

A Task

Ken Baumann

I laid the ghost of his gifts at last with a lie

– Joseph Conrad

Part One

She came out of the forest and onto the road. The cut across the center of her right palm had bled enough to coat her fingers which she now struggled to straighten, the new scab breaking as she opened her hand. She saw the wet asphalt, then her bloodstained fingers, and then the evidence of her wound—gray, brown, red. Before she remembered to call what she was standing on a road it began to rain.

She kept off the asphalt first, walking through cupping mud in her shredded sneakers. It was confusing, today's sun, hidden by the flat clouds and the overhanging trees, though even in the rain she felt its warmth. When she couldn't step without risking a shoe, she walked back onto the highway. She felt her hope for a car in her head and her dread for him in her guts and limbs. As she walked—north, towards the city—she grew bored, but only needed to close her right hand into a fist to come awake. She instinctually slapped a mosquito with her wounded palm and groaned. As soon as she imagined letting all the blood out of her, she whispered: *no ideas*.

The road curved, ascended. She took off her sneakers and tested her blistered feet on the asphalt. Though the cool rainwater didn't abate the pain, she preferred to touch the road like

this. Half a mile later, she tossed her shoes into a clump of brush. She saw a highway marker, walked to it, then waited.

All she allowed herself to think about was her promise to forbid herself of minding all but present facts. And by this thinking, she transgressed.

She said aloud the harmless facts of her body: pain, hunger, thirst, tired. *Scared*, she heard, then closed her eyes for a few seconds—standing, on weak legs and throbbing feet—before looking down the road in both directions. She wandered about how little she could say to whoever picked her up. She cautioned herself about the truck, but only so long as she forgot that she had slashed the tires. Amid a dizzy wash of regret over dropping the knife, she remembered to only handle the facts. Her palm stung. A car came.

She didn't stick out her thumb, but instead stood there wet, barefoot, and bleeding, thinking that enough. She winced, squinted. She saw the car's siren and turned, running through the mud and bush—she settled behind the trunk of a sugar maple. It had stopped raining, but now the tree's leaves studded her with drops that felt too cold, or aimed. The cruiser passed with a hiss as she sighed, realizing that she didn't have to avoid them, the police, that she should've asked for help.

Do not go back to their systems of prolonged suffering

His voice unlocked her exhaustion, even the memory of his voice. She began to puke but clenched her jaws and tilted her head back, matted hair against bark. She looked through the canopy.

It is out of deep love that you will do this.

Rose clapped her left hand over her mouth.

A car door shut.

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Her clothes were soaked and she hadn't eaten in days so she shivered against the AC. She didn't say anything, grateful for another fact.

Shit, he said. He reached and flipped the dial to red.

What had he asked her and what had she said? She was in the vehicle, in the front seat, but was already forgetting. Why did he stop the car? The artificial heat over her skin relaxed her to questions, those she went over privately. She rested her head on the window and stared at the sideview mirror. For the first time in many months, she could see a part of herself reflected.

Ma'am, I have to ask again. He paused. She blinked, wanted him to see that she was awake, wanted to have to say aloud what still felt obliterated.

What's your name?

Rose

He had followed-up with usual questions, and then those that felt like textbook extensions: did she have identification, was she a resident, did she have someone to call. And then: how did you cut your hand? Was it self-inflicted, or did someone do that to you? Do you want to go to the hospital?

No, Rose said. Her hunger vanished in the flush of adrenaline. No, she said, sitting up.

They treat uninsured people, if it's about that.

She glanced at her hand—a rusted claw—then out the window. Forest shot by at highway speed.

Were you running from someone, he asked. Rose sat still and did all she could to think about her feet, her thirst, but felt instead too antsy not to speak. Take me to Middlebury Courts. Do you know where that is?

Big houses just north of—

Yes, she said. She turned away from him, afraid that she had shouted. She didn't know, actually. She was all pitted stomach and confusion. I don't—she waited to understand what she

was about to say. I don't need anything but to be dropped off at the gate. Because I have a friend there, who lives there. She'll take care of me. Rose settled back into the leather, relaxing her back. The thin thrum of tires on the highway lowered her into the glue of sleep. Or—

When was the last time you ate?

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They drove through the Wendy's as the sun turned the sky orange. Rose stared at the menu, its red letters and imperatives.

It's too flat, she said.

Paul heard her, but just let her stare out the passenger side window while he ordered enough food for three.

The girl in the window handed over two packed bags and smiled, turning back to a cook out of sight, maybe, and whispering: shut *up*. She leaned out the window and gave Paul his change.

Have a good night, officer.

Hey, you too. Paul put both the bags in his lap and idled the car with his window still open. Wait, he said. You're not vegetarian or anything, are you?

Rose blinked—*you have one body to give*.

No, she said, exhausted by all the flat lights and arrows, the roads and lots promising her a seething return to choice upon choice upon choice. She wanted to eat and sleep. Paul was black. There was a computer in the car. These were facts which held weight, same as the bags in Paul's lap.

Thank you, she said to him. She didn't wipe the tears into her cheeks while eating fries.

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Paul remembered, once they were back on the highway, that she needed to go somewhere. He considered taking her back to the station—maybe he could press her about what she was doing on the side of the road, who cut her—but thought that she would bolt. He didn't want to let her go yet, intuiting a deeper problem that wouldn't get solved at her friend's house, no matter how well-guarded. He squeezed the steering wheel, rubbing the fry grease from his fingers into the leather.

Your hand, he said.

Rose looked down, gulping air after swallowing a huge chunk of chicken sandwich. She'd been awkwardly eating with her left hand and her right pointer finger, picking at wrappers while wary of her palm.

She looked to Paul. Can I turn the light on?

Yeah, of course, he said.

She tapped the button and saw the browning clumps and her blackened fingernails. Her palm had stopped throbbing, but now it burned. The food moved in her stomach, and she felt another subtler fact open to her.

The knife could've been rusty, I don't know.

Okay, Paul responded. He checked that: *the knife*. He turned to her briefly, registering the color of her eyes for the first time. I know a nurse, he said.

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They parked near the hospital's main entrance and waited. Its broad glass reflected sodium lights and shadowed trees. Paul rolled the windows down and Rose smelled the city's air, looking for difference. She thought, while they waited, of cubed rooms without outlets and windows. Her eyes were dry, ready to stop moving—the acidic twinge in her thighs and calves felt now as if it were solid and permanent—but she couldn't slow her thinking. She came to, away from his voice, only to think about killing herself. This focused and molded thinking lead her to stretch out her right hand, or to run her tongue over her teeth. She looked at Paul, who shifted in his seat.

What's her name, Rose asked.

Erin, Paul said.

He looked back out his side window, staring at the hospital. Rose listened to the dry score of the katydids—*names are potent signals*—and waited, ached.

A short blond woman in plain blue scrubs approached the car from Paul's side, and Paul got out, leaving Rose in the front passenger seat. She watched his back cover Erin entirely, then bend slightly. They spoke quietly, but Rose barred herself from eavesdropping. Paul came back to the car and leaned into his window.

You okay to sit in the back while she looks you over?

Rose flashed to that: locked in, enclosed. She looked past Paul to the nurse—eyes down, holding her large orange purse, tired. Rose nodded.

Rose and Erin convened in the back of the car. Erin recommended they park a block away so that she wouldn't be seen.

Paul looked at Rose through the thick plastic partition. Yeah. Of course.

Rose looked at Erin. I'm fine, Rose said.

While Paul drove them a few blocks away, Erin introduced herself while taking medical supplies out of her purse. Paul parked and turned on the overhead lights. Rose looked at the things in the space between their thighs: iodine, gauze, a needle packaged in white paper and flimsy plastic. A capped syringe, halfway full of something.

Okay. Can I see your hand?

Rose realized she was squeezing her right hand into a ball. She relaxed her fingers and set her hand on top of the white tape and cotton balls. Erin gently peeled Rose's fingers away from her cut palm.

How much does it hurt?

Rose shrugged. Not much. It throbs.

Erin nodded and Rose began to focus on her. Chapped lips, small nose, freckles. Dyed hair. Erin soaked a cotton ball in iodine and said, This might sting, and then dabbed and swiped the cotton on the cut. Rose watched strands of the cotton catch on bits of scab, watched Erin carefully squeeze the excess iodine into the fresher trenches of the gash. Rose felt the cold sting of the iodine and the new itch from air mingling in the wound. She felt guarded from the pain; it was slight and it woke her up, which meant it protected her. Rose noticed her hand was bandaged now, wrapped snugly in a band.

Thank you, she said.

Erin smiled and popped the upturned syringe with the back of a nail.

This is in case of tetanus.

Rose angled herself and pushed up her left sleeve.

The poke was brief—Rose thought of the camp.

Hold this, Erin instructed, and Rose pushed the swab against her arm with the outer edge of her right thumb.

You're moderately dehydrated, too, so stop—Erin looked to Paul then back at Rose, bedside manner glitching for a second—stop at a Walgreens, and pick up some Pedialyte or Gatorade. Drink a big bottle before bed. She paused, then started to scoop the supplies back into her purse.

No, Paul said. It's alright—leave the trash here. I'll throw it out at home.

Erin nodded and sighed. You feel alright otherwise? She laid her fingers on Rose's thigh for a moment. Rose flinched her legs closer to the door.

Yes. Thank you.

Was she only hearing crickets? Rose looked at her bandaged hand, at Erin. Looked at the faint scar on her cheek. Her eyes.

Thank you so much, Rose said.

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Paul took a wrong turn twice while driving to Middlebury Courts. He checked the time on his watch—20:49—and knew he should ask more questions, gather more info.

Rose yawned, covering her mouth with her right hand and inhaling the combined scent of meaty iodine and mildly ghostly gauze.

Are you willing to tell me where you came from today?

Rose stayed quiet. She was enjoying their slow creep past homes, each box of lives steadily disappearing, or at least becoming distant. She rubbed her eyes with a knuckle. She had been thinking of his face since they ate, but had given up on keeping the image still, objective. She had thought he could look dead if she actually concentrated.

Rose: would you tell me where you came from, before I picked you up? Who cut your hand?

Rose stammered, said I'll be okay if you drop me off—

Paul slowed the car at a stop sign, then turned the car off. Rose thought she'd need to open the door with her left hand before bolting into the backyards and over fences. Paul snuffed the urged to lock the front doors.

You're off the books. Hospital doesn't know, dispatch—he paused. Why hadn't he called it in before letting her in the car? What casualness was working on him? Or urgency. He turned on the overhead lights. Rose saw a piece of her head reflected on the plexiglass partition. She didn't know why she was scared, and realizing that—that she was only trapped in a kind procedure—made her feel weak. Pliable.

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They agreed that, before getting out of the car and staying with Amay, she would tell him the circumstances of how she was found, and why she was hurt and jumpy—Paul's word. She'd also agreed to see him again—two or three days from now; she'd already forgotten—at a chintzy diner ten minutes outside of town. Rose didn't intimate that this wouldn't happen, that she'd be gone; Rose kept her plans to herself in that moment, in Paul's cop car, contrary to what she had

promised herself—upon many pains, though all benign; sworn against the steady procession of trees and her bitter thirst—in the forest. Walking then, having run so much.

They arrived to the gate of the Courts as Rose felt herself panic at the presence of the guard.

I don't know what to say—she bit at the tape's end on the back of her hand. Shit—

Your friend—Paul said as they turned into the drive—Amay. She lives here, right.

Yes.

Okay, don't worry. Rose saw Paul smile a bit. In response, she wanted to bite his fucking ear off.

Paul rolled down his window and leaned his head out to prevent the guard from leaning in.

Dropping someone off, boss.

A second's pause.

Is this a resident? Rose saw the guard's thin pale arms.

You need to know police business?

Rose heard it—a solemn edge to Paul's voice, like he was both disappointed and at the edge of violence. His right hand tight on the steering wheel.

Oh—no, officer. Just—

Paul retracted into the car and grabbed his CB, squawked its signal out.

The white arms and beige button-up stepped back into its booth and hit a button.

Dispatch. A dry female voice out of the CB.

Paul eased the car over the speed bump, rolled up his window, and said: nothing here, my mistake.

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She gave him the first street name, already almost forgotten, and kept alert to the slowly curving rows of mansions. They—the houses—now looked strange to Rose, that here was edifice after edifice of horrible mores, clutched thick and secure by geometrical hedges and medical-shade street-lamp light. She looked at them and felt dumb. Even the old houses seemed struck from some synthetic clay, their material unsuited and unsmiling to their own form and occupants—the people inside were alive, and Rose knew what she should think about that. What she did still think about that, that living, which she might've realized if she wasn't so tired. Right, she mumbled, recognizing the paint on the house—wing of a house—on the corner, and maybe even the pallid green car. Had she not been gone too long for people to use the same tools? Rose felt at her throat with her left hand, trying to rub the itch out.

You okay?

She looked at Paul. He appeared heavier than before, wider.

Sorry—she coughed. I'm fine. I—

Paul slammed the brakes and the car stopped five feet away from a young kid in red shorts. The kid glanced back at the car, his push on the skateboard uninterrupted. A few seconds later the kid jumped off the board, grabbed it, and jogged onto the sidewalk.

Paul laughed, mumbled to himself: I don't care, kid.

Rose thought of the child, wondered who his parents were, if they knew how often he'd been hurt. Stupid, she said. Be quiet, she said. She felt Paul's eyes—she'd told herself aloud. Right at this stop. Then there should be a red door...

Paul drove a bit longer then stopped when Rose said Wait.

It was Amay's house, and Rose said so. She stayed in the car as she stared—no lights, no car—Amay's new white SUV—the home looked locked up and empty. Rose's stomach sank. She felt bloom an elaborate fantasy—they, he, broke in. Killed her. Killed her parents. Took their bodies back into the woods and buried them beneath six feet of vibrant black dirt and large stones. Rose thought: facts. Rose thought: where do I go.

Paul asked, Is your friend supposed to be here?

Yes.

Paul waited a minute. He had a plan for this, first formulated when he glanced at Rose eating—something about her voraciousness spelled out a fear that he recognized: a similar motion of the eyes and fingers. It all made him want to provide her shelter, and then he realized that he could.

Rose felt her flat thoughts. She wanted to answer questions without speaking; wanted to leave bladed inquiries in the woods. Blood, a compass.

It was night and she was cold and tired.

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They had idled outside Amay's house long enough for Paul to offer to put her up in a hotel, or motel. Rose, now empty, said a motel. She hadn't thought about money, not really, not yet, and this testified to a true and ancient exhaustion.

He drove them back the way they came, worried about calls, on the highway and back to a realm of scattered fast food and chain hotels.

They arrived, Paul paid in the lobby, then came back and drove her—still sleeping—to her room. He turned off the cruiser and waited. The wind had stopped. Rose was deeply asleep, gulping air in short fits. Paul looked at her—chapped lips, wrecked and bare feet, wrapped hand. She seemed a body that was safe but not lost.

Paul spoke her name to wake her.

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He made sure she thought the room was okay, said he'd be back tomorrow before noon if she wanted more help, then left. She stood in the small space between the bed and the dresser and looked at the shut door. Paul left the keys on the table by window. A half-full Gatorade beside them, an idle orange syrup, and in front of the little table a pair of cheap rubber sandals. Rose was inside, alone, and by a bed, though the sleep she had caught in the car made her feel unable to sleep. Not quite as doomed, she ran a bath.

Before easing her torn feet into the water, she flipped light switches, determined to not be lit by the florescent manic flicker—the vibration of the light felt imperceptible yet present, hungry, like a mosquito.

She scratched at her upper arms, flicked the switch above the sink. The room with the tub and the toilet was dark, yet she could see steam curling up off the water.

The pain filled her first where her old skin had come off—against rocks, twigs, dusted across sheaves of rotting leaves—and she said Fuck again and again. When she let her lower half in, she realized she could speak pain; that she could curse and be unquestioned. Here in this room.

She moved her hips side to side, easing her butt off the tacky surface of the tub to let her whole body under. She stopped herself from gasping as the hot water crested her chin. She closed her eyes, held her breath.

The water stung and she thought so. She thought then of the forest, and of Daniel. She wanted to pit his name against her lungs, see who could hold out longer. She felt her lungs tighten, then the bottom of her throat. She could turn over, maybe hold her head down with her own hands. She wanted to breathe. She waited, underwater, another few seconds.

Rose didn't think of anything until she felt the smell of the motel's dryer sheets against her face. She used the towel to abrade her skin until it was a boring pink.

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The bed was there, and Rose was in it. A television in front of her, off, and out of reach. A name was under covers, small history in a room. Hidden dust. She sipped at the Gatorade that Paul bought her... when? Had she forgotten?

The drink tasted like acrid candy. She felt dry taut pain in her thighs and calves, wrapped with an ache around her ankles and knees. Her cut palm throbbed, but its pain had beaten out for two days—in this way, the cut was continuity.

Both bedside lamps were on. The yellow light was strange, not dappled, nor gray—the lamplight was constant and simple and fake; he said that, that light is fake—but Rose thought it ridiculous, feeling weird here: she grew up in electric light, yellow or seizure white, and here she was, prone and breathing.

Rose thought of the deadbolt in the worn white door and panicked. She would close her eyes, fall asleep, then feel hands on her throat. The butt of a knife pressed firmly into her healed palm. She'd hear an invitation—so long drenched in its argument—and she would have to accept.

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When she first woke, she felt it was evening weeks from now; a dusk in which she was required to travel. She had to prevent herself—somehow; she knew in cold flits of being awake that this was impossible, yet it *felt* possible, and therefore was—from crossing a sluggish river. If she didn't stop herself from doing so—if her feet touched its water—she'd no longer be able to wake up into any remaining sleep. This challenge and its punishments made a rational shape in her vision that Rose grasped at while she woke. She registered the darkness between the blinds. Unwilling to look at the alarm clock's emergency glyphs. Rose felt dilated to let the room's still buzz in; she caught herself thinking rapid thoughts of sensitivity, destruction. How are you not asleep, she asked—how are you not sleeping past the next day.

The Artist

We grew up in Texas but had never seen a lake ice over. We were with our aunt, my father's sister, the last sister still alive. She walked Debbie and I out to Lake Michigan, which wasn't far from her front door. A long cold walk in the frozen center of America, is what my sister called that day—after she'd read Dante in high school. Shelly, our aunt, told us the whole walk about her dead sisters, about how they died, and only then about their secret problems and ways of making my father into an angry and quiet person—into a cocoon of a boy that we, all three of us, shivered against in the full knowledge of him as a man. He terrified us, me most of all, and now I think that Shelly brought him up in order to make us happy to be outside in such a wind. It worked, I guess. Still works, in a way.

So we came to the lake and stood on the freezing sand for awhile, awed at the frozen shore. The waves had stopped up as chunky glyphs, very dignified and terrible. Debbie grabbed my arm and held on. Shelly had stopped talking. It wasn't until I read *Antigone*—to address a peculiar sort of dare that Deb and I often traded—that I found a word for that ice: *deinos*. Root

of dinosaur. Wonderful and terrible. Ancient. We weren't trembling at the ice, but we were shaking before it, and I've wondered at the difference ever since.

I came back to the lake, in winter, when Deb died, and long after Shelly with her guilt and tales had gone. I had them both on my skin in portraits, making them visible in the way I thought most practical for me. The tattoos didn't quite cover me, not yet, and even now I don't know why I've left my face blank. But I was at the water, standing with my bare feet inches away from the ice, thinking about Deb—and I felt in my mind, held there both perfectly at once, a lucid memory of Deb's face just the day before she died, and an indescribable desire to disappear. For some reason, this desire presented itself, in tandem with my memory of Debbie's face, as a squat black crystal, this crystal resting on a long white table in a well-lit but empty room. I laugh now because it sounds pretentious, just recalling that little thought. But if I were able to take one of your hands into my hand, and then to squeeze that hand with the intense pressure of that desire—not to die, but to purely and utterly disappear, without consequences, without grief—then I think you'd buy it, that force by which my mind was commanded.

If you feel up to it, keep this story in mind during the next twenty-three hours. The frozen lake, a sister's face, the desire to go: together as a crystal on a table in a room.

In Venice, for the Biennale, the gallery that represents me and sells my work—this gallery—had put me up in a nice tired old hotel, a place at a comical proximity to the water. The second night I was in town, before I got sober, I spent a few hours—right around a sherbet orange, milky sundown—sitting and drinking in the bar. And don't worry: other than booze crumbling to pieces everything good or whole in my life, I was—and still am—severely bored with drunk tales, with druggy tales—so I won't fixate on details and recap every bent of another

night's dumb drunk—but I was at the bar when I was approached by an elder gentleman, maybe seventy.

He was stately—gray, pinstriped, manicured but not precious. Skin the color of an acorn. Rough hands, but not arthritic, that lit a cigarette with a small pewter lighter. He sat next to me. He asked for my name, and I mean just that: he said, May I have your name? We spoke for a few minutes then about I don't know what, yet I noticed that we both drank at a pace belying our desperation—like we wanted to die, but didn't want to broadcast that fact within a place of such civility. The plain way of saying this is that our hands were shaking. After awhile, the gentleman turned to me and said: I want to destroy something beautiful in Venice. Will you help me?

When he said this, I thought of *Taxi Driver*, of Scorsese confessing—or trying to convince himself—that he was going to shoot his wife and the black man she was sleeping with. That crazed vulgarity of wanting to fire a gun into your wife's vagina. Looking at this man in the bar, I was trying to suss out any psychotic violence. Sniffing, best I could through the new drunk, any want to kill. I knew I had to ask him questions. So we talked for awhile, hours maybe. He slowly revealed his desire to mar a piece of culture—some art—like a man slowly opening his right hand to reveal an injured baby bird, the man's face proud and protective and also curious about the consequences of crushing it. I indulged him—we ragged on Bernini, on Bosch. Not critically, but in a homicidal admiration. The gentleman asked: do all artists want to rid themselves of their predecessors? I finished my drink and placed my flat palm over the glass and said: one way or another. We traded good questions and bullshit answers for another hour. Then, the pledge: I would help the gentleman destroy something beautiful in Venice, and it would be an inhuman thing—the thing destroyed—and the destruction would be public. No apologies would be issued,

no pardons requested upon the event of arrest—no pleas against the original power of the act. He said within a year, it must be done within a year; I told him five.

This brings me to the thing destroyed: *Celebration*, pen on paper, twelve years. I started drawing the piece in 1990. I wanted to work on something, one thing, for a long time, to see primarily if I had stamina for repetition and redundancy. I told myself that I would draw chandeliers, hundreds of thousands of chandeliers, if possible. The first twelve by sixteen piece of paper that I filled with chandeliers became the centerpiece of the whole collection of sixteen thousand, eight hundred and seventy-five pieces of paper, all others arranged in a random grid around the first piece of paper, the whole piece occupying twenty-two thousand, five hundred square feet. Filled the first page at a desk in an apartment in Detroit, day-drinking and reading James Baldwin, trying to not sleep. The last page, which took me two months to fill, I worked on in my aunt's old apartment, in a hot Michigan summer, coming to and from the lake at dawn and dusk. Our family's money was all gone at that point—or at least all of the fortune that I could get ahold of—and so I kept up a pace of three small paintings per month, on top of my work on *Celebration* pages, in order to pay others what was owed and buy paper, pens, and soup. The prior three years, representatives of this gallery tried convincing me of the use of selling off *Celebration* piecemeal, both for cash and hype. With the Venetian gentleman's promise in mind, I refused, staying cheap and low.

It might be that novelists are excused for—or expected to—sacrifice precision for beauty, and philosophers beauty for precision. If that's true, artists should be expected to sacrifice neither. We've got no excuse, is what I'm saying. The freedom and power—in other words, the money given to artists who have been granted access to a club that peddles in a certain grandeur, or scale—I'm thinking of Walker's sugar sculpture, the hanging rock in Los Angeles, Koons and his Play-

doh, or Turrell's holy sanctuary in the goddamned crater of a dormant volcano, like some ascetic Dr. Doom—this money allows you into this club, and as much as this club is capable of anesthetizing artists to their responsibilities and skills, it also allows you to do whatever you want. In my case, secrecy about *Celebration* was its necessary pressure, and the art market's necessary gimmick. My bait. But I wanted to make sure that the piece did two things with my newish access to scale: draw attention to it, this access and pattern for grandeur in contemporary art, and do so with beauty and precision. This is why I worked on the piece for twelve years. This is why I did everything—drew it all myself. No unpaid, minimally paid, never credited assistants; no pyramid economics with a blank white face. This is why I told only Deb, Matthew, and Isaiah, and only showed Deb. The only eyes that had seen *Celebration* before it came and went in Venice were Deb's and she died with those eyes. It's strange to me that the only person who saw the piece—pieces of the whole, at least—took that impression underground, diffusing the sight somehow. Maybe the dirt is a more honest audience member—the *Eumenides* testifies to that. I don't know. Deb died, I promised a gentleman some destruction, hence Venice, 2003.

For those who don't know what I'm assholishly alluding to, I had *Celebration* exhibited in its entirety—all sixteen thousand plus pieces creating a huge rectangle—displayed on the floor of the Piazza San Marco in Venice, Italy, for the 2003 Biennale. What I kept private, though, until the seventh hour of the piece's exhibition, was its planned destruction. Nobody knew, so that's why there's only one video of the helicopter drifting forty or fifty feet above the square. This silly Zapruder film caught me pouring bucket after bucket of red and white paint onto *Celebration*, caught a few diligent security guards running out over the field of chandeliers in order to plead at first to the helicopter pilot and then to me—none of the guards with their navy arms raised knew my face; presumably none knew the Biennale bought a hefty insurance policy because I had

strategically refused to allow the papers to be laminated or laid over with plexiglass, and had also strategically refused to sell any of the piece, which stung only for a minute after the piece got valued, in an arbitrary and psychotic flurry, at over five million bucks, a number the pure product of fairyland art market logic, through which scale is confused for beauty then begets pride, which then, as always, affirms itself with cash—so the tan Italian men shouted up to us in urgent imperatives as I kept spilling paint, trying to avoid splattering the guards as the helicopter banked, tilted, its blades kicking up winds which licked the corners of each page. With each emptied bucket, the act of defacing this thing, this thing that I had worked on for twelve years, covering much of that work with simple and scattered colors: this never felt like a joke. I never felt sly or even triumphant, nor relieved. I was sober. I was fulfilling a promise from a drunk to a drunk. I was destroying the thing I had labored to make beautiful and precise, ruining it from above. This wasn't war; this simple act wasn't even violent. My destruction of *Celebration* was merely a necessity of responsibility. A pledge without mystery.

There's a line in Montaigne's essay on prayer: "He was wretched enough to be taken literally."

I flew back to Michigan the same day. Friends wrote letters about what friends said, simple critics. We wrote back and forth about banal stuff. Gradually, I slowed. Walking six, seven hours per day. Speaking a handful of times, mostly to checkout people at the grocery store, postal workers. Beyond those simple habits, my mind became mush. I got boring without being bored; I sank into middle America like a rock tossed by a kid, sinking into mud.

A couple gray months and I started walking less and reading more. Montaigne and Mandelbrot. Both made me laugh and look at things harder; I began to itch. I soon started drawing again, and then my gluttony for filled pages, completed work, kicked in. My old

stubborn stamina returned—I was sketching and painting twelve hours per day. Lunch: bread soaked in olive oil, tangerines, green tea. Dinner: rice and fish. Once I was settling into this new period of work, I felt capable of not being a disappeared prick, again ready to help friends. I mailed a letter to Celia, a friend who worked at Bomb Magazine, and asked for a short column every month. She approved, so I ordered the internet again. Spent two hours a night trawling blogs and portfolios, staying away from gallery websites. Eventually, I rounded up ten names and ten pieces. One thousand words per article. I promised Celia an eleventh post, too: an essay on the destruction of *Celebration*. With the ten essays on the work of young artists, I thought to keep those artists from starving, assuming the art game functioned as it had for years—the articles by the artists and critics fed the gallery owners and curators, who pitched the rich with the language from the articles. Sometimes just handing over the articles themselves, preying on the dumb potency of paper. I reread Orwell and avoided art speak the best I could.

One of the paintings I wrote about, titled *Four Objects in White*, was made by a gentleman named Antonio M. Noralez. A strange surname, as if the regular M had been factored out, shifting the alphabet to the left by one character, his last name already a denial. His work was great, mostly acrylics on paper, but *Four Objects in White* was incredible—the painting consisted of a large sheet of paper filled with what looked like three thick layers of about six shades of white paint, arranged such that certain shades served as plateaus on certain portions of the page. The photograph of the painting, taken with natural light coming from an unseen source behind the left shoulder—or at about seven o'clock from the orientation of the camera facing the painting—zooming into the photo reveals soft discoloring shadows created by the different geological thicknesses of paint on the paper. The four objects named in the title of the painting were four vaguely geometrical shapes, maybe solids, that had been painted and carved out with minute

strokes of a scalpel in a way that made the objects appear to move into and throughout themselves. The painting was new, beautiful, and worth looking at for a very long time.

I had questions about the painting, and questions about Antonio—his website was as bare of information as it could be. He was born in 1989, lived in Mexico, and titled the six pieces of art on the site—all photographed, none scanned—in simple, mechanical English. Surprisingly, he included his email address. I sent him a brief introduction and asked if he would be willing to respond to a few questions.

He responded eight days later. He said yes, thank you, and that he would answer five.

I thought better than to ask him more than one question about his life. His timidity was obvious; I felt that he could be pretty easily scared off. But I also wanted as much information about his work as I could get, greedily hoping to learn from him, and to get his new methods into my aging hands. That was tactical. Though my strategy in only asking one question about Antonio's private life was to present him as a mystery. I knew that, if I could do my job as a critic, if I could adequately describe his painting's novelty and importance without flattening his identity or explaining it away, then I would get him gallery representation and attention, and ultimately, get him paid and fed and able to make more work.

He answered my first four questions quickly and precisely. I got the impression he had struggled to learn English, and now wrote with a hard won grammatical fidelity. Checking the time signatures of our emails, he responded to the first four questions about *Four Objects in White* and his other work all within forty minutes of me sending them. So I learned we both kept late hours. For *Four Objects in White*, he copped to the painting's obvious laboriousness—hundreds of hours of work with the scalpel, putty, paint. He said that *Four Objects in White* was the only painting of his that felt “adequate.” This little phrase revealed his pain, which I instinctively

bought. His obsessiveness couldn't have sweated an ounce of affectation—faking care would've been an unbearable waste of time.

The fifth and last question I asked him went like this: do you feel capable of describing in detail your desire to make art?

His response, which I've now since memorized: Yes. My desire to paint and to draw feels like a convoluted itch. This itch causes me much complication. If I am to be honest, scratching this itch requires me to host a sadness. This sadness is that which I could never solve. I am sorry to answer in such mournful terms. When I am painting or drawing, though, I feel myself to be making quiet things capable of life.

Six weeks later, Bomb published the piece on Antonio. Eighteen days later, his body was discovered in a park six miles from his childhood home. Antonio had travelled to southern Mexico, near Oaxaca, by bus, and then had killed himself with morphine and a scalpel around midnight. In his apartment in Mexico City, he had gathered together his life's work—around six hundred drawings and forty paintings—and had destroyed them. He shredded most of his drawings with scissors and a scalpel, likely the same scalpel he used to kill himself, and burned his paintings, carefully diverting the smoke out his small kitchen window. His apartment was otherwise immaculate.

I've looked harder at Antonio's death than I've looked at anything. But I won't let my looking, and trying to understand, make me into the kind of obscenity that connects events to one another with colorless straight lines. I have plenty of facts about Antonio, his life and his death—I do now. His suicide eclipses those facts.

Two weeks ago, I returned to the lake in order to work on the circumstances of this piece. Needing to ask myself again and again if it was, or would be, a performance. Asking again: why

make this? Why invite other people, strangers, to witness it, or inevitably to listen to it, read it? Down at the shore in the evening, a strand of small black rocks sat just inches away from the pull of the tide. They were placed in a way that assured me of the hands that had set them down, carefully out of reach of the cold foam. I looked around, hoping to see a little girl, or some other child. Hoping for some benevolent kid to come around some corner that I hadn't yet noticed. Carrying one or two more little dark stones.