectly understand your position, Professor Weinstock, but I see no reason at the present time why this won’t work out. As you know, we’ll be needing *someone* to direct the Program at the end of that time.”

Weinstock felt his anger and disgust rise as the dean spoke. If the dean didn’t see any reason “why this wouldn’t work out,” why couldn’t she offer him a permanent position right now and get it over with, instead of putting him on trial for another three years? He had, after all, published three books in five years, gotten distinguished teaching awards every year, received more fellowships and prizes than anyone else in the Department. What in the world *else* was a person supposed to do?

"I appreciate how you must be feeling, Professor Weinstock"—the dean leaned away from Weinstock as she continued—"and I don't want you to think that both I and the Department aren't aware of your accomplishments, which are part of the reason we're making this offer. But, as you know, *this* University has a slightly more irregular way of handling promotions than most institutions." The stressed syllables of the dean's voice suggested she was testifying to the divinely ordained rather than the humanly premeditated.

"Yes." Weinstock couldn't disguise the rueful tone of his voice. "I know."

The dean gazes at her watch as he spoke. "You'll have to excuse me, Professor Weinstock, but I have to be at another meeting. What I would suggest is that you think it over a few days and then get back to me with your decision . . . which both I and the Department hope will be affirmative. How does that sound?"

"That's fine," Weinstock replied lamely, rising to shake the hand extended toward him. "Thanks very much."

"I'm very pleased at the thought of your staying on," the dean offered, striking an upbeat note as she showed him to the door. "Congratulations."

"Thanks," he muttered again as the door closed behind him.

"Thanks a lot."

As he walked down the long, carpeted corridor from the dean's office toward the front door of University Hall, a line by one of Weinstock's favorite novelists, a Czech writer now living in Paris, kept reverberating through his head: "But where was that sad funeral music coming from," it went, "the brass band that sounded so real?"

"I don't particularly care if the person we get is a nice person, or easy to get along with, or any of that," said the new chairman of the English Department, Paul Weitzel. "The only thing I care about is that it's *The Best Person in the World*."

Weitzel and Weinstock were discussing the new opening for a fiction writer in the Writing Program. The chairman, recently chosen to succeed Lawrence Gentry, a man Weinstock had been inordinately fond of, fidgeted nervously in his swivel chair as he passed an expensive-looking fountain pen between his hands.

Weitzel, as opposed to Gentry (a gentle, soft-spoken man who, it was rumored, spent parts of every summer and midsemester break at a Zen monastery outside Toronto), was the kind of person Weinstock most hated—"institutionally ambitious," as Marikovski described him—someone whose face was a living testimonial to God's dictum (as paraphrased by Emerson) that one can have power or joy, but not both. Unlike



Gentry, who belonged to that well-born and comfortable Harvard caste who were the most secure (and therefore in many ways the most trustworthy) members of the University community, Weitzel was one of those most dangerous of men: an escape from his own past. The third-generation son of German-Lutheran coal miners who emigrated to West Virginia, he had attended merely Princeton as a graduate student, during which period emerged the only two real ambitions of his life—chairing the Harvard English Department, and becoming a German.

Having spent his last four sabbaticals at various *Wissenschaftskollegiums* and *Freie Universitats* in Berlin, Hamburg, Dresden and Munich, and half his adult life reading Goethe, Holderlin, Rilke, Lessing and Brecht, Weitzel wanted nothing more intensely than to be able to say, along with John F. Kennedy, “*ich auch bin ein Berliner.*” This second metamorphosis had eluded him, however, and he therefore had to content himself with slinking suspiciously around the English Department offices, his pince-nez mounted triumphantly on his small, Germanic nose, mumbling “Harvard, Harvard uber alles” under his breath to assure himself that he had, indeed, reached at least one pinnacle of his narrow aspirations.

Sporting a wispy, gray-and-white goatee and a paranoid, furtive gaze, Weitzel suggested in both face and manner the sort of insecurity that, while it always gravitate toward power, was highly uncomfortable with its exercise, remind Weinstock of the words of Isabella, describing the presumptuous and mortal man in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*:

Dressed in a little brief authority,  
Most ignorant of what he’s most assured,  
His glassy essence, like an angry ape  
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven  
As makes the fragile angels weep.

Since taking over as chairman, Weitzel had set about zealously revamping the Department according to the latest vicissitudes of academic politics. Among this first acts had been the hiring of Harry “Suitcase” Gibbs, the country’s most eminent—or at least its most notorious—scholar of what was known as the “New Historicism.” (How, Weinstock had often wondered, did it differ from the “Old Historicism?”) Gibb’s nickname had originated with former major league baseball player Harry “Suitcase” Simpson, a journeyman outfielder traded so many times during his career that he was dubbed Suitcase in honor of the fact that he could never quite get around to unpacking his bags before being traded again. Much like his namesake, Gibbs was the incarnation of the now-fashionable, globe-trotting academic, a man so

adept at soliciting new (and more lucrative) offers from each successive university it was rumored that no landlord could ever get him to sign even a one-year lease.

"Jesus Christ," Armitage remarked to Weinstock on hearing of Gibbs's appointment, "they must have to buy a minivan every time they fire that fucker. He comes with a whole goddamned entourage by now." Gibbs, it was rumored—in addition to attending to more fund-raisers and fewer students with each successive appointment—also habitually arrived as part of a "package" deal, typically including several concurrent chairmanships (English, Comparative Literature, etc.), the editorship and funding of a major journal and the hiring of several associates (including, rumors went, his gay lover, a chauffeur and a full-time publicist). "The Michael Milken of academic life," *The New York Times Magazine* had dubbed him in a cover story earlier that year.

"He's an extraordinary asset to Harvard," Dean Podolskiy extolled to a reporter at a reception in Gibbs's honor at The American Academy of Arts and Letters. "His charm and network of connections are unequalled anywhere in America. All you have to do is open up the newspaper and you see his name."

Not everyone, however, concurred with the dean's appraisal. "He's like a little academic Napoleon," a Harvard colleague of Gibbs, asking to remain anonymous, was quoted as saying. "If you say a bad word about him anywhere in the profession, you're digging your own grave. Why, there's not a damned prize or fellowship in this country anyone in my field might want that he's not on the committee of . . . It would be like cussing out the Pope in the Vatican."

"That sonuvabitch has more voices than the Vienna Boys choir," Weinstock told Armitage after first meeting Gibbs. "One minute you could swear he was Jack Kerouac, the next he's Jacques Derrida. And anyway, I *hate* anyone who calls me buddy the first time they meet me," he added. "And that asshole uses the word with all the sincerity of George Bush using 'gentle.'"

"He's the type of person," Marikovski, not one easily to badmouth a colleague, remarked about Gibbs on evening after dinner, "who, once upon a time, would have gone straight into investment banking. But these days, sadly enough, you can do pretty well as an entrepreneur in academic life as well. The days when the academy was a place where good-hearted, honorable people with fine minds hid out and quietly did their work are over, *kaput*. It's Wall Street now, with a more duplicitous face."

In addition to Gibbs, Weitzel had used his ascendancy to the chairmanship to have his former student—a fiery, blond-streaked feminist literary theorist by the name of Hannah Trouble, who dressed habitually

in maroon—lured away from the English Department at Duke, along with assurance from Dean Podolskiy that she would be provided with a magnificent office overlooking the Charles. “I smell trouble” quickly became, behind Weitzel’s back, the battle cry of the junior faculty. When the dean, just before Trouble’s arrival in Cambridge, hedged on her promise, Trouble quickly further immortalized herself in the annuals of Harvard folklore with an angry phone call to President Atterton. “Mr. Atterton,” she allegedly told the president, “I want that fucking office and I want it *now* . . . or else I’m staying in Durham and you can take your silly little offer and shove it.”

Harvard loving no one more than those possessed of the hubris and sense of personal power, justified or not, with which to resist its allures, Trouble had her new office virtually overnight and was soon ensconced along with Weitzel—in her immaculate maroon clothes and elaborately painted red and black fingernails—among the Department’s power elite. Within a month of arriving (during which time she reluctantly cohabited with her long-time lover, former chairman of Latin American Studies Antonio Cabral, not believing, she maintained, in what she called “shared domiciles” between men and women), she bought herself a house in which, according to Armitage, “even the toilet paper holders and doorknobs look like they were designed by Oscar de la Renta.”

Trouble was the type of person the academy, and especially Harvard, loved—someone with an articulate and seemingly elegant opinion on every issue, from whether the University should continue its involvement with ROTC to whether kosher luncheons should be subsidized by the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Indeed, if there was any truth to Weinstock’s beloved Taoist maxim concerning the wisdom of silence, wisdom was certainly not an attribute Trouble could be easily accused of. Within no time, the minutes of the Faculty of Art and Sciences’ monthly meetings were replete with paragraphs beginning “Professor Trouble commented,” “Professor Trouble pointed out” or “Professor Trouble argued.”

“I’m not sure why the *best* person for the job can’t also be a decent human being who’s easy to get along with,” Weinstock said to the chairman. Weinstock had come, in his five years at Harvard, to feel toward the word “best” roughly the same antipathy the Jews must have felt toward the word “*heil*” in Nazi Germany.

“I’m not saying that.” Weitzel seemed somewhat taken aback by his untenured colleague’s attempted resistance. “I’m merely saying that we are trying to build the *best* department we can here, and I don’t think that personality and character are the criteria of utmost importance.”

Weinstock’s hatred of Weitzel intensified as he sat starting at the chairman, thought he tried hard to rouse some scintilla of compassion

by remembering what a friend in the Philosophy Department, whose father had been a colleague of Weitzel at BU, had once told him. "You have to understand," his friend explained on an occasion when Weinstock was complaining about Weitzel's contemptuous attitude, "what an uptight, uneducated Lutheran family he came from . . . and the whole business with his father."

During Weitzel's undergraduate days at Oberlin, Weitzel's father, laid off from the mines and suffering from black lung disease, had apparently walked into a bank in Charleston with a sawed-off shotgun and escaped with some \$500,000 in cash, before being apprehended some weeks later at a brothel in Las Vegas. "I don't think he's ever gotten over trying to distance himself from what his old man did," Marikovski had once told Weinstock. "He's simply the kind of guy who, as soon as he feels what he's achieved being even slightly threatened, sees the abyss yawning all around him."

Weinstock, having felt the abyss yawning all too often himself, stared at the chairman and tried to arouse an even momentary sympathy for the constricted bundle of near-humanity that sat before him. Unlike Gamson, with whom he felt both a certain identification and a certain repulsion on account of it—Weitzel aroused in him only a feeling of disgust at his angular, daemonic impenetrability, his dark evocation of that life principle Weinstock so hated: the triumph of the will to power over the hunger for goodness.

"Well," Weinstock said, trying his best to mimic the chairman's habits of stress and accentuation, "I'm sure the *best* person will turn up, and—when he or she does—will be *dying* to come . . . But it seems to me," he added with an air of resignation, "that we ought at least to be open to the fact that he or she might be a decent and affable human being as well."

"I *am* open to that possibility," the chairman replied, rising from his chair and moving toward the door to indicate that he considered their meeting at an end. "But I very much doubt it will turn out that way."

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15 June 1992

Dr. Paul Weitzel, Chairman  
Department of English  
Harvard University

Dear Paul:

There comes a time, even in the life of Iseult of the White Hands, when she (or he) has had enough patience and devotion (or, to put it in the present context, of trying to be the so-called “Best in the World”) and wants, as this writer does, merely to be loved for his flawed, human, imperfect, less-than-Best-in-the-World self—a mere mortal in the world of living.

And so it now is with me—your merely human Weinstock of the occasionally unscanning verse who has not (why not finally say it?) ever read *Ulysses*, and frankly doesn’t intend to, no matter how many times he may hear an angel speak its name into some realm of the ought-to-have-read or the canonical.

Why, in the end, just not say what happened? I got here, and was miserable, and—from the first day my mortal, imperfect self walked through these lofty portals—have felt like a life-starved wanderer in the realm of the dead and dying. *Somewhere in the middle of my life I went astray*, as the Good Book says, and now, still somewhere in the salvageable middle, I intend to fix it.

T. S. Eliot (at whose expense I confess I’ve had my share of laughs) said it better than I can (but I’ll paraphrase anyway, being a classic profaner of what others hold sacred): The end is often the beginning, the beginning the end.

And why shouldn’t I, Martin Weinstock, begin again by ending here? I was sick, and then, right here at good Old Thanatos U, my sickness grew worse, and now I’m—if not restored—then at least better enough to say, in the immortal words of my adoptive father Heinz, *Auf Wiedersehen*.

So, Mr. Best-in-the-World Chairman at this Best-in-the World institution, this is a formal *adieu* from your lesser but wiser Weinstock, wishing you, as the old song goes, bluebirds in the spring and all sorts of other fine things too.

And the fire and the rose, as the old dead bard said are still one.

Your not-so-obedient-servant,  
Martin Weinstock

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June 18, 1992

Mr. Martin Weinstock, Director  
Creative Writing Program  
Harvard University

Dear Martin:

I assume from your letter that what you wish to convey to me is your decision not to proceed with submitting your name to the Department for promotion next fall, a wish I most certainly intend to honor. I realize, of course, the difficulty and bravery of your decision—as well as, I must confess, its wisdom, given the realities of life at this University and the undeniable fact that permanent positions for those with such unorthodox credentials as yourself are, indeed, few and far between.

I want to make clear, however, that we in the Department, and the University as a whole, are deeply in your debt for the fine work you have done here—not only as a teacher and administrator, but as a poet (and, I understand, an incipient novelist) during a unique and formative part of your own career. You not only served as an important source of continuity after Morton Gamson's retirement, but, even more importantly, as an inspiration to such students as Melissa Wainwright, whose success and public acclaim are such an important aspect of this University's mission and continued prominence.

I am most certain that—and we in the Department plan to be helpful in any way we can in that endeavor—you will soon be able to locate another university worthy of your talents, energy, and honesty, and where you will be able to continue making the same sort of unique and generous contribution you have made during the last ten years here. In the interim, I wish you every success for your future career, and thank you again on behalf of all those in the Department for your fine work, for which you will be remembered long after your actual presence here is past.

With great admiration,  
Paul Weitzel

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June 21, 1992

Dear Martin,

I wanted to tell you how very moved, and of course deeply troubled, I was by your letter to Paul. You certainly did the right thing, if I have reconstructed your previous conversations with him correctly—the noble thing, the self-respecting thing.

The important point is to realize that these bastards have nothing on you, that you don't need them or their approval, that your esteem is self-generated, that you did good work and know it, and no more needs to be said. It is appalling for me to think that Harvard is letting you get away from them, but then I say to myself that it's logical in a way. You were always too true, too honest, too libidinous (in your work) for these false and phony and castrated nonentities. You showed that beautifully and movingly in your letter. They know it and shudder at the thought.

Whatever the difficulties it may bring you, you should realize that the authentic and honest path was the one you took. I've thought about it quite a bit. It seems to me that what must have been the motivating factor, aside from the apparent justifications of no tenure position or whatever Weitzel told you, was the fact that you never pretended: Never pretended to be more than we all are, never pretended to coincide with some overriding Harvard destiny, never faked being something other than a guy who wrote some poetry, read some books, loved this or that about life, had these anxieties and these hopes, came from this or that background.

What all these characters can't face is just that—their mediocre humanness, their nonimportance, their ephemerality. My guess (though I don't really know for sure) is that you mirrored something to them that they couldn't afford to acknowledge, and that Weitzel's defense—like every good German's—was his officiousness. Maybe that's all wrong. But it's the way I imagine it. And I guess I imagine it that way because you are one of the few people I really admire, and admiringly love. It's the existential honesty I admire and love which, I suspect, so threatened our overly important colleagues.

Above all, and entirely selfishly, I will miss your presence here—your sunny disposition, your zest for life, your relentless honesty with

both yourself and others, your unwillingness to distort your zeal for life itself into a postured obsession with what's mostly dead and dying. Harvard or no Harvard, you and I are "tenure" for life—in those moments of affection and truth which friendship, uniquely, offers to us all, and which will endure.

Ever-affectionately,  
Siggy

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And what of the wish for a happy ending? Well, there are *many* possible endings, some far worse than others, but none of them entirely happy. Because the wish for a happy ending, when you get right down to it, is also a kind of childishness—like the wish to undo your own history, or to return to your mother, like the hatred of rabbis. It is, after all, a divinely mixed world, neither heaven nor hell, neither all yin nor all yang, and the only sure thing is that some form of living and dying, in the end, will come to us all.