

Traps and Other Stories

By

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ABSTRACT

This selection of four short stories treats low-culture plots, subjects, and storylines, with high-culture rhetorical techniques. Taking as its sources material B-movies, or Portuguese plays from the 16th century, this thesis believes that the distinction between high and low art is nonexistent, another binary created where binaries do not exist. Literature is for, and made of, drunks, prostitutes, and thieves, as much as many honorable people. It is also attempts to be American, in the sense that the plots hint at violence, conspiracy theories, and Christianity, the American trinity.

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A Thesis

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By

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Traps

When Ron DeSantis got home from vacation late Sunday night and found out that his wife had forgotten to clean out the kitchen sink strainer before they left, and Mrs. DeSantis found out that her husband hadn't fixed the kitchen sink's leaky faucet like he promised, and they both found out the entire first floor was flooded, really messing up the marble tile, Ron swore it was the worst thing that had ever happened to him. Until, that is, the next morning when he was woke by the voice of an older man in a general's combat uniform standing at ease at the foot of his bed.

"The kids have taken the schools, sir," the older gentleman said.

"MacPherson?" DeSantis thought he recognized the older man as the newly appointed Secretary of Defense. "General MacPherson? How did you get into my bedroom?"

"Your wife let me in, sir."

"I let him in, Ron." Casey came through the bathroom door, carrying a bathrobe. She threw it on the bed beside him. "It's serious."

"Mrs. DeSantis is quite right." MacPherson nodded to her politely. "She thought that it was appropriate I come right away. The schools, sir," MacPherson paused, "your schools, sir, have fallen."

"My schools?" Ron realized he had had night sweats.

"Yes, sir. Ron DeSantis Vocational High and Ron DeSantis Military Prep."

Ron sat up in bed and saw that it was still dark outside. "What? What time is it?"

“0500 hours, sir,” the general said. “We waited as long as we could, but President Trump felt it best to bring you into the situation at this point.”

“Honey,” Casey pointed to their bedroom TV.

An MSNBC news crawl at the bottom of the screen listed the number of students participating in what they were calling “an active armed rebellion” at the twin campuses of RDVS and RDMP as over two thousand. Live helicopter footage began to stream.

“That’s Fake News,” Ron said.

At that moment a half a dozen men in combat uniforms carrying a mess of equipment, a tray of coffee and toast, and what could only be a folder full of classified military intelligence, burst through the door of the room.

“Perhaps it’s best you get up now, sir,” the general motioned to his men, “and have a cup of coffee before I bring you up to date on the situation.”

While a young man in uniform pulled Ron out of his bed, another slid a robe on him; a third handed him a cup of coffee and a fourth escorted him to his own bathroom where a fifth soldier splashed water in his face and then handed him a towel.

“A moment, please,” Ron said.

The soldier shook his head no.

Ron didn’t like being told no, even if it were silently, but the young man was professional about it, so after he had dried his face and made sure his hair was okay—he had a feeling cameras would be outside of his governor’s mansion any minute—he walked into the bedroom and took a sip of coffee.

Casey had been changing channels since he left.

“It’s on Fox,” she said.

“It’s trending on Truth as well, sir,” the general added.

Ron felt like he needed to sit down.

The general lifted a plate towards him. “Toast?”

Ron shook his head.

After the general had made himself a piece of toast with strawberry jam and ate it, two soldiers from the hall entered, gathered the dishes, and pushed the cart with all the breakfast food from the room. With equal efficiency six men in the room set up a large table and spread out a map of the school campuses and began putting little figurines on it.

“Well, sir,” the general said to him, “I believe you are fully awake now.”

MacPherson gestured for him to join them at the war table. When Ron was standing beside him, the general began.

“I cannot say that I was familiar with your schools in any meaningful way, governor, except that I was pleased when you announced your change to a curriculum focused on, designed by, and administered under the auspices of the U.S. Army. My U.S. Army. I thought that was swell, and I would like to express my admiration.”

Ron and the general shook hands. The general continued.

“But now that I am familiar with curriculum, with the—how should I say this— cutting-edge depth of what you are teaching in Florida—”

The general waved a folder full of intelligence about the school’s curriculum.

“I can say that I am only more pleased. Half my active-duty soldiers wouldn’t pass 9th grade—”

“Cut power,” Ron said.

He had walked away from the war table and was staring at the TV. He started to feel nauseous.

On the TV, Fox News showed a live stream of the twin campuses lit up like military airbases atop their strategically designed groundworks. The landing strip, the high groundworks, the military grade constructions—he was trying to think of what else—were part of his latest round of hardening. Schools designed to keep active shooters out, and resolve the situation quickly if they did get in. He was proud Florida had the hardest schools, but looking at these two now all he could think was that he wanted to sit down. He felt clammy. The last shot on the TV showed the helicopter pulling out of the campuses' airspace; instead of American flags, Progress Pride flags were now affixed to the perimeter wall of the campus.

“We did cut power, sir,” MacPherson replied, looking at the TV. “Marvelous structures. They make the Pentagon look like a 7-Eleven.”

“Cut the power.” Ron felt the coffee in his stomach churning. “Cut the power.”

“Sir.” The general gestured for a soldier to lead Ron back to the war table. “I can assure you we cut power first thing. However, the kids from the Vocational school, sir,” the general highlighted the Vocational campus on the map with his pointer, “have teamed up with the kids from Military Prep.”

The general used his pointer to indicate the two main buildings of the respective schools, and the series of lines and small dots in red that had been drawn on the map between them, carefully avoiding the little tank, jet, mounted machine gun, landmine, and troop figurines his soldiers were still setting on the map. The schools had two separate campuses built on the same plot of land, on top of two manmade hills—small mountains really—less than two miles from each other. Though a wall separated them from each other, Ron knew an extensive series of

tunnels ran underneath the wall and between the two schools, allowing access in emergency situations. He also knew a wall ran around the perimeter of the school, providing an extra level of security.

“Through the one’s extraordinary trade school training, and the other’s extensive theoretical and practical training in military tactics, paired with the extraordinary military resources stored on the campus, the amount of practical drilling you did, the kids, sir, have built their own self-contained and self-sustainable electric grid.” The general highlighted the series of red lines drawn between the two campuses.

“Their own grid? That’s not possible.”

“Yes, sir, it is. As you see, the young soldiers and technicians at the two schools have deployed solar panels.” The general indicated a neat row of red squares which represented the solar panels.

“Solar panels are illegal in Florida.” Ron kept getting sweat in his eyes. “The 2025 Stop Solar act went in effect last year.”

“They are illegal by Florida state law, sir, however federal law allows for them. And since the schools are technically a wing of the army, the kids at military prep were trained on them. The military kids trained the vocational kids, who grasped their use immediately. I watched them via satellite construct their entire electric system in an hour and a half. An hour and a half. It would have taken the entire U.S. Army the better half of a week.”

The general was beaming. He looked positively giddy.

“Look,” the general held out a tablet with a video playing on it. In the sped-up aerial footage, Ron could see hundreds of young soldiers and young journeymen deploying the

electrical grid with terrifying precision. He could also see that all the young soldiers, and most of the young journeymen, were in battledress and fully armed. He also saw a lot of rainbow flags.

He started to pace, hoping it would calm his stomach. “Cas, can you get me an Alka-Seltzer?”

Casey went to the bathroom, returned, and handed him a glass with the Alka-Seltzer already in it, which he drank before it had fully dissolved. White foam spilled out of his mouth as he finished it.

After a soldier handed him a towel and he wiped his mouth, Ron spoke. “Why would they take over a school? I thought they hated school. I thought they played video games.”

“They do, sir.” MacArthur gestured for another folder. “One game, sir, at this school. One VR game. The same VR game the Green Berets use to train. The Green Berets, sir. They hold lines.”

“I worked with the Green Berets, general, I know what they—”

“No, governor,” the general interrupted him. “You were a lawyer for the Green Berets. You worked *for* them. I work *with* the Green Berets, and I have been in contact with them concerning this matter, and—”

“And, General MacPherson?”

“And with the libraries—”

“Libraries?”

“My apologies, sir. With the Training Media Centers,” he pointed to the reinforced bunkers on each campus, “being converted to armories at your request, the amount of fire-power available to these high school students is enormous. Paired with the state-of-the-art military

constructions which make up the schools' facilities, the Green Berets think the compound is impenetrable."

"They're kids. They're kids with guns. This is insane. They are ins—"

"Sir!" MacPherson slapped the map with his pointer.

Ron stopped.

"I apologize." The general continued, "Sir, I have been in contact with the ranking student officers at RDMP, and these young individuals—I hesitate to call them kids—are some of the most highly trained soldiers in the country. With their superior reaction times, their twitch reflexes, the amount of weaponry available—sir, I agree with the Berets. The U.S. Army would be cannon fodder."

"They have cannons?" Ron felt dizzy.

"Cannon fodder is more a figure of speech." The general motioned to one of the men standing near the bedroom door. "But, yes, now that you mention it, they do. Tell him, Davids."

The young soldier now standing beside Ron showed him a clipboard and began to speak.

"Mr. Governor, sir, our intelligence puts their inventory at," the soldier flipped the page of the clipboard for him, "two crates of M-4s, 12 cases to a crate, 124 rifles to a case. Two crates of—"

"Stop. Stop. We don't have time for this." Ron could see the long list of weapons, and that the sun was already up. "Do they have cannons?"

"Thank you, Davids, that will be all," the general said. "Yes, in addition to the M-4s they have tanks, cannons, mortars, plastic explosives, landmines—"

"Landmines are outlawed by the Geneva Conventions."

“Yes, sir, the kids used them to train for fighting against insurgent forces, mercenaries, Russians, any guerilla force state-sponsored or not that does not follow or is not bound by the Geneva Conventions. They also have tactical nukes.” MacPherson stopped and gestured towards a chair. “May I sit? This part of the conversation may be difficult.”

Ron nodded.

MacPherson sat in the chair and pulled out a cigar.

“May I?” the general asked. “It relaxes my nerves.”

“Sure.” Ron had to grab a table to steady himself.

When a soldier with an ash tray appeared, MacPherson continued.

“Ronny. May I call you, Ronny?”

“I would prefer you not to.” Ron sat down.

“Ronny, let’s get to the heart of the matter. If I were in charge, I would have already deployed the mines and all other defensive materials. I would have executed a count of the armory; I would have stationed mounted guns, tanks, scouts, and snipers; I would have assigned rifles, grenades, flak jackets, helmets, radios, rations, and sidearms to every trained individual; I would have begun drawing up plans, strategizing with my brass, and probing for weaknesses in my opponent’s infrastructure with drones and even manned vehicles if necessary. And, I would have aimed my nukes at D.C. and every major military base within their range.”

“They have drones?”

“They have drones. They have helicopters. They have jets and runways.”

Ron’s feet felt ice cold and his neck on fire.

“Anyway, sir, I say all of this to say that the young Lieutenant in command delivered this letter to me last night.” General MacPherson pulled a colorful letter out of his overcoat, spilling

glitter everywhere. “Delivered this letter to me *by dove* last night—I’ve heard of pigeon, but *by dove*— as I drank wine with Cythnia on the veranda of our Florida home. And this young Lieutenant, Christopher, has certainly already done all these things and more.”

“I tell you,” MacPherson continued, “after reading this letter,” he waved the glitter-coated correspondence and smiled, “I wasn’t sure whether I should mobilize my troops or introduce the young officer to my daughter.”

Ron’s throat burned.

“But,” the general continued, “To be honest, sir, I would be both terrified and honored to go to battle against this young person. But we are not going to let that happen, I assure you.”

MacPherson stood up and handed the rainbow glitter letter to Ron.

By the time Ron had finished reading the letter out loud his hands were covered in glitter, and he was furious. He expected to see a similar level of anger on his general’s face, but MacPherson looked like he was about to cry.

“Beautifully written, sir, this letter.” Ron noticed MacPherson wiping his eyes. “It’s the cigar, sir, the smoke from the cigar got in my eyes.”

“What are their demands?”

“Their demand, sir. They have one demand.”

“What is their demand?”

“You, sir.”

“Me?”

“Yes, sir, you, sir, your person, delivered to them, by me, by five o’clock today. If they do not receive you by five o’clock, sir, Chris says they will consider negotiations failed, and war declared. They will not hesitate to strike.”

“He said that?”

“They said that.”

“They?”

“Yes. H—they are non-binary, sir. Meaning they do not identify as a man or a woman. I’m still learning too, sir, but Lieutenant Chris was kind enough to explain it to me. A—”

“This is woke. He—” Ron felt like he could breathe for the first time. “*He* is crazy. This kid is crazy.”

“Sir, Chris is the most sober, thoughtful, and intelligent commander with whom I’ve had the pleasure of negotiating. Their boyfriend is equally as thoughtful, and positively charming. If you don’t mind my saying.”

Ron wasn’t sure he minded anything. He just felt sick. “His boyfriend?”

“Their boyfriend.”

The ringer went off on MacPherson’s phone.

“Excuse me, sir.”

After MacPherson had taken his phone out and swiped the screen, music began to play. MacPherson watched the screen for a few seconds and laughed.

“Marvelous,” the general said.

Ron looked up. “Good news? Surrender?”

“No, sir. A TikTok.”

“I banned TikTok.”

“You banned TikTok in Florida. As a member of the feder—”

Ron raised his hand. “Fine. What is it?”

“It’s a video-sharing multimedia platform that beg—”

“Not TikTok, general. The video you received, what is it?”

“It’s Chris, Chris’ boyfriend, and a young Latinx individual, a friend of theirs named Zeke. They’re dancing to a song from the Barbie album. They even have some of the lyrics written on the screen. It’s marvelous. I had no idea of how creative young people are today.”

Ron walked over, stumbling a little on the furniture.

“Oh, thank God,” Ron surprised himself with how hopeful he sounded. He knew what something was, who someone was, for the first time that morning.

“General, that’s a young man and woman kissing and their,” Ron paused, “friend dancing beside them.”

“Sir, I hate to correct you, but since these are three of the finest soldiers I’ve had the pleasure of negotiating with in my career, and since I’ve already told you Chris is non-binary, something you still don’t seem to understand, I must.” The general reached over and placed his hand on the governor’s.

“I understand how you might be confused—this is new to me too—but that isn’t a young man dancing, it’s Chris dancing, and that young person you referred to as a young woman, isn’t a young woman. He’s Ashton, Chris’ boyfriend, who identifies as a trap. Now I’m to understand trap is a bit of an outdated term, and one Ashton cautioned me on using to freely, but he said that he felt empowered by it, and I respect that. I would not be a good general if I did not respect what empowers my soldiers, as the army is only as powerful as its soldiers.”

The general pointed to the young Latinx man necking with Ashton and continued.

“Zeke, the young individual necking with Ashton, thinks he himself may be a femboy, but he would like to experiment as a verbal top as well.”

Ron was beginning to have a hard time comprehending sentences. “Traps? Femboys?”

“Yes, sir. As far as I understand it, a trap is a young person who is not a cisgender female who passes for a cisgender female, while a femboy is, as you have probably guessed, a feminine younger man. I’ve already explained non-binary as best I can but, if need be, I can try again.”

When Ron looked back at the general’s phone after this string of nearly incomprehensible words, he wasn’t sure if it was something he ate, or the stress of the situation, or his being woken up so early, but when he looked at the image on the phone again, it was as if the phone were some portal through which he glimpsed a world his senses only could approximate, as if he were a 2D object encountering a sphere but seeing a circle.

“It’s their prom, sir,” MacPherson said. The video clip repeated on his phone, playing a clip from the song “Man I Am” by Sam Smith with the lyrics *no I’m not gay bro but I’ve been on that lay low* superimposed on the video.

“They made all the decorations themselves. Marvelous. They said you didn’t let them have a prom. That you wanted a military ball. They told me a lot of other things you didn’t let them do.” MacPherson was staring at Ron. “And Zeke *is* on the lay low, so we would appreciate your discretion.”

“Lay low? We?”

“Yes. From what I understand it’s when an individual is figuring out their gender identity or sexual orientation but is not ready to be open about it publicly. Like I said he thinks he may be a verbal top, or femboy, but he’s still figuring things out and says when he is ready that we’ll be the first people to whom he comes out. He speaks that way, it’s marv—”

“We’ll?”

“Yes, to Chris, Ashton, President Trump, and me.”

“President Trump? He’s negotiating with mentally ill kids who are capable of starting nuclear war?”

“Not ill, sir, that’s offensive. It may be gaslighting, though I’m not quite sure what gaslighting is yet. But—”

“What?”

“Nuclear war. I have assured President Trump, these young soldiers, and the American people that under no condition will I allow nuclear war. And now I am assuring you.”

Ron noticed that the video on MacPherson’s phone had changed. It was Chris dressed up as a fox in military garb with #glittertwink superimposed in the corner.

Like a proud parent, MacPherson smiled. “That’s Chris’s fursona, Major Fox. Marvelous, they made the costume themselves.”

“Fursona?” Ron’s jaw hurt.

“Well, a fursona, sir, a fursona—well, sir, this is all very new to me. I know a fursona when I see one, trust me, but I still can’t describe it. The most I can say is that I recommend you google it. I recommend you google it alone sometime. Maybe when your wife and kids are out of the house for a few hours. Here are a few links.”

Ron heard his phone beside the bed ding.

“No need to thank me.” MacPherson smiled.

“So what all does this mean?”

“It means, that with the recent change of public opinion—”

“Change o—” Ron’s chest felt tight.

“It will be better if you don’t interrupt me anymore, sir. It means that this talented generation of honest, patriotic, and diverse young soldiers—savvy on social media, influencers—

have so far inspired a change in public opinion that the newest IBD/TIPP poll has conservatives at ninety-nine percent pro expansive protective legislation for LGBTQIA+ Americans, with one percent of Americans undecided. One percent! Fifty-eight percent are even open to new letters. Laws are already being passed. As for the left, while they haven't reached a consensus opinion on the use of assault rifles and other weapons of war, as they call them, by these young soldiers, they are so moved by the change of opinion on the right, and by their hatred of you—which frankly, sir, I am starting to understand—that the people in the nation are the most united they have ever been on any issue. Even WWII. Think about that, sir.”

Ron couldn't think; he felt dizzy, and the center of his vision began graying out.

“Given public opinion, and the Army's belief that an assault would be mutually assured destruction—their nukes and ours guarantee casualties in the hundreds of millions—that leaves us with only one option.”

MacPherson took Ron's hands into both of his.

“Or it did until I negotiated another option, sir, on your behalf. Ashton, Zeke, Chris and President Trump took some convincing, to be sure, but they eventually understood how important it was to me that I bring this situation to a zero-casualty conclusion. I explained to them that a good general tries to save lives, that a good general never resorts to battle but as a last option, that a good general avoids war, and that, as I am a good general, that I am trying to save lives.”

“What is it? Cas?”

“That you change your mind. About everything All this nonsense.”

“Cas?” Ron's left arm hurt.

“Your wife left an hour ago.”

The center of Ron's vision grayed out completely. "An hour ago?"

"Change your mind, sir." MacPherson gestured to his soldiers to surround Ron. "Short of nuclear war these compounds are impenetrable, and these young soldiers indomitable. The American people are decided. Change your mind."

Ron tried to speak, but the pain in his chest overwhelmed him. He collapsed.

A medic appeared and started CPR. After a few minutes Ron was declared dead.

"His heart has stopped, sir," the medic said to MacPherson.

As his soldiers removed the body, MacPherson took a seat and sent a text. After he received a reply, he dialed a number on his phone.

"Mr. President, sir. Yes, sir, Project GlitterTwink was a success, Chris and his team have agreed to surrender the school. Yes, sir. No. No, I am afraid I failed as a general. There was one casualty, one which I tried to avoid. Yes. Unfortunately, it seems the governor suffered a heart attack before he could accept the terms. Yes, sir, the army hospital will do a full autopsy. Hahaha, yes, sir, #glittertwink. Very good, sir. Dinner at the White House? Yes, sir, I'll pick up Zeke, Chris and Ashton on the way. I am excited to meet them as you are. Yes, sir, we'll stop by McDonald's on the way."

The Dame of the Camellias

An unfaithful translation of Machado de Assis's "Singular ocorrência"

Teddy stood on the street smoking a cigarette and talking to his friends when he saw a familiar figure. "See that dame," he said, pointing with his cigarette— it was the late 1940s and the war was over, but nobody could stop, or nobody cared to stop, smoking cigarettes like they had on the frontline—"Entering the church of the Holy Rood?"

The boys—Daniel, Seymore and Ned—looked and nodded.

"She stopped just now to give a donation" Teddy said.

"In black?" Daniel said.

"Exactly. She's going in; she's in." Teddy threw his cigarette down, stomped it out, and then lit another. "She must be 46 now."

"Beautifully conserved," Ned said. Men spoke like this back then.

"This is the most engaging you've ever been, Teddy," said Seymore, who often ribbed Teddy for being dull. "Come on then. Stop looking at the ground. Tell us everything."

"Guess," Teddy said.

"She's a widow?" Daniel asked.

"No."

"Her husband is alive but he's really old?" Ned asked.

"Not married."

"At her age?" Seymore asked.

"Her name's Maria Marocas and she was in her 20s when I met her. She wasn't a seamstress, or a schoolteacher, or a secretary, or a stay-at-home mom. I could go on driving forth

with professions more and less noble and we would arrive at it eventually, but I think you get the drift to which I am maneuvering. She lived just outside of the city back then and was just as skinny as she is now, but decidedly prettier. Serious bearing, well spoken, attractive. Whatever they wanted to see, she showed.”

“For example.” Seymore held his hands spread out as if presenting Teddy to Daniel and Ned. “To this gentleman.”

“No, not me, but Andrew. He was a friend of mine back then, twenty-six-year-old half lawyer, half politician type, born in North Carolina and married in New Jersey, whence he came here and met this Maria. Drew’s wife was pretty, affectionate, meek, resigned, and pregnant, all noble qualities in a woman, and they already had a little two-year-old child when I met them.”

“But in spite of all this wedded bliss, Maria?”

“Exactly. Look, if you’re not in a rush, gents, let us go into this restaurant and relate this story over a drink or two.”

He led them to a restaurant a few hundred feet away but still on the same street as the church Maria Maracas had gone into, and once they had their beers and some peanuts and their cigarettes all lit Teddy continued.

“The first time Andrew encountered her was at the door of Paul Bright’s, a tobacco store out on 52nd St. He had stopped near the doorway, not being a patron of the store, to light a cigarette of his own, having his own vender and that just being a convenient spot, and as he was so doing he saw what he thought was a beautiful lady walking towards him and he waited, already agitated, for he had in high degree a passion for women.

“Maria continued walking towards him holding this piece of paper and looking around like she was lost. In front of the store, she stopped a moment; then she, with her dainty hand,

extended the small piece of paper, and asked Andrew where the address there written was. It was the other side of the neighborhood, Andrew told her, looking up and pointing with his cigarette. She thanked him gracefully and he didn't know what to think about the whole event, just assuming she was lost."

"That's what I would assume as well," Ned said, a little drunk.

"Well, I'll tell you right now she knew where she was, but she didn't know how to read. That's why she had to ask him where the address was. Andrew didn't suspect it either. He watched her traverse the street headed in the general direction of the house she sought, most likely to go on asking others help to direct her."

"And?" Daniel asked.

"And that night Andrew went with his wife to the theatre to see *Lady of the Camellias*."

"I love that play!" Ned shouted, a little too loud for the small bar, which was one long hallway.

"Maria was there at the theatre and she and Andrew engaged in an indecorous amount of eye contact all the way through the third act even when she was crying and couldn't possibly even see him. And that was it. Fifteen days later they were madly in love. Maria turned away all her clients, and I believe that she lost not insubstantially by it as quite a few were good capitalists. Staying by herself, living for Andrew, neither wanting any old affections nor cogitating new interests—"

"Just like the *Lady of the Camellias*!" Ned said.

"Exactly. And he taught her how to read. 'I'm a schoolmaster,' he tells me one day, and then he went on about the incident in front of Bright's, the night at the theater, tracking her down, their first tryst. He said she learned quickly, the reading that is. Annoyed by not knowing what

everyone else seemed to, that and the desire to read the novels all her friends talked about, and finally the pleasure of being with him. From then on he confided in me and with a grateful smile in the eye would tell me everything.

“I had both their confidence. We dined at times all three together, and often at nice places. Maria liked fine dining and fine clothes, and Andrew was willing to go along. Little by little intimacy was established among the three of us; she would interrogate me when Andrew wasn’t around, about his life, his wife, his kids, his habits. I could tell she truly loved him. Why else the rain of questions?

“Anyway,” Teddy continued, lighting another cigarette. “Soon it was Andrew’s wife’s birthday, and Andrew promised to take her on vacation to Florida. When he returned, he, Maria, and I went to another one of our dinners. While we were there, she mentioned another play she had seen, *Dinner with Mom*, where the protagonist ate dinner with a portrait of her mother; she swore she did the same with a picture of Andrew while he was gone.”

“What a gesture!” said all three of the boys. That was a phrase then.

“Truly, gentlemen. And then he took her by the head with both his hands, pulled her towards him, and gave her a paternal kiss on the forehead.

“One day after this he and I were out and he told me about all the lace lingerie he had bought her, and how he wished to buy her an apartment as soon as he had the money available. He even praised her modesty, how she took no more from him than she needed. ‘More than this,’ I said to him, and told him how three weeks earlier she had pawned some of her jewelry to pay her tailor. This news floored him; I won’t swear, but I thought his eyes even watered. Any case, after thinking about it for a while he told me that he was going to arrange an apartment for her.

“Then, the next week Andrew is at his office and a little after mid-day one day a certain Lee gentleman walks in, an ex-clerk for some law office Andrew dealt with. He came to ask for a job, but Andrew wasn’t interested. Lee, however, didn’t seem upset by the rejection. He smiled even, and that’s when Andrew asked him what he was so happy about. Lee shuffled a bit, bit his lip, and Andrew, who was as I said was given to amorous pursuits, recognized the signs and asked him if his present mood concerned a lady. Lee replied that it did.

“Look!” Ned pointed out the window where Maria was just walking past. “There she goes leaving. That’s her, right?”

“That’s her alright,” Teddy said.

“She really must have been quite the looker,” Daniel added. “Looks like a Lady, or maybe a duchess.”

“I understand why Andrew was so smitten,” said Seymore, watching her turn the corner.

“Back to the story,” Teddy said. “Lee confessed that he had yesterday evening had the rare fortune, or perhaps the unique fortune, a fortune he himself knew he didn’t merit—he was always a poor devil—of making a young lady’s acquaintance. But poor devils are still the children of God, or so say our pastors, and this poor devil had encountered a well-dressed dame, so he termed her, dressed in the height of fashion out for a walk. What’s more, this lady seemed to be following him and, on passing, she even held eye contact. Lee, knowing himself as he does, figured she had mistaken him for someone else: what interest would this rich young woman have in a poor man such as he? But she kept looking, he likewise held her look, she made a move, he made a move, she made another, and soon they were in her apartment.

“Andrew asked where, and though Lee couldn’t remember the exact address, he gave out her street and general location.”

“Don’t tell us this,” Ned said. “I was beginning to like this Maria.”

“Imagine how Andrew felt? He said he didn’t know what to do, or think, or feel. At last his reason mustered and he asked if it were true what Lee had said, or if he were just spinning a yarn. The man said he could think of no reason to invent such a story; he then asked Andrew for his discretion. It was this last plea for discretion that startled Andrew’s suspicion. After this this Lee was ready to leave but Andrew stopped him.

“‘I’ll give you a grand,’ he says to him, ‘I’ll give you a grand if you go with me to the house of this young woman and repeat in front of her what you said here to me. There’s no way to make as much money in as short a time.’ And he pulled out a grand.”

“Woo!” the boys wooed in unison.

“I can’t defend Andrew on this one,” Teddy continued. “Nor Lee, as I think it foolhardy myself. But as I already said, this Lee was poor. It wasn’t kind, but passion blinds the best of us, and though Andrew was dignified, generous, sincere, he couldn’t give up his chance to know, and if knowing, revenge.”

“And the other man accepted his offer?” Seymore asked.

“He hesitated a little bit, I think more for fear than scruples. A grand and he out of work? He wavered as one already decided and then said that he would on one condition: he didn’t want to get involved in any domestic disputes.

“Maria was in the living room when Andrew entered. She came to him with the intention to embrace him; Andrew gestured that he had brought someone with him. Then, staring at her, he told Lee to enter. Maria paled. ‘Is this the lady?’ he asked Lee. ‘Yes, sir!’ murmured Lee in a whisper. Andrew opened his wallet, took out the thousand dollars and gave it to him. Then, with the same satisfaction, he told him he could leave. Lee left. The scene that ensued was brief, but

dramatic. I don't know what happened entirely, because Andrew himself is who told me everything and naturally, he was a little upset and yeah maybe some things escaped him. She wouldn't admit it though. She was distraught, and when he, after saying the harshest things to her he had ever said, headed towards the door she wrapped herself around his legs, grabbed his hands, crying, desperate, threatening to kill herself; and she ended up thrown to the ground on the top of the steps as he descended and left."

"Really, a sordid subject. Found off the road? Probably a habit of hers," Seymore said.

"No," Teddy said.

"No?"

"Listen to the rest. It was later at eight that same night when Andrew came to my house and finally stayed to wait for me. He had been by three times earlier. I was shocked; but how could I doubt it, he took precautions and carried the proof to evidence? I won't tell you what all I heard then from him then, plans for vengeance, exclamations, names, all styles of deprecation. I counselled him to drop it; to live the more so with and for his wife and children, a woman so good, so meek. He agreed. But soon agreement turned to anger; anger passed to doubt; and he started to think that Maria had invented some scheme to test him, and Lee twice paid for. Latching onto this unlikelihood, he tried to flee reality; but reality always wins— the paleness of Maria, the happiness of Lee and the fact that he led her there, everything told him that it was true. I think he even started to repent his actions. As for me, I thought about the affair without coming to an explanation. So modest, so polished, and so in love with everything he did, and to be in the street?"

"I believe there is a phrase from theater," Ned said, "that could explain the affair, Augier, I believe: 'nostalgia for mud.'"

“I don’t think so,” Teddy said. “But go on listening. At ten that night Maria’s maid, a pretty young thing of 20 and a good friend of Maria, appears at my house. She had been looking desperately for Andrew because Maria, after locking herself in her room and crying a lot, left home without eating dinner and hadn’t come back. She asked us to do everything we could to help her. ‘This isn’t a habit of hers?’ Andrew asked. The woman said no. He was pursuing that same unlikelihood I feared so I asked her about the day before, if she had gone out then. She said she had. I didn’t ask anything else; I liked Andrew and didn’t want to make it any worse. We left to look for Maria. We went all the places we thought it was possible to find her, and then we went to the police, but the night ended without any news. The next morning, we went back to the police station. The chief or one of the detectives, I can’t remember which, he was a friend of Andrew, and we told him the pertinent parts of the situation. Moreover, everyone already knew about Maria and Andrew. His police buddy checked everything he could; no big disasters that night; no passengers falling off ships into the harbor; no guns purchased from pawn shops; no poison from mountebanks. Resources were used, areas explored, nothing. I cannot accurately describe the state of affliction in which Andrew lived those long hours, though I know he spent every day in vain search. It wasn’t just the pain of losing her; it was also remorse, doubt, consciousness of the presence of a possible disaster, that seemed to justify the way the young woman had acted. He asked me at every step if it was natural to do what he did, and if in the delirium of indignation, I would not do the same. And then he would go on to prove to himself and me that the affair had happened, just as the hour before he would have proved it hadn’t. He always wanted to accommodate reality to his mood.”

“But, in the end,” Seymore asked, lighting another cigarette, “did you find her?”

“We were eating something in a hotel the next night and it was close to eight, when we received a tip that a cab driver the evening before had carried a lady to Our Lady Hospital. We didn’t finish dinner and went straight to Our Lady Hospital. The receptionist confirmed the tip, said that the patient hadn’t left her room, had not eaten since she arrived, only asked for coffee, and appeared in her non-clinical opinion totally defeated. The receptionist directed us to her room and we knocked on the door; she responded in a weak voice and opened it. Andrew didn’t even give me time to move, he pushed me out of the way, they fell in each other’s arms, and Maria cried herself senseless.”

“She explained everything then?” Daniel asked.

“Not one thing. They never brought the subject up; free from the shipwreck, they didn’t want to know anything about the tempest the caused it. They reconciled quickly. Andrew gave her, a few months later, the apartment, and a year after that Maria gave him a child who died at two years old. When Andrew had to travel back to North Carolina as part of the political half of his job, she wanted to go with him, but I told her to stay. Andrew said he would be back soon, but he died in a car accident. Maria took it badly, went into mourning, and considered herself a widow; I know that she always heard a mass on his birthday, at least for the first three years after he passed. It’s ten years now since I last saw her. What do you think of all this?”

“Really, if this isn’t a put on. It seems like a story out of a romance,” Seymore said.

“I haven’t invented anything; it’s the pure truth.”

“But for a young woman in love to just go out to the street like that. I believe it,” Daniel said.

“She didn’t leave that night to find a man to sleep with.”

“Then why did she leave that night,” asked Ned.

“Because she wanted to talk to someone who didn’t know anything about her. She wanted to confide in a stranger. She thought Lee, poor as he was, would be separated by a social abyss from everyone in her and Andrew’s life. And, by chance, she picked Lee.”

Elle

When the new preacher moved in outside of town and built a church near where her dad worked, Elle didn't think much of it. She didn't think much about preachers, or churches, or where her dad worked, or about her dad at all, really. She thought about a few things and even fewer people, and one of those people happened to be standing beside her in the bathroom blow-drying her hair.

"Mom. Mom!"

Deborah turned the hair dryer off. "Yes, sweetie?"

"Do I have to go to Dad's new church?"

"Yes, sweetie."

"Every week?"

"Every week."

"Really?"

"You love church."

"I don't love church." Elle couldn't imagine where her mom got the idea that she loved church. "Can't I go feed grandpa's sheep?"

"Your dad's already paying Mike to do that." Her mom put down the brush. "And," her hands made a rapid gesture at the bathroom, "you know you're getting too old for this. Your dad would have a fit. Let me see your nails."

"They're fine."

"Let me see them."

“They’re fine!”

“Don’t raise your voice with me; stand up straight.”

Elle did her best to stand up straight.

“That’s good. You look handsome.”

“I don’t want to look handsome.” Elle would rather dive into an ice-capped pond than look handsome.

“Well, you do. Deal with it.”

“I don’t want to deal with it. And I don’t want to go to church.” Elle shook out her dried-and-combed hair and began styling it in the mirror with her fingers. “I want to go, with you, to see grandpa. And I want to repaint my nails.”

Elle showed her mom her nails.

Deborah grabbed her by the wrist. “You’re ruining your hands, sweetie. I didn’t tell you to hurt yourself.”

“You didn’t tell me not to.” Elle had filled a bowl with acetone, submerged her hands in it to the wrists, and scrubbed her polished fingers raw with a Brillo pad. “Why did Lynn get to paint her nails and I don’t?”

“Because she is your sister.”

“So?”

“Because she was a girl. Is a girl.”

“So?”

“And you’re not.”

“Am too.”

“No, you’re not. Plus, your dad said no more.”

“Why is it always what Dad says? I can’t paint my nails because of Dad; I can’t sleep in a nightgown anymore, because of Dad; Grandpa had to go away, because of Dad; you gave me that stupid fucking na—”

“Tertulianus!”

“Exactly!” She couldn’t believe that anybody who hadn’t been born in ancient Rome could have the legal name Tertulianus Arcansus. Her brother got a normal name, she sounded like a conspirator in the plot to assassinate Julius Ceasar. And, as if it were in punishment for a crime too terrible to discuss, nobody would explain to her why it had to be hers. “It’s a stupid name. Who names their child that?”

“It was your dad’s dad’s name, and it’s important to him.” Deborah was putting away the dryer.

“Why is everything what’s important to him.”

“Because he pays for everything.”

As she stood looking in the mirror trying to think her way out of church, Elle remembered when her grandpa used to pay for things, and she remembered being on the farm every day during summer, and every Saturday and Sunday from sunrise to sunset during the school year. She wondered if her dad’s friend Chuck was even there yet, and if he even knew the names of half the sheep.

“My throat hurts.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“And my vision is graying.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“I think I have the consumption.”

“Nobody has consumption, it isn’t the 1800s.”

“If you’re not going, why do I have to go?”

“Because you’re fifteen, and your dad wants you to go.”

Elle knew that she was twelve, and she knew her dad wanted her to go, but she didn’t know why her mom never took her side, or why her name couldn’t be Elle, or why she couldn’t paint her nails, or why everyone kept saying she would be a man one day when she knew she wouldn’t, or why Grandpa had to be sent away.

“Do you hate me?”

“What?”

“Did you not want me? Do you want to send me away like Grandpa? Is that why I can’t paint my nails? Is that why you let Dad name me Tertulianus?”

“Your name means a lot to him.”

“To him. To him. What about to me?”

“And you can’t paint your nails.”

Elle followed her mom into the living room, where she saw her brother James dressed in his Sunday best doing something stupid with a knife. And she knew her dad would be there any minute to pick them up.

“I don’t want to go.”

“You have to,” James, who had just turned sixteen and liked to act like he was in charge, and who didn’t look up from his whittling, said. “Dad said.”

“I hate Dad.”

Deborah stopped arranging the dirty shoes lined up beside the front door. “You love your dad.”

“I don’t love Dad.”

“I love Dad,” James said, looking up from his dumb carving. “And so do you.”

“Shut up, James.”

“Tertulianus!” Deborah arranged a pair of shoes.

“Don’t tell me to shut up,” James, who pointed at Elle with his knife, said. “What’s wrong with him.”

“Her!” Elle felt her eyes water, but she refused to cry. Just like she refused to go to church.

“He doesn’t want to go to church,” Deborah, now arranging magazines on the coffee table, said.

“She!” Elle felt that she was losing her temper as well as any chance of staying home. “James tells his friends to beat me up.”

“Is that true, James?”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it isn’t.” James placed his stupid carving on the table and looked at Elle. “They beat you up because you write poetry, and you play the flute, and you’re always staring at Alex. Plus, you look like a girl.”

“I am a girl,” Elle said.

“You’re not a girl—”

“You’re not a girl,” Deborah agreed.

James continued, “—you’re just gay.”

“I’m not gay.”

“He’s not gay,” Deborah, who was looking at the clock, said.

“She’s!”

The room grew quiet for a few seconds and Elle listened for the sound of her dad’s tires.

“Okay, I’m a little gay.” She did think her friend Audrey was cute.

“I knew it!” James took out his phone. “I’ve got to tell Alex.”

“But I’m also a girl.”

“You’re neither.” Deborah looked upset.

“He plays the flute!” James didn’t look up from texting.

“She!” Elle looked at her dumb brother. “And Alex already knows.”

James looked up from his phone. “Wait—”

Deborah, now sitting on the couch, turned to look at Elle. “This is a phase. You know that?”

“It’s not a phase.”

“Wait, what do you mean ‘Alex knows’?” James was still looking at Elle with his phone in his hand. He turned to Deborah, “What did he mean?”

“She!” Elle stamped her foot.

“Tertulianus,” Deborah was using her serious voice now. “It’s a phase. Remember when you spent all your time with Grandpa? You wanted to be a farmer and tend sheep?”

“So? Girls can be farmers.” Elle loved to spend time with her grandpa, and she loved tending sheep and knew how—she even knew how to crutch them without upsetting them, and how to operate the Burdizzo.

“You’re not a girl—”

“Am too.”

James put down his phone. “—and your voice is going to break any day now, so you won’t get to pretend you’re a woman on the phone anymore.”

“You do that?” Deborah looked upset.

“My voice isn’t going to break.” Elle turned to her mom. “And it’s not pretending, because I’m a girl.”

Elle hadn’t noticed her dad pull up, but the sudden quiet in the room and a slight breeze she felt on the back of her neck assured her that he was standing in the doorway.

“C’mon, boys.”

“I’m not going.”

“Tertulianus, you sit in the front.”

“I’m not going!”

Mac walked into the apartment. “When did you decide that you get to decide what you do?”

At church, Elle hated how Mac pretended to be a good person; at home, she hated how he asked a question when he wasn’t asking a question; and in her memory, she hated how he had treated her mom, and sent her grandpa away. But no matter where he was, she hated how he swore he loved her, and how he swore he loved the truth.

“Tertulianus Arcansus.” Mac spoke as if he were counting to ten already. “Get in the truck.”

Elle felt trapped. “I’m a girl.”

“He’s gay!” James piped in.

“He’s not gay.” Mac was looking out around the apartment, but now he angled himself a little towards Elle. “You’re a man.”

“No, sir, I’m not.”

“Don’t talk back to me.”

It was silent for a while, then Mac spoke.

“Is it Alex?”

“What?” Elle didn’t know why her dad was bringing up her friend Alex.

“It’s Alex, isn’t it? You’re sleeping with him?”

“What? No.”

“Is this why you play the flute? Are you mad at me? Is this about your mom and me?”

“Is this about us, sweetie?” Deborah joined him.

“No. And I play the flute because I like it.”

“Don’t get smart with us. What is it then? The way you feel about girls will change soon.”

“I like girls—”

“Then you’re not gay?” James looked confused.

“—and guys,” Elle finished.

“You aren’t hanging out with Alex anymore.” Mac was gripping the hat in his hand as if it could help him.

“Gay,” James added.

Elle turned and said to her brother, “I’m dating Alex.”

“What?” James stood up. “What did y—”

“You’re dating no one!” Deborah said.

“You’re too young.” Mac was now fully in the apartment, standing in the living room.

“You’re not gay, and you’re certainly not a woman. This is ridiculous. Are you still letting him

hang out in your bathroom? Are you still painting your nails? Things need to change now that you're about to become a man."

"I won't become a man."

"Yes," Mac looked at Elle for the first time since he arrived, "you will. It's biology. No matter what your mom or your teachers or your friends or the internet is telling you, it's going to happen."

Elle had hoped that her dad would die or something and save her the trouble, but now it seemed—with Grandpa sent off to an old folks home where she never saw him, and the farm in the process of being sold—like a good time to tell him that not everything would go the way he wanted.

"Dad, do you remember how I used to help grandpa with the sheep? You know, before he got too sick and couldn't remember enough to care for them?"

"How could I not?" Her dad softened a bit. "You used to talk about sheep all the time. Once at a wedding you told an entire table the story of all the different ways you had castrated sheep."

"This story is a lot like that one, except it starts at a dinner table. Remember when you told me how you thought it was great, how much of a 'little man' I was, to help him on the farm. How if I kept it up, I'd be a man just like you, right?"

"And you will."

"And that was the first time I'd ever heard that, that I'd be a man just like you. I never forgot that."

"Tertulianus," Deborah sounded nervous.

“And you remember how I would go earlier and earlier in the morning to help Grandpa, because he needed it?”

“Tertulianus,” Deborah continued.

“How proud you were that I would wake up so early to help him? And all the while Grandpa grew sicker and sicker and you started to sell his land because he wouldn’t remember anyway, right? ‘He wouldn’t recognize his own grandkid from a sheep,’ right? He ‘couldn’t remember what happened that morning,’ right?”

“Tertulianus!” Deborah was standing up now, holding Mac’s arm. It was the first time Elle had seen them touch each other not in anger in years.

“It was funny to you that he couldn’t remember the name of the grandkid he loved so much.”

“He loved me too,” James piped in.

“And, Dad, you’re not always right—”

“Tertulianus, stop,” Deborah was pleading with her.

“—but this time you were right. That morning, I got there before him, and after banding the rams, I decided. That’s right, I decided for myself.”

“Tertulianus.” Deborah looked pale.

“The All-in-One tool is a lot more painful, but quick, you know? And I knew you’d put grandpa away soon, so it had to be quick.”

“Tertulianus.”

“You see, you use the scissors portion of the All-in-One tool to cut off the bottom of the ram’s scrotum, about a third of it really, and then you use the teeth portion to grab and remove

the testicles. After that the seminiferous tubules are cauterized, and the scrotum stitched. For the wethers, it's painful, but only for a few weeks. Six at most."

Elle realized no one was interrupting her, so she continued.

"And I bet, like you did when selling his land, that when grandpa arrived and saw me among the new wethers, that he wouldn't remember. I bet he'd cauterize me, and stitch me up, because he had no other choice, and then he would tell me that he loved me, because he did. And I was right. And when it was done and he asked me why and I lied and said I didn't know, he said it'd be okay, that when we got home, he'd tell you and Mom. But you were right, Dad; I know you think you're always right, but this time you were actually right. He dropped me off that afternoon and said, 'I love you, Lynn'— because by then he always confused me with her—and drove away. And there I was, as sore as any gelding, but certain that I would never, ever be a man. Least of all one like you."

And for the first time in her life, neither her dad, nor her mom, nor her stupid brother, could tell her she would be a man one day.

"And now," Elle said. "I'm ready to go to church."

Auto da Paixão

Gil Braga expired at two in the afternoon on a Friday in the month of August in 1536 in Lisbon in his favorite bed at home. He was napping, it being a necessary part of his lifestyle at seventy-three, when an earthquake hit, and he did not make it out before an aftershock brought a brick down on his head, cracking his skull and nearly spilling his brains. He was wrapped up in unconsciousness a minute later when the broken mass of his home came down on him like a cinderblock on an overripe tomato.

And that, as they say, would have been that, but Braga didn't feel dead, or crushed, or even sore. In fact, he felt an absence of pain, which for the moment was an improvement on his usual existence.

He opened his eyes and saw he was not where he believed he should have been, beneath the rubble of his home, but instead upright and pain-free in what appeared to be an uninhabited desert or sandy wilderness, unadorned with modest shrub or humble grass, and a starless sky above and an oceanic body of water some ways off and a sad rain—or more of a melancholy sprinkle, perhaps—coming down to boot.

It was all very unsure. That he should have woken in such a cavernous province was worth consideration, and if only his page, philosophical partner, and inheritor were there (these are not three distinct people but rather one to whom all these titles pertain), perhaps they could get some answers. What had he read about the afterlife? He didn't remember reading anywhere in the Bible a verse about death being a starless shore; did this mean the Greeks were right? Was that vast ocean Lethe? But, as these thoughts worked their way through the high-wire act that was his

mind, another more immediate, less philosophical question swung into focus. How many people would attend his funeral?

As he was pondering this, he began to survey his surroundings. Dire really, the shore, barren and sandy, with the moan of that far-off and potentially oblivious surf. He didn't know what he could have done in his life as a poet to merit such an afterlife as this, but he supposed it was better than no afterlife. He would have probably continued in such a manner, looking around and thinking, had not he a moment later heard something behind him and turned around to see Ensel—the beloved page, pupil, intellectual equal and inheritor mentioned earlier—and his noble steed Esperança, both now standing likewise near him taking in their new environment.

“I thought you were dead, sir!” Ensel said. “I was out in the stables, there to clean the stalls as is my chore of the afternoon, and saw the house come down which I would have sworn you were in, its being then your time to nap. Then all within a blink was I here no longer with pitchfork in hand but instead looking at you. It took you a while to notice me, you know. You think you would have a sense for that by now.”

Gil heard a bit of reproach, or perhaps kind admonishment, in that last sentence, and walked over to hug Ensel, his tender page of sixteen, thereby to comfort him. However, dead as he was, his shady hands passed through him. Would that push Ensel, who was prone to emotion, —a weakness in the character of a young philosopher—to tears? He began to speak as if it were a normal day and they engaged, as usual, in some discussion on a present matter.

“I think I am dead.” Gil began there not knowing where else to start. “And beneath that very mansion you saw fall, Ensel, the one in which you and I spent so much treasured time in philosophical consideration. And, to cut to the heart of it, though I would have sworn when one was dead one was dead and that the end of it, here we are. That said, there is much for us to

discuss, it is wonderful to see you, and please hand me Esperança's reins for now, as I feel capable of riding and am desirous to be thus employed."

"I can't." He motioned Gil over and then demonstrated for him, trying to grab the reins. His meat hands only passed through them unimpeded.

"I thought," Gil replied, after pondering for a moment, "I though you said the earthquake did not affect the stables."

"It did not, sir; however, Esperança, your honored steed, was of an advanced age and frail demeanor. Perhaps the stress of the event was enough."

Gil looked at the reins, grabbed them in his airy hand and then alighted upon the fantastic horse. A smile came across his face, as he hadn't ridden in years, and it felt good to be atop the insubstantial steed. However, he soon noticed the dejected countenance of his young companion.

"I can understand," Gil began, all he had now were words. "Or believe I can understand, by the expression on your face that you are none too happy with my death and our most likely separation, and that is understandable. But as it is our duty as philosopher poets to rise above the vicissitudes of life and afterlife, and as I have always said there is nothing like stichomythia to improve one's outlook, I therefore shall engage you in a rapid series of questions to which you may in kind celerity respond. By this we may frame the present, plan the future, and exercise our fallen mood."

"Hold forth, then." Ensel gave a smile. "And let us see if by this our moods, transient as they are, may find amelioration."

Gil did his best to sit upright in his saddle, it had been a while after all, and then began what was more of a catechism.

"With no deficiency of our reasoning we found that death was necessary, did we not?"

“We did.”

“And in that vein likewise proved we that happiness—though an admirable state for which it is only right to long—does not for itself exist and is instead the bound subject, as is every emotion, to the mutability of human life. As like weather, or any other vaporous distillment of atmosphere, to earth is, so passing and impermanent are our moods.”

“We thus have reasoned.”

“And have we reasoned not that sweet philosophy is concerned only with those things which attain permanence, even if those things we may debate and err?”

“We have.”

“Therefore, take heart, sweet squire. What we are experiencing now is as necessary as the absence of happiness or the presence of pain, and as we hold them no objective reality, but rather its distraction, let us focus on that environment to which we have found ourselves translated. For I contend that it is a cavern in which we are. Otherwise at this dark hour—so the lack of sun leads me to call it—would not the heavens roll out their starry orbs?”

“Interesting that you remark. There are no obscure clouds to hide them either,” said Ensel.

With that question proffered and Ensel pondering, Braga started out at a trot—something he and Esperança hadn’t been able to do for a half a decade—headed nowhere. He was just glad to be on his horse again, and for Ensel there to follow him all the better; but soon he wished to speak of all the half-formed conjectures he had made since his death and explain how all was very rotten about his heart.

“Though of my death I am almost sure,” Gil said, “all is so fantastic here that I can’t help but feel I could have been dragged into one of a nightmare.”

“Have you tried pinching yourself?” Ensel asked.

“Oh, Ensel.” Gil tried to pinch his insubstantial self but was unable to do it. “Have you tried to pinch yourself? Perhaps this is your dream.”

Ensel pinched himself and nothing happened.

“Well then, Ensel, as you are not dreaming then I am most likely dead—as so is Esperança, thus am I able to ride him—and I now so far beyond your tactile sense as you mine, yet are we able to engage in that intimacy which soul in conversation with soul affords. Of course I speak of philosophic inquiry. We see already that there is an afterlife; now it is to discover what rules govern it, what its geography, what laws or peoples there be, and thus proceed to an understanding of our situation.”

“Sir,” Ensel began speaking, his lithe mind no doubt far ahead of Braga’s, “I have a question. How is it that you are the one who died but I am here, wherever here is? As for Esperança I think we have our answer, but I yet live and was not ten minutes ago in your stable; the earthquake did not harm me, nor the aftershock, and I am young and could not have passed otherwise. What rule or law governs our adherence?”

“Ensel, the bond of teacher and student, of page and knight, pedagogic and chivalric code in general being a humane and imperfect copy of that which in its divine perfection is the lawful word of heaven, permits me you until my soul be in its eternal palace housed. This, I would argue”—Braga gestured to the umbrageous demesnes—“is some sort of prologue to that final judgement and my soul’s fate not yet decided. Therefore, I assume you have been here translated to be able to fulfill your duties up until that point where my eternal fate be lodged. What think you?”

None of this was obvious or logical to Braga, even though he had just said it was, but a barrage of words confidently spoken was all he could muster now, and he was sure they would be enough for his page to tease some meaning out.

“As to the heritance of law and whether it be of divine or earthly provenance, I hold it not to our ability to answer that question at the present. But perhaps,” Ensel continued, “if we take as a given, until confirmed or disproved, that this is some staging area for judgment, as you propose, then maybe those two ships which now approach yonder harbor pertain to your soul’s divine sortation; or, at the least, there is someone among them able and willing to assist us in figuring out our destination; or, perhaps at least there is likewise someone if not willing to action, willing to engage in the dialectical arts from whom we may glean much, and they in turn and equal measure profit as is only fitting such colloquy.”

Gil wasn’t sure he had understood the last part, but he turned towards where Ensel was now pointing, and his eyes confirmed there did appear two dots—and though well assured of the eyes fallibility, he was fine to grant the supposition that they were ships—out on the deep horizon.

“I know not what to which they may pertain”— Gil often spoke in this undefined way when he felt threatened by his young page’s quick observation and keen surmise— “or what assistance anyone can to me give at this point, but I agree that is our best course as I see nothing else but sand.”

Thus agreed the two set out again, this time wending towards the harbor.

“I’m afraid, Ensel—” Gil began as they declined the slope of one sand dune on the way to climb another— “on my soul’s account. Till now I never considered that I even had one, the whole thing seemed unlikely, and now in my afterlife I think this may be a problem.”

“But you have lived a good life and perhaps that is enough.”

“Good? Perhaps by my terms and those of ancient custom, but if anything in scripture holds true according to moral law, I am afraid I’m in for an ill reckoning.”

“Are you talking about us?”

“I’m talking about a lot of things, but yes. I thought dead, worm food, and acted accordingly. Who wouldn’t? You know if we’re all going out. And you know I never cared for the rigid cant of scripture, so much so a group of priests tried for a long time to have me excommunicated and then failing that murdered. But I guess in some way they were right as though I have denied an afterlife, and you held a heavy skepticism, here we are on this chthonic shore—” As they had been engaged in philosophical discussion and not paying attention to their surroundings, they had nearly trod upon another shade lying on the sand in front of them.

“I think he is like you another soul newly arrived,” Ensel said after they stopped.

The recumbent shade was a young man with a pained expression and eyes held shut, as if he simultaneously enjoyed the benefit of and suffered for his sleep. He was muttering something under his breath and Gil and Ensel listened to him for a while trying to understand what he was saying but never could. They then discussed the virtues of naps and admired one so capable of sleep.

And the man continued unaware of them and their conversation and with the same pained expression went on sleeping as if he were on his deathbed and finally sleep had overcome his soul, and that he would be quite content to keep on sleeping even if he never woke up again.

“He’s evidently unaware that he is dead, dear Ensel, and perhaps lies there still dreaming on his sickness, as I posit as evidence one must do so if one dies sleeping. What do you think?”

“I think you often declare things evident when presented with scant evidence, whereas I hold reasonable doubt and would like to speak to the man after he is awake to see if his experience backs up your hypothesis.”

Ensel was enamored of the natural sciences, it was beginning to be all the rave, and therefore “hypothesis” was one of his favorite words. Gil had a much more intuitive understanding of his environment, owing to his past as a poet, and often acted on it.

“No, we cannot leave him here beneath the incubus of whatever horrible disease or sudden infection dispatched him,” Gil said. “Much less now that all the ills of the body should have been sloughed off. I will address myself to him and wake him from the dream. As I have often said the mind is a castle, reason its flag, and dreams a riotous insurrection threatening to pluck it all down.”

Thus spoken, Gil did his best to stand up tall in his saddle, plant his horse almost atop the sleeping man, and, with a clearing of his throat, begin.

“Dear Sir,” Braga addressed him in his loudest voice. “Open your eyes. How is it that you, asleep and unawares, unguarded, defenseless, are encountered thus on the solitary sands? It is not safe, dear sir.”

The young man, hearing this elegant yet fatuous interrogator, opened his pallid eyes and saw an aged ghost atop a spectral horse yelling at him, and, as one could only do in such a situation, possibly assuming that it was a nightmare, slipped away and began to run along the sandy bank.

“Perhaps, Sir Braga,” Ensel remarked, looking at the running shade, “you and your horse and your loud voice are enough in their combination to scare even the dead, and it would have been better to stand a little off and wake him more gently. What do you think?”

“Perhaps,” Gil was certain this was it but felt he must put forth his own idea to counter his page’s. “Or perhaps this is the reaction of all dead men who fall asleep and wake to their death, but we have scant evidence to prove either hypothesis, don’t we? Either way I’ll go after him, Ensel, and you do your best to catch up.”

As he was a young dead man he ran fast, but chthonic sand is as lugubrious to behold as it is difficult to flee in, and though a shade’s steps may not weigh down the arenose soil it nevertheless proves difficult running. So, Gil was upon him in a moment and entered into what he considered a gallant and persuasive speech.

“Sir, I cannot doubt how this all is frightening you, but you have no reason to run from us. I came here myself but thirty minutes ago with my boy page, Ensel, and my horse, Esperança. We then spied what we thought were two ships, which now as I look still prove to be so, sailing towards a harbor.” He pointed to the two ships which were now larger dots on the horizon, and then towards the harbor.

“Though you are no doubt reeling from the tragedy of your own death, or considering of your unfinished mortal business, or imagining loved ones, and were perhaps frightened by my ghostly visage and the sudden surroundings, you may, if you wish, accompany us to the harbor. We will be willing to listen to your story, should you want to share it, or answer any questions that you have; if none of these things appeal to you, this way you may at least avoid solitude and perhaps profit from my and my page’s conversation. What I cannot help you with is the fact that you, like I, are now aware that you are dead and that we have here arrived at this forlorn beach.”

The young shade stopped running. Perhaps it all was a lot to take in and now that he was lured back to his good senses by Gil’s speech he stopped, or perhaps shades run out of breath too. Whatever the reason, when Ensel caught up, Gil and Ensel started towards the ships and the

harbor and the young man, though he had yet to speak, followed. On the way there Gil decided to pass the time, and perhaps encourage his new companion, by speaking of his personal experience since arriving.

“Companions, though I put on a brave front, on my cold soul’s account I am afraid. This earthquake, I died crushed beneath Titan’s wrath”—he addressed this aside to their new companion—“was prodigy and omen to my extinguishment, and a dire prognostication to my ever after.”

As Gil went on in this vein his eyes tended towards the harbor and the two ships there approaching. One burned like a comet, he imagined, or like a swan made of stars, he couldn’t decide which, while the other, smaller ship had ragged sails and looked like weathered flotsam or jetsam.

“Ensel,” Gil began. “I’m going to here dictate some words that I hope, though I doubt you can remember them exactly, at my burial you can repeat the gist of in your peculiar manner. It is only two lines, the rest I leave how your genius dictates. You are more eloquent extempore than I.”

It was often his habit to pretend that Ensel, though sharper than he, had a lazy memory, and it made up part of the gentle, good-natured ribbing in their dialectical relationship.

“I can only do that that I can.” Ensel employed empty speech whenever he was asked to do something he didn’t want to do—he wasn’t fond of public speaking—“so it is good you demand no more of me.”

“Then it is as follows, to be delivered at my graveside. ‘You good gentlemen that knew Senhor Braga may here witness with me that nature weeps’—it will be raining, hold the funeral the next rainy day there is—‘the loss— the irreparable loss,’ that is better, ‘of one of the most

beautiful and honored poets to have graced this country, and in his later years one of its most probing philosophers. For our illustrious defunct bard nature herself is stricken and the somber sky-obscuring clouds rain woeful drops.’ Repeat there these lines with whatever additional flourish you are capable of, and I will not repent me of the small fortune that I leave you. I’m sorry about the house though, that was to be yours too.”

Ensel repeated these two lines to himself a couple times, and then addressed himself to his companion. “While they may not be prostrate with grief, nor wail and rend their faces, I can this speech deliver such that there will be tears in the hearers of it.”

Gil smiled. “I understand that the death of a seventy-three-year-old does not unite in it all the elements of tragedy, so tears, and those lines reasonably well delivered, is all I ask, excepting one thing.”

“Hold forth.”

“Let there be dirges as well, and whether sung or spoken let them with moderate expression be breathed, and let their themes be honest in dealing with death’s solemnity. Though I go like one leaving the spectacle too late I—”

At this point they were approaching the shore, and Gil started noticing a smell of rotten vinegar and couldn’t shake the thought that the sea had something in common with a wounded animal, which was a strange, intrusive association, so he broke off his speech for another.

“Let’s discuss no more graves or epitaphs. Ensel, though you may now be thirsty owing to your continued corporeality, I would advise you to abstain from drinking this surf. A man can last at least three days without water, a boy such as yourself should last at least a day, a day and a half.”

“Why do you say that, sir?”

“Don’t drink the water? I fear it may, like the poisoned stone thrown in the well, be poison to your senses.”

Gil, who felt no thirst, finished giving this thoroughly sound piece of advice to his page as they climbed the last dune that gave way to the harbor. At the peak there was another shade who had the distinct appearance of a cobbler. Gil was a bit of a shoe hound in his life and could recognize the type and this one stood there standing there like they do at their shopfront watching a customer approach.

“That man is a cobbler,” Gill said.

“How do you know?” Ensel asked.

“I can sense it.”

“That’s illogical.”

When they reached the top Gil asked him who he was.

“Daniel Cobbler. Which is also what I am as a healer of shoes, a cobbler.”

“I knew it! We, I an honored poet-philosopher, he my page-pupil, and this mute soul, are headed toward yonder harbor and those two ships. I know no better than you where we are, though I like you can see that the starry heaven’s hid and therefore I assume our present habitation underground. If you would like to join us, perhaps we can make this final descent and arrive, as near as I can tell, alongside these two ships.”

“A philosopher-poet! Why sir, though I will have no difficulty taking the walk with you, I will try to keep up in your conversation and you will have to forgive my plain speech.” The cobbler, then doing his best to elevate his plain speech, continued. “But by the most elevated orb of Him who regulates the heavens, I will join you, your page, and yon silent man, in your journey to said harbor for the stated purpose of discovering the source of those two ships.”

“Well agreed,” Gil replied.

“Well agreed,” said Ensel.

“Well agreed,” said Daniel, assuming it was a custom of the land the dead man and his young companion came from.

As they were close to the harbor at that point, they descended the last dune as this growing party, Gil, Ensel, the shoemaker, and the silent young man, and made their way onto the pier. Gil noticed they were unable to lose themselves among the multitude of shades gathered there, something he had hoped to do, due to Ensel’s presence. The young man was the attention of all but a few of the shades, but at least they parted to let the group through.

“Squire of my body—” Gil began, addressing himself to Ensel.

“Is that a pet name or chivalric term?” the cobbler asked.

“Chivalric term.” Gil began again, “Squire of my body, stay close. Boon companions.” Gil turned to the young man and Daniel. “I like not the look of this harbor. What is more melancholy than stagnant water? Why, nothing other than departures for sea. Here I see both.”

“Why this sad ocean does serve for a profundity of reflections,” Ensel replied, doing his best to stay beside yet not pass through Gil and Esperança, “laying as it may within the entrails of earth. And this seaside judgement—for so it seems to me by the binary nature of the ships, my intuition—may furnish us with material enough for a treatise on morality and a light allegory of some seven or eight hundred lines—”

“If there be one, I only recommend you write it in the style of the medieval troubadour, as it would not hold up under any more expansive form. Otherwise, you would employ an adoxigraphic style, for I consider the morality play a light fair.”

“I will take your advice,” replied Ensel. And then, as was his habit, he was on to the next idea that popped into his mind. “I have to wonder under whose tutelage resides this harbor?”

Gil was going to reply when the cobbler chimed in.

“Reverend philosopher, nimble page, of these subjects which you two handle with your refined glove of words I cannot begin to get a grip, but are not those the two ships which you spied on the horizon?”

As he delivered this question the two ships seen often on the horizon by Gil and Ensel were now coming to dock and from the golden one issued a stern but noble seeming voice giving orders.

“We’re nigh to the benighted shore, shady mariners. A gentle landing, lost souls, a gentle landing.”

“Thy will be done!” was heard in reply to the captain.

Captivated as he was by this voice, Gil was even more so by the ship now that he could see it. It was a golden trireme, its sails of fantastic tapestries. The other ship, the one that still looked like a piece of driftwood, had also arrived, and it actually looked better close up, though still humble, like a rustic model of the far superior golden ship. From it no commands issued but instead a choir sang, and a tuneful breeze carried the notes of it to the dock.

But the golden ship was now parallel with the dock, and it commanded everyone’s attention when the noble voice, now louder, which was heard issuing commands now issued more commands.

“Good Masticu, tie off the ship. Zeb, see all’s let down, I’ll see that these stale shades be accounted, and we shall depart as soon as we are able.” A launch slapped down on the dock at this point, from whose vicinity all the shades backed away. The bearer of the proud commanding

voice stepped off the ship and down the launch carrying with him a large scroll. He was handsome, naked, winged, and apt to examine the multitude of shades crowded on the pier. He looked at his list, and then looked back at the shades.

“Be he angel or devil?” Gil asked Ensel.

“Devil if I guess, for though he does bear himself as one known to heaven’s majesty, scorn lours in his countenance.”

“Always more than we can carry,” the devil remarked to the crowd, and then turned back to the ship. “Careful now. Make sure all is fast. Oh, what a harvest this is. Hoist high our flag, make festinate.”

These commands given, the devil captain, for so Braga thought he must be, stood beside the launch, unfurled his scroll, took out a pair of spectacles—for which his nose looked made—cleared his voice, and then began to call names.

“Edward McEntire,” the proud demon shouted, looking at a fearful shade.

“It is I.” the shade of Edward stepped forth in the previously open spot before the launch and the captain. “What would you have?”

“Naughty, naughty, Edward McEntire, had you a catamite?”

“Exorbitant magician! Extravagant ship demon! Saucy devil! What gives you the right?”

At this point other shades from the crowd began to defend and excuse the prenominate offense with many “Oh come ons!” and “Have you seen them!” to which the devil paid no heed, looking back at his scroll.

“Admit it, McEntire, admit it and then aboard for shame. I see we’ve been given a lot of you. Every week it is now, more and more. For shame, admit it.”

“I here admit it.”

“Aboard, and to an oar, McEntire.”

Gil had formed surmises about the situation, but there were still many things about which he held uncertainty. Ignorant of the deathly harbor he would have remained unless a neighboring shade who saw his confused countenance and heard Ensel’s question said hello to the pair, indicated that he was likewise disposed to chatter, and was willing to explain that the two ships newly come to harbor ferried souls to heaven or hell, and that the sailors were of the celestial sort to which they pertained, the willful fallen, depending, or the angelic saved, and that when they call from their infernal or celestial scroll no shade can ignore the summons, nor deny the least syllable of the sins subscribed.

“Of which here you have seen proof,” said the shade, pointing to McEntire who was now clasped in chains and led up the launch to his seat, an oar, and eternity. “Who would submit otherwise to the operation unless he be bound? And bound he is,” the friendly shade pointed to the doomed man. “For manors of rebellious confusion, alleys of torture, plazas of corporeal incorporeal punishment. Abundant weepings, sad-faced melancholies, bituminous catarrhs, ineluctable eructation all brought forth and with such noisome punishment, that they say is hell, and heaven tuneful paradise, and we for one or the other.”

“I like this not, Ensel.” Gil looked pale even for a shade. “For here we see the sober and reasoned judgement of humanity’s violent eruptions. Which eruptions, like those of the earth, are only natural to them.”

“Right true, noble philosopher; but here may you also behold the mind with pride inflated popped flat, the fire of resentment put out, the boasted clamor silenced, the hasty motion of turbulent desire stilled, and all dark expression of indeterminate thought brought forth through the obscure passage of the sinner’s throat to sound in his own derision. As for your question,

young man, this harbor is, as I can tell, held likewise by heaven as hell, but with high heaven's sanction of course, as so it is with all things and praised be that may be said to come from God, and to Him pertain, or at least by His sufferance existence are allowed."

"What is this of God? Don't you mean gods?"

"Nope. Apparently, all our religions were wrong and all of our philosophies. There is one God, though not the one described so intimately in our scripture, and ours demons all, and we though deceived responsible are determined and must pay or reap in eternity for sins unknown to us. And what were you in life, sir, its only custom here to ask before I move on?

"A philosopher."

"Not very well informed were you in life, no?"

"No. It seems not. And you?"

"A teacher." The man walked away.

So well informed as they now were, Gil recommended they observe for some time more the roll call.

"I agree," Ensel chimed. "By this we may prove or disprove what the garrulous gentleman has here just said, about which I have some little doubt."

And so, they all turned their attention back to the captain and his scroll.

"Senhor Duarte Braga," the captain called out. "Step forth."

A gallant mariner, who by the wet looks of him had died by sea, stepped forth.

"How many people have you killed?"

"Five."

"Why did you kill them?"

“Duels mostly, bold effronteries demand bold actions; one, however, was accidental. I had loosed an arrow when a man, or more accurately a man’s neck, entered the arrow’s flight.”

“That one falls not upon your soul then. However, the other four weigh heavy in their dispatch. And lechery? I see here that out of wedlock have you trifled with many maidens by force, and many by guile. Is it true you plighted troth and in subsequence never gave satisfaction, instead retracting said trothplight?”

“True it is, and could I number the number of women I so conquered over again I would.”

“The gallant gentleman,” Gil remarked to Ensel, “replies as calmly to his crimes as if he were asking for the salt at dinner.”

“It here,” the captain continued, “lists a dozen or so boys as well who you in the guise of teacher, may we say, educated?”

“Such pedagogical techniques were embraced in antiquity; I see no harm.”

“Oh, you are an assured one. No equivocations? Masticu,” the captain now spoke to a demon who had walked down the launch. “Masticu, I swear these souls no longer suffer their damnation but rather admit all under the guise of ignorance, custom, or moral relativism. Is it true that through your life paid you no attention to the scripture, how answer you that charge?”

Senhor Braga, who, it is true, had replied calmly and quickly to all his interlocutor’s questions, paused for a moment. Then he began.

“I hold this as a strength of my character and not a failing, and would have you demons note, if noting is what you are doing so deviously there on your all-knowing scroll, that my rejection of scripture was philosophically, not diabolically, founded, based in reason, which reason I now believe is Go- given, and if there is any justice in the afterlife that intent should be considered.”

“You have admitted your sins and moreover declared intent to multiply them if so allowed; aboard, Braga.”

The gallant Portuguese gave a shrug. “As if I am from something splendid sundered? I’ll go and never complain about it either, and I doubt I shall see much difference between your world and ours.”

He then true to his word walked willingly up the launch, held out his hands to be clasped in chains, and joined the other pederast at the oar. While these two souls had been dealt with by the captain the driftwood ship had likewise docked, and likewise another captain, humbler in appearance, stood with a scroll so small that it looked comical. However, though many crowded near, none entered that bare ship, and the humble angel captain called none.

“Gil,” Ensel began, as they waited for the next soul to be called. “I believe there may be some category, some reason, that these such souls are here gathered.”

Gil did not respond, and Azazel called the next soul.

“Don Armenio!”

The next soul, Don Armenio hight, did not wait for the captain to list his sins but instead set forth in his defense immediately. “I was an honorable knight who did no more killing, raping, or pillaging than was set down and sanctioned by the rules of war.”

“It says here you often slaughtered women and children after raping them.”

“True. But they were basely born and not subject to the protections of the chivalric code.”

“Aboard, your sins are as gross as your ignorance, which neither excuses them but them compounds.”

Don Armenio was then dragged onto the ship, clasped in chains, and set at another oar, and the devil continued, indifferent to the cries of the Don or the pleas coming from the press of shades.

“Alfonso. Alfonso! have you come so soon to our eternal mansion?” The calm ship demon seemed to recognize this name.

A handsome young man walked out of the shades and stood before the captain.

“Demon captain, you will address me as Tertuliano Maximo Alfonso, as that is my name. What business have you with me?”

“What business, sweet knight? For your sweet soul was it not Friday last you and a sorceress dallied?”

“Friday last? No, but there was a party and at it a maid, one who played a sorceress in jest to whom with matching levity I sold my soul for a kiss upon her cheek. Are you speaking about that?”

“Much more than a kiss, but no matter, if she will not damn you then will all the others. What brought you here? A jealous lover?”

“A fever.”

“As for your lecherous lifestyle you will admit it?”

“I do. And that I am familiar to all manner of indecency need not here be rehearsed. Take me and let’s be off.”

“Off for the lost isle then and in brief.”

“Goes there some willing ladies?” Sauced asked, walking up the launch.

“Listed there are here some among our souls.”

The handsome young man smiled as he was led by another demon onto the ship, clasped, and directed to an oar.

“Saucedo!”

Saucedo, so named was the shade, did not seem as willing or as resigned as those previously summoned, and began to ask questions of the demon before he could even relate his crimes.

“The lost island by you thus nominated to that licentious ghost, which territory holds it in esteem?”

“Hell.”

“Hell! And here you call me off the same role? What have I done to equal their depravity? A boat of pederasts and murderers, pederast murderers, and I to be among them! I will have you know there are those alive who still pray for me.”

“Those yet who for you pray?” The demon captain put down his scroll for the first time, looking happy to have a live one, so to speak. “Why, sir knight, consider your incontinent life, your sins, your intrigues, and come aboard lest you stand for lack of room. The press is thick. And when thus came your father, he came without complaint.”

“What? My father? Hence?”

“Hence.”

“I’ll not believe it! That there is a hell and I for it, it me, perhaps, but for my father? For my pious father? No, this is a trick. A devil’s trick. Oh sadness. Oh misery.”

“Would you be content yourself to choose—” the demon countered, seeming not bothered but more assured by the knight’s anger—“then choose. To that ship there, the gnarled one, go. Seek, ask, implore, beg, it’s all one to me. But I would have you know that this is your chartered

fare and that before you passed even from your corporeal nature signs were seen in hell giving out your embarkation.”

“Oh, oh you saucy fellow you. Signal, say you? Signal and what signal was this?”

“One by all your contentious life made.”

“Oh, oh, we will see. To the other ship, which once though dull now appears to me in radiance vested, will I go. Good day, fair devil. May we no more meet.”

As the knight walked away from the now bemused devil and approached the other ship, Gil spoke to his companions. “Let’s follow this complainant, Ensel. I would see how the other ship receives him, and was in general interested to inspect it more.”

Gil, Ensel, the cobbler, and the silent man all followed the impudent poet to the next ship, where, with the devil now watching to his enjoyment, he took up his speech again.

“Hallo, numinous sea captain! Whence goes this ship? Does great Moses’s ghost reside behind the helm? I would with his honored soul speak.”

The angel looked up from his small scroll at the nobleman then back down.

“Having trouble, Saucedo?” The devil cajoled him from his launch.

Sauced eyed the devil and then turned back to the angel. “Did you not hear me? Respond, fair angel! Bit of a hurry.”

The angel looked up. “What do you want?”

“I have here come to ask if this fine ship which you inhabit be that same ship of paradise which our ancient writers spoke of and which our priests still today in exhortation hold?”

“Denominated thus it is by sundry tongues, though its true name beyond humane pronunciation. What else would you demand of me?”

“What else would I demand? My sempiternal interlocutor, I pray you and God— praised be His name who founds and confounds kings—allow me hence with you to embark. I, as a knight of heaven’s empire, of noble pedigree and pious service, I demand nothing. Though you would do good to let me in.”

“Tyrant, do you think this some armada shipped for war? Or confuse this nude radiance with your rude livery? You may not embark.”

“I don’t know why your majesty would take it ill that I enter.”

“For you this ship’s too straight. You would better accommodation find aboard that riotous bark.”

“Good angel, sir, I fought for God. How does a gentleman of such service, such mark, find here no courtesies? No entertainments? No chances? No fair hearings given to fair pleas? All appeals as soon as made as soon denied and then without so much as a polite word? It’s just not done! I’d have a second consideration! A fine accommodation would that be, fitting courtesy in godhead. Then would I bear harsh heaven’s banishment, but not before. Tear up my noble heritage, my honor sink and bury in oblivion, but there must be fairness. Where is there here fairness? All I ask is consideration of my own word in my soul’s estate?”

At this point the shady silent fellow that had been Gil’s, Ensel’s, and the cobbler’s companion stepped out from their little group, gave a nod, and walked up to the angel and the knight. The angel, obviously recognizing him, addressed him when he was in earshot.

“Meek shepherd, enter.”

The silent shade moved to the narrow launch, only to be barred by the knight.

“Swain, enter not, or I here will throw down my ghostly gage and defy you to mortal, or I supposed post-mortal, combat.”

The silent man stepped back, doffed his cap again, and spoke to the angel.

“Good angel, sir, I must not. The knight would on grounds of honor fight, and claims on heritage his precedence.”

“And you for him would turn down a heaven-chartered ship?”

“Quiet, impudent seraphim, are manners foreign to heaven as to—”

“Noblesse oblige, pert knight.” Gil had ridden up to the man. “This reticent youth will board and then you can with this angel barter.”

“I come here first in person and heredi—”

“Then like one of your breeding let this poor soul aboard.” That was enough to quiet the knight, and good thing too because it’s not like he could pull his sword.

“Now, young man,” the naked angel began. “Tell us first what it was that undid you?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe diarrhea.”

“What?”

“Diarrhea. See my grandfather and I both got sick from the same meal, and I was so worried about taking care of him and making sure he drank enough water that I think I forgot to drink it myself and passed of dehydration. That makes you laugh?”

The haughty knight was laughing.

“Not very kind that, laughing at a man dead of diarrhea and that too at a bad hour. But so, each man his humor. My poor grandpa. We both sick and I the one to die. What will he do?”

“By all means, aboard. Worry not about your grandfather. He too to the eternal mansion will arrive.”

“Is there like a crane to hoist me? Or do you fly me there with those your wings?”

“This launch here. The one you saw me walk down.”

The angel pointed to the plank.

“But my grandpa.”

“Aboard, good son.”

The young man turned to his companions, gave a wave, and walked up the launch. The proud knight started in again.

“Now that that fool is gone give me my right. Does not our law from yours descend? Though cribbed, forlorn adornment, as imperfect as human copy of divine perfection must be, could human law err so much that I, in life God’s servant, here must be Hell’s vassal? Permit as far at least to plead my case.”

“Heaven knows of these your earthly laws and of your earthly kings,” said the angel. “And while some are just and justly founded many more are to corruption turned. But thus it is no matter now, you come not in good manner for this ship, your season is passed, the ship cramped, its list full up; the other is commodious, with room enough for your heredity. There will be no bear baiting on this ship, no gory slaughter, no weapons in anger brandished, and I fear our paucity would offend your excellence. Follow the way of your illustrious ken, take the golden trireme, this ship is much too small for such a one as yourself.”

Though it was full of praise for his excellence and in itself well spoken, the knight didn’t like hearing this, nor did he much like the look of the angel, but so rejected was he forced to walk back to the demon it seemed, for that is what he did and on the way there mumbling.

“To hell then? Hell? There is a hell, and I for it?”

Gil and Ensel and the cobbler stayed back to speak.

“So that our silent young friend is one of the only saved here on this forlorn harbor, and he never once spoke to any of us damned. Do you think he could sense it?” began the cobbler, getting into the dialectic swing.

“Perhaps,” said Ensel. “Or perhaps the young man was mute in life and only when called by the angel, as those there called by the devil, was he able to speak upon his own behalf, though this time to his salvation and not his damnation was he forced.”

“I think apt Ensel is correct,” Gil added. “Good cobbler here it is we part ways. I wish you the best though I think by that angel’s silence we both know where we’re headed. I would have what time left before my name be called spent in private conversation between my pupil and me.”

Here the cobbler desired his two companions likewise a fair life and afterlife respectively and walked off.

“Ensel, I’m going to speak to this angel here, but I am afraid I must apologize to you. I am most likely for the damned and your sweet soul endangered by my philosophical persuasion. I here will bear my fate as only a noble philosopher can, but for you I am much grieved, and it weighs heavy on my soul. Let’s go speak to the angel.”

Before Ensel could respond Gil spurred over to the angel. By the time Ensel arrived Gil was already onto his second or third question.

“Am I, sweet angel, on that list?” Gil asked.

“Your name?”

“Gil Braga.”

“I see it not here registered. In life attended you the scripture?”

“No.”

“And believed you in God’s laws?”

“No.”

“And asked you now with knowledge of your sins if you were listed here?”

“I value honest speech and find the quick back and forth of question and answer to be encouraging and, if I’m honest, at this moment I am quite scared and needed encouragement. It’s true I knew what I would hear here, but I thank you for this opportunity and your kindness and will not beg a hearing as that rude fellow did.”

“If granted one what would you say?” the angel asked

Ensel and the angel stood looking at Gil as he thought about it..

“That I found it hard,” Gil began after a few moments. “That I found it hard to build my morality on the basis of obedience to injunctions deriving from an external transcendental authority, and that I made a lot of mistakes. But come, Ensel. Ask me not how but I feel the time come when I will to my summons be called. Goodbye, angel.”

As the two walked away Gil could hardly look at Ensel, and Ensel for once had nothing to say. When they arrived back at the golden trireme’s launch the proud knight had been recalled, however he was as proud as ever.

“Haughty high cozener. There is room still upon thy ship?”

“Embark, sweet knight,” the devil replied. “And so that we understand each other, take there the silver bench beside the cardinal and see your ghostly hands with his joined upon the oar, once arrived at the isle we’ll see you well attended for one so dignified as you yourself in life were.”

They watched the haughty knight enter the ship, and then Gil addressed his companion, who was really starting to look quite down.

“Ensel, seeing as there is nothing you can do for me or that I can do for myself it would be the polite thing to do for us to here pretend that all is fine, but philosophers stand not on such niceties. Nothing is more offensive to the philosophical mind than to grieve that which is without remedy. Therefore, therefore—” Gil said, waiting for Ensel to reply.

“Therefore, it is best we submit with dignity to calamity,” Ensel said.

“Exactly! We choose to face the truth, no matter how horrible—and this seems truly horrible—and so we will not deceive each other in this moment. I am dead, and I am going to hell, which feels like itself a second death. Let us then put forth some questions.”

“Gil,” Ensel began.

“You do love me, don’t you, Ensel?”

“I do.”

“Then, though it may seem ridiculous, our last moment thus, but they say to a sick man all things are forgiven, cannot the same be said for a loved dead man?”

“It may. But Gil—”

“Don’t interrupt. These are the last things I will ask of you. For what is it to be dead that I should fear?”

“This isn’t the time for philosophy.”

“And what is our true nature?”

“This isn’t time for philosophy!”

“My disciple, don’t cry. No time for the sweet fruit of philosophy?”

“Gil Braga!” The devil captain called his name, cutting the philosopher and his pupil’s discussion short.

“One moment,” Gil held a finger up to the devil, and turned back to Ensel. “Dear, I need to say this. Here you see me, genius poet, inventor of philosophies, founder of a school, noble benefactor, kind teacher, caring lover, and yet in the end I am a man of ruins and the architect of my own ruin. Though I would never trade our philosophical relationship—or our games of roman towel boy and gladiator, or of find the strigil in the peplos—I cannot help but see my errors ripe with sin. I ask that you forgive me. In the name of philosophical truth, I misled you, and I only hope my sin does not bar you the gates of heaven. The only good I can see out of this, besides your possible redemption, is that at least my sudden death spared you my going out with some sickness slowly eating me.”

“Oh, Sir Gil,” the devil at the scroll continued. “The sweet fruit of philosophy has not led you to bear your death with ease?”

“Philosophy is one thing, death another, extravagant ship demon! I ask one minute more.” Gil turned back to his page. “Oh, Ensel, stop these tears! I’ve kissed them more oft than I can remember.”

“Then were they tears of happiness.”

“And now?”

“Of tender parting, and this my teary vow: that I lo—.”

“What is love?”

“Now, good sir!” the ship demon called again. “It is not at your leisure that we stay. In short, you are the last passenger and once you to us are joined will we be on our way.”

“Unholy sorcerer!” Gill yelled, and then turned back once more to his page. “I have delayed me and still would I tarry longer but that this unholy summons hurries me. Forget no moment, call me often in your account, and know I will let slip no chance to do the same.”

After that was said Ensel tried to grab Gil, forgetting, or perhaps not caring, that his hands would pass through him, and Gil walked away from Ensel up to the ship demon.

“Send my page away, foul demon. I would not have him stay to see my damnation.”

“As you wish,” and with a flick of the wrist Ensel was gone from the shore. Gil then began, determined to go out on his own terms.

“Where to is this voyage?” Gil asked.

“To where you have to go.”

“And we here to leave soon?”

“No sooner than this conversation ends.”

“Under whose governance resides this locale?”

“Under one of infernal jurisdiction.”

“Though not so proud as yet I was, I would not go on such a ship willingly.”

“Then whence would you desire to go?”

“Home. I thank you for this exchange.”

“Then let us to the judgement. Senhor Braga, have yo—”

“As you are a devil you desire me evil, but as you were an honest angel once and pitied humankind, list not my sins. I admit all. I imagined him my deity. I would do it again.”

“Aboard then, Senhor Gil.”

“But that my sorrow blinds me and I cannot see the way I would.”

Gil was led up the launch, clasped in chains, and delivered to an oar.