THE CLASSICAL WORLD

A NOVEL OF IDEAS

Thomas Fuller

for Lea Ann

Digression is the sunshine of reading

PROLOGUE AS GREEK CHORUS

It's true that when the author asked me to write an introduction to his book, *The Classical World*, I was dumbstruck, not so much by the request itself as by his suggestion that he write it for me, and then for me to put my name upon it. I, of course, refused and Mr. Fuller and I did not speak for some time, until the book was completed and I read it yet again, then agreeing to write the prologue the author and I both thought necessary. Consider these remarks then as a sort of Greek Chorus in which the author and I speak as one while wearing different masks. For I admire this book greatly.

Thomas Fuller's a sensational travel writer, a writer who takes the notes out of his pocket's as he's traveling, as much to consult what's already been written as to write something new. Mr. Fuller truly believes that questions orient the traveler, and that a little disorientation is essential to any trip work taking. Who to compare him to? Kipling, perhaps? Samuel Beckett? (there's a travel writer if there ever was one). Fuller's not so much a failed poet, as so many novelists are, but a failed novelist who sticks with poetry because it's so difficult to write. "Poetry's not writing per se," he's said to me on more than one occasion, "which is precisely poetry's charm." But wherever Fuller goes—Rome, Naples, Sicily, Calabria, Wyoming, San Francisco—he's seeking the poetry in it.

The Classical World is a lark; no, it's a blackbird with a human face. The question is: is it a song the blackbird sings? Or a screech filled with questions that have no answers? How the book ever got written is one thing—a miracle perhaps, since it's obvious Fuller had so much fun writing it—and whoever gets in the spirit of it will surely feel among the most fortunate people alive.

Think of the notes Thomas Fuller's stuffed in his pockets—written on the backs of bus tickets, hotel stationary, matchbook covers, whatever paper he had on hand at the time—as maps to a world he's hoping will come alive again, a shimmering landscape of questions that have no answers. Also know that Mr. Fuller wanted to subtitle his book, *A Novel of a Film*, but was persuaded by his editor not to do so.

PRESTON BLAIR

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“The thinking man always finds himself in a gigantic orphanage in which people are continually proving to him that he has no parents.”

Thomas Bernhard

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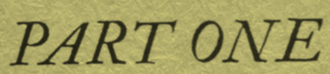

PART ONE

LIVE, FROM UPSTATE WYOMING

If asked, *do you live in a time of peace or a time of war*, what would you say?

Were you to wake up among the dead tomorrow would you be happy with the way you lived your life, or sad, or neither?

Would you confess to liking federal government, or say, *I'm proud to live in a country that offers food stamps*, when asked by Joe, (who lives downstream in a big-timber-and-glass bad idea of a house) if you believe in the concept of the welfare state?

Joe who lives down hill doesn't believe in Jesus, he only believes in luck like nearly every man I've ever known. He's 82 and has never taken a handout in his life—hunter, gun lover, a man who stands naked at his bedroom window in elk season and nails his buck long-distance. Wife #3 dresses the meat. Her name's Sharon. (Joe and Sharon are prime examples of why Wyoming hospitals are filled with people dying of outspokenness).

I know I'm lucky to know Joe, to have met him before he died, that's what I know, and that I live in the golden age of words and pictures in a place where I can think about war and government without having to go to war. I don't believe in luck as a life philosophy, there are other options, such as faith and truth or cigarettes or beer, pick one or the other, every man does; I've put my faith in words and pictures. My problem is not being able to pick one or the other to believe in. I can't decide. All I know is that living in a straw-bale cabin in Wyoming guarantees I'll change just by being here.

I'm staying in Wyoming for as long as I'd like with friends who aren't here, the best type—Lea Ann and Brooks Roddan (or is the last name *Meyer*? I confuse the two name's, having two friends, one friend named Roddan and one named Meyer). It's fair exchange: they permit me use of the cabin for the time I need to think, and I'm taking pictures of their property for publicity purposes. The cabin's at the end of a dirt road under the Bazooka Mountains, a good place to think if thinking's what you have in mind.

And what do you think about?

...why is it more fun to take a picture than to make something out of words

...how sucking the blue paint off an Advil PM pill is more effective than swallowing the whole thing

...a rational explanation for a Wyomingite's love of lite beer and pepper jack cheese—how could such good people, the kind who look you in the eye, suffer this way?

So, is a picture better than a word?

A picture's far more natural; there's real physics with an image, and heft that a word just can't achieve; furthermore, pictures are far more adaptable to change. Last night, trying to meditate, I put a candle on top of the cherry-wood dresser in the bedroom, just for the effect it created, and everything became something else. Suddenly I was in an opium den, smoking hash with Julie Christie in 1968, trying not to masturbate, holding one of those x-rated pair of panties some little missy left in the dresser drawer, testing my new theory that people who tell you, "*I really like to be alone*" are really telling you (in secret code) they prefer masturbation to consensual sex with a partner. Everything transformed in the potency and diminution of candlelight, flickering to become new and then losing its newness, looking so different from moment to moment I temporarily became transfixed, forgetting all about my propensity to do something I ought not to have.

Besides, it's good technique to try and see things as they are, not embossed, to be patient enough when you see something that catches your eye to walk around it at first and then come back, give it a chance to become a real image.

What are you doing in Wyoming?

—I'm here to write a poem for Anthony, my young poet friend who left the world as profoundly as any human can leave—by dying young—though I'm prone to do nothing other than walk around the cabin, concentrating on the silence of who I am, to just get over it and accept myself for a change.

Then the best time's what the worst time used to be—when nothing's coming, and words like *love, beauty, kindness* have outlived their meanings, and I can't think of anything else to say about Anthony or anyone else in my life.

I knew better, I could see something wrong with Anthony from the beginning—and he took it from there—a total failure at everything other than his own postulations.

Postulations?

For example, Anthony didn't think one person alone could write a book—*how could you possibly write a book all by yourself?* he'd say. And Anthony's poems really weren't poems, he never called what he wrote, *poetry*. He called it *trance music*, or *rap*.

I can't listen to trance or rap, I'd say to Anthony, *it's unlistenable, but I can listen to you so I'll call what you write, poetry. After all, poetry is just a word.*

What do you do for fun?

Some afternoons I climb onto the roof of the cabin to sunbathe. I lay on my back, face-up, in order to look at the sky, until dark clouds come rolling over the ridgeline, arriving from Yellowstone Park where all weather comes from. At the first feel of rain, I scramble down from the roof in a big hurry, go inside the cabin and wait it out until the storm's over. Then I open the back door and step outside. It's always as if nothing has just happened; everything's still—the rocks and the bunchgrass, the little bushes the rabbits huddle under, the cottonwood trees—everything and everyone's better than ever, grateful for the experience.

When I get down-in-the-dumps Alone, I light cigarettes—nobody's here to tell me I shouldn't be smoking, such a pleasure once in a while—and start keeping a journal about what I'm really feeling. I write by hand on unlined sheets of white paper. I almost always cancel what I've written immediately—if I write one line I cancel another, a cancellation leads to a re-writing of the cancellations I made the day before, and so forth. Every night before I go to bed I put the journal in the freezer beside the bottle of Swedish vodka stored for an emergency.

Could you share some journal entries?

Sure, they're all questions:

> *Why are some things inspiring and others not?*
>
> *Why do some books make you want to read them again and again, and others you close after reading the first sentence?*
>
> *If Nietzsche's immortal, why can't I read him for more than a page or two?*

Earlier this evening I was out walking in the alfalfa fields below the cabin, playing a little game: identify which irrigation pumps work and which don't, without turning the pump handle.

Ultimately, I'm seeking semi-working pumps with potential, which are identified two ways:

1) the pump handle is fastened to the spigot with strong baling wire and/or

2) the grass beneath the pump is a mix of green and brown grass.

I place the pump handle in my right hand and prepare to pump without pumping, bending down so that my right ear fits into the spigot hole. Then I put my ear in there, listening for the water that is, or is not, going to come. It's a real game, and therefore a pleasure. The trick's to chose a pump that seems unlikely to produce water but that sounds like it's trying. I put my ear as close as I can to the spigot, into the pipe itself where there's nothing between the crust of the earth and what's beneath it, where all sound is hollow but promising, and just listen.

Most times nothing comes, it's just me listening.

It's right then—the moment I place my hand on the pump handle—that I know I can never really know the time I'm living in. I might think I can but I can't, but I can poke around with a stick, if only to see if I can get rid of the feeling that life's not good for me.

Playing this game with the pumps all summer, I conclude that the act of freeing myself from the thinking I've always been thinking will either come from a lifetime of hard work or happen instantly, and in either case I'll have to be lucky.

In late fall I leave the cabin, at that weird impasse of knowing I'll never change and that knowing this could be the time everything changes of its own volition. I get rid of most of my material possessions, including the words I'd written for Anthony, take everything to the landfill on the road out of town, pack up what I have left and leave.

SO THIS IS WHAT SILENCE SOUNDS LIKE! It's like stubbing out a cigarette. There's no yesterday, today, or tomorrow. All this time in Wyoming I thought that if I could write a poem to Anthony the last thing he'd do is die.

By the way, did I mention the axe that I thought I'd lost in Wyoming?

Well, Brooks Roddan-Meyer, owner of the cabin, had left it in the shed out back, under a burlap sack. When I found it this morning there was a baby rattlesnake curled up against it.

I took it as an encrypted message—that I'd been chosen to go into the wilderness, split up the world between that which ends and doesn't end, and leave it at that.

THE PHONE RINGS, SHOULD I ANSWER THE PHONE?

Jane's just called from San Francisco to tell me I'm on my own.

If you think I'm taking care of you when you're old, think again, she says.

She's using old long-distance shock treatment technology, though maybe Jane's not being as literal as usual, maybe she's referring to caretaking responsibilities, intravenous drips and bedpans, colostomy bags and so on, to bolster her major theory that people believe in death before they die AND THEN they die, instead of thinking that she too might need someone to talk with when she gets old. Or maybe it's just another one of her declarations of independence.

I'm reading a biography of Mies van der Rohe when she calls, listening to every word he's saying, so it's possible I've misinterpreted what Jane said. Mies doesn't seem to care what anyone thinks of his art; like Anthony. Mies has his own philosophy—that *architecture is clear structure*. I've got to finish the Mies bio tonight; it's too big a book to lug back to San Francisco.

I tell Jane I'm writing again, a poem this time, and that I couldn't seem to finish it in Wyoming. She says I'm too hung up on an ending, that there is no end, there's only plot and plots only ruin things. Then she turns stony, signaling an impasse.

The impasse is a source of friction—that one of us wants to build a new house and the other doesn't know what he or she wants. If we knew what each of us really wanted we probably wouldn't be in relationship. The deep problem is Jane and I always have to feel up in the air about something—that if something important isn't undecided between us then we aren't living. We have this odd habit of always wanting to add value to things.

I'd much rather talk about the house—it's time to build one last house—building one last house will bring Jane and I closer together.

Listen, I say, *we can make it ideal this time*, sharing my floor plan in words she can hear and pictures she can't see, trying to find a balance between the two.

Our last house will have three main rooms:

1) the room in which I'm loved by someone else

2) the room where I love myself

3) the room where I think about what it means to love someone else, like Jane.

I want a library too, where I can write this book. Jane wants a place she can throw pots.

After I share my vision for the house with Jane, and draw her a picture telephonically, there's a long silence—of Jane and I reaching a place in our relationship where our talk has no predetermined outcome.

And then Jane says she's bought a plane ticket to Iceland. Icelandic Air has a *deal*, she's flying from Seattle to Reykjavik. And once in Reykjavik a passenger can fly anywhere the airline flies.

Would I like to come too?

ICELAND: THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF MASS TOURISM

You've been to Iceland, you know when you first feel something's wrong and then that's all you can feel? And this *something* forms the way you see things from then on, so that it's agony when everyone around you says, *everything feels just the same as always, nothing's wrong at all*.

Well, by the time I reach Iceland Sigga's telling a story about the sudden summer snowstorms in the far north. Her oldest son's rushed to join a rescue team to help sheep farmers recover herds of sheep lost in the snow. It's dangerous work. *A rescuer's a person who randomly pokes holes in the snowdrift to find sheep buried under the snow*, one on top of the other. The sheep on top are often still alive; the sheep on the bottom are usually dead. If the dead sheep are found soon enough they're sold for meat.

Sigga has countenance, a way of making you feel you're lucky to see her, though she's not good-looking when you see her at first, in the western sense. She's foreign even to fellow Icelanders—a blonde Indian whose tribe interbred with invading Turkish pirates—and the moment you describe Sigga she changes. I can't imagine what it might be like to live with her, to be Gummi, her husband, a big handsome, obvious man, her complete opposite.

We're sitting in the café, waiting for coffee after our little voyage—Gummi and Sigga of Reykjavik, and two teenage boys, one their youngest son and the other an exchange student from Mexico City, Jane and I, just after being on the water in a rubber raft for hours at Jokulsarion, exploring icebergs. Gummi invited us when I'd met him at the hotel, drinking beer and watching soccer on TV in the bar. He said they were going to show the icebergs to their son and his friend at 1 p.m. and that we should come along.

It's impossible getting into the raft, even for Icelandic people, but once we're in none of us want to get out. The raft's slightly schizophrenic, made of boots of Spanish leather, and the icebergs look like they're either withering or are meant to be fake, planted by environmental-terrorists who hope to make us feel guilty: when the raft nudges one of the greasy icebergs it's by mistake, and the pilot apologizes in Icelandic. He says he hadn't meant to.

On the water everyone stiffens—it's the way we communicate, by freezing. Gummi says we've paid for less than a hour, but it seems intolerable, like we're getting much more time on the water than paid for. By the end of the voyage it's more difficult getting out of the raft than it was to get in, regardless of your nationality.

It's at coffee afterwards that Sigga tells the story of her oldest son rescuing sheep. I show their younger son a $2 bill, US, holding it high in the air, then slapping it on the table like a card dealer in the days of Wyatt Earp. I tell the kid that there's a superstition in the US: *you shouldn't spend a $2 bill, it's bad luck*, then I give the money to him.

Sigga, the mother, smiles like I've done something good and Gummi the father, a lawyer who watches American professional football every Sunday, a fan of The Oakland Raiders, gives me a high five.

They want to reciprocate. Sigga says, you must *go to Vestmannaeyjar, the island, the original Iceland. There's a volcano there. Take the ferry.*

Arriving in Vestmannaeyjar, the wind's so powerful Jane and I have to walk in the opposite direction of ourselves in order to go forward. It's like walking against everything our lives might mean to us now and in the future, and knowing that walking like this is the only way we'll survive.

I revert to a primitive form of alcoholism, drag Jane into a restaurant on Main Street and ask the waitress for, a *good martini*. She's too young to have heard of a martini so I make it myself, the right way.

Making our way back to the hotel after dinner Jane and I step right into the eye of another big storm. Exhausted, I finally climb into bed where my sleep gets pummeled by wind and rain. It's like being the only fish in a fishbowl while the water's being changed. By morning my skin's covered in gooey pellets and flakes made of salt and dirt. There's an Icelandic word for it, *vaar* or something like that. When I run my hand through my hair I can feel specks of stuff that must be *vaar*; it tastes like coarse black salt, studded with mud.

The ferry's cancelled—Jane and I can't sail back to the mainland as planned where Sigga and Gummi have invited us to dinner at their house in Reykjavik for Icelandic lamb, a traditional meal.

Everything that aspires to be progressive on Vestmannaeyjar stops here, not only to all other people on the island but also to us. The aquarium's padlocked, so we spend hours in the local museum. When I ask the docent if there's a chance the ferry will sail for the mainland in the afternoon, she laughs and says, *nope*. It's the same question she's been asked thousands of years. When I ask about *vaar*, she claims it's common on the island, that *you get used to it like a shirt or pair of shoes*. She's the same woman who was only a child when the volcano first erupted and covered the island in molten lava and ash, old enough to remember the excitement of the feature-length movie made about the volcano, how the producer flew the whole island to Reykjavik for the premiere.

Finally, the hot chocolate café next door, full of creative people addicted to the internet, opens at noon. I get into making mode there—I just have to make something, a poem, a picture, an email or text message—and everything I make is wonderful, every word, image, everything I say or hear or see works together as it should, though other times nothing happens and my life feels like something that will never come to me no matter how long I wait.

By 2:30 p.m. I only want to sleep but can't sleep; it's midday and the wind keeps me awake. When I can't sleep, I write. Writing, I start to

feel better. I hadn't wanted to write but I'd written, I made myself write. I'm a real writer then; a writer the reader struggles with almost as much as the writer struggles to write what the reader's reading.

> *Start at the bottom, I write, between the root and the trunk of the tree. Nothing has to fall if you put it on something, rest it against something else. Trees fall, true, trees fall in the forest and elsewhere when it's their time, a fallen tree is often the most beautiful.*

I pause here, writing longhand is not my forte—when I write by hand I often can't read what I've written—then I continue, slowly:

> *Nothing's ever the way you think it's going to be. Perhaps your fingers and toes will remain constant, not exciting perhaps, but dependable if you keep them warm.*

I ask Jane to look at what I've written. She looks down through the cheap hotel stationary until she comes to the bottom of my heart. *It's ok, in fact it's pretty good writing,* Jane says, *in the sense that all writing may be interpreted as travel writing. I realize that part of a writer always dies while traveling and part always comes alive, but I feel you're stuck somewhere in-between, in a place you hope to get new meaning from but can't for some reason, or won't. I think you violently oppose mass tourism but won't come right out and say it.*

Jane's struck a nerve, gold-capped but sensitive; I'm traveling while being finished with travel, disliking almost everything about the process—flying on airplanes, finding the right hotel, ordering strange food, mis-placing my toothbrush—the whole unnecessesariness of it. I want to cry.

What's wrong? She asks.

O nothing, I say. *Nothing's wrong, I just wish someone would ask me to dance, I wish I didn't have to ask myself, I mean.*

No, something's very wrong, she says.

My fingers, especially the little ones on my right and left hands, I say, *haven't been the same since living in Wyoming, my fingers don't feel normal but continue to be on my hands.*

And so Vestmannaeyjar becomes two different islands since we've been here: the island we traveled to and the island we can't escape; we're just tourists, participating in a re-enactment every foreign place performs for tourists. Jane's unhappy here—it's such an effort to be yourself on an island, at least twice as difficult as it is on dry land—and I don't have the skills or contacts among the higher-

ups to make a deal. So I begin to feel responsible for putting her in danger, having brought her to a land of such violent volcanic activity. It's the last thing I mean to do—I love Jane to the degree of not being able to imagine living without her; I only want her to notice I'm here, that I'm valuable and that she's made the right choice in being with me.

We sail tomorrow, it's supposed to be clear. Everyone on Vestmannaeyjar says we'll soon be reunited with Sigga and Gummi in Reykjavik.

Arriving at their house near downtown it's not what I pictured—the place's far too small for them. Sigga and Gummi are big people, have a family of three grown children, but the house is full of shortcomings, crammed with so many toys and trinkets it looks explosive.

Would you like a drink? Sigga asks first thing, proud of her culture but thoughtful about it being perceived as provincial. She compensates by sharing its connections with the classical world—a small Roman head she found just north of Reykjavik, the writings of Hesiod and Tacitus, the concept of the Thule, some folktales and songs scattered around the countryside that have Latin lyrics.

Sigga's made a lamb dinner, and there's plenty of red wine. We all sit at the dining room table, touching elbows as we cut our meat, an ancient custom, I suppose.

I mention *vaar*, the dark sticky stuff that covered our car after the storm on Vestmannaeyjar, and had got into my hair. Sigga claims it's ash left over from volcano Eldfell, that the volcano was imported from the British Isles, taken apart stone-by-stone and transported to the island on rafts by Celtic monks who'd hoped to import Christianity but failed. She spent her sophomore year in the university doing an internship on the island, knitting Icelandic sweaters of sheep's wool and vaar to make a little extra money. Gummi's wearing the only sweater to have survived, a thick white and black and gray pullover. *They last forever*, Gummi says. He's sorry he won't be able to pass it down to one of his sons, but he's made a promise in his will instead to display it in the tourist kiosk on Vestmannaeyjar.

After dinner, Gummi wants to drive to the river just outside town to show me the water where he fishes for trophy salmon, but there's no time, it's dark by the time we finish eating.

Later, over coffee, we all promise to meet again—trying to control our lives by language—but years pass and then completely disappear somewhere over the Atlantic.

Of that time only Gummi the male survives, last seen lounging on a black leather couch in a pub in the Outer Hebrides, watching football highlights on the big screen, wearing the Icelandic sweater Sigga knit for him in the late 1980s, a very happy man.

SILENCE IN THE LIFE OF A POET

Anthony's funeral is a spectacle, as overproduced and macabre as a book of experimental poetry. It's a real party.

There's a full orchestra and chorus, with four backup singers, two of them stunningly gorgeous black women. They sing the usual stuff, then do a gospel version of Bob Zimmerman's, "Stuck Inside of Mobile With the Memphis Blues" prior to the pastor's official eulogy. Television news crews aren't here; the Bloggers are though and I want to be as far away from them as possible.

I'm supposed to be the eyewitness, so I go down front, close enough to Anthony's family that I can touch the backs of their heads—his mother, his younger brother and sister, all blond, their heads bowed.

Since I'm the eyewitness, it feels like they're crying just for me. I can feel their tears staring at me from the eyes in the back of their heads. I bow and pray the family doesn't turn and look back at me so that I feel obligated to speak.

I've scribbled some lines from Spinoza on a little piece of yellow paper—*The endeavor, wherewith everything endeavors to persist in its own being, is nothing else but the actual essence of the thing in question*, (Ethics iii, prop.7)—should someone call on me to say something about Anthony.

But no one calls. I officially stopped being a writer who gives poetry readings or a poet who delivers eulogies the moment Anthony died, I no longer knew where to end a line and begin one again. I still don't know what a poem really is, and I've been thinking about poetry for forty years.

So why didn't you say anything at Anthony's funeral?

That I didn't speak is unconscionable, I was certainly expected to speak, everyone seems to think I'm a real wordsmith. But had I said anything I'd only realize later that I could have said something else which would have been the right thing to say.

I agree, hearing you talk about it now—what could you have possibly said?

That Anthony was exceptional and lived his life the way I'd hoped to live, a true nobleman, obscure in almost everything, pursuing obscurity with his whole being the way others pursue wealth. That he was a good enough poet to be successful in his failure!

I was the older writer, I should have spoken, by saying nothing I made a tribal gaffe. I had the chance to speak, but I'd have to be surprised by what I was saying or it wouldn't be authentic. Besides, everyone else who spoke said the same thing, that Anthony was *too young, that he'd gotten more out of his life than those who lived into their nineties* etc. etc.

I just sat there instead, assuming the position of a stoic, sitting on my hands to keep my back straight, as the seats were wooden and quite stiff.

In retrospect, I might have said—

There are *two types of people—people who have souls and people who don't, people who tell you the real story and people who tell you lies.*

A person with soul uses words that come in and out of their mouth naturally, well proportioned, so that whatever they say has a chance to be human.

Soulless people have mouths that don't fit them. Their mouths open and close like a coffin lid they're designing just for you. Soulless people never mean what they say.

Some people open their mouths on mouthfuls of light and close them by giving you the light they've opened.

These people have souls whether they write poems or not.

And Anthony could tell by looking at someone's mouth as they spoke whether or not they had a soul.

I might have also said—

The dead rule the world, and its correlative, *that the past exists so that stories may be told about it.*

The dead rule the world.

There, I've said it again, much more concise than "The Iliad" or "The Odyssey," consistent too with Anthony's idea that a poem either comes to you or doesn't, something to think about, at the very least.

I could have said what I should have said, but the words came when I was driving home and it was too late.

After the service at which I didn't speak, I go behind the curtain where Anthony's body lies in state. There are only five of us, a small but serious squad of elite mourners.

Anthony's dressed in a baby-blue tuxedo and a formal, shiny black bow tie studded with little pink abstractions.

I look down, he looks up, when he looks up I laugh, not knowing what else to do. I have no choice, I can't stop laughing.

Gwen, his mother, standing on the other side of the casket, takes the hand of my laughter, seeing what I see, and starts laughing with me. Gwen and I shake with laughter, we roll around in it, it's the kind of laughter nothing can stop, not love, discipline, respect or propriety; the kind of laughter that can't possibly be defined and is pure. We laugh and laugh until it's time to stop and the funeral director turns off the lights.

It's not the last time I see Anthony, it's the next to the last time.

The day after Anthony's funeral, the shame at having not spoken at his service blossoms in me like strange marine algae.

I take it out to sea, examine my guilt with a microscope and see it's only an old snowflake left over from the Ice Age.

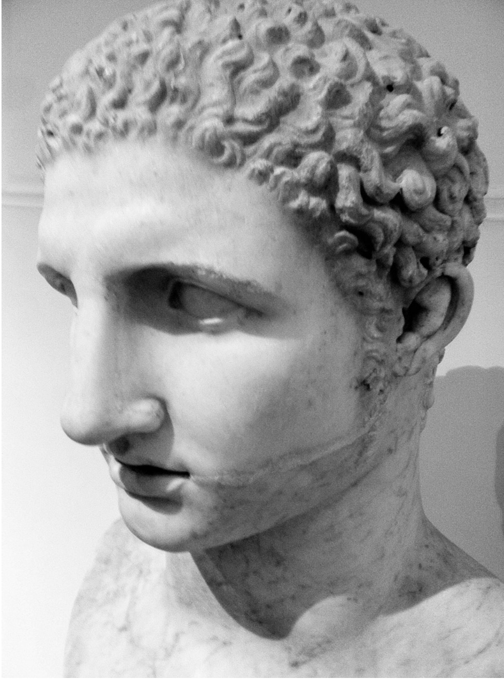
I thought a snowflake was white but it's not white at all, it's blue under the microscope.

But sometimes, all you can see in somebody else is his or her death.

FLASHBACKS, AND THE WORDS THAT CAUSE THEM

A month after Anthony's funeral I'm walking in northern Wyoming, so alone I'm all by myself, on that one-day between late summer and early fall it always snows. The path's iced-up and I have to focus not to lose my footing, but I fall anyway. I'm sure it's fate, that I was meant to fall, and as I fell the words came to me—

—it's possible gravity is drawing all of us toward meaning.



How exciting! The words sound like something Anthony would say, as if he'd said them himself. But I couldn't go on, couldn't reach the next thought or feeling, couldn't continue, couldn't see how to go on from there and make it flow, a feeling all poets know.

Somehow, I managed to walk back to the cabin. I'd suffered a gash to both knees and a cut on my right hand, the blue hand I was trying to write the poem with, the one that handles memory.

The last time I saw Anthony he'd called at such a strange time, just when I'd given up ever seeing him again. We made a plan to meet for dinner at a faux steakhouse in the suburbs.

He showed up wearing a rainbow-colored bathrobe. One of the monks in Big Sur lent him the robe to keep warm and he'd forgotten to give it back.

I made him take it off the moment I saw him.

Anthony, the robe's inappropriate, I said, like you're trying to be someone you're not. You don't have the right shoes either. Red shoes are all wrong, only circus clowns or Popes are allowed to wear red shoes. The belt's hideous too, but I didn't say a thing about it.

All he wanted to talk about was poetry and women, '*girls*' he called them. By this time there was a woman in the picture, Monisha, a big blond girl who wore heavy down-filled parkas even in summer. Anthony was *deeply* in love, wanted to marry Monisha, but I couldn't see it. All I could see was that she wore eyeliner flecked with bits of dark matter. Anthony sensed what I was seeing and read me a poem he'd written about the tattoo on the inside of Monisha's thigh, how he'd taken himself out of her when they were having sex and licked the tattoo and both of them had come. I think he thought the poem would either cheer me up or make me feel tender toward Monisha, but I didn't say I liked the poem or didn't like it.

We ate steak, drank cocktails, and then adjourned to the parking lot where Anthony smoked a bowl of hash.

Then Anthony fishes a black 3-ring binder out of his backpack, and hands it to me. The notebook's full of his poems, neatly typed. I look inside the notebook, start to turn the pages, scanning the titles. There are hundreds of poems, poems about pencils and pencil sharpeners, wizards, dragons, a dolphin, basketball, his mother (but not his father), sex and chastity, the tattoo on his right bicep and the tattoo on Monisha's thigh.

The Selected Poems, Anthony says.

He wants to put his poems in my care, but I won't take them.

I don't want the responsibility, I say, handing the black binder back to him.

When I close the binder, it makes a sound like it was the last time we'd ever see each other.

Do you know how it is when you hug someone you love and wonder what he or she is feeling? And you either feel what they're feeling and know it's exactly the same, or you feel they don't really feel what you feel at all. That's how I felt the night that became the last time I'd see Anthony. When Anthony and I hugged one another it was like we didn't really know each other at all. Our embrace wasn't from the heart; it was all arms, like we were Roman's, men first and then poets.

And so it takes me at least a year to finally find the words I should have said at Anthony's funeral—they're there all the time in a passage from one of the poems Anthony collected in the black notebook, a line of poetry chiseled into white construction paper:

It's darkness that wakes us, not light.

TWO PARANORMAL GREEN CHAIRS

Now—reading the manuscript of this novel-log while sitting in my big green chair, the chair I sit in when I want to make time stop—I see I've taken far too many pictures of the classical world, and that the pictures show only what I imagined had been made of the past and not the past itself. Images of twisted streets, jumbo and pint-sized monuments of antiquity, faces of gods and emperors whose faces are either pockmarked or powerful, ruins of palaces I'd forgotten the names of...I'm exhausted, addicted to communication to the point of distraction, pre-occupied with what I think I know and what others think they know.

I book a session with Hannalore, my therapist, a beauty in the classic Germanic style. Had I known her 20 years before and had I been 20 years younger then I would have been in love with Hannalore!

Hannelore's very helpful, though I spend a considerable personal fortune and at least three years working with her on the problem I was having with dust—dust really bothered me at the time, not knowing where it came from or where it was going and finding it everywhere—in little clumps and big balls beneath my bed, in the closet, in the corners of the bathroom etc.—finally identifying the problem not as neurosis but as a metaphysical issue that would gradually dissolve over time.

I see Hannalore one hour every other week (the hour's up when she smiles as if some conclusion is still to be reached, leaving me in suspense). She watches the clock like a nuclear physicist watches an egg-timer before the bomb drops. I always act surprised when time's up, as if I could sit forever in the dark little office she rents, on the 2nd floor of the old building on the corner of Alder and Morrison.

I'd prepared to tell Hannalore that my problem's not really with dust, rehearsing the lines of my real problem the night before—*the tragic loss of Anthony, my failure to speak at his funeral, the poem I was trying to write in his honor that wouldn't come no matter what I tried*—but every time I open my mouth I say something else instead. I tell her *I drink too much*, instead of telling her the truth, or read to her from writing I keep on parchment, rolled into the shape of a scroll to look important. She doesn't think I drink too much—a gin martini every night and at least one glass of white wine, and looks at me as if it's sad I think drinking's my problem.

Hannalore says, *Just stop right here mister! Your real self is that which always forces you to be who you are, to go back to the place where you live most of the time, and then listen to the person who lives upstairs and walks around all night, whose footsteps shake the fine china on the shelves.*

In our session today, I tell Hannelore that I'd always wanted to go to Rome.

Then go to Rome, she says.

I've been to Rome once, I say, *and it was so different from what I thought it would be that I knew that no matter how many times I'd go to Rome it would always be different, especially when I arrive.*

Hannelore says our time's almost up, we can talk more about it next session. Then she says I must go to Rome.

When I arrive home from Hannelore's I tell Jane that I'm going to the classical world, with the purpose of asking certain questions. Jane's the woman who walks around upstairs, whose footsteps shake the fine china on the shelves that flank the two big green chairs where I sit every night in the hope of writing a poem for Anthony.

What kind of questions, Jane asks.

What is justice?

Where did the idea of beauty come from?

Rome isn't what I think of when I think of the classical world, Jane says.

I've read the fine print, I say, *I know I'm not starting from the beginning.*

There's really no beginning to start from, she says.

Jane might be correct, but I keep trying to believe the beginning's right inside me, as I sit in one of the big green chairs trying to write the poem for Anthony.

Later, when I tell Jane that Socrates is reported to have said, *the best part of getting old is being free from the burden of sex*—she laughs.

When she laughs I say, *the older I become the more I see how little I was told about the past, and what I was told was for the teller's benefit.*

We're sitting in the big green chairs, both of us. We should all have our own big green chair, that's the first job of a civilization, to provide each of us with a green chair where we can sit alone or with another human being to figure out how to live our lives, if only for a few moments.

Jane's just gone upstairs to sleep, leaving me alone. She's left a coffee-table book about Chinese art on the little side table. The book's too heavy to pick up so I just look at the pictures. The images are the images everyone sees—trees, waterfalls, mountains, lakes—but each one looks different from the way trees look in my own country; each looks Chinese! Why does Chinese art look the way it looks? Is there something about the optic physiology of Chinese artists that enables them to see the natural objects of the world differently than a Northern European artist or an artist from the Mediterranean, who'd see the same things but see them differently?

Sitting in the green chair, looking at Chinese art, I start to see that no matter how many books I read I'll never get an answer. Then I close the book and imagine I'm holding a ticket to the classical world, reading the fine print carefully: in very small type it says that *there's one question I'll spend my whole life asking, asking this one question will show me how to become a real human being, and that if I follow this path I'll live a good life, the life good enough for me, no matter if I answer the question or not.*

Next morning, Jane says she might join me, not at first, but later.

She sits in my green chair, the one with the reading lamp that illuminates the classics as well as The Sports Pages of major poets.

I've asked her repeatedly not to sit in my green chair, though the chairs are completely identical. Whenever I see someone sitting in my green chair it feels wrong, my chair's the chair set aside for me, the person who sits there first, the chair where I dwell night after night trying to write a poem for Anthony; Jane has her own green chair.

If you really need to go, you go ahead, she says, not aware of the issue I have of her sitting in my green chair, *I'm not interested in going to Rome. I'm interested in Naples and Calabria, Matera, Sicily. Maybe we could meet in Palermo, then drive up the east coast of Italy until the money runs out,* she says.

The moment Jane says she doesn't want to go to Rome hails a new era, a time I'll look back on as decisive, meriting at least another new chapter in my novel-log. But I must stop now, return to Wyoming to do some more work on the cabin of my friend, Brooks Roddan-Meyer.