

A misty, atmospheric landscape with a fence in the foreground and a structure in the background. The scene is hazy and monochromatic, with a dark foreground and a lighter, misty background.

DAVID  
SCOTT  
EWERS

PETRICHOR

*excerpts from*

# PETRICHOR

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David Scott Ewers



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“Weather” from *The Devil’s Dictionary* by Ambrose Bierce (1911).

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# 1

“You guys ever been to Disneyland?”

There’s no answer. Stevie’s a spring, the headwaters of a wild and indivertible river of words. There are signs, however, that the river has crested. His pauses have been getting longer. “You know those little rides they got for the little kids, like Mister Toad’s Wild Ride—”

“Dude, you are Mister Toad,” Keith says. “You’re fucking clucking like him.”

Stevie ignores this, and continues:

“—how they got those black lights or whatever they are and they make like your white t-shirts glow?” He spins around and looks across the expanse of lakebed they’ve already crossed. The almost-full moon is starting to settle toward a long, steep bank of mountains to the west behind them.

“Disneyland,” Lee grumbles.

“Look at how the lake is, the way the moon is hitting it makes it totally look, it totally looks like how it looks in— it’s like the moon is a black light or some shit. See? Doesn’t that look—”

“Fuck the lake. Fuck your fucking...wild ride, Stevie.” Keith takes a swig from the bottle of Baileys they pooled their money for earlier that night. He laughs, sort of. Keith’s getting a little anxious. They’re an hour’s walk from Cartago. Up ahead is just big, dark and empty clear past the Talc City Hills; a hundred miles of nothing just to get to the Death Valley road. “I didn’t know it was this far. Fucking Toad. This is all probably just some

fucked up dream you had. Oh, wait. I forgot. Your lurpy ass don't sleep."

Keith and Stevie have known each other since grade school, and have spent a fair amount of time together, there being few companionship options to choose from for either of them. 'Lurpy' goes back to a time when Keith could only comfortably attack at Stevie's physical characteristics. Stevie for his part never made the counter-assault. Not directly. He didn't have to. But Keith never stopped waiting for it.

"I gotta say, just... just for the record... toads don't cluck. That's chickens. Hens." Stevie half-sings, half honks: "Clucking hens/cluck all day—"

Lately Stevie's lifestyle choices have led him to adopt a sort of 'reach into the grab bag' approach to thinking, and Keith relishes his new advantage.

"Man? You're shot out. When are you gonna shut the fuck up?"

Dena laughs.

It's past midnight.

"Toads... croak—"

"Shit. All right, croak then. That works."

"—and hens cluck. But roosters... they crow. That's trippy isn't it... seems like crows should crow, but what... what do crows do again?"

"They sit on telephone poles and watch your sorry ass, fucking wander around talking to yourself."

"Nah... that's not it..." Stevie says casually, dismissively.

"Caw?" Dena suggests.

“Caw.” Like he’s trying it on. “Caw... I think you’re right. Caw...”

After a spell of silent trudging wherein the only sound is the low hiss of a breeze none of them can feel:

“...Crow, cluck, croak, caw...”

Silently, gradually they descend. Eventually they hit a sort of atmospheric boundary and the air around them abruptly drops in temperature. They step through it as if wading out beyond an invisible shoreline. They’re in the ghost of deep water now.

“We’re getting warmer. I swear.”

“Bull shit we are,” Lee says, rubbing his arms for emphasis.

“You ever wonder? How come if there’s such a thing as warm, like between cold and hot—”

“Ahh shit. Here we go—”

“—and if you start with something cold and add heat you say you’re making it warmer, like closer to quote unquote warm... but if you start with something hot and add cold to get it closer to quote unquote warm, you know? You can’t say you’re—”

“Hey quote unquote dingleberry! Who quote unquote fucking cares,” Keith barks. Not yet finished savoring his wit, he adds: “quote unquote douchebag.”

The grunts of general concurrence compel Stevie back to bargaining.

“I’m telling you, you’re going to trip. All you guys. You’ll see.”

“Motherfucker you’re already tripping. Serious, you probably just hallucinated this shit. Then I’m gonna have to fuck you up. Watch.”

Stevie isn’t listening. He’s watching his feet as they crunch

over the salty crust of the dry lakebed. They are making their way around a small promontory and into a large bay. Because of the way the peninsula curls around its mouth, the bay can't be seen from the 395, or from Cartago for that matter. Likewise, the lights from the road and town are completely hidden from their view. They're alone.

“Okay, turn on the flashlight now.”

Dena hands the flashlight to Stevie, who starts sweeping the spot of light around chaotically. It darts around on the surface like a particle.

“Give me that fucking thing!” Keith says, getting loud. “What the fuck you doing?”

“Hold on. I'm looking for the end of it. I don't want us to step on it.”

Dena, sensing that the scene could use a note of hysteria:

“Step on it?! Step on what?”

“Look.” Stevie brings the light down to the area around their feet. The spot shakes in place, insect-like.

“See how the ground is so smooth here? No cracks or big pieces? See how it's like paper almost? Come on this way.” He stomps over to where the shore once was, taking the light with him. The others follow. Dena takes a swig from the bottle.

“What were you doing here in the first place, Stevie?” she asks.

“You don't— I don't even want to go into that. Let me just find it first.” They follow the old shoreline, keeping the volcanic, sage-covered hills a few feet to their right. Stevie sweeps the light back and forth—from just in front of them out toward the middle of the bay—with a sort of fly-fishing motion. The

moon falls out of sight as they walk, and the flash-lit spot grows brighter in contrast. After ten more minutes of hypnotizing and thoroughly frustrating the party with his spastic illuminating (while half-singing snippets of ‘The Seeker’ and just starting on ‘I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For’) Stevie finally yells:

“There it is. I see it.”

Keith exhales sharply.

“Uh... you better fucking see it,” he says.

“Hey I told you. You guys are the ones who didn’t believe me—”

“Chssshhh!” Lee puffs. “What am I looking at, dickweed?”

“Well? Look at it! You tell me.” Stevie twists the neck of the flashlight. The spot dims and spreads.

“I don’t see... no, yeah, I do see it!” Keith shouts.

“What did I tell you?” Stevie shouts back.

Soon they all start discharging in audible sparks the nervous energy they’d gathered during the trek.

“No. Fucking way...” Dena shouts.

“Way! Fucking A, right?”

“Who the...? What the?” Dena stammers; speechless-on-purpose. “Man-o Jeez-o...”

“Did you do this?” Lee shouts as he walks into the dry bay toward the oval of light, “on one of your speed binges?”

“Not even! I told you— Dude, you’re fucking stepping all over it! Look at your footprints!”

“So what? I don’t give a shit.” Lee keeps walking. But no one



joins him, and Stevie takes the light away, so he gradually works his way back to the edge.

“All right, then. Well let’s, fucking... see how far this goes. It’s huge, huh? It looks like.”

“I bet it goes all the way to the end,” Stevie points the flash-light straight ahead of them, then attempts to focus on the spot in space where the beam gets digested by the darkness.

“I’ll take that bottle now, Dena.” Lee says. “All right then!” he repeats, taking a hearty swig, “who’s got the weed?”

“My guy’s out.”

Keith spits.

“Fuck your guy. He ain’t ever out of crystal though, huh Stevie.” Keith allows a few seconds to pass, then slowly sighs, playing up the reluctant hero routine. “All right. You fucking leeches. I got something. Good a time as any I guess.” Keith unzips his jacket pocket and takes out a heavy-duty brass and steel pipe. “Flash that light over here, Mister fucking Toad.” Keith’s the man now. He unscrews the pipe, bisecting its abdomen, tears at something he finds inside, shoves that into the bowl, reassembles the pipe and hands it to Lee. “I’ve had this bud in my chamber for like, a month. It’s gotta be sick by now. But we’re walking and smoking, cause I got shit I got to do tomorrow. Shit. Today, I mean.”

“Me too.” Stevie adds.

“Shit... What are you worried about? Your ass don’t sleep, remember?”

Lee takes a hit and, without exhaling, says: “What do you got to do tomorrow, Keith? Watch the Price is Right?”

“Bitch, shut the fuck up! I got your Price is Right right here.” Keith grabs his crotch. “I’m talking about making some ducats.”

“Yeah right.”

“Yeah right.” Keith studies Lee for a second. Stevie came through after all; time to lay off him and back into his usual foil.

“Maybe I’m thinking about getting with Esther—”

“All right Keith. Now you’re just being stupid.”

“—she’s got this fucking freeloader, living in her garage—”

“Shit.”

“—that she’s got to support. Buy him cereal, and fucking pop tarts—”

“Damn dude why do you got to get all personal. Shit’s twisted—”

“Oh right! Woops. That’s you, huh!”

“Man that’s cold blooded. Even you saying that is—”

“What? I’m just saying your mom’s fucking got it going on.”

“Whatever, Dude.”

Lee lives in his mother’s garage and, to Lee at least, there has always been a mystery surrounding how her (and, by extension, his) bills get paid. There’s the long sequence of ‘relationships’ she’s had; the interchangeable succession of truckers; the ‘visits’ of a few days, every few weeks or so, for a few months or so. Thought-wise, Lee keeps his mom’s situation in a perpetually unformed state. It’s an approach he takes with most things. Two years older than the others, Lee boasts a premature potbelly that he leads with when he gets riled up, like a sea elephant. When they’re together (which is most of the time), he generally prefers to let Keith do the thinking.

Stevie winces as he takes a hit. Crude shit talking makes him uncomfortable, especially with a girl around. Even Dena. He

passes her the pipe and watches her say, pipe in mouth: “You guys are retards. You know that, right?” cough, then choke “—oh my god this shit is strong, huh...”

Stevie has settled the light; as they walk it floats along next to them like a spectral tour guide. As they talk, they stare; as line after line of print tumble from the diffused, parabolic frontier of the light field to clarify themselves—briefly, at just perpendicular, into a neat, regular script—before peeling away and dissolving again behind them.

Stevie shoots for changing the subject. “I know man; you got to clean your pipe. There’s like a tar pit in there—”

“Dude. Let me clean it for you,” Lee says.

“Why? For the resin? You probably would, too. Fucking sponge.”

“What?” In the tone of someone defending a deeply held conviction, “Fuck yeah I would. I love resin. You know that.”

“You, motherfucker—” Keith, exasperated, starts to say, before dismissing the subject, and Lee.

“Hey Stevie how’d you get that fucking gig washing cop cars or whatever the fuck you do over there? They got you mowing their lawn and shit?”

“I don’t know, it kind of fell in my lap—”

“Shit. Fell in your lap... you mean you fucking fell in Sergeant fucking Slaughter’s lap. Is that what I got to do, Stevie? Service Officer Dale’s fucking unit?”

“You’re such a fag, Keith. I swear to God,” Dena says.

“Maybe. Shit, I fucked you didn’t I?”

“Damn, dude.” Lee says quietly, gazing at Dena and hoping

Keith doesn't notice.

After an ugly little pause, Dena mumbles, "That what you call it?"

There's another, longer silence as the pot takes hold. The black-on-black silhouette of the ridge line more and more noticeably closes in, nudging them with something like a gentle gravity in a radial arc toward what now feels to all of them like the top; or the beginning. But the words are upside down, and the end is their destination.

The bay has narrowed into a broad box canyon. The lines of print have gotten shorter, the letters smaller. After a few more minutes the words stop coming. They've reached the end. They stand still there, rapt in the visual silence. The backstop of black hills looms directly in front of them. They're standing at what would be—if the bay were a giant printed page—its lower-right-hand corner. Stevie follows the last line with the flashlight. The print is only recognizable as such for a few feet before dissolving, but Stevie keeps following the line before settling the light on a dark form near what should be its middle.

"What the fuck is that?" Keith says, stressing 'that'.

"What the fuck is that?" Stevie replies, stressing 'is'.

"Is that a animal?" Dena asks.

"Maybe it's a cougar."

"Your mom—"

"Not that," Stevie pleads. "Please. Besides, looks like it's too dark to be a cougar."

They head towards the form while Stevie keeps the light on it. The last line of print drifts by on their left, too dark to read.

“I know what that is! Holy shit.”

The form clarifies itself to them all, more or less simultaneously.

“What the heck, Stevie?” Dena says angrily.

“Is that a human?”

“Dude that’s a fucking body,” Keith says, stepping up a register. “Looks like it’s burnt or some shit.” Everyone looks at Stevie.

“Don’t look at me. Swear to God I never seen that before right now.”

“Let’s bail,” Keith says as he scans the huge, black piles of volcanic debris that box them in quickly, blindly, as if he’s expecting an ambush at any second. He spins.

“Yeah, fuck this noise. I’m out of here.” Lee chips in—

“You don’t want to check it out? We’re right here. We should—”

“Are you fucking crazy, Stevie?” Dena grabs the flashlight and points it at Stevie. Stevie tightens up like a worm that just got his rock pulled out from over him. He closes his eyes to slits. Dena shouts at him.

“We’re out in the middle of nowhere... in the middle of the night... with a dead body—”

“How do you know—”

“—and no idea who else is out here, I might add. And how’d you find this again?”

“He hasn’t said—”

“I know. He ain’t said shit.”

Stevie would like to tell them something; only he doesn’t

know what to say. He can't tell them how he just had a feeling. He would have to tell them how he spent all those hours—so many hours speeding while they slept. He'd have to admit to his thievery. Stolen time spent pacing around in that concrete bunker out where Lake Street dissolves into the trona, frantically staring through that blown-out window toward the lakebed, staring at that framed-like-a-projection-screen view that invariably conjured images of atomic test site buildings from the old military footage—of that split-second sucking pause, that freakish emptying between the brutal blur of the initial shock wave and the obliterating, transplanted-from-the-surface-of-the-sun tsunami, moving so insanely fast—of the blast... all the while scribbling his thoughts into a spiral notebook. He'd have to explain about how the parallel headlands that enclose or, maybe, embrace this bay are perfectly framed by that rectangular hole-in-the-wall, and how if you stare at it long enough (kind of like those posters he'd seen at the mall in Tehachapi that just look like a design until, right when he'd get ready to give up on it, another image would emerge) it sort of reveals the space it is harboring, and how from that space he could have sworn he heard people, and lots of them? Now, would he believe that if he heard it?

[end of Chapter 1]

# 7

*My screen went blank just long enough for me to release my breath.*

“Okay, so where were we...” Stevie kneels next to the reel-to-reel and adjusts the straps on the respirator/microphone contraption to accommodate the vinyl headphones supplied to him by Chief Hill. He rewinds the tape a revolution or two by hand, then flicks a toggle. “...where were we.” The playback is a little muddy and a little hissy, and his voice sounds more immature than he was expecting it to, but the words are easy to understand. He repeats the process to check the VU meter. It seems fine. He throws the pack on his back and finds the spot. He pulls a pad from one pocket and puts it into another pocket. He takes another toot from the bullet and flicks the toggle again. “Ho-kay! Let’s see... where were we... ah yes yes here we are. Yes-sirreebob. Sirreeboppitybop... andabopbopalooobopalopbam...”

*My screen went blank just long enough for me to release my breath. A bead of sweat broke free from my underarm and tumbled, tickling my ribcage on its way down. Another one rappelled along my biceps before coming to rest in the crook of my elbow. Then the now-familiar petrous features of our intermediary (or whoever he was) reemerged. He was almost smiling, and there was something in his acid-yellow eyes that was almost caring, if not exactly kind.*

*“Mr. Edwards.” The voice was so resonant, self-contained, and crisp as the sound of officiously shuffled paper, somehow, that the top*

*of my head tingled. It was like he touched my pituitary gland and my scalp, like some tide-pool creature, contracted around the contact. "Mister Edwards, you have finished reviewing the full contents of your file, and have verified the veracity—" did he say voracity? "—of all textual and... extra-textual information. Is this correct?"*

"Okay," Stevie editorializes, "so this guy just looked at this file these other people, well I don't mean exactly people, but you know what I mean. I'm just gonna say people. But more like a company. They know all this weird stuff about the guy and he's kinda trippin' because it's all pretty much out of the blue and I think he thought he was just going on a regular job interview. Don't ask me. So I'll continue now, and whoever's listening to this just so you know I won't keep interrupting I just wanted to, um... Well anyways, here we go:"

*"It is," I said,*

Stevie: "This is the guy talking, not me...um..."

*"It is," I said, modulating the last syllable as if to imply "but...". I left it at that.*

*"It is..."*

*"Uh...correct?"*

*"Okay," stressing both syllables. "Good. Now then..." He looked me right in the eyes; that is both of them, simultaneously. "You must have questions. Questions as to our methodology, as to our intentions perhaps, or perhaps as to the ultimate aim of this process. Who are we? What do we...do? I'm sure you are aware that you have been*



*given no obvious clues as to what, exactly, the position is that you are seated here in hope of securing. That brought you to this room. Why is that? And many more questions, I'm sure. Questions as to the data we have collected; as to how it has been presented to you. Why this and not that? Perhaps you feel the need to explain—*

*“You know as a matter of fact I have to say one thing. That skin-head guy?”*

*“Mister Edwards, let me as—”*

*“I mean why that guy? You must've figured out—”*

*“Let me ask you something.” A half-measure of authoritarian tone again, eyes literally flashing, “Mr Edwards.”*

*“Nn-kay.”*

*“Why do you think your history looks the way it does? You think it's because you're lazy, or unfocused? We don't think so. You may find it...unfair of us, to present you to yourself in the way we have. Let me assure you, we possess much more information than we have provided here, and are not unaware of the...circumstantial complexities, extenuations, and so on, which surround and inform your actions... But all of that is inconsequential to what we are hoping to illustrate to you here.”*

*“Can I just ask is this really leading to a job offer somewhere?” My throat felt like a leaky valve— “Because honestly I'm just not seeing, I don't see how— ”*

*“Do you consider yourself a...humanist, Mister Edwards?”*

*“Well, in what sense? I mean—”*

*“In the broadest sense. Would you assert that the process of attainment... of the realization of full human potential—Aristotelian excellence, if you will—is the, if you will forgive a metaphor, the ‘best game in town’? Or the only game, perhaps? Would you assert*

*that the maximal degree of opportunity being given to the maximum number of human beings is intrinsic—even necessary—to the self-realization of the isolated individual? Would you assert that this is the highest aim to which a society can aspire?”*

*“Well...”*

*“Speak frankly.”*

*“Okay, welp... I would say... if I understand you right... there doesn't seem to be any... well sure. I suppose I would.”*

*“Yes...”*

*“Yes what? You want more?”*

*“Please. Keep in mind, Mister Edwards, that we are quite aware that the clear articulation of your thoughts on this subject, particularly within an unfamiliar context, is a difficult task. That is our intent.”*

*“Okay. You want me to explain...I mean, I'll try but...I'm not sure I can. Honestly, I'm not sure I want to try, but I will. I mean, you're talking about relative consciousness here, right? And that's kind of tricky, cause, you know, you take some of those ideas about what a 'higher consciousness' might be? All that jealous God stuff, or the um... Medieval Lord stuff? Taking everything personal, and so much in the wrong way? Going around dispensing rewards and punishment to His, um... inferiors? Being anti-logic and reason? All that? I actually don't see much sense in...you know, I just think that makes for a pretty twisted view of human potential. I mean, if you think this world is just like a waiting room for some exclusive club in some other dimension, well...well I don't really see that. But it does seem like our best conceptions of...of, like, say, transcendence, or illumination? Best to me I guess I should say; well sometimes I think that could be our... our aim, for ourselves, for*

*someday... Like a species project; does that make sense? And we use God, maybe, as like a blueprint." I paused. "I know I'm not being clear enough, but you asked...you know I've got to say this really is hard...I mean, for a job interview?"*

*"Have patience with yourself, Mister Edwards. Please continue."*

*"This might sound, uh, I don't know..." playing right into a weakness of mine, aren't they? "...but maybe our compulsion about becoming like God? Well, maybe we can do it." I stopped to catch my breath. "Even if there isn't one. Yet. You know what I'm saying? Is this at all answering; what was the question?" Silence. "I'm not explaining..." Silence. "Well it does seem to me that we're the only animals trying to become something else all the time. So that might be what we do. Because it is what we do. I mean, it's not like I see chimps being able to ever... but then; I guess no one really knows what dolphins—"*

*"Do you like people for that, Mister Edwards?"*

*"I'm sorry? You mean—"*

*"In the objective sense. The people you encounter in your normal, everyday life, read about, and so forth. The people that exist. With their distractions, their thoughtlessness, their willful ignorance. All the pettiness with which they—we—conduct ourselves. Their willingness to settle. When you dream about what humanity could be capable of, do you ever really ascribe—to the real people you interact with on a daily basis—that potential?"*

*"Oh, I see. Well, I don't know. Not everybody... I could see us being like one big organism, right? A liver cell isn't a brain cell, but they're both human. And anyways, that's where education—"*

*"Do you like children, Mister Edwards? Your students, when you have them? Do you look at them differently than you would, say..."*

*their parents? Are they different? Is it a future...different from your present that you see in your student's faces? Or detect in their cruel rehearsals? What do you really see, when you glimpse the adult in the child?"*

*"Actually, there is the occasional kid—"*

*"—and what can you offer the occasional kid? Your theory of transcendence, your 'willing God into existence', while it might be hopeful enough to ward off nihilism, if only just...it is a bit tortured, isn't it? A theory that requires the primacy of theory? You offer up a pregnant chicken, Mister Edwards; you've dusted off the Biblical concept of 'word made flesh'. But you are a writer, aren't you?"*

*"Again, I'm not sure what you're getting at here. That's what I meant by tricky. Everybody's ideas are different, and... are... each one in constant flux. I'm not saying I'm right, but that's the view from where I stand right now. I mean, you can't believe everything—"*

*"No? Hmm. While you've brought up the subject of religion—"*

*"Wait a minute. It was you that asked me to—"*

*"—you mustn't fail to mention the simplest explanation in considering its utility. As something for the—not your new brain, Mister Edwards, but rather the brain opposite that one...the old brain, if you will—to attach itself to. And attach itself not in order to change, but in order... not to change. In order to remain just what it is. With the rest being merely window dressing. The evolutionary process? Simply a refinery of efficiencies; more consultant than priest, if you will forgive me a metaphor. Is there something about simple explanations that causes you to avoid them, Mister Edwards? Because, as you well know, in this capacity religion has a proven track record. Nature itself seems to prefer surety of mind, and pays no mind to theoretical elegance. An action defines its reaction. But a dimly imagined ideal of humanity? A theoretical exercise, with*

*actual oblivion awaiting every individual in the meantime? Come now, Mister Edwards. If it were possible for you to believe in anything else, anything with something in it for you, would you not leap at the chance to do so?"*

*All right, I thought. So this IS some sales pitch. Maybe the Mormons got some computer out in the desert that—*

*"As it is, you appear to have become dependent upon a chemical facsimile, not even of personal salvation, but merely of an absence of... absence. Lack of meaning. You think the world would be a better place if everyone thought more like yourself? Or let me put it this way, Mr. Edwards. Is the world a better place with you thinking like yourself?"*

*"Hey wait a second. Is this some sort of a... an intervention?"*

*"Do you ever feel, Mister Edwards, that what you have to share may do more harm than good?"*

*"You know? How much of this do you expect me to take? You're full of shit. I'm sorry. I came here to interview for a job, not to have you scour my soul. If this is some conversion attempt... job or not, I really don't need some, whatever, telling me..."*

*"No need to get excited, Mister Edwards."*

*He's right. Don't show these fuckers any emotion. Try— "Okay." Breathe. "What's your point?"*

*"Bear with us here—" the 'I'm in your ear' voice again, "while I make some... educated guesses... about you. Certainly there's no harm in that."*

*I exhaled dramatically. "Shoot. What the hell."*

*"Respond freely, but, please, continue trying to be honest."*

*"Go ahead?"*

*“I’m going to suggest some things to you, then I’m going to tell you something that might surprise you.”*

*I shook my head in hopes of expressing annoyed bewilderment. He went on, not appearing to notice:*

*“Our assessment of your... personal outlook suggests a certain amount of angst and uncertainty. A certain amount of what might be called... existential suffering.”*

*“And what possible difference could that make to you? So what? I can’t imagine what any of this could have to do with anything. I think you should probably mind—”*

*“Here’s what we think. You tell me if we’re wrong. Somewhere far beneath your surface pessimism and anxiety; the seed, if you will, from which your philosophy of open-minded futilism initially grew; is something of a martyr complex. You watch those around you blithely going about their daily lives in a cloud of self-satisfaction and ignorance; while you perceive yourself as being in possession of a truth you suspect most of them are incapable of living with, of suffering the possession of. Mister Edwards, do you see yourself as shielding them from this truth? You once told a friend—in a bar, January of 199—, I quote: “...where’s the sacrifice if you know your ordeal will get you into heaven?”*

*Does that sound like you? You went on: “What God worth its omnipotence wouldn’t see right through that? The motives are selfish...”, and so on. This, I suggest, you do believe. I also suggest you possess an amoral moral superiority, a self-image built around a certain nobility of purposelessness. An exceptionalism; perhaps even a...chosen-ness, if you will. Or, to put it in terms you may be more comfortable with, a mutual empathy with a mortal universe—a mutual affinity, even—beyond the reach of mere human endeavor.”*

*“Seriously? I would say...honestly? That you guys were singularly,*

*um... wrong? Psychotic? And maybe any purposelessness, as you say, you detect? That's coming from this horror show you call an 'interview process' or whatever." I wasn't lying then, but at the same time I knew he was right. That was how I felt, to a degree... if I was truthful about it.*

*"And what would you say if I told you," he said, "that you were right? Yes. You are right about it all. Your exceptionalism... your chosen-ness, Mister Edwards... it is real. It is the truth."*

*"Um, I would say you—whoever you are—you're even crazier than I just thought you were a second ago. Honestly." Not entirely honestly.*

*"Let's examine your job history, your career choices and/or lack thereof, in this light. I would suggest that the same dynamic is at play here. Perhaps you've seen... oh, countless individuals I would imagine... people who do not share your... depth of awareness... seen them achieve outward success merely by limiting the breadth of their experience and choosing instead to focus on a simple... you would probably say shallow... game plan. Or perhaps they pick from among the previously existing templates for a life, and merely retrace, or stencil it. It is hard to deny the effectiveness of that approach; wouldn't you agree? Society does tend to reward what you might, in a strident mood, consider cowardice, or at the very least, monomania. Perhaps you've wondered: is this not only the most that seems to be expected of you by your fellow man, but the most that might be tolerated by him? Whereas you, on the other hand, your inner life is far too vast, isn't it? Too profound to be limited by the banalities of say, career, or... or any number of similarly artificial constructs, for that matter. You operate within an arena of ever-unrealized potentiality, as the prince of a delicate, crystalline palace of thought. You protect this inner life of yours like it's your only child, and react with defiance to anyone who would assume authority over even a*

*small portion. Perhaps you perceive this to be the... the only valid approach to truth. And the difficulties this characteristic brings you can be explained simply as resulting from more ignorance and weakness on the part of your fellows. They would be lined up to enlist you to their aid—*

*“I wouldn’t say I’m nearly that, um, paranoid.”*

*“And what if I were to tell you that—in this also—you have been right in your approach? What if I told you that you have acted with rare nobility of spirit, Mister Edwards, inscrutable to all? Well... to all, that is, save for us.”*

*“Okay. Well, I don’t really know what to say to that. I actually don’t think I agree, but I’m not... maybe at one time....” I wasn’t sure of much at that point. My head felt like it was filled with hydrogen. My thoughts revolved around each other without touching. “Again. Even if everything you say is true, how would any of that pertain to me getting a job, is what I’m wondering.” Which was true.*

*“Attached to the back of your computer, you will find an electronic pen. If you would like to participate in our training program, take that pen and ascribe your signature to the last document in your file.” A document appeared onto the screen.*

*The letterhead read: PISR, 5 Paradigm Dr. 94616-0005. That was it. The body of the document read: I hereby agree to participate in the Special Career Training Program. Information gathered during the course of the program may be used by PISR for research purposes. Signed,*

*“Upon signing, you will be asked to read the statement aloud while facing your monitor. At which point the sum of one thousand dollars will be automatically transferred to your... Union Bank? ... your Union Bank checking account, and made immediately avail-*



*able to you. We have arranged for this and all further payments to be tax-exempt. You will then be directed to take—*

*“I’m sorry could you slow down a little bit? What’s that about research? What kind of research am I submitting to?”*

*“Nothing...sinister, Mister Edwards. Nothing so sinister as... well... as yourself. As a matter of fact, our research will require nothing of you outside of your participation in the various interactive exercises which will comprise your training regimen. You will be asked to bring this laptop computer home with you—it is yours—and your gloves, which you will use while operating the computer while away from our... facilities. The gloves will also serve to allow you to enter and exit from our facilities. As I’m sure you’ve guessed, the gloves you have been given are outfitted with certain biometric sensors, and should never be tampered with under any circumstances while you are off-site. Now—”*

*“Wait a second. I’m confused. Is this the job? A thousand bucks to submit myself— ”*

*“Merely the training, Mister Edwards. I’m sure I explained that. Further compensation will be made in additional thousand dollar payments automatically transferred to your account at the conclusion of every twenty-four hour period in which you are in active participation in our program.” Wait. What?*

*“That’s a lot of money, isn’t it?”*

*“No, Mister Edwards. It is not.”*

*“Well.” This must be some kind of a trap, I thought. I didn’t know any more about the place than I did when I got there. “It’s legal, whatever it is you’re doing?”*

*“Perfectly.”*

*“Okay, well can you tell me who you guys are now? Or how this*

*money is tax-deductible? Whether or not this is some sort of a church at least?”*

*He smiled. “You should understand at the outset that a degree of patience will be required of you with regards to our training. You will be...illuminated as to our...aims and means in a manner consistent with your progress—”*

*“Okay, if not you guys, then you? Yourself, personally?”*

*“That, I’m afraid, I also cannot disclose to you at present. Permit me to suggest to you—and I realize the meaning of my suggestion cannot be fully...comprehended by you now—that our mutual purposes will be best served if you are able to perceive...try to follow me here, Mister Edwards... to metaphorize me as a function of, how shall I put it, your own subconscious. Do you follow?”*

*“No. Not at all.”*

*“No. Of course you don’t. Mister Edwards, if you do indeed agree to participate, as I strongly suspect you will, you will be required to set aside an uninterrupted amount of time—say, a quarter-hour, perhaps after your wife retires at night—to be spent in correspondence with me via the laptop you have been designated. It is important—please try to pay attention here—that you assign no particular identity to me during these sessions, as that may... compromise the integrity of our research data. Naturally, you may deny the reasonability, or even the possibility, of this request, as you have undoubtedly already gathered certain perceptions, individualized me in other words, which you may feel yourself unable to... deperceive. But we insist that you try. As you will find, we have certain...applications...that will make this task quite less than impossible. Again, we find that the simplest way for you to furnish us what we require is for you to conceive of our dialogues as... monologue, if you will.”*

*“I beg your pardon? And what exactly will I be furnishing that’s*

*worth a thousand dollars a day to you guys? That song and dance about me being, like, some singularity? I think a lot of people must feel that way.”*

*“So we were correct. And yes, those notions are quite common in persons given to certain forms of... introspection. They are generally mistaken. Not always, of course, but generally they are. Now we are by no means completely certain about you, Mister Edwards, but here’s what we suspect, and why you are here.”*

*Wait. Didn’t I find them?*

*“What may set you apart, and this is more than we anticipated sharing, may not be so much your relationship with society, but your relationship with... time. We shall see.”*

*I snorted, “Well, that clears things up, right!”*

*“I would suspect not. But you asked what we should expect of you during your training period. And I have responded honestly. What we expect, all we desire from you, for now, is your time.”*

*There was a predatory flash in the way he said that that made me uncomfortable. “Don’t worry, Mister Edwards.” –the gloves must’ve picked up something– “There is no danger. Just the opposite. I grant you, the training process may seem... unusual at times, but you will get used to it. Of that much we should be confident. You enjoy unfamiliar circumstances, do you not?”*

*“Only to a point.”*

*His eyes became sunny. “So. Do you give it a shot? I’m afraid we have to ‘wrap this up’ now. Again, assuming you agree, after you sign the form and state your affirmation, you will take this computer with you and exit through the doors by which you entered. You will not reconvene with your fellow candidates today. In the Green Room you will find an escalator. Take that down. It will con-*

*nect you to a moving walkway, which will convey you a distance to another escalator. Take that up. It leads to a short corridor, at the end of which is a door. Hold out your gloved hand, and the door will open. You will find yourself at the head of a short trail leading to the gate through which you entered this morning. When you reach the gate, hold out your gloved—”*

*“What if I’m not interested?”*

*“If you choose not to participate? You will be asked to remain in the Green Room. After a short wait you will be driven to the gate... and released.”*

*“What about my shoes?”*

*“Your shoes will be waiting for you in an alcove located to the left of the door leading to the exterior pathway. You will leave your slippers there in the alcove.”*

*“And tonight? How do—how would I—”*

*“Simply turn on your computer. After a moment—”*

*“Any time?”*

*“Any time before two AM.”*

*“Well, shit.” I looked around. The doors were open. When did that happen? Most of my fellow applicants had already left. “I wish I could have some time to think it over.”*

*“Time? Take a moment. But you must decide, one way or the other, before you leave this room.”*

*I leaned back. On the one hand, the whole experience had me feeling somewhat degraded and somewhat more creeped out. And in my head I had already sacrificed the next day to that night’s getting smashed on airplane bottles of Jack Daniel’s and sifting through my drawer of note paper scraps and post-its to see if any of those old*

*flashes of inspiration still made any sense. Or maybe I'd just add to the pile, like usual. It sounded like an impossibly good time, actually. But then it occurred to me that they may already have guessed my plans. And they didn't seem to care. But was that a good thing? Could any of it be good? Are there any 'good' organizations willing and able to pay thousands of dollars to people like me? There was, of course, the thousand dollars. A thousand dollars a day was a good thing. For training, though? With no strings attached? It was too good a thing.*

*"All we're doing is some team-building exercises, you said? And late-night computer meetings? That's it?"*

*"That's all you would be agreeing to at this time."*

*"And what about later?"*

*"You will be made aware of any changes to the program as it evolves. You will be asked to do nothing to which you have not already agreed. You may rest assured of that."*

*Creepy.*

*But: a thousand dollars a day. A thousand dollars a day.*

*"And my time away from here is my own?"*

*"You are free to do as you please."*

*"Well." I knew there was no real question as to what I was going to do. I had the internal debate, to make myself feel better. Now—*

*"Well I'm going to do it."*

*"Very good, Mister Edwards. Excellent. Now just sign the statement, and read it aloud while looking directly at your monitor."*

*I did what he told me to.*

*"Okay..."*

*"You are free to go. You will be returning tomorrow at nine AM."*

*In the meantime, we will talk for a few moments tonight. Good afternoon, Mister Edwards. And good fortune.”*

*“Uh...okay. Thank you, uh...—”*

*“Mister Edwards.”*

*“Yes?”*

*“Or you may call me David, if you prefer.”*

*“Are...—oh! Wait a minute! You mean... You’re kidding, right?”*

*“You are under no obligation to address me by name, Mister Edwards. But should you choose to... no. I’m quite serious. Oh, yes... and please refrain from conversation with your fellow candidates on your way out.” I stared at him in disbelief. “And Mister Edwards? You may want to keep in mind that not everyone has been given the same manner of compensation as yourself.”*

*Before I knew it I was outside and alone. The road disappeared around a bend below me and reappeared several hundred feet further down. I could see the fat guy from the interview room stomping his way across a bright patch down there, shielding his face from the sun with one arm. The other arm held what I guessed was a laptop, but his girth caused it to angle away from him in a way that reminded me of a discus thrower. There were no cars, and no one else on the road that I could see. Maybe the place had multiple exits. Who the hell knew? It wasn’t me. I lurched stiffly down the hill, slapping the balls of my feet on the asphalt, till I reached the spot where I’d glimpsed the man. There was a clear view to the west from there. The sun was being cupped by the suspension cables of the Golden Gate Bridge, and the sunlight was drifting toward the red end of the spectrum. I must’ve been in there for hours, I thought; but it didn’t feel like any particular amount of time had gone by. It was a funny feeling.*

*I figured I'd work my way down to the BART station and check the Union Bank ATM that was across the street. I'd hit a liquor store when I got back to my neighborhood. I looked back up the road. I could see no sign of the place I'd just come from. The eucalyptus trees around me had that cat piss smell to them. Ammonia. I had drank about a gallon of water before leaving, and with all the sloshing around it was doing as I sole-slapped my way to the flatlands, a cramp was starting to form like a tropical depression in the area of my kidney. By time I reached the bottom it was at full force. I had my fingers pressed up behind my ribcage. It didn't help. I squinted up the block of faded bungalows on my right, then the block of worn-out apartment buildings in front of me. At the end of that block I spied a moldy-looking white plastic store sign, dimly backlit. There was a 70's era RC Cola logo on it, and—in black-faded-to-grey letters—S&M Liquor. The ampersand was of a do-it-yourself type, a backwards 3 bisected by a lower case L. Fuck it. Get something for the walk.*

*When I got to the store the metal door grate was locked. A note was pierced by one of its galvanized metal spears. It read: back in 15 minutes. In an apartment above the store I could hear a man chanting. Evening prayers, I guessed. Should I wait? I looked up the street. I couldn't see any signs of opportunity for at least the next couple of blocks. What an annoying note! How was I supposed to know how long ago it was put there? A pair of black teenagers showed up on bicycles and began silently orbiting around the intersection. They were both wearing oversized, bright white t-shirts. Quite possibly bought from that same liquor store. I could see them for sale behind the register. One of the guys rode a beach cruiser with silver strips woven into its spokes in an apparent attempt to simulate auto rims. The other guy was on a girl's ten-speed. They kept circling. I had already stopped, and obviously appeared to be*

*waiting. I felt exposed. The battered, anonymous neighborhood suddenly became a barren plain, and I was a forsaken herd animal with nothing to do but watch as the predators and scavengers gathered around me. A thousand bucks a day. I could rent a car for that. Take a cab at least. I was still holding my new laptop, and I also held a fleece pull-string bag that contained my supergloves. Sky-blue, with PISR printed on it in white block letters. Oh, brother. The chanting stopped. I relaxed. A few seconds later an old bearded man opened the grate, turned around and shuffled to his perch behind the counter. I walked over to the register and peered beyond it to where the miniature liquor bottles were usually found. Postcards of Yemen hung from a shelf filled with 50ml bottles of E&J Brandy. Ugh. "You got any of those little Jack Daniel's?" I asked, helpfully supplying a bottle measurement with my thumb and forefinger. The man looked at me and shook his head. The combined odors from a dozen varieties of cheap incense disturbed my sinuses. A bouquet of tiny glass tubes—each tube containing a gratuitous cloth-and-wire rose—balanced on the register, partially obscuring the proprietor. "Jim Beam?" "Only this. E and J." He pointed at the brandy. I gave him an "I'm really stretching the old self-loathing here, partner" look and said, sighing, "let me have two of those then I guess." He looked back at me—in the way my grandma might, were I trying to buy bad booze from her—and said "You know, you can buy from somewhere else. I don't mind." Well, I thought, No use pretending here. For the purposes I had in mind, cheap brandy would serve just as well as anything else. Even better, perhaps, more to the point. "No that's all right. I'll take 'em."*

*As soon as I got outside I reached into the small brown paper bag and pulled out a bottle. The guys on the bikes were gone, and the sunlight had begun to shift from orange to purplish grey. It had gotten darker in the five minutes I was in the market. I squeezed*



*a bottle from the bag. I twisted the aluminum cap from its sealing and poured the brandy straight down my throat. I let out a quiet moan and choked back a dry-heave. "Oh, Jesus," I said out loud. The stuff was miserable. I made it about a half a block before draining the second bottle. It went down more easily than the first, but hit my empty stomach like corn-sweetened battery acid. "Oh Jesus," again, but with less conviction. I wrapped the bag around the bottles, shoved them into a hedge I was passing, and ran for one step. Out of sight out of mind. My eyelids relaxed, and my senses became slightly less edgy. I covered the next few blocks with pointless determination. I'm going to have to cover this taste up with something, soon as possible, I thought. I kept meeting my reflection in the passenger-side windows of the parked cars I passed; each time I gave myself the same look of chronic disappointment before sheepishly averting my self-gaze. What a pain in the ass this is, I thought. So much work...*

*I popped into another liquor store on the same block as the bank, and successfully acquired four little bottles of Jack Daniel's. As I quickly emptied the first of those, an escaping air bubble caused some of the liquid to splash from my mouth while a burning rivulet formed to travel, pachinko ball style, or like quicksilver, through my stubble to the collar of my shirt. I thought about it but didn't bother checking to see if the rivulet reached its destination or—like the Colorado River being gobbled by the circuitry of sun-belt sprawl, never to reach the Gulf—got dissipated en route. Dissipated en route. I looked around. It was a busy intersection; cars were peeking out from between buildings, turning on headlights and inching their way across sidewalks full of elderly Laotian ladies being ballasted by reused bags of strange greens. A pack of strangers huddled together in a hive at the bus stop. They waited anxiously—buzzing into the street by turns—for an accordion-type bus that was stuck, folded into*

*another stop up the street and unable to work itself into the flow of traffic. All of it was acquiring that alcoholic 'things moving in a fluid' quality that, for some reason I never could figure out, made urban navigation so enjoyable. I walked over to the ATM. Shit am I still holding—Okay, yes. Can't forget... I decided to get a hundred dollars cash first; then I'd look at my balance on the receipt. Heighten the suspense. I gave my card to the machine and typed in my PIN with a gust of nervousness. What if I'd been played? What if I couldn't take any money out? I spent all but my last dollar and a quarter on the whiskey. Not enough for BART. I'd have to... I didn't know what I would have to do. Panhandle seventy-five cents? Walk home? A dollar twenty-five would get me one more of those E&J's, I guess...*

*Then what do you know? Modern banking's Great Affirmation was given: 'Please Take Your Cash'. Card? Check. Receipt? One thousand, six hundred seventeen dollars; eighteen cents. There it was. What a pretty number. \$1617.18. That morning I had \$726.19 in my account. So with the bank scraping \$9.01 off the top (unexplained, of course; and so consistent with that customary obliqueness which should make Byzantium look like a barter faire by comparison), I luxuriated in a vision of the penny being channeled to some robot war chest somewhere before relegating the thought to my 'used flashes' stockpile. There it was. I'll be damned. There it was. I folded up the receipt and put it in a pocket of my wallet. Just in case. Great! Now whatever happens, I win. I got a thousand bucks from those people! And all these people around me? None the wiser! Look at them. Look at them! Noble, clueless... trying and failing, trying again... You poor people!*

*Wishing to make the most of my mania while knowing all too well what tended to replace it, I walked around the building to its parking lot and downed another bottle. I was on top of the world. I*

*shoved that bottle into a bush in one of those curb-reefed streetlight islands, thinking: who cares who sees me? I looked at the glove bag. Who cares what they see? They asked for it. We're all connected like that.*

*I took this darkly carefree attitude with me onto the BART train. I spent the next few minutes with my forehead pressed to a window that looked like it had been bombarded at high speed by millions of abrasive particles and watched as the chiaroscuro reflection of my face morphed through an evolution of grotesque masks. Every so often I would get disturbed and blink, thereby resetting the spell/process.*

*When I got off the train the sky was the color of a blood plum. A desert sky got lost in Oakland. The air was still and full in the way it is just after a windstorm, but there had been no windstorm that I knew of. The moon was somewhere—also full, or almost—but I couldn't find it. There was a windy sound coming from the freeways, but I couldn't see those either. Lights were starting to take their time transiting my field of vision, darting and elongating a bit. Falling into my singularity, I mused. But still comfortable. Not the frantic torquing yet. Not yet. I got three more airplane bottles for home, had one for the walk, so...four. Rattling around in my pocket like bamboo chimes. I wrapped them tightly with a bag and tucked that into the inside pocket of my jacket. Oh shit did I...? No, okay. I got them. I enjoyed the eight-block walk in that stage of blooming intoxication, in boyish awe at wonders like overlapping angles of rooflines silhouetted behind ground-cover-hugged retaining walls, or the multiple-light-sourced shadows falling over the curb. All of it important and remarkable, and me the man to bear witness, etc. Before I knew it I was home. The traveling carnival ground to a halt at the bottom of my stairs. That was awful quick, shit. Was I running? Not prepared... I cleared my throat and, holding my eyes*

*open a little wider, walked in. My wife was sitting in the living room, reading. She looked up at me slowly, stared for an excruciating three or four seconds, then returned to her book. I couldn't see the title, only a pen-and-wash drawing of a caged bird on the dust jacket. Something with some shitty man in it, no doubt. I stood there dumbly, at a loss as to how to proceed, then dumbly held out the laptop and bag. Then, finally—*

*“So I had a weird day,”* pathetically.

*“I'm sure you did.”* Not looking up, voice dripping with contempt.

*“I did, actually. I don't even know where to start—”*

*“What's that in your pocket?”* My pocket? I stared at her damply, damning myself.

*“My pocket?”*

*“Your pocket!”* slapping herself on the chest. I just kept staring, trying to feel offended while my chest pocket bulged and a little flap of serrated brown paper peeked out of it like an idiot's handkerchief. I was the convicted man, watching the judge's mouth for the sentence.

*“You know what? Can you just fuck off? Leave me alone.”*

*That was just the sentence I was hoping for. But no. Not yet. Hopelessly, perversely: “You know what?”* What? What the hell was I going to say? *“Maybe you could try and not be so...I don't know. I mean, maybe—”*

*“Are you really going to make me get up and leave this fucking room, now?”* Her eyes were white hot. I did my punctured-tire impersonation. *“No.”* Deflating... *“I'll be downstairs.”*

*“Surprise, surprise.”* Slinking away, I worked on piecing together a logic that would put the blame on her. It was there, I knew.

*As usual, I only tried to find it when I was drunk and obviously, directly guilty. When it wouldn't cohere. She should treat me like a man! I thought. So it's not true...so? It could be. But she refuses to cast the spell? The exercise always seemed to be too much trouble when I was sober; to say nothing of pointless and unfair. There's a definition of irony there...*

*My writing area was in a moldering corner of the garage. It consisted of two filing cabinets supporting a blanket-wrapped length of plywood upon which sat an outdated, beige computer amidst various scraps and filmy stacks of paper. The space was enclosed on two sides by rough-framed redwood siding that had been marinating in oil and dust for decades. I could see moonlight through the rotten siding boards, and on the studs were black-moldy patches, freshly irrigated from a recent rain. I took out another bottle then got down on my stomach to shove the bag under an old magazine-covered sewing machine console. As a child I used to escape the summer heat by lying out on the garage floor, where the concrete slab always stayed cool. I was reminded of that every time I performed the bag-hiding ritual in my area, and it was soothing; though at times the floor could be so cold there as to feel wet on my cheek, and would eventually begin to hurt. The bag joined some others (also empty-bottled), which I would sneak into the garbage can on the night before trash day. I curled my tongue into a tube and poured the whiskey. It cascaded down my tongue like water in a waterslide to the pool of my throat while I, in an unformed sort of way, imagined myself as young and carefree, riding the chute. For an instant I was ecstatic. Then the instant was over.*

*I was sitting in a cold garage staring at composting piles of old inspiration in a lot of creativity gone to seed. This is what I was looking forward to? At times like this they struck me as vaguely nauseating, those piles. I would get this feeling while looking at*

*the obsessively rendered, hyperlineated drawings made by schizophrenics, for instance (the more technically astute the draftsman-ship, the more horrifying, generally), or while watching the chaotic finger movements and darting eyes of some bus-bound, mid-episode unfortunate. It was like a glimpse at a certain dark secret about the nature of things. Inner...brokenness, made manifest in the world of objects, assaulting the necessary illusion of, the possibility for... moderation, maybe. Not only man-made manifestations either; obsessive design in nature would give me the same feeling. Too many eggs in one sac, too many sacs... too much going on in that flower if you looked too closely. Too many stars. I suspect that that was the secret behind the mild horror I would feel while looking at my own display of uncontained fertility. Nature itself, unfolding in a realization of... insanity.*

Ugh. "And that's why you drink, son," I said out loud, in what I noticed was my father's voice; in what may have been his father's voice. "Oh kay," in my own voice, "pull out." I looked at the clock, pulling out. Nine-thirty. Okay. I resolved to take another stab at organizing my mess of unfocused conceits, honest and half-honest attempts, pretty unfettered sentences, beginnings of epic works; other abortions. 'All these little bits of proof. Proof that you did not indeed drown in that pool on that day; that no vehicle rushed in to occupy at least one of those spots on the wrong side of that mountain road on which you too often found yourself, trapped in the back seat as your old man's girlfriend in her whining Subaru Brat determined to take the straightest possible line...' Sure. I would do that. Edit. Just like the last time I 'tried', or the time before that. Edit what? There was no way of organizing all of these undated abstractions; nor was there any reason to bother, really. No one ever saw any of the stuff but me. I would get it into my head from time to time to piece a bunch of it together into some formalized compendium, with stories

*here informing aphorisms there as all parts played off of the whole, maximizing the profundity and beauty of the work and—by extension—of my mind. The Dave. But what always really happened was I'd get drunk and read my own stuff (again!) and sort it into piles according to however any particular thing struck me at that particular time. Like there might be a cringe-inducing pile, a good workmanship pile, an 'I totally know what I mean!' pile and so on. Then I'd come back to it after a while, on a different drunk, and start all over again. And in the meantime the piles grew. On receipts, photo and printer paper, the margins of old crossword puzzles, notebooks whose purposes tended to devolve from specific to general, post-its... Then there was all the stuff on the computer hard drive, which I would have to treat like an alien, imponderable world if I were to get anything accomplished at all. Either that or some mental input overload breaker would trip, and I would end up more or less paralyzed, staring at but unable to comprehend my own words. And trying to transfer those notations and scribbles onto the computer? There was a bleak exercise! Just the thought of it had me on the floor, my hand sweeping like sonar for the heaviest bag, empty bottles rattling like bones. Ugh!*

*Refortified, I thought: this time it's different. Thousand bucks a day for me. Cause? Because I 'got what it takes'! Whatever it is. That takes... a unique specialness; a special uniqueness. And here was my proof. I'd written things I'd never read before. But then just about everything I'd read before was actually published, whereas... hmmm. There were piles just like mine, unpublished, all over the world. Must be. Maybe we're all working on the same thing! In communal isolation. And ignorance. Writing the Great Unread Thing. Wow; then; nah fuck that. I'd let them read it. Who knows what's useful after all? So what if I couldn't see redemption in it? Someone might! Right? Who was it that said writers should keep in mind that*

*someone might be reading them on their deathbed? Aw well. What are you supposed to do? Lie? Write lies and dress them up as truth? Isn't that the opposite of fiction? That's a sin even an atheist can get behind. Or against, rather. Ah, screw it. Why do I have to be all these other people? Why can't there be any, 'you know, I'm just a dumb writer. Let someone else do the figgerin' part...' Hell, they say; no, they usually write, don't they, that nobody even reads anymore, but then writers are still expected to be responsible for Everything. All right. Fuck it. No more thinking. What have we got here...*

*It turned out that I was in a narrative mood. My poetry was getting on my nerves. Too much self-conscious meaningfulness; too much romantic hiding in the mist. I became overly aware of a mawkish quality in everything I wrote. I fell into one of those moods where I wasn't too impressed with my work, and I could see the problems with it too clearly; they were too obvious and fatal to be bothered with. I really hated that mood. But there was nothing I could do about it; I never knew how I would respond to myself until I started reading the words. That's all right. Soldier on. There were some little stories I had set apart, some long-ago A-Team. All right, let's see what's wrong with these. Let's see...here's Russ (c. 199-), sitting on the tail gate of his '78 Chevy Luv, throwing acorns at the far curb. Waiting for his coke dealer. Here's Scott (c. 200-), my mooncalf 16-year-old alter-ego, sitting on the curb at a suburban bus-stop, waiting an hour in the heat for a ride to Pasadena. Tiana (c. 199-), elevenish, sitting on another curb, sharpening a popsicle stick on the pavement. Not even waiting. Jesus! Come on, people! All these back stories, but nobody's fucking doing anything. Nothing's happening. Screw these guys. Let's find some action! We got Harvey (c. 200-) here; what's he up to? Oh yeah, Infinity Fever. Pass. Scott again (c. 199-), wishing he could roll the world into a ball and hold it. Pass. Somebody training his nostrils to smell*



*in stereo. Mmn, nah. Description of a sunrise? A guy trying to use telepathy to get a bee off his face? Lonny and Ronny? Hetrix? (c. 200–): “Darksome...”...ugh... Scott again, with Infinity Fever: “he realized HE was a matter of time...?” Sheesh. Oh, yeah...that dismal old style, of sentences like “...as a wet night may cause a certain blending of parts subject to contact with its effluent medium into a more cohesive and yet not so definable or delineable environment, an arena suitable for elemental interplay inherently symbiotic (due partially to the wonder of that most gregarious of molecule in its gifts for both bonding and transmitting...” just to describe reflection? Oh, Brother. Scott again, saving sow bugs from pincher bugs? A description of a sunset? How about a field? A road (Joe (c. 199–); waiting while moving)? Drunken love-letters to cigarettes? Pee Wee hanging from the semaphore, working arcane equations? No. No. No! Snippets of conversation? Okay. Sure. I’d set those aside. Let’s not make this a total waste.*

*Was I looking for something in particular? No. In general? Well... it had occurred to me that certain themes and subjects orbited around the whole... whatever it was. I had been developing the same ephemeral ‘concepts’ for all the twenty years covered by that pile of jottings. A boy leaves home, in order to ‘leave home.’ An adolescent is disillusioned to muteness when he figures out he’s been lied to by society. A young man sees himself as an old man looking back at his life, thinking about how precocious he once was. An old man, receiving the message that he as a young man had sent to his future, transmitted along the lines of mental notes-to-self like “remember, the alarm clock is broken and you got to be up by six-thirty, so, if it’s six-thirty, get up,” but on a macro scale, over years; strong initial signal, a path subconsciously kept clear... Little nibbles at the nature of time, about how perspective shifts with context, and how it doesn’t. And, as far as the writing went, it hadn’t. I’d written the*

*same thing over and over with different-ish words, different structures. It occurred to me that, since I didn't like anything I had done at that time anyway, I would try to organize the stuff thematically. Maybe if I saw everything about 'leaving', say, or 'trains', all together, some hidden thread of meaning would show itself. Something hard to get to; something worthwhile, maybe. I got excited by the prospect, excited enough to grab two more bottles. That left one. Would I get more? That was a secret I would keep from myself. No. No way. Be strong. You know what happens. You don't need to go wandering the streets again, making those sick rounds. Hitting liquor stores you've stayed away from for a couple of days. Mixing 'em up, letting the proprietors think theirs is the only store you patronize, hint at that being the case. Hmm. Maybe they all know each other. Did they know my game, and pity me as a lost cause? Or cash cow? No. I wouldn't do that tonight. Then, of course: Yes. I will probably go. I plan on being up for a while. The sooner I stop the sooner the hangover arrives. The sooner I stop the sooner tomorrow arrives. Yes. No. NO! Yes. Who knows? I gargled another shot, and threw everything back into a single pile.*

*The next hours were spent in a blurred, slippery haze. I sat on the floor and started spreading papers around. Just to overwhelm myself I noted all the different times, all the different contexts and states of mind and body before me. It was like looking at the stars on a dark, clear night, and contemplating how each little dot of light began its trip toward me at a different point in time, and how what I'm really looking at is all this time, all these times, converging at me... I began building piles of themes that would evolve into other themes. Time seemed a good place to start, but turned out to be too broad. It all seemed to be about time. So, here's 'time as river'... Okay...rivers. I found some 'memory as river', which branched out (I had the paper physically branching out from the*

source), other stuff about memory. Plenty. I started reading all this stuff about memory, written at different periods of my life. Different ideas as to what it was (memory), or what it was to remember, memories accruing contexts through past remembrances, and similar stuff. And again, it all seemed to be beating around the same bush, one I'd never managed to identify. I was surprised by that... that murky consistency that still somehow was consistent in all this far-flung production. Something very strange was happening to me. I found myself being transported to the time and place from which each 'piece' emanated. Not just imagined myself to be transported, but there. Really subtle things, like atmospheric pressure, or the taste in my mouth as I wrote, all that I was aware of; but there was something more than sensory input I was getting. I was getting everything, all of the context; like, what I was looking forward to the next week, or whatever thoughts I couldn't get out of my head, or what bills were overdue at the time. When I got to: "...eyes flutter, he reached beside him and from the top of a large box of fruit pies, grabbed a copy of 'Paradise Regained'...", for instance, not only could I smell that the cheese-bread cooking in the toaster oven was about to 'ding', and see the precise shape of that mote-sparkling parallelepiped the afternoon sun was transmitting to my tabletop, and hear the scrape of the outside gate as it dragged against the sidewalk, but I also gathered that I was sick of cheese-bread, and would make sure that for dinner I would get something healthy, maybe a nice soup packet from the health-food store and definitely not let myself be lazy and get pizza slices for dinner; and that the beam of sunlight was then transporting me—but only in a dimly perceived way—to my grandmother's house, when I was five or six, staring at another dusty ray of sunlight terminating at her oversized, amber glass lamp, and that I hoped the person who'd opened the gate and was about to bound into the house was the Mike that

would have weed, and not the Mike that was going to want beer. I could sense the contours, my vista on the past and future, what shape the past was making, what was emerging and what was receding and with what character were these things emerging and receding. What Doppler effects, what overlapping influences... It was a very intense experience, one I would call spiritual even, if it wasn't so cold. As to the river pile: I had strayed from whatever focus I had to begin with; there were 'branches' all over, and they were moving away from each other like a universe bound for heat-death. In addition to the more metaphysical suckers on the trunk, there was one for 'train tracks and trains' (via 'rivers of men'), which became 'roads and 'the road'; then bits on traveling that all seemed to belong connected. Another for actual rivers being actually experienced which went nowhere. Or rather, it went, briefly and out loud to: "why is this all based on rivers anyways?" while the foundation for that branch had me off in another direction. This one started with something I wrote while sitting on an old couch left by the side of some small river in a regional park up North... Boring. I found the first few pages of this piece I had worked on for a rainy season of brown sugary lattes (c. 199—), that (in synopsis) starts with a boy (Mason), standing on a dry, chaparral-covered hillside, overlooking a scene that included a long reservoir being held by a dam. Next to the dam was what looked like some giant obsessivel/compulsive erector-set creation, sitting on what looked like a massive pile of dirt. That was the switch garden; I explained how it took the power released by, or inherent to, moving water and transmuted it to a different kind of current (electrical) which flowed by way of cables strung over enormous transmission towers. The line of towers followed the canyon down to the beigish-grey, heat-shimmering valley below, tracing closely the path once defined by the river. The canyon itself was the result of the power now being sent in sort of an obverse

manner, to tributaries and then on to silicon capillaries so small that the electrons flow in single file. Meanwhile, above him on the hillside Mason sees the figure of an old man doing something with a disc. He goes to investigate. The old man turns out to be a sort of Ishi, the last of the band of Chumash Indians that used to inhabit the area, and the disc is a polished obsidian mirror, an effigy stone, which the old man is using to map out, with green and blue pigments, certain star patterns; but in reverse. They get to talking, and the old man tells the boy about how the Chumash saw themselves as living in a 'center world', balancers of power between the Sky People and the Nunasis, who lived in the lower world. The Nunasis were Dark Beings; they were misshapen, evil and harmful. They were also capable of coming to this world—at night, of course—and were known to take the form of humans. It turned out that the old man was a mysteriously anointed shaman charged with the noble and completely disproportionate task of restoring a certain cosmic balance, the deviation from which was somehow evidenced by the dam. He explained how he used the mirror image of the heavens to plot out the terrain of the underworld. At this point the air around them begins to vibrate suspensefully. What starts out as an ionic disturbance more felt than heard builds to a deafening electromagnetic C# hum. Here the scene suddenly shifts to the inside of an observatory, where a beautiful young woman, a grad-student/dominatrix type, is busy coaxing a scientist to name a star after her. The rest of the story was missing. "Didn't I finish this?" I whispered, though while reading I sensed clearly what I had intended to happen next. Had in fact happened, somewhere. I was on a dripping park bench in bright polarized November light, everything around me wet and fiercely reflective, the breaking clouds especially...the specter of the future, of days beyond the millennium, having the dim, greyish-blue aspect not of hell but of an older underworld; a hades, or maybe

*an Elysium... I found some notes that I 'decided', now in High Stupor, somehow seemed to follow, like: (c. 199-) "... those who have developed their sense of will to an extent that it controls the destiny of masses of people and things. They point their mirrors away from themselves, never looking directly at them...", comparisons between the fall of the druids and ancient Germanic magical techniques, mirrors and the destruction of collective memory and PRECOGNITION, an explication on the superstition regarding mirrors sucking the souls of whomever looks into them, the use of mirrors to sell ourselves to ourselves and, as with large glass office buildings, to DRAW MASS GAZES. Tezcatlipoca—the God of the Smoking Mirror—and its association with a sacred lineage of people. The Black God of the north, god of witchcraft and black magic. The God of time, ancestral memory, and the embodiment of change through conflict who, by looking into his mirror, controls the deeds of men. Electronic mirrors, mirror imagery on lapidary stone in the Mayan tomb of Lord Pacal the Great, and finally: (c. 199-) "...look, you got all these wonderful ruins to play in, yeah beautiful old stuff we don't really have too much use for anymore—tell you what; let you in on a little secret here... NOW is your last remaining relation to time, regardless, unfortunately, of how it suits you. As you may have read, the workings of collective memory have been fully mapped out. These processes can be accelerated in any given case to where by mere contextual injection any action can be altered almost immediately to one suiting us. Therefore your past is nonexistent—rather, irrelevant—except with respect to your own private entertainment which, of course, is no secret to us. [illegible]. But of course we [illegible] that's the whole idea, and it's easy to do. So if you feel subversive you know, go ahead. The ratios have been stabilized [illegible] got your place to fill as far as we're concerned, and you can fill your [illegible]." When did I write that?*

*It was at this point that my stupor began losing altitude; the here-and-now reasserted itself, and the more prosaic thought processes marched in to reestablish their predominance. Another revolution put down. I was starting to think more clearly but I was at the same time no longer capable of capturing, of sensating the contextual essence of what I read. The last bit of writing no longer seemed to belong where it was. But, like waking from a dream that immediately slips from memory, I snatched enough from the void to know something was there. It was quiet; I could tell that Hope was asleep. The room was a mess; and it was cold; colder, it seemed, than it should have been. The whiskey was gone. All drunk up. At some point, presumably in order to keep warm, I had put on the gloves. They really were comfortable and warm. But it gave me the creeps that I couldn't remember putting them on, or how long I had been wearing them. Not often did I black out and back in the same night. Usually I had until morning before that bill came due. Perhaps this was a sign of advancement, and not the good kind. And, as usual after drunk driving down memory lane, I felt a little banged up; sore. Suddenly I remembered my teleconference. I didn't look at the clock. I knew that if I waited any longer it would be too long; the exact time didn't matter. I grabbed the computer and threw it open. There was that short electronic crackle; then the machine ramped up with an ascending turbine-like whir. The black screen became, for an instant, somehow blacker, then bam! There was the face of my new employer, or my new employer's representative, or whoever the hell he was. I couldn't tell if it was my sloppy vision, but his features seemed a little softer, not quite so stony. Maybe he'd been doing a little tipping himself. "Ah, Mister Edwards. Perfect timing." I looked at the clock then. Eleven eleven. "You've been busy, I see." There was something different in his voice as well. He sounded extremely relaxed; not loaded exactly, but more*

*like someone enjoying the effects of tryptophan at the end of a long Thanksgiving Day. Doubting that I could pull off professional, I decided to be familiar:*

*“So are you just like, waiting there—”*

*“Not waiting. But here.”*

*“First of all I got to say,” I said, as soberly as possible, “there’s just no way I can call you David.”*

*“Mister Edwards, please. Suit yourself. Point one seven.”*

*“I beg your pardon?”*

*“Your blood alcohol content. Point one seven. Falling. You were wondering—”*

*“Wait. You can read my mind now?”*

*“The gloves are a great help. They’re equipped with... sensors. You must have guessed—”*

*“Yeah but—”*

*“Mister Edwards, try not to jump to any... illogical conclusions. Of course I cannot hear your thoughts. That is impossible.” Did I sense a shade of regret? “But at the same time that is not a condition necessary for me to... read your mind, as it were. Consider, Mister Edwards. One can only read what is written. If you will.” His eyes scanned the space around me. “You write words, Mister Edwards. Though... your production has slowed a bit?” I looked around as well and, sitting there Indian-style, pulled my shirt out over my crotch. “Words. Yes, look at them all. What you’ve done with them. My. Could you tilt the monitor slightly, so I can get a good look?” I did. “MmHmmm.”*

*“Okay... So...?”*

*“You received the bank transfer.”*



*“I did.” I waited. “And that’s great—”*

*“Tomorrow morning you will be introduced to your co-respondents. A number of you will indeed succeed in your...training. But not all. I sincerely hope you are one of those who do. I would urge you then to act with determination and clarity of mind, as there may be difficult—”*

*“What? The drinking? You know, I could—”*

*“Mister Edwards,” cooing again, “patience. That is not your problem.”*

*I was starting to get tired, weak, and annoyed. I needed food. “Do you think you could be a little more cryptic?”*

*He smiled. “Mister Edwards. You write. You... explore... with language. I’m surprised you don’t understand,” looking back at the paper schematic surrounding me, “You must have heard it a thousand times. Nothing is cryptic; there are only the... alphabets... you have never learned.”*

*I sighed.*

*“So is that it? I mean, I don’t mean to be rude but are we just chatting here? Talking unlearned alphabets? And how you can kind of read my mind?”*

*“I reiterate: only what is—”*

*“I know. I heard you. That’s great”. Trailing off, “clever”.*

*“Mister Edwards?”*

*“Nothing. I apologize, but I really need to get something to eat. Shouldn’t we, don’t we need to talk about—”*

*“Mister Edwards, why do you suppose you never finish any of these,” sweeping the room with his eyes. Mine followed.*

*“I don’t know. I get to a point and then—”*

*“Perhaps you understand more than you think you do, Mister Edwards. Perhaps you realize that...that one must be careful what one writes. That in some...in some way, what one writes all does seem to be...true. We have come to understand that nature abhors surprises. That our world and everything it contains is—indeed, must be—expressed. Have you never sensed that? Consider. Rather, let me give you a simple example. Earlier today, you hinted at your opinion of certain Biblical interpretations. While you might mock those who live in expectation of, shall we say, the actualization of the written prophesies of John the Revelator; dismissing them, perhaps, much as you did during one particular Community College ‘rap session’ held in April of 198—, as: “a horrific, base, primitive and bigoted creation... a senseless, destructive hallucination...” perhaps your underlying indictment of Revelation is not that it is a lie, or even the ugly product of a troubled mind, but rather that it is...irresponsible? That, having been written, it can not but be true? That there are no lies? You understand that; don’t you, Mister Edwards? It is clear that you do. It’s written all around you.” I looked him in the eyes, or rather I looked at the eyes on the screen. They rolled and dipped, but stayed still. Sickening. I blinked to refocus. It was true. My characters all at some point stopped acting. They would gather their identities only to a certain point; generally, just to when they attained a volition separate from my own and, strangely, when they should have been able to ‘write themselves’. Their first, and only, demonstration of free will was invariably a choice to stay put, suspended in medias res. It wasn’t that I could think of nothing for them to do or nowhere for them to go. I had written many clever plots full of causes and effects. But the plots always remained oddly uninhabited. It was as if my ‘creations’ all had one thing in common: they would refuse to go, to do. They would not let it be written. It was as if they knew...*

*“Yeah.” I’d never looked at it that way before.*

*“Not so cryptic. Simple. Frustrating, though; I would think.”*

*“Impossible.” I felt like, I sounded like someone talking to a shrink, though I’d never actually gone to a shrink before. I’d imagined it, though; many times.*

*“You know something, Mister Edwards?”*

*“Hmm?” My eyes were watering. I wanted to explain things, but I couldn’t. My forehead felt like it was tied to a water balloon.*

*“Not impossible. Maybe what you’re doing here,” again with the sweep of the eyes, “is just what you think you are doing.”*

*“Can you please—”*

*“Let’s assume that you set out on this task of yours tonight in the hope of reaching some revelation which might enable you to transcend your stunted narrative. Of conjuring a burning bush moment, if you will.”*

*“Sure.”*

*“Look around you. What do you see?” I looked at the paper form I’d created; the thematic generality of the ‘trunk’ splaying, branching out, realizing into specifics.*

*“What?” Uh...huh! Yeah, it did— “A bush?” He smiled again. “Are you suggesting that I burn—”*

*“I’m not suggesting anything. I’m merely... reading. Rather, we’re reading. Mister Edwards, get your food, and some rest. Remember. Nine o’clock. Tomorrow promises to be a long day.”*

*“Yeah, okay. I’ve got to tell you, these chats of ours really take it out of me.”*

*He kept smiling.*

*I woke up the next morning on the basement floor, cold and*

*slightly damp from the concrete condensation that had formed overnight. I had been sleeping with my arms wrapped around my chest, and as I came to, it was with an unpleasant sensation wherein any point of contact from one part of me to another—whether it was arms across torso or, as I masochistically confirmed, fingertip to fingertip—came with a sickening reflection of mass. That is, I felt gross. Gross as in I was taking up space; I was a thing coming into contact with another thing; this other thing also being me, and also having the same nervous experience. It was accompanied by that creepy ‘can’t make a fist’ feeling, felt over my whole body. I literally shook that feeling off, then stood up and walked my fingers from my temples to the top of my skull, feeling along the furrow where, when I wasn’t so dehydrated, I could feel my blood flow. I took a couple of deep breaths before looking at the clock. Eight-oh-five. “Well, that’s good,” I said, looking on the good side of sleeping on a slab of cold concrete; that it did not let me oversleep. I marched upstairs and turned the coffeemaker back on. Hope had already left. God, I thought, how does she do it? Why does she do it? She’s got her good job, good solid education behind her, all these good decisions in her past. And then she’s got me. I must be looking a lot like a lapse in judgment to her; I know that’s how I would feel. But she leaves me some coffee...*

*It was hard to make sense of it. “...that problem won’t be yours...” Is that what he said? What was that? I took a shower while the coffee reheated, drinking no less than twenty full swallows of warm water straight from the showerhead. I brushed my teeth, scrubbed my tongue, chewed up and swallowed some toothpaste. My tongue felt like a blimp in a hangar. That feeling again. Ignore it! Get moving! Visine. Hat...no hat. I combed my hair with my fingers. Shit! I dragged myself to the dryer and opened the door. My clothes had been sitting there since the morning before and they had*

*gotten deeply wrinkled. I pulled all of them out except for a pair of fading black chinos and a maroon button-down shirt. I cranked the machine to Cotton and stood there watching it as if it were a toaster. A sketchy outline of the night before started forming in my mind. I clearly remembered starting to go through my writings; then being drunk. Lights and images darting around in the air, splashing; lights tracing, streaking by like sardines, carrying familiar things. No details, of course. And just little bits of the conversation I had over the computer. But those memories, such as they were, were suspiciously fantastical in their nature, and I had the feeling that I must have dreamt at least some of what ran through my mind. Well, Christ. Again I would wait for today to tell me about yesterday. What a lousy way to gather information! "Well, there you go." I dressed quickly. It was almost eight thirty; it felt like it was taking five minutes to get through a thought. I downed a cup of coffee over-cooled by too much half and half and got myself outside.*

[end of Chapter 7]

## **Petrichor by David Scott Ewers**

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Stevie Ludich stumbles upon an isolated, word-covered dry lake bed in this cerebral and adventurous novel. “Petrichor” is a well-paced black comedy with a paranoiac dose of science fiction washed over with ruminations on identity, language, and the composition of reality.

The official website:

<http://www.petrichorbook.com>

Press release and supplemental material:

[http://pelekinesis.com/catalog/david\\_scott\\_ewers-petrichor.html](http://pelekinesis.com/catalog/david_scott_ewers-petrichor.html)