



Own

1.

Just fine.

A foot stool suited
Nezworth Abbey, Harry's allonym,
writer of scrunch verse,
author of rants,
builder of cathedrals in pop sticks
and president of the Society for the Restoration of
Mispronounced Words, like harass and schism:
a membership in flux.

Thirty-two, the recidivous dreamer.

Today Harry feels like the tread of the earth, though,
for the grave mistake that rolls out
this chronicle of scandal, of fate
is entirely his.

Alone –

And now he broadens out a smile sized to that of
the lunatic in the park who lustily claps his teeth
at joggers. He smiles,
those bald eyes, into the mirror
at the far end of the office
at himself, aware,
virilely aware
of his power to right the universe,
as we all are
at some depth of our own,
and to hammer across the room and to do it right now__
but smiling,
and still,

he sits awe-struck by the unseen suck
that incapacitates him,
and keeps fleshy joggers safe
in public places.

“It’s a dead squirrel,” she said in the disposition of taxonomic grunt work, but Richard Berth wouldn’t hear of it. He would not go in. He shook, and fashioned a grin, and if he had the kind of levity his kind will never wear, he’d ask what his probing eyes seemed to ask, *for what do I deserve this pleasure?*

“He didn’t eat here,” she said, in the way of reassurance.

“It’s a dead rodent,” he repeated. “If not a banner of health concerns,” and here Berth was careful with his syllables, “it’s a little bit ominous.”

“For it to be ominous,” she grabbed his arm at the pit with all the tenderness of forceps and discovered him through the door of the Ten Second Rule, “you would have to sponsor some strain of creed, some whimsy of belief.”

Berth, for he had to, acquiesced to the locale of his afternoon feed by electing the plastic chair over the cratered foam booth, “Death,” he intoned, “is the *casus belli* for all religions, so I needn’t declare one at this point. It is ominous to all who fear dying, or worse, who fear dying by salmonella, botulism, flea ticks, or,” he had found a white tube threatening a nozzle, “tepid mayonnaise.”

Fact is, the Ten Second Rule café was nearly done in already by the self-perpetuating gear works of inspections and permits of symbiotic city workers. It was these clipboard hacks who had kept the orange construction barricades in front of the café for nearly a year, dispossessing any food gatherers the chance to happen upon it delirious and starving. That there were those who found charming its flexible floor and its windows kept clean enough to discern the shapes of large things outdoors, or its cosmic patience to endure the occasional arboreal rodent dead at its threshold, hardly buoyed the total sum to make it through September. The point is they over-malted their malts, and this pleased her as much as bringing Berth into the stripped utilitarian interior.

“It is remarkable,” she said, “and I suggest it is an optimistic outlook for all regimes of faith.”

“What are you about, Stephanie?”

“Well it’s interesting because it makes its popularity more explicable, that the promise of death, and not the quandary of life, should be the engine of our faith. Who’s bothered, really, to query whence we came when we’re all morbidly fascinated to see what’s next?”

Berth looked up from his menu, thoughtfully spackled with real bits of entrees to attend their pithy definitions: “chicken, cooked,” for instance.

“Stephanie,” repeated Berth, “what brings us here? Today, that is, and here?”

“Business,” she smiled, “with my father, dead now twelve years.”

THE TOMB OF OSCAR LUNGE

MCMXXXII – MCMXC

HIS WORDS, OUR WORDS

The Lunge Estate and the Berth Publishing Group would like to welcome you to the Tomb of Oscar Lunge, poet, essayist, novelist, lyricist, playwright, philosopher, husband and father. Our amazement at the tribute of your coming, and of all Tomb visitors, is perpetuated day and year by the ever increasing endorsement of Oscar's life and work. To be certain, our gratitude keeps the proportion of your numbers.

The Tomb and its grounds were designed by Iker Flores, who found inspiration for his ideas in the works of Oscar himself. Mr. Flores worked in fellowship with the Berth Publishing Group (BPG*) to make the Tomb as widely accessible as Oscar Lunge's audience. Listed in this guide are descriptions of some of the more popular departments of the Tomb, its galleries, its chambers, its arcades, and notable monuments.

Oscar once wrote in an epistle to the librarian emeritus of UCLA that he should always find it bewildering that audiences should want to meet the author of a work they judge meaningful; for a work to secure that high and sacred ranking, every word needed to be weighed and tested against the entire rest of the language. What further enlightenment can possibly be teased out of an evening's conversation? On that occasion, as on many others, Oscar humbly declined the university's invitation for a speech and book signing. We, his family and the few that knew Oscar intimately, find it poetically reassuring, and in good humor, that Oscar should now have thousands visit him at his final resting place, and with no pressure at all to speak. As he would prefer, his work surrounds and holds him aloft, as every point, line and angle of design has been set to convey his words. And ours.

~ The Lunges, his wife, his son, his daughter

*The Berth Publishing Group would like visitors to know that all net proceeds and donations go to the preservation and further dissemination of Oscar Lunge's works, as well as to various charities and humane organizations**. All italicized remarks and suggestions are the sole responsibility of the Berth Publishing Group, and all proceeds are independently managed by BPG and associates. Thank you for your support and charity.

***All net proceeds go to the Berth Publishing Group; the Free Lunge Campaign, books for the hungry; the Lunge and Berth Charitable Societies; the Lunge and Berth Arts Endowment Fund; the Berth Co. Trust; The Lunge Libraries of St. Louis, San Luis Obispo, Las Cruces, and of Phoenix; various charities and organizations for the advancement of the human race; the community centers of Pulaski, Virginia and Calabasas, California; and public education.*

The Hordry Falls

Upon entering the grounds you'll see and hear, and if you near, feel the spray of The Hordry Falls. Inspired by Lunge's first full novel of the same name, The Hordry Falls surge skyward in a powerful fountain. The deliberate reversal of flow is to mimic in that story the gift of every fifth generation of Hordry villagers to live the reverse of time with the luxury of foresight, and the extraordinary ability to backwards-engineer the greed out of every idea and tradition of their forebears. *For those who would like to express their mourning at the loss of Oscar Lunge, a vial of tears™ may be purchased by the Hordry Falls BPG Kiosk. As per tradition, empty the vial into The Hordry Falls and watch its ascendance though the fountain and into the sky! (\$4.00)*

The Terraces of Zeal and Zero

The first performances of Lunge's most critically-acclaimed play, *Of Zeal and Zero*, were widely panned in the popular press and, as a result, generally shunned by all but the most avid audiences. The careful symmetrical construction of the acts, the uniform alternation of dueling styles, and the seemingly forced metaphors and alliteration perplexed the public and exasperated the experts. It was only because of the virtuosity of Lunge's past work that some critics refused to scrape the play from their hot lists, and instead attempted to crack the meaning of the play from its obsessively complete construction. More reviews were written, and helpful guides soon followed: what they finally realized was that the play's composition responded to strict mathematical guidelines, which of course provided the perfect vehicle for the story people have come to celebrate in myth and in popular phrases: "that's Zeal from Zero, Zero from Zeal," a cosmic tale of two memorable characters large enough to govern a universe under the divine laws of equilibrium. From the distance of The Hordry Falls, you'll notice the five Terraces of Zeal ascend in a warming gradient of colored gardens all the way to the Midge Forest on the top terrace, while the five Terraces of Zero descend in a reverse gradient. While climbing the Terraces of Zeal, notice on each step the sentences of Act I; while descending the Terraces of Zero, notice the sentences of Act IV engraved, naturally, in reverse order. *A staircase tram is provided for those who would rather ride to the top. Side seats, full windows and a measured pace allow passengers to appreciate the perfectly reverse differences between the two sets of terraces. (\$2.00 each way)*

The Midge Forest

The *Midge Forest* collection of poetry has been credited with single-handedly reversing the antiterrestrialism inherent in western Judeo-Christian tradition. Reversing the rotation of the earth is no mean feat: to coax a people steeped in a particular regime of thought, and in a culture with a healthy skepticism, or outright disregard of poetry, *Midge Forest* had to climb to these precise heights: it had to insert the actual planet logically back into a cosmology created by a[ny] supreme being, and, more difficult, it had to *entertain*. The poetry of *Midge Forest*, it has been claimed, alchemized language into every emotion so completely that to feel anything is merely to crack the glue of its binding. At the top of the Terraces of Zeal and Zero, each tree of the Midge Forest is imprinted with a separate poem from the collection. Each branch carries along its span a different interpretation of the poem, each according to the nine levels of meaning intrinsic to all of Lunge's work. Try to find some of the more popular pieces of the collection, such as "The Bitten Cat," "Angry Posh," "Lipoid," "A Novel Pursuit," and "Poems Five Through Twelve." Read the translations and you'll notice each level of meaning contradicts the others, a clear display of Lunge's comprehensive, gestaltist ontology. *At the tops of the Midge Forest trees are fastened paper leaves in autumn colors. These can be purchased at the Midge Forest BPG Kiosk at a dollar apiece. Pens are provided (\$1.50) for those who wish to write a note to the departed.*

The Tomb and The Etching Plates

Above the Midge Forest, the crown of the sepulchral hill, rises the Tomb of Oscar Lunge. A stalwart of granite and basalt, the composition and design of the tomb belie its comparatively small profile. The Moorish-Byzantine-Baroque-Art Nouveau style in which it's built is a blazon admission of the designer's reluctance to coin the body of the occupant in a single style. Most visible, though, are The Etching Plates, the towering plates of frosted glass that bookend the sides of the tomb. From their foundation, the plates stretch to a height of eighty feet, often stabbing through the fogs of morning and night and producing an effect of otherworldly nexus. On the outer surface of each plate there is a thick glaze of ice that is kept frozen by an internal cooling system. Each morning, after the ice of yesterday is allowed to melt to a smooth finish, phrases from Lunge's *The Etching Plates*, a philosophical treatise on the definitive forgetfulness of man, are etched deep into the icy glaze. Instrumental in the study of human thought, and the central text of lasting educational reform, *The Etching Plates* reaffirm the sublime creativity of man as a natural product of his forgetfulness. Verging on the theological but determinedly humanistic, *The Etching Plates* asserts that we are assigned to a limited memory and severe historical nearsightedness only so that we may have the life-fulfilling pleasure of invention, even if our invention is simply a redoing of something already done and

forgotten. *On the north-facing plate, there is a section designated for the etching of visitors. Etch your favorite Lunge phrases permanently into the day's ice. Etching trowels can be purchased at the BPG Kiosk at the rear of the tomb. (\$10)*

Other Areas and Items of Note

- Between the hours of eight to noon, and again from three to six-thirty in the evening, many of Lunge's lyrical poems are sung by visiting choirs within the tomb. *Recordings can be purchased at the BPG Bookstore near the entrance. (\$15-\$32)*
- Surrounding the central crypt, many alcoves exhibit illuminated Lunge manuscripts, the work of various artisans from Lincoln, Nebraska to Langkawi, Malaysia. The text in each alcove is broadcast in two hundred languages. *Also on display are diverse knit hats the Author may or may not have worn to proverbially blind himself during the composition process. Facsimiles of the hats and manuscripts can be purchased at the BPG Bookstore. (\$28+)*
- The view from the Tomb and the Midge Forest atop the Terraces is breathtaking, especially at twilight when the surrounding mountains are yet visible, and the mountainside villas have lit their porch light torches in nightly vigil. *Coin-operated, fixed telescopes are provided at random intervals along the Terraces. (\$.25/min)*

NB: The crypt is temporarily closed to the public.

NB: *The last tram leaves at six.*

3.

Bald eyes: Harry Lunge
in the office.
Spot on the foot stool.
Legs banded at the knees.
Back curled like a lamp post.
The precise counterpoint of unease
to the resolute column of manuscripts
that anchors the glass bookcase at the far,
distant end of the office.

He can see it, it's thin,
but he can see it fine:
A fifth into the column, sits the manuscript
that if published would ruin his father,
gap the firmament of his tomb
and reduce to stones his memory in a cataclysm of disrepute.

Here he sits, a still life, without consequence.

Harry had felt it once, a wing in the turbulence: a real vindication of his feverish intent. He had presented himself, Nezworth Abbey, at a local poetry slam, and with the old wine he had tasted accomplishment. The poem he read had suffered two presidential terms' of revisions, with the last brush giving it a fine gloss of uniqueness. He had, at the suggestion of his sister, removed all the adjectives and nouns from the adverbs and verbs, in a comment, she said, of all the action that substitutes for substance in a daily life.

He upped himself that night and in Nezworth Abbey's voice, the grease of wine, and in his best shorts, he read the poem, "Nullify Faithfully," to an ecstatic, late night mob of poetry lovers. The applause came all at once, and Harry thought, rather violently.

That upheaval of gratification was his sustenance for nearly a year, and out of it he pursued his writing, cathedral designs, and membership recruitment for his Society with renewed vigor. He didn't return to the venue of his singular success, however, because he was careful not to dilute his memory of the performance. Every morning he retreaded the memory with details. The smell of the lime garnishes. The snare of ice shaken in the bartender's tin. The cold anxiety of the moment it occurred to him to read. The wet of the microphone on his lip. The quiver and then the compensatory boom of his voice. The applause. The whistles. The soul-rubbing smiles as he returned to his seat – the way the overly perfumed, sweat-dotted waitress said, gently, "The poet Abbey, right?"

And how at that point, thrummed through with blood, he could only grin, when he knew that something, something said would have been more adequate for the title she'd given him.

And so he retreaded the memory. Every morning, with new details. Details he'd excavate ever deeper and more broadly from the past. He remembered how wet the napkins were under his glass, how red the corners bled by the wine. How cracked the plastic leather from the bar rail. How angular the veins down the arm of the bar back. That table of business men – their shirt pockets yawning tongues of ties, their proud stomachs, their thin office-mate with his jacket still on, holding his mug with ten tangled fingers and a face as grave as thought. The mess of power cords on the stage above the obstacle of steps. The vacuous gaze of light, the faces of patrons he couldn't make out through the tops of their heads, the burn mark on the waitress's arm.

Or was it scar tissue from an immunization shot? Was there a carpet? Had the stools pads? Was there music ever playing? Had she really said "the poet, Abbey," or did she just say, politely, professionally, "the Poet?"

The mornings came when Harry began to question his memory, what was manufactured, what was lost, what was replaced. Had she spoken to him at all?

He returned to his pop stick cathedrals. He studied the works of his father, and worked on his own, sitting at tables toppled over with books, heavy and distinguished, sensing at city tourists and passersby, the dull knock of the ordinary.

He continued to collect rejection letters from publishers, those polite and firm orders of restraint. He once pasted the letters together in what he titled "The Human Condition: A Giant Collage of Trial and Error," and submitted that to the galleries. And that, he never saw again.

Still, he writes. Because his father wrote, and his father did famously.

4.

Because his father was Oscar Lunge, however, Harry did have the essential task of delivering his father's yet unpublished manuscripts to the publisher. A constant marvel and boon to his adoring masses, Lunge had been so prolific while alive that, instead of saturating the public with libraries of work all at once, it had been arranged between he and his publisher that his work would be released over time, at regular intervals. Of course, the works are so many that Lunge continues to surprise, delight and inspire his readers with new releases years beyond his death. And since both Oscar Lunge and his publisher and dear friend, Aldus Berth, had since been flattened and pressed to literary history, it was the responsibility of their sons that they should carry on the spirit and letter of the arrangement. Harry would be responsible for delivering the manuscripts to Aldus's son, Richard, and Richard would have them published.

As is the hope and promise of everyone, then, Oscar Lunge lives on by his deeds, his family, and his friends. Every year, August 2, the day Oscar died, Harry Lunge delivers ten works, thoughtfully selected by his sister, Stephanie, arguably her father's most dedicated fan, to the office of Richard Berth, inheritor and president of the Berth Publishing Group. These manuscripts are typed and sent to the printer,

and with as much certainty, alight on the public with the grace of rain from a hot empty sky.

Today is August 4, though, two days after Harry dutifully delivered this year's stack. Two days, because it took two days for his sister to realize he'd delivered the wrong stack, for which Stephanie blames only herself. She'd been cleaning and reorganizing her office, which is seated in the estate library, and for all the mess she'd inadvertently confused her brother when he had come to pick up the manuscripts.

He selected the stack on her desk, instead of the stack by the door: That stack, the stack he selected, just so happened to have in its glory of deeds the one work the public was never to see, for their cozy minds hadn't the vast intricacy to appreciate the material locked within that particular piece of Lunge. Scandal they'd scream. Shame they'd oblige themselves to administer.

Now this mystery to all but Oscar Lunge and Aldus Berth themselves, that is to say, to all the living, sits in queue for world broadcast on Richard Berth's desk.

But Harry knows the one now, as his sister has always known and had told him yesterday. It was the thinnest, he was told, with a waxen seal, clasps that would permanently fracture upon opening, and jade covers that would crack in guilty white lines if molested. Harry could see that Richard had already marked each manuscript with a yellow tab, itemized and listed the works for advertisement – for Richard was nothing if not diligent – and the advertisements would be at the press now, set to burnish the titles of each into the public's imagination. But Harry could also see, from the distance of the office, that the clasps were unbroken, the waxen seal, glossy and complete: the scandal unknown. All Harry was to do now was to walk over and take the manuscript.

But Harry sits bald-eyed.

On the foot stool.

Legs banded at the knees.

Back curled like a lamp post.

The precise counterpoint of unease

to the firm column of manuscripts

that anchors the desk at the far end of the office,

his legacy's perpetuity and destruction.

5a.

"Pig, bird, or other, Richard," Stephanie nodded. He returned to the menu, squinting at the contents as if it were the Apocryphal Texts, dead serious.

"Do you suppose," he asked, "the peanut butter is fresh?" She smiled; he wouldn't notice.

She'd known him all her life, and she was all that time piqued by his crude usualness. An amateur's bust, she thought his a hastened assemblage of generic

parts, lucky enough to have an identical pair of ears and eyes and matching teeth lying about in the bins of creation on clearance.

Their fathers were long friends and famous associates, and with an infant's, a kid's, a teenager's mobility they'd seen each other often through the film of their childhood. Summers it was at Aldus Berth's stone house in the city. On a block with sidewalks left to crack open by the roots of trees and asphalt left to cinder – where all was left to age by the rare and rarefied aesthetic design of *let it be*, the stone house of Berth dated the trees. There was moss on the patio furniture, sharp pebbles on the flaked stone, but for Harry and Stephanie the redeeming gem of the stone house was its pool. Deep, elliptical, the tile marbled black and blue: Harry had once chipped a piece of a piece he bumped into with his elbow, a painful accident; he had placed it in the mesh pocket of his swimming shorts, his only crime, a jewel he has kept in his pockets since.

Stephanie had liked the pool because she could swim to the concave depth, let out her air, lie back and stare through the blurred lens of ten feet of water and, bliss, have to talk to no one there. Richard had liked it because she eventually had to come up for air. He had allowed then that he loved her, but was always chilled by what he thought she might be thinking, and decided when he was sixteen that he'd only dare himself to admire her distantly.

“And your mother, Stephanie, how is she?”

“Forgetful,” she answered, “it's a peculiar symptom of the Alzheimer's.”

“I know,” hastened Richard, his hand up, “but it's polite to ask. Her physical health, I mean, is it sufficient?”

“She's a Lunge,” said Stephanie. “We live.”

And with that particularly finite, clipped and cauterized end to that conversation, Richard blanked her a stare, and returned to the descriptions of food that would not upon his scrutiny alter.

“Do you remember,” continued Stephanie, “how our fathers would stand on the corner outside of your house and hurl insults at passing cars?”

“Like boorish drunks,” corrected Richard.

“Oh, they were harmless. Your dad in old professor's clothes, my dad in a lawn chair, legs crossed.”

“Thank God for air-conditioners,” said Richard, “that windows were up.”

“Your dad did all of the heckling,” said Stephanie.

“Your dad would laugh at every comment.”

“They thought there were being so anti-intellectual,” she laughed, “they were a funny pair.”

“Yes, odd,” he agreed.

The waitress came and they ordered by number. Stephanie ordered fries with “vats” of ketchup, and Richard did in fact order the peanut butter and jelly. When she had taken the order and the menus away, and that reassuring side-act of having to dine in company had ended, Stephanie rattled her fork in her teeth, slammed, Richard mistook, the utensil down, and said, “look, Richard, right now Harry is in your office. He's to get back one of the manuscripts. You see, we made a simple, rectifiable mistake. Now I realize you would have already sent the titles to the

advertisers, and the list would have gone out to the journals and bookstores and media.”

She paused for any gesture or hint of understanding on Richard’s uncluttered face.

She continued, “but we’ll give you the correct replacement, and we’ll simply acknowledge a mistake in the title.”

His blank copy of a face.

“Look, Richard, we can even submit a replacement with the same title.”

“How is that not absurd, Stephanie?”

“Yes, true, you’re right.” She was glad he had spoken.

“Do you know the value of those titles, Stephanie? What people do to those titles, their weight to them, their,” he paused, “solidity?”

She said, unconvincingly, “no matter.”

“That paper list of titles, right now, as always,” said Richard, his demeanor unaffected, his calm tone incongruous with this warning, “is the centerpiece of so much conjecture, the anticipation of thousands: right now, they are filling in the gaps of a whole mythology – what they are convinced is a new world of awareness, the red rubrics of which are those titles.”

“We give them more conjecture,” offered Stephanie, eyes wide, “we feed them, we provoke – who knows, we’ll prompt a whole new denomination out of this.”

“They’ve come to expect nothing less from Lunge than a calendar of precision, a mathematical precision, the – if it is – illusion of a perfect plan. This mistake, Stephanie, will situate the blame fully on us.”

“Yes, she said, that’s right, that’s fine.” She trusted she could live with it. Blame and ill repute are not so difficult to shoulder when the fields of her daily toil cannot afford to discriminate the help offered them: charity, the work that can never unveil its final product, and of course her work in special education – though she knows her contribution in that area is not without its rewards, even beyond the emotional self-satisfaction. Coupled with what she knows already about time and space, to look through the eyes of children whose cognitive abilities deviate from the sensible consensus is to see a more accurate sketch of reality. She had, too, in the way of escape, her hobbies: exploring the lines of descent of different philosophies in search of the crazy uncle, and, to her great amusement, writing letters under a rotation of ridiculous pen names to editors of national newspapers, journals, and magazines.

Dear Editor,

Your coverage of voter apathy in the United States is rashly simplistic. Your reasons lack depth, comment, and any hope of insight. They have only the convenience of an attractive superficiality – “The Three Reasons for Low Voter Turnout” – and a quaint banality; certainly, you pose a low risk of upsetting or losing an audience over this article, but have you no more sleepless nights over the purpose of your publication? If it is to drill the basic literacy of

your audiences, then bravo! If, though, you have ever aimed to provoke a single synapse of real contemplation, I'm afraid instead your audience is that much more obtuse for having rubbed their eyes over your print.

Herein, for your dutiful review, is a more comprehensive explanation for the apparent political malaise that defines this age. Inside, your three reasons – disenfranchisement, disenchantment, and disengagement – are addressed, but unlike your treatment, provided is a detailed evolution of those symptoms, causal and corollary, including historical and cultural references. What your article did not take into account, however, and what comprises the greater length of this essay, is the psychological proclivity of a democratic majority to passive-aggressively, consistently damn itself to the perpetuation of its cronyist, corrupt leadership. Detailed within is the subconscious self-immolation of the ordinary citizen's political will, burned over time, by popular consent, to sustain the image of a government they've come to understand and believe in. You estimate it's apathy only, a lack of confidence in the system, but you neglect to consider that people stay home election day to willfully allow the steady, incestuous build-up of corruption. Simply, people now that *that* is what government is supposed to look like. It reaffirms for them the very substance of world literature, poems and fairy tales. My charge is that you shamefully underestimate the public's talent to recognize, understand, and to do everything in their democratic power to write themselves into a national narrative, full of invented heroes and appointed villains.

Please enjoy.

Yours,

Dotty T. Thimblesport

5b.

When Richard's sandwich landed before him, he tilted the plate to take in the remarkable thinness of the work. He released it to spiral back to its better angle and pushed it to the ends of its earth, unspoiled by human hand, bite or vandal of stomach acid, in fact, letting it be. She was three fries in.

"What's in the manuscript, Stephanie?"

She looked at him. "It's crap."

"That's without precedent," he said.

Richard couldn't believe her. Oscar Lunge's critical infrastructure was so well developed at this point that a discarded grocery list, if submitted in the annual release of ten works, would ascend to epic significance. So revered were the designs of Lunge's imagination and intellect that an unsavory audience response called into immediate question that audience's sensibilities and their literary, historical, and philosophical aptitude. *"Don't you understand? The Grocery List is a compendium of prefabricated and overly commercialized artifacts that together comment on the existential cycle of need, desire, and perishability in a post-post age!"* In fact, the position of editor at Berth Publishing, despite that company's commercial success and status as Lunge's literary pump, is hardly a desirable position. There's nothing asked of them but to type in Lunge's exact words, faithfully to the comma splice, and if there be any suspicion of altering the message: pitchforks and torches to their door.

"Stephanie," Richard assured her, "your father's work is so universally admired that even a crap manuscript can do no wrong. And negative criticism? The critic that gambles an attack on Oscar Lunge purchases by his deed the brand of fame-seeker, jealous upstart, and brigand of truth."

With her teeth still on the straw of her shake: "not this one," she said.

"What's it about, then?"

"Don't know, can't say," she said.

"Don't know, or can't say?"

"What's the difference?"

"Is it," Richard asked pretending caution, "scandalous?"

"Ruinous," said Stephanie.

"That bad?" Richard laughed.

"I'm not sure," said Stephanie, leaning softly forward to shorten her stare, "you comprehend the gravity of this manuscript."

"Ruinous," he repeated. "End of the world. It could ruin everything."

"Yes. You've got it now," she said.

Richard flicked the plate of his sandwich, the black jelly beginning to permeate the core of bread. "Odd," he said, "I've been thinking about an ending."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she demanded.

"Something new."

"New is an old slogan, Richard."

"So we're all repeat offenders, then?"

"Incorrigible."

"Yes," he agreed. Richard, son of Aldus. Inheritor of his occupation, profit, and, expected, his ideals. How couldn't, he wondered, the end of a life-repeated seem tempting? "Aldus's son" had been his means and his mission, his every act a token or stain on his father's headstone. Certainly, this is the weight of every child, but Richard believed as he had lived, when a father imprints his deeds on the public consciousness, the yoke of expectations remain locked on the shoulders of his children into old age. A yoke that wouldn't be so onerous to bear if not for the public perception that every surge forward is tied to the carriage of his father's

legacy. A life was possible, Richard believed, a life apart from expectations, supposing that there was a tragic end to a life of good intention that expectation must constantly demand.

“Harry’s gone to my office now to steal back the manuscript?”

“Yes,” said Stephanie.

“Though it’s locked in a glass bookcase?”

“Harry will find a way. He knows the haste.”

“Our man of action, Harry?”

“I’ve told him,” said Stephanie, “in the most general terms, without divulging any details, what will happen to his father should he not retrieve the manuscript.”

“Do you mind if I call my secretary?” he asked, feeling for his phone.

“He will have locked your office door.”

“Do you mind if I pay the bill now?”

Stephanie looked up from the plastic lid of her malt. She hoped that he’d find the face he had faithfully watched when they were children. “Richard,” she said, “I diverted you this afternoon not because I don’t trust you – because I do as an old friend. I diverted you because of the certain conviction of consequence.”

Richard stood to grab the coins from his pocket. “Yes,” you diverted me,” he allowed while counting the change. He looked at the face he had to keep distant in his childhood, and repeated, “out of trust. My hope, then,” he said, “is that you’ll trust my own judgment with that manuscript.”

“Stephanie” was his only parting, and he turned and walked out, pausing for the squirrel, dead at the door.

6.

Still, in Berth’s office, Harry sits.

Back bent

like a lamp post. Legs apart.

Eyes bald

and tiring.

A singular, slow twitch of muscle

courses through the raised blind of his eyelid.

The column of manuscripts

remain steady.

The glass,

is unopened.

The deed, still

Undone.

But this hour, Nezworth Abbey has conducted a most proper survey of the room.

This much he knows:

From the viewpoint of the footstool, the office seems to slope upward and amplify to megalithic proportions. The pile of the Persian rug grows by the distance, the frames of the rough portraits on the wall thicken and the sketches themselves intensify in contrast, the desk sucks in its panels and bows out its top, and the stapler, tape dispenser, and other utensils rise in monument to their critical responsibilities. But Nezworth had to laugh at this – there really is no humility to the efforts of man to foreground the image of himself against the diminished statures of his contemporaries, his enemies and his associates both.

At the back of the room there are likely spirited various devices of electronic devilry to shake out the presence of any interloper, manufactured, as all tools of war, in the same limited mentality of the first sword maker who disregarded the notion that the blade might be used against himself. He was, Nezworth thought, after all, the son of Oscar Lunge himself!

And then there's the lock on the glass bookcase, the polished metal holding in mockery the smudge of Nezworth in the middle. Doubtless, there is one key, only one way to open it: ridiculous! Nezworth knew, the hubris in the notion of a single solution in a changing world – can there never be extraordinary circumstances such as the now and here? The glass of the case was blue in density, frozen and smooth to the finish, frozen and perfect in the layout of its molecules: until broken naturally, like all invention, the flipside of its fictional perfection the violent consequence of its malfunction. Trains derail in impossible carnage, cars conjoin their metals by the twitch of a finger on the wheel, and glass finds its teeth.

What Nezworth couldn't know sitting there in his familiar pensive stasis, is whether, as he moved toward the case, noxious fumes would erupt from the ventilation. What lovely irony, he thought, that a tongue his father was so reticent to use would be the cause of his own choking, unconscious to the floor. And were there foot traps in the rugs? They do sag conspicuously before the case – and would the dried sweat on his legs gather and hasten the parasites to the muscle and bone? There's no telling the nature of vapors of poison that would fall to his hand should it make it in the case, some scrubbing acid or perhaps liquid nitrogen – and Dogs! They may appear at the alarm, the spiteful, toothful Cerberus – and What Agent cut from the heavens might claim him with its beak and talons, his body gagged and blue and bloodied, marrow drips from the ankles, frozen and pocked and failed again.

He rises at this.

Nezworth, at this image of his iterant failure, now hoists himself from the footstool, high above the tyranny of his tendency, and steps toward the case. He walks, finally with bitter determination, and he outpaces the nature of his sodden self; and thrumming with purpose, he plunges his naked hand through the glass. The alarm sounds. He pinches the binding of the jade-covered manuscript and delivers it free from the column, flicks the clasps, fractures the covers and the seal and with the

office door opening behind him, he tears through the pages. The manuscript, the ruin of his father, is scrapped.

The deed is ended.

But no sooner is he grabbed by the shoulder and in a paroxysm of nerves and self-acclaim he turns wildly to face Richard: "I'm sorry," Harry screams. "It had to be done!"

"Harry!" yelled Richard.

"It had to be done!"

"Harry, please! Have a seat!"

Harry sat on the chair behind the footstool, his breath rocking him in tight circles. In the chair beside him, Richard sat on the edge, "Let's talk about this, Harry."

"It had to be done, I'm sorry, Richard," he said, slowing his sated heart. "Stephanie told me it could ruin my father. She told me to come, and while you were out, to sneak past your secretary, which I didn't have to because—"

"Because she let you in," said Richard.

"Yes, but I locked the door, took stock of my surroundings, and then, and then I had to break through your case and steal back the manuscript. I'm sorry, Richard, I had to," he breathed, "for my father, for Oscar." He stared at Richard, as Richard looked for the damage.

"Harry, as your father's publisher, I should see that manuscript."

"I'm sorry, Richard, it's shredded."

Richard turned again, and looked for the damage.

"It had to be done," Harry repeated.

"Harry," said Richard, "the manuscript is in the bookcase."

"It's—" Harry looked to the bookcase. The column of manuscripts stood, resolutely, behind the smooth, frozen, unbroken glass. The recidivist dreamer, he had, in fact, done nothing. In infinite regression, he had again done nothing. Without consequence. Nothing, just fine, Harry Lunge, son of Oscar Lunge, he had done nothing. His world, a balance.

"I think it's important," Richard was saying, "that we both look into the manuscript, together."

"I'm sorry," said Harry, pitifully.

"Your intentions were good, Harry. I'm certain of that. Now as old friends, you and I should do the sensible thing, and together, calmly—" Richard was on his course; he had his ending.

"I'm sorry," said Harry, as he stood above Richard. His dead stare at nothing hushed his old friend. He breathed in what Richard thought was the volume of two bodies. Methodically, almost casually, Harry clasped the bottom of his shirt and stretched it off, one arm at a time.

"Harry?" Richard would have asked, but the sight of Harry shirtless caught him without air. His stomach distended slightly below his numbered ribs, his elbows and wrists hung crooked on the tendrils of his arms – but it was his skin that disarmed Richard: the transparent, lifeless blanch of skin, a dull, luminescent, phantasmic paste over veins blue and knotted.

Harry coiled his shirt around his hand, and without poetry, walked over to the case, smashed the glass – “Harry!” Richard had screamed but kept his distance – and he tore through the manuscript, breaking the covers into incriminatory white lines.

7.

That night the styles at Oscar Lunge’s Tomb registered its 370,184th guest. The choir tried some lyrics in Farsi. The bookstore sold out of pencils. They had a problem with the cooling generators at The Etching Plates, but the repairman, they said, came just in time. In the surrounding villas, the porch light torches were lit as usual.

At the Lunge estate, Richard sat in his car at the drive. He had called Stephanie that night because he wished to talk to her in person. She approached him through a side gate, and she asked him if his lunch had settled. She stood at his door, while he remained in the dark of the interior. The engine idled, and when occasionally the RPM flagged toward a stall, the engine spun in double-time to compensate. They could not see each other’s faces. Occupying two different planes of sight, above and below the roof of the car, and in the panting of the engine, their voices and their heads were disembodied.

“Your brother was in today, as you know.”

“He was,” she said.

“He retrieved the manuscript, you’ll be happy to hear.”

“He did?” she asked. She seemed surprised.

“In rather dramatic fashion. Impressive for Harry.”

The engine throttled itself to recover from stalling.

“Yes, well,” he continued, “he tore your manuscript in half a few times.”

She had no comment, and Richard thought it odd that she hadn’t.

“Precisely,” he continued again, “he tore your manuscript in half three times. The resulting eight pieces were left to lie on my floor.”

“Yes, and?” she asked, as if prompting.

“What kind of publisher would I be if I didn’t piece the work – submitted twice by Harry this week, incidentally – if I didn’t piece that work together?”

“Not much of one,” came the voice, “I suppose.”

“I did, and I’ve read it.”

“You have,” she said.

“It was a short essay. In the confessional genre.”

“Yes, it is,” she said.

“And the line that stands out from the rest, I believe,” said Richard, “is this: ‘My husband’s is my pen name.’”

“Yes,” she breathed.

“Your mother’s quite the writer.”

The engine maintained its idle. The street lamp on the corner snapped black in a hollow pop. It clicked on again, and it regained its brilliance in the generation of a moment. Her mother, she's quite the writer.

It's certain; she'd fashioned a more complete world, emotional, philosophical, supralogical and real. And one that sounded like the last symphony in the canon of redemption. Never will the words she'd selected sound on key to any ear if cut apart from her phrases. But her first piece was written under her husband's name. She did this partly out of whimsy, but for the most part out of embarrassment: it takes a certain amount of unpardonable daring to parody the works of gods – which is what she had believed all art sets out to do. So she let Oscar have it.

She wrote – the Mrs., *she wrote* – and to the peculiar metronome of her ear she reeled off a mythology the public was perfectly willing to substitute for a less rewarding actuality. All under the name of Oscar Lunge. It became her most signature literary convention.

But with the near-rapturous reception of her work, she became less embarrassed by what she considered less blasphemous: and her ideas became bolder. It was then to prevent the embarrassment of her husband that she felt it necessary to keep up the secret; and besides, who was she to cross the trust of her audience, who in their guarded and cynical responsibilities had tendered their carefully metered admiration heaps upon Oscar. Really, who was she?

“Yes,” Stephanie agreed, “she is quite the writer.”

“And her pen name,” said Richard, “was Oscar Lunge.”

“Yes,” she said.

“Did my father know about this?”

“Our fathers knew,” she said, “he must have.”

“Right,” said Richard to himself, “I imagine he must.” And as if to shut down that line of thought, he said promptly, “Stephanie, there are two items of note I'd like to bring up about this work.”

“Yes,” she said.

“Well the first is that it exists at all. Why was it written, and to whose attention?”

Richard could hear her hand set on the roof of the car, and tap twice lightly.

“I suppose,” he could hear her say, “some part of her, at a vulnerable moment, wanted someone to know, or better, to find out, on accident. As if by her accident.” Richard could hear her finger slipping down the metal of his roof. “It's like a thief,” said the voice, “who grows tired and leaves a trace of herself at the scene of a murderous larceny, on purpose, hoping that some crack detective will give her identity, will give her form, by capturing her, will give her birth, to the public.”

Richard cut the engine. “I'm not sure I understand; this was on purpose?”

“It would have been, yes,” she said, “she let the essay stand.”

“Okay, that brings me to the second item.”

“Yes,” she said expectantly.

“The second item of note is that apparently there never had been a surplus of work – by anybody's hand – that your mother, and I suppose my dad for those two

years after Oscar's death, had created the myth of the surplus so that she could continue writing even after the death of the author."

"Yes," she said. "That's logical."

"So the manuscript reads."

"Well then," she said.

"Well your mother, Stephanie, began suffering from Alzheimer's without return about five years ago, the way I figure, and still these manuscripts reach my desk."

"It would appear," she said, "she had a surplus herself."

"I'm not sure, Stephanie."

"How else would you explain it, Richard?"

"I believe another Lunge is writing."

"No," she said.

"That would be logical," he said.

"No, Harry—"

"Not your brother," interrupted Richard, "you, of course."

"No," she said, after a most conspicuous pause.

"You hesitated."

"I am not Oscar Lunge."

"Is your hesitation your moment of vulnerability, Stephanie, your own purposeful mistake?"

"No, Richard, you're seeing ghosts."

"Stephanie, trust me," said Richard, bowing down in his seat to try to fashion a face from the dark, "don't let your good intentions forsake you, who you are," he said.

"We're ghosts, Richard." She slid her hand from his roof and turned toward the gate, hastening steps to the entrance. Richard swung open his door, foot to the ground, but trusted the celerity of his voice, "Stephanie," he called, "you can trust me, your secret is kept."

She paused at the gate, before disappearing, a hesitation he mistook for gratitude.

8.

Through the windowless halls and the double doors of the house, she carries two bowls of soup because she cannot carry three. She's left hers to cool in the kitchen.

She's exceedingly careful; it's counted as an inviolable rule that if the soup should spill over the rim, it's never a dotting of drips but two-thirds the contents – and who but she is there to wipe up that mess? Leaving nothing to chance, she sets the bowls onto a desk in the passage to the south end of the house and opens another set of doors. She returns for the bowls and passes through the library to a low-vaulted living room. She sets the bowls on the glass table before the couch and pulls two spoons from her pocket. She tests the temperature of each bowl, for she had to heat them separately, and set each on a tray. Each tray she locked into the armrests of the two reclining chairs. She paused to look at them.

The both of them,
the old woman and the old man
were still napping before the evening news,
and she thought she'd give them
some more time
to sleep —
for who knows the characters
of their hingeless dreams?
What new stories peal thunderously
from their windswept memories? —
while their soup was allowed to cool
before she would go back
for her
own.