

If you press me to say why I loved him,

I can say no more than it was because he was he and I was I.

—Montaigne

I Once More Unto the Breach

Mr. Pig looked up at me with shining eyes. “Nobody knows the truffles I’ve seen,” he said. He gave a series of dry coughlike grunts – his laugh – swirled the cognac in his snifter and took a long draught. I did the only thing I could at these times, I exuded empathy and filled his glass. Outside it was pitch dark.

The lights were out for complex reasons, among them, lack of power. For other complex reasons, people had shot most of them out and the authorities, such as they were, insisted that they could not be replaced for lack of funds. In truth, what was missing was the political will to reilluminate the public thoroughfares. Further, a consensus cut across party, ethnic and even class lines that sometimes things are better left in the dark.

Consequently few people were abroad after sunset and even those who were wouldn’t want to meet themselves coming the other way. On those rare occasions when scuttling house to house was unavoidable, the perilous trip might at any moment be interrupted by the sudden appearance of a torch, or rather a flare bearer, or a party of same – long pigs of a mercenary turn – charged with securing the perimeters of certain quarters, but not beyond pressing the advantage afforded by their superior arms and vision. At such times it was advisable to become one with the shadows, until the guttering lights had passed.

The most privileged enclaves, commensurate with the generally heightened sophistication retained from former years, employed infrared, and in some cases, heat seeking sensors which triggered an astounding variety of defensive measures. Peripatetic rodents, dust balls or whatever tripped their vector were subjected to an avalanche of ballistics. Doric capitals, disused toaster ovens, crockery and bric-a-brac of every description would rain down on the affected intersection. Thus – since the sensors could not distinguish the rare, predatory biped from a gusting scrap of tickertape – had the latterday bourgeoisie purchased safety with the coin of shattered repose and the frequent, irksome expense of dawn cleanup brigades.

“It’s better that people like me should die – that we not rain on anyone’s parade,” said Mr. Pig vehemently. His eyes crossed to focus on the amber bottom of his snifter. I admit that I was taken quite aback. Mr. Pig had as many demons – “scratches on the brain” he called them – as any of us, but I had never before heard him utter a word about his own death.

I hesitated before filling his glass from the lead crystal decanter he had given me for Three Kings day, unsure as to what revelations further libation might provoke. Clearly, he was drunk. Not gay and puckish as I had seen him on countless evenings past, but morbidly, animatedly drunk.

“Don’t you know that denial makes the world go round, and if it stops, what then?” He raised his glass in a mock toast. “Let tyranny be transmuted to tiramisu! Let sugar drip stalactites in the common ear – let the master’s voice be sweet!” His piercing black eyes looked through and past me. “Let’s turn this around in the name of

comfort almighty! Let Lucy Stone take a third position and modulate that hard name. Let the baby be saved at the foot of the Odessa steps. Let the credits roll. Let the mob offer up its collective sigh and shamble stiffly to the exits, picking up the machine pistols they carelessly dropped during the *denouement*. Let an enormous change have transpired as they sat transfixed, let the spring blades caress their feet as they step through the multiplex gates, out onto the real carpet, shake to the real sensurround. Let them see 3D – bones, viscera and everything – hail Vesalius! Let them engage one another as visible men and women, long pigs, skins transparent Kristalnacht glass – as flawless as bombsight lucite, like prosciutto so thin you could see strudel through it – like strudel so thin you could read the party organ proclaim the new race laws through it. Let their ears get big and flap in the breeze. Let them downlink anything with those ears. Let them talk subsonic. Let them...”

I slipped out of the room and through the front door. Despite the heavy late summer air, the stone was cool under my feet. All around was night.

In daylight, the sun still raised clover to wave in breezes in public parks, to brush people’s hands and arms and naked feet as though none of it had ever happened, masking the definitive sea change with lazy, reassuring greenness, so that it was possible, for a time, to believe that one was still in clover – a pastoral youth paroled from the insistent tasks of husbandry – waiting only on that micro shift of angled rays, that incremental cooling to warn: time to go, time to give some purpose to flight.

It was, in fact, a practical necessity to be indoors by nightfall, but people love to con themselves and I am no exception. They – we – drive all sorts of bargains for a few seconds more of light, cruise to any elevation to postpone the sunset, throw up a flurry

of glancing rationales, then convince ourselves that we've heard the last resolving chord, that it's ok to lift the worn-out needle from its static groove, that silence is appropriate to night.

No matter how generous the interpretation, even the most impenetrable individuals eventually arrived at the realization that something heavy had gone, and was continuing its relentless trajectory down – and that no time-honed, steadfast reconfiguration of perception would dissolve the lump of inert consciousness that humped everyone's back, clogged every throat and rigidified the universal colon.

Through a haze of probability emerged suspicions that budded as speculations and flowered as facts.

Instead of evading them, several notable authorities took the unprecedented step of publicly owning up. Substances had been mistaken for other substances. Technologies that had promised universal abundance had produced only more refined and tenacious forms of poverty. Crucial decisions as to the viability of certain populations had been taken in an undemocratic manner – in short grievous lapses in judgment had been made for all the worst reasons. In a crisis, people – even otherwise rational people – aren't always clear headed.

The resulting cultural, political, economic and genetic diminutions, the chastened worthies conceded, were more than regrettable, they were of tragic proportions and some erosion of public trust was more than understandable under the circumstances. There were hard and undeniable facts to be reckoned with. But, since no amount of vituperation, name-calling or assignation of blame – however justified it might seem – would result in one shred of material restitution, what was the point? Why fixate on

the irrevocable past?

“Don’t mourn,” they enjoined, “aggrandize.”

One unforeseeable consequence of the collapse was an odd tolerance – born of exhaustion perhaps – but at any rate an elasticization of the normal – in which it was now possible to walk, arm in arm if you liked, with a pig in broad daylight without anyone thinking the slightest thing about it.

Of course, people’s thoughts were elsewhere and all manner of polymorphous bonds were formed under these exceptional conditions. For years prior to the collapse, Mr. Pig and I had nodded good day in passing – a formality rooted in the antique civility that formed the common ground for our first conversation and led to regular sessions on one of the square’s dilapidated, but surviving benches.

“And after the demolition of the University, what then?” I recall him asking, his eyes roaming from the Garibaldi statue to the arch and fixing on the lifeless fountain. “I assure you,” he said, between spoonfuls of lemon ice, “this place will be put to some use. After all, before this was a square, it was a military encampment, and before that, a graveyard. With minor alterations – if the fountain were bulldozed, for instance – and with those eight dramatic avenues of approach, this would make a magnificent site for public executions. The invalid who exceeds his allotted time at the Hygea machine, for instance, he’ll be quartered right over there.” He pointed with his spoon and uttered the high staccato series of grunts that signified black amusement. “A lesson to us all.”

Whether it took months or years for our encounters to ripen into intimacy, I cannot say. My grasp of chronology is tenuous at the best of times and the disjunctive atmosphere

of those early days further eroded my efforts toward perceiving and cementing the sequential. Suffice it that during this first phase of our attachment, my depressive fog remained maximally opaque and in order to extend his role in our discourse beyond sympathetic acknowledgements of my bleak circularity, Mr. Pig resorted to a strategy of provocation.

Nothing, it seemed, delighted him more than his mocking attempts to extricate my utopianism from a dependency on, and hence an enthrallment with, the once-promising detritus of the past.

“This dead age you pine for had nothing to do with ‘information.’” He waved a trotter dismissively. “It was about the disastrous promiscuity of data and see where that gets you.” For emphasis he raised what under different genetic circumstances would have been his eyebrows.

I knew Mr. Pig’s “implosion of meaning” argument inside out, but took enjoyment in hearing him endlessly rephrase it for me. “From living in the Great American novel, you barricaded yourself in the Great American hovel, crawled into your Great American navel and buried yourself with a Great American shovel.”

He paused, hoping to have broken through my abstraction. I resisted, as always, the temptation to surrender to his combined humor and sweeping reductivism. “People once wrote elegies to light,” he continued, aware, I’m sure that I was barely listening. “Light was once the centerpiece of an entire ethos – your ancestors made plans to erect a tower to illuminate the whole of Paris from a single source...”

I flashed involuntarily on images of the grotesque mutilations – the first primitive experiments in computer/human splicing. How many of the “lesser orders” had been sacrificed to the cause, I can only speculate. Thousands, millions – in any

case, many. But there was nothing new about progress and carnage providing mutual alibis. What retroshocked even our corrupted sensibilities was the reawakened enthusiasm for indulgence in direct bodily interventions that hearkened back – albeit from vastly different motives – to the absolute revenge of kings.

People were missing members, and parts of members – sometimes whole sections of skull where attachments had been effected. Otherwise flawless bodies were cratered with scars at the sites of failed fiber optic interfaces with the chakras. And the zealous volunteers, vapid dupes and impressed chattel whose severed hands had promised fewer typos, were rewarded by parenting undreamt-of systems of pernicious error – as varied and complex as their constituent psyches.

What a wreckage of flesh and fused sand now commingled on the once-pristine beachhead where there had been a World Cup uplinked live to the multitudes, intercut with bathing beauties shrieking “mira mira!” as the freezing surf hit their thighs and a solar flare so powerful that it caused a hemisphere’s worth of watches to stop at 2:20 – all in one day!

“Come on,” Mr. Pig said, slapping my knee. He stood up and discarded his empty cup toward the garbage mushrooming from an arabesque mesh container. “I could use another one of these. Let’s see if the ice machine still works.”

II In Country

Mr. Pig was suspicious of miracles and miracle cures in particular. Not, he claimed, because he doubted their veracity, but because – either through manipulation, or by

their very nature – they often provided an alibi for day-to-day travesties. Thus, an otherwise inveterate traveler, he avoided Lourdes and similar sites because he didn't want to be cured of anything. Or so he said. With Mr. Pig there was always a slightly mixed message. His elliptical thinking combined with a certain adamant style of expression made him both a fascinating and irritating verbal partner, at once provoking and precluding argument.

Granted, his pronouncements had the air of decisions arrived at after considerable thought. His assertions were couched in reasonable terms and he was enormously capable of defending them on that level. But beneath his adroitly crafted positions, I felt, lay an impulsive base whose extraordinary inventiveness I eventually put down to one half pure inspiration and the other, denial of fear.

And the latter was not without cause, since Mr. Pig – who before the travel restrictions had bantered with the concierges of all six continents with the easy grace of a seasoned traveler – had also, on several occasions, narrowly avoided being literally seasoned. And cured as well, since some cultures, particularly those reduced to involuntary dieting are not prepared to accept pigs on equal terms and insist on defining them primarily as gastronomic objects. Hence, during these expeditions, Mr. Pig became the embodiment of the phrase “at risk.”

But vulnerability in certain forms can serve to deflect aggression and even attract affection, by virtue of a subtle transmutation of humors which allows it to appear as strength, creating an aura bordering on the sacred – the power lies in engaging people in play. Only the terminally bored will violate you. Shahrazad knew this and so, on some level, did Mr. Pig.

That Mr. Pig, a true universalist of the faunal world, who numbered among his friends porcupines, bats, bears, lemurs, marine mammals and badgers – a diversity encompassing marsupials and rodentia – was able to charm many long pigs was undeniable. After all, an attractive image is there for the taking – and the Venetians are notorious for their love of facades. They thrilled to his courtesies, his extravagant praise of their squid ink and polenta – even supported his petitions to the Vatican on behalf of the beatification of a fictional virgin, Maria della Vongole, who in 673, he alleged, miraculously saved hundreds of Buranese from dying of poisoned clams.

So it was that on departing the Veneto, “Il Grande Signore Corto” left in his wake seemingly endless ripples of cult popularity – as evidenced by the sotoportego, piazzalle, several caffès and a pharmacy bearing his name.

Having passed materially among the Venetians, he entered – upon leaving them – their realm of myth. Even now, in a thousand kiosks, authentic and appropriated images of him are to be found side by side with grimacing Pantaloons, flirtatious Columbines, long shot Canallettos and grand displays of festival pyrotechnics.

There is Mr. Pig, in a postcard taken from a bridge, playing the eternal gondolier – sporting a waxed moustache and straw hat flying a festive red ribbon – belting “Santa Lucia” and adroitly navigating a picturesque canal. His lifesize wry pink countenance, broadly rendered, still adorns a perennial best-selling tee shirt and grins in conspiratorial miniature from novelty buttons – his *nom de guerre* printed beneath. The final tribute paid him by the Venetians, in his extraordinary rite of cultural passage, was the minting of a counterfeit 5.000 lira piece with his likeness in brass at the center – frequently passed as change to unsuspecting tourists. *Ecce Porcellino*.

The fact that at last count there were more pigs than people in the Po Valley of Emilia-Romana is, in part, an enduring testament both to Mr. Pig's Lotharian powers of seduction and to his fecundity.

Though naturally drawn to cultures which, though they reviled pigs, at least forbid their ingestion, he nonetheless – if somewhat selectively – took literally the Biblical exhortations to increase, and if the price of righteousness was exposure to manifest peril, well, in this world one took one's chances.

Some of his most nostalgic recountings concerned transient yet fervid trysts in the late siesta shadows cast by the half-ruined walls of the multitude of hog farms south of Parma.

One would think that the sheer quantity of these liaisons would blur them into a single, composite, functional, reductive image. But beyond an enormous catalog of names, Mr. Pig recalled a myriad of details about each exquisite sow – her lineage, character and idiosyncrasies. And what a wealth of neural stimulations! A dappled flank turning DeChirican orange, receiving, then giving up the last rays of sun shimmering through a stand of poplars, the curve of a snout, the point of a cocked ear, the smell of warm dust – the smell of warm mud.

When pressed about the glaring contradictions I felt were inherent in his conscious and persistent contributions to what was, after all, a pastoral factory for the varied products of his species, he replied in the terms that my heart and mind would stretch to fit, but could never fully accept: Our embraces, he said, were as delicious to us as our progeny wrapped around melon are to some carnivores.

The planet is full of agendas, and pigs are not exempt from their invention. I knew that he believed, or at least had been convinced in his youth, that all questions

political, economic and gastronomic have, ultimately, demographic solutions and that, short of the unlikely acquisition of direct political power, that the pig's best chance lay in reproduction to the point of obliterating demand. Until then, he reasoned, barring unforeseen evolutions in genetics or consciousness, there was no arguing with desire, whether seated at the table or served up on it.

In all other respects, it was clear that Mr. Pig's memory – certainly his will to recall – had been, even according to his own admission, diminishing steadily for years. He regularly confused Titian with Tintoretto, handsaws for hurricanes. Though an organic base can never be precluded, it was my assessment – since his faculties seemed to sharpen as our conversations progressed – that his apparent deficits were caused by his preoccupation with the fungibility of perception and the relentlessness with which all sensations are opportunistically repurposed. Hence he clung to the shrinking ground he could encompass and abandoned the rest.

But this seeming exhaustion of his sensibilities was ameliorated, and to some extent replenished, by unanticipated infusions of meaning from past experiences which emerged full strength in his colloquies with me.

It was on his last trip to Venice, for instance, that Mr. Pig had seen the vision of the hand, or more accurately, the forearm. Unattended by celestial pyrotechnics, it stood, disembodied and complete – “like its own person,” he had said – by a partly opened door from which the light of a garden courtyard poured into the alleyway – neither triumphant nor in supplication, nor grasping the brass head of the Moor who had served as a handle – a way in – and whose face was crushed into flashing caricature by the simple physics of resistance to the palms which had smothered it for centuries,

releasing just at the point of asphyxiation, or not in time.

There, before the door the forearm stood, and though there was nothing radiant – nothing overtly sacred about it, Mr. Pig was overwhelmed by the belief that the hand could fly – that it might leap into action at any time: to husbandry, to the laying of stones, to the casting of brass Moors, to the carving of doors – that it could work a needle or mold spinning clay – and he was convinced that it would do all that and more the instant he looked away. And he knew furthermore that this was the hand's alley, the hand's garden, the hand's house beyond, the hand's canals, the hand's huge cranes, the hand's boatworks, the hand's lace, the hand's olive press, the hand's foundry, the hand's abundance.

Pigs blink reflexively as do humans and in that moment the picture changed: light spill, brass Moor, garden, door, alley.

III Safe as Houses

Moving into Mr. Pig's flat did not merely signify an exchange of domiciles. It was a leap into a shared consciousness which I, at any rate, had to explicitly acknowledge. Although the formalities of our predomestic relationship remained largely intact – no crucial divisions of labor ensued, nor did we strive to impose a synthetic cohesion on our now coterminous space and time – nevertheless, by the simple virtue of being there, I was made an instantaneous partner in Mr. Pig's nocturnal expositions.

"Don't cross the bridge," he shrieked, sound asleep and lucid – less than a week after my arrival. I bolted upright in my cot and in the blackness saw or sensed his

writhing form, tourniqueting the bedclothes against the opposite wall. I was at his side in an instant, amazed at having avoided destroying my shins on the random chairs or knocking over the obelisks of books that separated our beds. I groped for him and his trotter seized my hand like a vice. It felt, I swear, pickled.

“What’s the matter with the bridge?”

“The – the – Nazis mined it – they blew up all the bridges.”

“Except this one?”

“Except this one – and they mined it.”

He grabbed for me with his foretrotters and crushed me toward him, rigid and swaddled in the damp, wound sheets. My right arm was immobilized between our bodies, but with my left hand I stroked his smooth, slick forehead. It seemed like hours till his spasm subsided and I was able to extricate myself and return to my cot. Mr. Pig slept peacefully through until dawn but now it was my turn to lie there wide awake and rigid as a corpse. There were heavy footfalls of watchmen passing outside followed by the hiss of their flares and the jangle of their weapons. Although we were separated by a stone wall and a shuttered window, I shut my eyes instinctively and turned my head against the light.

“If it’s any comfort to you” said Mr. Pig, thumbing through the rotogravure section of a newspaper excavated from beneath layers of linoleum in the kitchen, “this isn’t the first time that life and image have been cheap – the first time that the long pigs have brought it all down around their ears.” I cracked the brittle sheets into strangely cartographic and zoomorphic shapes and layered them in a carton, stacking continents on top of island chains, lapping proto-Madagascars over detached Tierras del Fuego. “Just look at

it as a form of creativity," he went on, "their quaint way of getting from here to there. Just think of it as rough love." He laughed. I could tell he was pulling my leg, trying to tease me out of the chronic Weltschmerz seizures I could never shake like he did – one *nuit blanche*, or a purgative, refreshing nightmare, then Sunny Jim redux.

"You're sanguine enough this morning..." I avoided a direct reply in an attempt to avoid doing any thinking and piled an elephant ear on top of a pair of bat wings.

"Can't spend your life in the dumpster." He pored over the sepia images. "Anyway working on our place makes me happy." It was *our* place now. The irony of my insistence on undertaking an intramural renovation in the face of a thoroughgoing social breakdown was not lost on Mr. Pig, who, I'm sure, must on one level have considered it the height of futility. Nevertheless, he evidently relished demonstrating his competence in matters of domestic refurbishment as much as he enjoyed interrupting his work to share some new discovery.

"Look at this!" Before me he held a yellowing photo spread, a montage of faces: young and flawless, creased, embossed and exfoliated, curling moustaches, hats with cockaydes – and laborers: a multitude in peasant dress piling sandbags, a skinny young woman in fatigues with her arm on the open bonnet of an ambulance – all clustered around a map – it looked like a weather map – with converging low and high pressure systems.

"The Lincoln Brigade at Jarama" he sang, "they made the Fascisti yell mama—"

"How old *are* you?" I interrupted.

Mr. Pig raised his eyebrows. "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety..." He turned the page. "Whoa! Check this!"

Across two pages, a line of shiny prototype Volkswagens stretched from factory

door to vanishing point down an arrow-straight Autobahn. We both stared intently for some moments. Mr. Pig crumpled the papers and threw them in my box. On top of them I laid Laurasia and Gondwanda.

“That’s why they went micro,” Mr. Pig said as I continued breaking down sheets of figured linoleum. He carefully tacked molding into the glass doors of a cabinet built over the sink, then began chiseling recesses for the hinges. “All they could think up was scale extensions, ‘enhancements’ and multiplications of old technologies. So they forgot how to lay a floor that was level, put up a wall that was plumb, drive a straight nail” – here he bit out a rather too large chunk of door frame – “but they did learn to print some mighty pretty circuit boards. Two out of three of ‘em even worked. Sometimes.” He screwed the door tentatively into place and closed it. It hung a good quarter inch off. From across the room, I could feel him hoping that I hadn’t noticed. Unmounting the door, he chiseled a thin strip of wood, gluing, then clamping it into place. There would be no more work on the cabinet until the patch dried.

Mr. Pig knelt and with scraper and claw hammer returned to prying up the old linoleum. “I’m in love with the power of the modern world” I heard him humming through the crackling din, as on all fours he backed towards me, ripping new polymorphous contours from the splintering, friable mass of the old.

Late that evening as we sat by the fire, a series of reports rattled the shutters. Whatever else it may have lacked, the world still possessed munitions in plenitude. Mr. Pig stopped rocking and sat erect, listening intently.

“Claymores,” he said after a moment and, to the rhythmic creak of his chair resumed his colloquy.

“By ritualizing the position of an other, you set yourself up. If you’re going to set about dividing the world in to separate but unequally privileged subjects and objects and then try to reconcile your contradictions in the realm of myth, good luck! – because even if you see yourself clearly as the subject, at least two extremely unpleasant things are bound to happen. First, you’re going to become dependent on your object to reflect your light –”

“Sister moon...” I mused, under my breath.

“Almost, but not quite” said Mr. Pig, “your metaphor has too much symbiosis, too much recognition – I’m talking about an object lumbered with all kinds of sloughed-off values – a safety valve for everything you can’t or won’t acknowledge – a multi-purpose displacement recycler –”

“A space colony...”

“Exactly! Eternal maroons – but the kicker is, you’ve become one yourself –”

There were shouts followed by a cacophonous montage of heavy running feet, hoarse panting and clanking armaments outside as the flarebearers pursued a real or imagined prey. We gulped in unison.

“Chasing shadows again.” Mr. Pig took another hit of VSOP and exhaled loudly. Then, hopping out of his seat, he performed a rapid series of knee bends, several unique interpretations of ballet positions and culminated this manic burst with a lengthy headstand.

“The second thing that happens,” he continued, his smooth pink features slowly turning an apoplectic crimson, “is that when you’ve finally established dominion over your object, all the space junk you shot at it falls down again – but on its own schedule and at its own tempo.” He rolled nimbly out of his headstand and resumed his seat in

the rocking chair, taking another quaff and closing his eyes – his long lashes resting delicately on his porcelain cheeks.

“Like a boomerang that comes flying back and slams you in the head just when you forgot you threw it,” I offered.

A faint whiffling sound emanated from his snout. I took the precipitously tilting snifter from between his trotters and poured the cognac back into the decanter, then covered him with a tattered comforter, retrieved from a dispossession site, which I had laundered but had not had time to patch. Thus enrobed, Mr. Pig, his head falling to one side, looked like nothing so much as a dummy that had been used for bayonet practice and abandoned. I shook my head to banish this ghoulish vision and when I refocused my eyes he had returned to being Mr. Pig again, snoring in the firelight.

I walked back into the kitchen. It was still in extreme disarray, but exuded an aura of unrestricted possibility. Mr. Pig had installed the glass doors on our new cabinets – the whole built from salvaged materials. I ran my hand along the bare, sanded wood searching for the crack where the doors met. My touch confirmed what, in the dimness, my eyes could not. They were perfectly flush.

In bed, I strained to hear sounds of the world beyond, but all that came to me was an occasional torpid grunt from Mr. Pig and the pop of a random ember. There were no further alarms or excursions from the flarebearers within earshot that night. As sleep overtook me, their preoccupation elsewhere was a source of relief, or – however temporary – of fear displaced.

IV Things He Told Me or That I Dreamed

On his last transatlantic flight, Mr. Pig thinks of the millions of waves rushing beneath the airplane and falls sleep. In his dream he is a speechwriter for the late Lyndon Baines Johnson. By a weird prescience, he foresees the unhappy outcome of the regime and resolves to quit. He wakes with a start after being informed by a top aide that the President is very distraught about his decision and has implored him to stay.

In the compartment of the train from Milano to Venezia he studies the beauties of repurposed language.

Dozing and propped against one another, a young man and woman bear on their bodies messages for a waiting world. The man's oversized polo shirt is emblazoned with a frigate surmounted by the words: Old Ironsides Tarpaulins – For All-Round Protection, this in distressed "colonial" lettering.

Against her perfect bronze, molds a pewter gray, hooded spandex sweatshirt on which several St. Catherines – like proto-surfers triumphantly astride their wheels – cavort with gold and jet alchemical symbols amidst repeats of black letter type reading: The Name of the Emperor Justinian. Then, in the swaying car and afternoon heat Mr. Pig sleeps too and dreams of a room, painted so many times you can't get in.

Observed through swirling mist, a clenched, shriveled, scarlet, two pound preemie lies on a metal scale – wired, vulnerable and furious for being brought into life in this wretched condition. Nearby, on an identical scale, reposes a plump and tranquil newborn, tipping the digits at seven pounds and change. "Which of their mothers," a disembodied voice asks "do you think received prenatal care?" And this sign is only in

two dimensions!

He shrinks, somehow, and realizes he is now on all fours in a sordid metro car. All he can see is the lower half of a swaying human giant, whose scuffed leather hightops stick thick tongues out of their Medusa laces and chant: Driving Force. One pantleg, the size of a tree trunk taunts simply: Clout. The upper part of this gargantuan rhetorician is lost in the clouds. The doors open and he runs out and into the nave of a romanesque chapel. Confronting, mesmerized, a huge gold, red and ultramarine mosaic of the Last Judgment, he realizes in horror that while he is certain his right brain is pure, his left hemisphere, and consequently his right hand have sinned. What then when he is judged? How can he avoid cosmic dismemberment?

A lame girl, thin, tan and exquisitely beautiful passes the portals of the church looking neither left into the interior, nor right across the square. Her progress is tremendously awkward, but resolute in its superabundant energy – she possesses the transcendent grace of a self-animating marionette, knees snapping high and feet planting on their balls alone, her right hand securing the strap of her shoulder bag, her left arm swirling out in a wide arc – and black hair sweeping in two-step rhythm, like a curtain across her shoulder blades. Overcome with shame for having eroticized her struggle, he shifts his gaze along her trajectory to the one structure to have survived the vicissitudes of the square undamaged. A bright orange cantilever of enormous height, erected for some long-forgotten restoration project, it now looms silently over the wrecked buildings suspending a solitary wheelbarrow. Looking at it, he imagines the moment when she will reach the foot of its ladder, scale it with deliberate, disjunctive grace, swing into its cockpit and set it in motion.

All around town there are Torahs buried in the walled gardens of the Catholics – sacred books secreted in the National Library under protection of their Catholic names. An armored car speeds out the blasted portal of the synagogue and careens down Via Farini. After another dream – this one lasting generations – two *carabinieri* lounge on a bench beyond an electronic door wearing mirrored shades and cerulean uniforms with machine guns bridging their languid knees. A volley of extravagant yawns gulp in warm, unpressured August air. Framing a litre of mineral water, their discarded flak jackets lean against the shaded wall.

Mr. Pig is singing in his sleep again – to the tune of “Summertime” – in his slow, rich, bogus Paul Robeson baritone:

“Gonna move on up
to the Gheto Nuovo
Gonna live in a fine house
And be the Doge’s MD
Til that mornin’...”

“Freedom,” Mr. Pig, intones from an extravagant onion marble pulpit “is not the absence of order, but the dynamic interplay of fluid agencies. It’s attendant discomfort resides in its imperative toward continual realignments, retunings, reconfigurations, repurposings, repositionings, recastings – not with a view to establishing stasis, but to maintaining interaction.”

Mr. Pig claims descent from a certain Tuscan boar, – immortalized in a sculpture that had once been part of the Uffizzi collection – who had both confounded and earned the enduring respect of several generations of Medici huntsmen. This boar, having savaged dogs, horses and pikemen alike, was never slain. He died from old age, having sired countless offspring.

One daughter, disguised as a nun, had been among the throng at St. Marco's to hear Savonarola inveigh against the heretics and Jews. Although she had secretly read and enjoyed Decameron, she too danced around the bonfire on which it was consumed. A granddaughter founded a hospital order in Brugges and still another descendant, posing as a friar had, through rigorous study and exemplary voice modulation, been appointed Kappelmeister of Basel cathedral.

A young woman pursues a 16th century antecedent of Mr. Pig's across a wheatfield, then into open country – the two of them leaping across ditches and streams. The pig, evades capture and later learns that the exertion of the chase – having raised the girl's level of vital heat – has caused the transmogrification of her vagina and ovaries into cock and balls. Through courage and cunning the pig remains free and lives a long and bountiful life. The girl, now boy, neatly trims his crimson beard and enlists as a courtier to king of France.

Pigs, Mr. Pig reminds me, are as historically contextualized as anyone. He clicks off the television which has gone on one of its spates of nerve-wracking alternation between programming and noise. The tube has been snowing silently and prodigiously these past fifteen minutes as we sat rapt and silent, waiting for coherence to resume.

“The road to hell is paved with good inventions.” He turns on the radio and

turns the dial. A definitive static bridges the frequency range.

“It’s just us now,” says Mr. Pig. “Can we talk?”

V The Last Time I Saw God

What could have been the source of Mr. Pig’s extraordinary proposal? Certainly I am no match for the magnificent sows of the *campagna*. I am not beautiful and even when I could be said to have had a viable head of hair, it never assumed Apollonian configurations. I resemble David only to the extent that I always stand with hips and shoulders on a disjunctive bias – this owing to my left leg being shorter by an inch, the result of a childhood injury to the spine. Whatever my attraction for Mr. Pig, it clearly was not physical, or if it was, it lay in the physicality explicit in my humanness – angularity, heightened muscle definition and length of neck and limbs. I have a tendency to either coldly reduce or else sentimentalize Mr. Pig’s motivations in our suggesting our lovemaking, but perhaps this is because I could never entirely encompass his complexity.

On one level, at the risk of valorizing what manifested as a fundamentally unremarkable act, it would be fair to say that what drew us together was a mutual trajectory toward a metadesire – a unity that had brushed past us like a breeze in encounters with “our own kind” – but which we had never before experienced fully blown.

But lovemaking is after all, bodies in a rare and intimate proximity, and – however we may gild it with meaning – consists of pressure, release, call, response and

hopefully, a blind, ecstatic, conjoined memento mori. Yet if there was carnality in Mr. Pig, I never experienced it. I was far too conscious of the pleasures I know are inappropriate to an *eromenos*. But I have never been a very good Platonist and the desires of others have always acted as contagions in the body of my own sensation. A pig – or at any rate Mr. Pig – is smooth, warm, round and extremely firm – in short, not unpleasant to embrace. I am taking no liberties with veracity when I maintain that a pig's physique ideally conflates certain crucial classical paradigms. The value of this may be lost on those who insist on a polar bifurcation of male and female types. It is not, again, stretching the truth when I say that I had neither felt sexually attracted to Mr. Pig prior, nor was I subsequently – though our union demanded that I henceforth experience him in a definitively recast light. As it happened, the fact of our coupling demanded a great deal more.

“A truly democratic society would probably not represent itself in the monumental,” mused Mr. Pig as we explored the domeless ruin of a baptistery. “What would be the motivation to celebrate accretions of power?” It was a typical Mr. Pig rhetorical question.

“Every society needs points of fixity to anchor it,” he continued, his head tilted and his ear cocked so that I too nearly heard the canonical bells he seemed to be counting, but which had been inaudible for centuries – the campanile in rubble, the bells melted down for cannons which laid end to end would girdle the asteroid that it was predicted would someday obliterate the planet. Predictions of doom had become ubiquitous, if not fashionable, of late. In Mr. Pig's view, if people said it long enough, one day probability would prove them right.

“Cataclysm makes a poor point of fixity when one has not experienced, war, plague or famine.” He grunted with the effort of righting a marble ionic capital with his foretrotters, ensconcing himself like an emperor, then raising, pointing and turning out his hind trotters balletically. “Or,” he added, “allowed itself to comprehend that experience.” When he sat like this, balanced on his rump, I invariably thought of the phrase “centering,” coined before it really became a new age. “Points of common fixity are basic to grounding meaning – but meaning is fickle, refuses to be rooted and won’t attach itself for long – a century here, a millennium there – so the points multiply, spread themselves thin, atomize – so that even infinitely nimble angels dance off them – in desperate attempts to readadhere to the meaning which has deserted them and for which they were nothing but stepping stones.”

“So meaning evaporates, searching for new points of fixity to give it temporary form?” I asked.

“What do you think?” He sprang to his hind trotters and gazed into the frayed circle of piercing blue sky above the jagged baptistery walls. “Hogwash,” I thought. “Hogwash,” I said. Mr. Pig rolled the capital back into its former position and laughed.

The first jarring, internal shift finally brought absolute, tangible immediacy to the astonishment that had built from trepidation since the beginning of my revulsion at my morning cup of coffee. When aversion to this ritual was followed hard upon by a sensitivity in my breasts coupled with a nearly imperceptible swelling – a tightness, a pressure – symptoms of physical illness vied with and were subsumed by dawning fears of insanity.

The sphere of possibility now proceeded to balloon and prolapse beyond any

formerly cherished notion of boundary. This globular effusion of consciousness was paralleled by an incremental but undeniable quotidian thrusting of breasts and abdomen. These events have a retrospective knell of rationality – an unanticipated but nonetheless eminently natural process inexorably in motion – but for most of the four months I carried our child, I was literally mad.

Mr. Pig, whose bursts of affection, though unquestionably genuine, had always been marked by a subsequent retreat into formality, now evinced an intense and consistent solicitude. Out of the squeezed-shut corner of my mind's eye I could feel, refracted by the blur of my rageful tears, the warmth of his radiance which never once, despite my abject vulnerability veered toward triumph or domination.

What a sight I must have been – crane legs and boy's hips supporting a cantilevered girdle that in others of my sex and generation had resulted from the anatomic fusion of a critical mass of Budweisers. Modest yet robust breasts protruding from a hairy chest are hardly within the scope of the classical paradigm to whose imagined similarity we dutifully cling, and are even more disconcerting when one is both their observer and possessor. Hence, I refused to acknowledge the rapidly compounding evidence which, every day, became more stressful to defend against. The turning point in my delirium came with the spontaneous eversion of my navel. At that instant and for hours afterward, I laughed and sobbed. The unwilling site of unexpected fecundity in an impossible womb – I was finally complete.

The week of calm which followed my breakdown-epiphany was perforated by horrible fears of stillborn, or worse yet, living monsters – *manqué* or grossly over-endowed, and our isolation, I must confess, amply nourished these apprehensions. I was comforted

somewhat by our fetus's prodigious and apparently healthy activity and despite excruciating pain in my lumbar spine, a tendency to edema and persistent sinusitis, my worst torments were not physical. Rather – having begun to overcome the interwoven outrage and disbelief at the use to which my body was being put – my incipient delight at the miraculous nature of our progeny was impaled by icicles of not-unfounded panic. Questions of blood compatibility which attend even intra-species pregnancies were compounded by uncertainties as to the genetic viability of human-pig offspring.

At their most intense, my doubts engendered terrifying hallucinations. On one occasion, for unknown reasons, the flarebearers resorted to an unprecedented number of patrols. Each time they tramped, clanked and hissed by outside, my inner eyelids became projection screens, alive with inescapable visual accompaniment. Broken helixes whirled like the skeleton of the campanile's ravaged spiral stairs, centrifuging phosphoros-haloed fragments into black space, resolving for an instant into Mannerist spiral altarpieces, then bursting apart again. After this bout, gelatinous with exhaustion, I resolved, for the sake of the gestating life within me to redirect – or at least suppress – the worst of my anxieties. Possessing nothing but time in which to contemplate yawning uncertainties, I devoted hours of speculation to the imagined logistics of future caregiving and when these efforts turned circular and concentric, abandoned myself to a flood of involuntary remembrances.

VI Everything Blows

"Anyone can be your St. Francis," Mr. Pig had commented – was it only a few months

before? – as we watched a pathetic trickle of ragged believers pass through the busted doors of the shrine. With their last pennies they paid to have the curtains drawn back to reveal, backlit, withered body fragments – here a foot, there a fragment of purported Levantine holy cranium. Some arrived borne by others, family members impressed by the weight of frail, blood-tied flesh. Offerings were solicited at the door for restoration of the long-ago drained hydraulic mechanism that would have ameliorated the final excruciating ascent of the treacherously degraded marble stairs.

“How,” I wondered rhetorically and aloud, “could it all fall apart so exhaustively – so fast?” I knew, of course – or fancied I did – what it was that held mechanisms together and then allowed for their ensemble collapse. Planes had flown because people believed in vacuums and that it was their destiny to harness nature. But it doesn’t take much to shake faith – which is more than anything else a question of desire – and materials are bound to oblige. Could one’s eye collapse from a sudden turning to gas of the vitreous humor? If Boyle himself got out of his grave and walked into this square he could proclaim the how, but never the why. There is an acknowledgement of the point of fatigue, accessible to mothers, bridge builders and autobody welders that eludes the average torturer – which is why real answers, satisfying answers, sustaining answers fail to emerge. From where I sat, on that fetid day in the square, I didn’t need Mr. Pig to tell me that the idea systems that once sustained our material architecture had lost their critical mass of adherents – or perhaps gained a critical mass of doubters.

Mr. Pig never failed to regard my persistent rhetorical questions as genuine and undertook each time to offer a different rejoinder. “You humans have a marvelous quality. Everything you believe in comes true – your wish is God’s command.” He unpacked some fruit from his reticule. “What’s that you’re leaning against?” he asked,

passing me a plum.

“A wall,” I replied, annoyed that I was being set up by my personal tin Plato.

“And what’s it made out of?”

“Stone.”

“What else?” He spread a small plastic table cloth over a plateau of rubble.

“What do you mean what else? Stone, that’s all.”

“Stone and spaces between stones.”

“Oy gevalt!”

“Obvious, right? But your people never looked at a wall and saw stones and spaces in between. Once they saw only stones – now, they see only the spaces. Your whole civilization fell between its own cracks.”

Yet, under a steady pastel rain of disintegrating frescoes in the last chapel off the right aisle, a dozen or more extravagantly gnarled supplicants, deposited thence by hired porters – who at the base of the stairs had, with varying degrees of delicacy, transferred them bodily from sedan chairs to hand trucks, wound them round with cords and bumped them backward up the stairs, through the portal and into the cavernous gloom – now assumed, to the best of their disparate capacities, postures of reverence and were sprayed with the atomized essence of a martyr to the faith who had perished in Anatolia, but whose distillation multiplied wondrously in the service of necessity.

Moments later, at the door, the grateful few, risen as though from the tomb, dismissed their porters with a newfound and doubtless transient beneficence manifesting in coin, and made their way – at first timorously and then with surging confidence – down the steps, finally evaporating into the dazzling and superheated

light of the square.

From the shadows of the portal, the remaining porters waited, cupped their hands to eye the position of the sun, stretched languorously, exchanged bluff slaps of affection and reentered the sepulcher to retrieve their charges.

“Fail again, fight again,” snorted Mr. Pig, expertly opening a cantaloupe, which we shared in the shade of the ruined campanile. Despite his hangover, he was clearly on a tear. “If six turn out to be nine, I don’t mind,” he sang and buried his snout rapturously in the orange melon. He eats like a pig, I thought, closely followed by: he *is* a pig – a frequent but never completely assimilated revelation.

I admit that I felt a certain aloofness that morning, borne of a failing of mine, namely that I have always detested drunks. Not that Mr. Pig was a habitual inebriate or that, in his bouts of intoxication, he abused others. But, what caused my resentment to spill over onto him was my observation that for many, what begins, or is initially rationalized as a social exercise, serves as a pretext for abandonment to a certain splendid isolation, in which the channels of incoming sensation are forfeited to a display of rampant and unbridled ego. I do not question the therapeutic value of a good bender, but I believe there must be ways of achieving solitude and reestablishing subjectivity, which do not entail first driving away one’s loved ones in helpless dismay.

Nonetheless, Mr. Pig’s occasional nocturnal binges seemed to temporarily purge him of melancholy. In the morning – and today was no exception – behind his bruised sockets and through his bloodshot eyes one could discern, or imagine, silent flashes, to be closely followed by the audible manifestations that could blossom into a pyrotechnic barrage.

“Ezekiel saw the wheel,” he intoned, in the closest approximation of a Paul

Robeson basso that a pig's larynx will allow, "way in the middle of the air" – then turning to me, "more melon?"

"How do you suppose the grunts," he asked, excavating a rind with his lower tusks, "how do you suppose they came up with the term 'zekes'?"

I had the headache that by rights should have belonged to Mr. Pig, attended by an impatience – a discomfort with my whole state of being, now capped by frustration with his elliptical and, one suspected, rhetorical questions. The juice dripping down my chin was sticky and hot. I itched to be somewhere else. "The world is full of euphemisms," I replied. "Things don't have to have significance – humans make up all kinds of silly shit that means nothing."

The sun edged around a notch in the broken wall momentarily flooding our chamber with light and I flashed on the day I attained immortality as an industrial statistic. Fifteen hour days on a crew laying new tarpaper on an microchip plant – a building with a roof so vast you could have used it as a flight deck for sorties over the University – we were ecstatically happy to be bringing in three and change an hour – a wage which, since most long pigs viewed unionism as the social equivalent of typhoid – was considered pretty good unskilled money. Four of us would rotate sleeping on the floor and double beds in a local motel and be pounded awake at five to work until the late summer sun set at nine.

Gloves or no gloves, that hammer raised blisters on my palm that I can still feel – years after the callouses have fallen away. There we went, crawling backward down the tarpaper seams, banging in broad-headed roofing nails. By mid-morning we'd have worked up a sweat and started shedding the flannel we'd layered on in the chilly dawn.

“Fuck me!” the foreman would bellow, springing to his feet, throwing down his hammer and uncoiling his not inconsiderable bulk. “C’mon you cunts – let’s tar!” Thank god for pulleys, otherwise we’d never have gotten half the junk up there – certainly not the buckets of molten pitch, just shy of the point of combustion that we used to mop over the seams.

Around one o’clock one Friday, right before lunch break, we finished a section and the foreman sent me to fetch two fresh five gallon buckets from the lip of the roof. It’s a wonder I didn’t walk straight off the edge. Everything was shimmering – the black roof, the green treetops, the bubbling surface of the tar. I flexed my knees, grabbed both handles, straightened up and headed for the center of the roof. I didn’t go all the way down when my foot snagged on a broom handle – one of the thousand invisible obstacles strewn across the radiating surface waiting to burst into utility. Suffice it to say that the observable similarities in flight of tar and mercury abundantly reconfirmed my oft-repressed belief in alchemy. Acutely conscious, even at that instant, of the dynamics of my relationship to both the pain and the triangulating gazes of the long pigs gyrating to lock on my coordinates, I forbore to scream.

Afterward, while baking on a steel table in the E.R., I opened my clenched eyes turning my head away from the overhead floodlight and toward the balding young intern – who knows how many sleepless hours into his shift – hunched over a tome on burn care, trying to decipher the meaning of an arcane passage tabbed under P, for petroleum.

Still later I waddled, swathed and salved into the cool of a tiled bathroom to observe my transfiguration into an object of ridicule and revulsion. Amazement and tears of relief. How could an anguish so fierce have left so little evidence? A bandaged

calf where hair still refuses to grow, a dime-sized angry moon on my inner forearm and balm flooding an island chain scatter-arching from neck to cheek, to the left corner of my mouth which today won't register affect, being slightly healed shut...

"Baptists!" proclaimed Mr. Pig triumphantly. "A lot of grunts were back country boys – Baptists!"

I catapulted back from the past feeling utterly disconnected and powerless. Everything I thought I had understood, the life I had taken for granted, every expectation had been transformed into a brutal, inescapable parody of existence. I had been raised in the naive belief that anything that could be imagined lay within the realm of immediate possibility, and clearly, with a vengeance, it was. My species was on all fours and the significant other in my life was a freak of nature – a feckless, arrogant freak at that – one who juggled melon rinds with what weren't even proper hands and sang about Ezekiel. Who was Ezekiel to him?

"You fucking pig!" I screamed after him, scrambling to the jagged crown of the wall as his form blended into the confused whiteness of the square – the pressure of my rage crushed inward by the poverty of my expression.

VII *Quand le porceau demihomme on verra*

Mr. Pig aroused both my intense rage and the belated realization that it wasn't him I was angry with. Undeniably he catalyzed my fury but then adroitly dodged the brunt of it – the net result being that it rebounded in full measure, forcing me to examine myself, what I knew of him, our relationship and the extraordinary circumstances

under which it took place. But the presence of conflict in our life together in no way overshadows the fact that the majority of our time was spent amiably, and of that time the greatest part was devoted to conversation.

In retrospect, it's amazing the obvious things I never asked him. I was, of course, accustomed to his grilling *me* with a flattering solicitousness which was a persuasive inducement to free disclosure. At any rate, between his evident interest and my desire to be known, he eventually came to hear, in fits and starts, pretty much all of my relentlessly unremarkable history.

I was enormously curious about him and his background as well, but my natural reticence to press him on the oblique tidbits of self-revelation he inserted into our wide ranging dialogues ("bipedalism has not come easily to me") combined with his unsatisfactory answers to direct questions ("grandfather was a pig"), resulted in my obtaining a "porktrait in Swiss cheese" – his phrase.

To this day I have no idea where or when he was born, his actual lineage – though he repudiated what he termed "Mayflower swine" – how he came to learn English, or for that matter Italian, French, Latin, Greek, Aramaic, Simmenthal, North American Badger and several dialects of New World Monkey. Equally mysterious is how he acquired his skills in carpentry, plumbing, baking, acrobatics and chess – where my disinterest in competition proved me an unwilling and unworthy opponent – or, most importantly – in theater.

Of all his exceptional capabilities, acting was clearly his great love and foremost talent – particularly when he was moderately in his cups. I discovered this when, some months into our friendship – in fact soon after moving in – I asked him, since I had never heard him talk to another pig, what such a conversation might sound like. What

ensued surpassed all expectation – an extemporaneous farce in which a youthful suitor pleaded with a hoary swine for his daughter’s hand. In the course of this comedy of manners, Mr. Pig performed both male roles as well as the reactions and asides of the eavesdropping object of betrothal. Back and forth across our chiaroscuro bed-sitting room he pranced, delivering himself of an emotive range that cascaded through supplication, anticipation, arrogance, swagger, shock, rage, fear, gratitude and beneficence – seamlessly negotiating every violent reversal and delicate modulations.

On another occasion, I returned from a salvage run to find him snout deep in a volume of Kipling.

“What possible value can you find in that?” I asked, astounded for the nth time by the range of his predilections. He put the volume aside and replied in improvised verse, reciting with almost frightening credibility the saga of a Cockney soldier of empire:

*Oh the jasmine air is sweet
And the boolies wash your feet
As you lie on the verandah eating figs
But when the sarge says: On the double!
And you’re charging through the rubble
You’ll be dodging death beside the Blazing Pigs*

*When you’re in the Doojer Pass
And your ammo’s gone at last
And Fuzzy Wuzzy’s all around you dancing jigs*

*When you're to your neck in mucka
And you're crying out for succor
Hope the Lord sends a platoon of Blazing Pigs*

*When you're slicing for your life
with half a butter knife
and the wiley wogs whirl round you wearing wigs
When it comes to retribution
There's no finer substitution
Then a groveling grunting horde of Blazing Pigs*

*Oh it's pigs, pigs, pigs, you squeaking little porkers
Quick step now or I'll have you in the brig
For the grilling that you've taken
Through the stink of blood and bacon
There's no man nor beast to top the Blazing Pigs*

*No I never will retire
From the cannon shot and fire
'til they cover up me corpse with dirt and twigs
But till Satan's acre freezes
Cross my heart, so help me Jesus
I'll be frying down in hell with Blazing Pigs*

His range – what he had trained a pig’s voice and body to do – and his subtlety of expression bespoke more than raw talent. Months later, in one of his animated dreams, he bolstered my suspicions by somnambulistically reenacting a lengthy series of curtain calls at, what I have decided – without proof, but not unreasonably – was the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza. I gathered this from his gracious thanks to the audience in Italian, and the correspondence of his seemingly idiosyncratic movements to the theater’s compressed design. Sound asleep, he trotted up and down in the pitched *trompe l’oeil* Palladian stage set, first bowing solo to the ovation – pressing flung bouquets to his bosom – then gesturing for the cast to flank him and bowing low again.

This performance, which I glimpsed through half-shut eyes in the dim glow of the dying fireplace coals lasted ten minutes or more, till the the thump, clank and fizz of the flarebearers jogged his dream state to another plane and with regal bearing and great deliberation, he returned to his bed.

Our dialogues and my observations are the sole sources of what I know about Mr. Pig. I never discovered anything written by, for or about him. There is one artifact, a blurred snapshot taken sometime in the ‘50s, to judge by the cars, on what appears to be the Boulevard St. Germain. Mr. Pig is in the foreground, looking very lean and romantic in a long muffler, engaging the camera directly, his snout out of focus, his piercing black eyes alive with gaiety. Falling out of the frame behind him, a wild haired young man and a woman with a beauty mark and wearing a beret – both clasping books with illegible titles, proximate arms wound round one another – are laughing urgent, sexy, snaggletoothed French laughs – at Mr. Pig perhaps, at the act of being photographed and apparently, at life itself.

Except for this snapshot, a portable wooden chess set and a small, exquisite pink conch shell, whatever memorabilia Mr. Pig owned, he carried inside his head.

Despite countless discussions, religion and politics were matters on which Mr. Pig remained opaque at best as to his personal convictions.

“Only those starved for identity find it necessary to bludgeon one another with signs,” was the sort of remark that insinuated itself into his communication, leaving one to infer that he, certainly, did not consider himself among them. That Mr. Pig was a mystic of sorts he amply demonstrated, but whether underlying his eclectic fascination with the causes and consequences of belief ran a coherent stream of faith, or apostasy I have not a clue. He only once allowed himself to be drawn – beyond its application to strictly human historical experience – into a colloquy on salvation and the soul, and this was a parenthetical reference, during a feuilleton on colonialism, to a certain Spanish Jesuit who successfully petitioned the Pope for the “human” status of Native Americans. The granting of souls to the Indians, Mr. Pig said, crucially reinforced the necessity of their conversion – but changed not so much the reality of, as the terms under which they were slaughtered.

As to the withering of the church, Mr. Pig averred that, unlike Boccaccio’s Jew, for whom the blossoming of Christian faith in the hearts of believers – despite the putrescence of its institutional hiercharchy – proved the purity of its tenets, there were many among the primates and quadrupeds who wanted in unconditionally. “All it would take is one small encyclical – a mere wave of the pontifical hand, and your gutted shrines would burst with four-footed adherents seeking communion and more. Did not the beasts of the field adore the Savior? I personally know at least a hundred

swine and not a few less sows in Romana alone, who already profess the faith." He shook his head in wonderment, his snout curling upwards in disgust. "The Lord prepareth a feast for me in Heaven. Guess who's coming to dinner?"

Though he met every eye with openness and equanimity, human behavior remained a threatening mystery. "Whatever else they are, the long pigs" – and I never knew whether he meant the term ironically or pejoratively – "have a pragmatic streak beneath their superstition or they wouldn't have lasted this long. And they're insatiably industrious in previewing hell. They never think: why? They only think: can? It's as unreasonable to ask a man not to use the tool in his hand as it is to forbid a dog to wag its tail."

"Woof woof," I teased, then gave an involuntary grunt. My contractions had begun.

VIII Chimera

No camcorders documented the event, no supportive midwives exhorted me to rhythmic breathing, no stern obstetricians ordered me to push. No one but Mr. Pig, whose firm trotters caught her, witnessed the birth of our child. No prep, stirrups or sterile ground, no eleventh hour episiotomy, no spinal and fortunately no complications. The feared eclampsia and breech position failed to materialize, the labor was swift, the delivery smooth, the placenta prompt in its arrival, and beyond an intensity of pain that defies description, all proceeded without incident. In truth, delivering our progeny was far easier than a fully human birth owing to the

proportionately smaller head. Her shoulders were the hardest part. It helped immeasurably that Mr. Pig, as bathed in sweat as I was, remained cool under pressure and my training years before in emergency medicine – though I had never practiced – lent a caste of rationalism to an otherwise overwhelming crescendo of sensation. Within two hours of the onset of contractions, it was evident that we had produced what, under the circumstances, could only be considered a normal infant. Exhaustion, shock and joy soon commingled to form a potent narcotic. Our infant having suckled, we three slept entwined. Just before waking, a stranger appeared to me and plainly said: “the breach that engendered life is irising down. It can be forced, it can be gently dilated, but by what hand – and when?” When I opened my eyes to shrill demands for nourishment, Mr. Pig was gone.

I know that haste causes inordinate risk-taking and that a soul drunk with paternal euphoria and having survived the rigors of a thousand checkpoints might falter in his judgment. In such a world as we are become, just an instant’s inattention can invite one’s undoing. And who among us can say when we will stand at the pole where the azimuths of time and mortality converge?

That night there was a dramatic and protracted thunderstorm, severe enough so that his absence caused me no great concern until the rain lessened at around four and a party of flarebearers thumped and clanked passed, their interchange inaudible, but evincing high spirits in a certain triumphant shrillness of timbre. The hiss of their torches pitched high above their conversation and for a few seconds the ceiling was sprayed with light that crept around the shutters and cast a swirling canopy over our bed. Our baby whimpered, but did not wake.

The two hours that followed were unendurable. Finally, driven by a lupine sense of imminence that encompasses and nullifies fear, with chairs and blankets I improvised a tent around our infant that permitted flow of air but which, I hoped, would provide an acoustic buffer should she awaken and start to cry.

I have no gift for precognition, nor greater instinct than any other of my species, yet I knew what I would find. Proceeding in the direction from which the flarebearers had come, I traversed the square without incident, crouched low under the electric eye secreted in the disused fire alarm box and hopscotched through the alley which had been so clumsily mined as to have caused no casualties.

Down a cul de sac, through the broken door of an abandoned building, in an otherwise empty room stood an iron bed frame, retaining most of its springs, on which a dead pig lay. Cloven from throat to groin, his body and this improvised altar were promiscuously strewn his viscera. A pig has very long intestines and is as vascular as any other mammal. I will not describe at length the image which is incised behind my eyes and through which all other images now must pass. Suffice it to say that his head was nearly severed, its crucial vessels cleanly and definitively sliced through. That he died very quickly is a kindness to us both, intentional or not, for which I cannot help but thank his executioners.

There was a time, not long gone, when if you were a pig, you read in eyes brimming with digestive fluid, in the fixity of the gaze that followed and penetrated you, only raw material hunger, spiced perhaps with a pinch of gratuitous aggression. Besides nourishment, there were other employments to which your parceled anatomy could be lent – wallets, File-o-fax covers, brushes, ivory ornaments – everything, it was said, but

the oink. Some elder swine considered it an honor to be of such wondrously prolix utility to the long ones who stied and slopped them. It was they who encouraged impressionable sucklings to pose for bucolic, idealized depictions of coy complicity – to wink seductively and lick their lips while playing double dutch with links of sausage, on labels adorning the packaging of their own and their progeny’s collective butchery. With a macabre humor that always made me cringe, Mr. Pig had, on more than one occasion, expressed his delight in continuing to remain the “missing link” and parodied the bathetic, once-popular refrain: “maybe it’s the best thing for you, but it’s the wurst that can happen to me.”

Yet his murder was motivated neither by physical hunger nor profit motive. His assassins were well fed. They lacked for nothing material. But there is the power of knowledge to be found in the organs of animals and they had not shrunk from employing the best science they knew. Recalling their joy as they passed by our window a few hours before, I could tell that his entrails had offered up a wonderful divination.

Sitting down was abrupt and involuntary. Amazingly, I didn’t vomit. The smell of four hour old blood, the abstract patterns light acting on the textures of this tableau of utter silence encompassed me and arrested my action for an incalculable span of time. When finally I stirred, I moved rapidly. Blank and automatic, I recall gathering scrap wood and setting it alight, but I have no memory of returning home. Although the neighborhood was abandoned, I know not what suffering I may have caused. I subsequently heard that the conflagration, though localized by numerous rubble blocks, had raged for days. In its steady consumption of the quarter, it set off numerous

booby traps and caches of secreted ballistics. Rocking in the darkness, eyes closed as I nursed our child, as my milk flowed into the body we now shared, their reports became aural counterparts to a gorgeous panoply of imagined light over Mr. Pig's beloved Venezia.

I am selfish enough to count myself lucky that I did not witness his death. Thus, despite the objective evidence, I remain at a loss to ultimately square the scene in the abandoned room with any previously understood reality, and hence still find myself half believing that he is alive somewhere.

Though I know he would never have abandoned his child, I like to pretend that weighed down by the incipient demands of paternity in a time of such great vicissitudes, he somehow found his way back to Emilia-Romana and is rutting himself into Lotharian insensibility – drowning Europa in the flood of sows and swine who will one day realize the demographic solution to the long pig question.

Such realist as survives in me, though, is focused on our offspring to whom I must now be both father and mother and on whose physique and nature we are both indelibly stamped. I have found no name to do justice to this infant, so for now she is simply: Chimera.

The sun is on its way down and I am hurrying home through streets already blanketed by shadow. Suffused with a strange competency, I have obtained provisions for a week as well as the rudiments, procured from one of last night's uncleared missile barrages, of what will become her first toy. Her faintly audible crying assures me that she is still there, growing – soon to swim across our bedroom floor, soon to stand, soon to ambulate – her long lashes wet with tears and crusted with sleep – her heart racing –

her hands like vices. Her toy will incorporate myriad colors and textures. It will reflect light and make sounds. I am bursting through the door.