

## Skinny as Rain

### I.

Mayonnaise. I have always wanted to begin a story with the word mayonnaise, and it was through mayonnaise, rancid, crusty, moldy, spoiled mayonnaise which for over four years her mother had been keeping under the bathroom sink to massage someday, when the occasion arose, gobs of it into her stringy, lanky, dusty hair with the hope of restoring that long gone-away luster and bounce to the otherwise despondent skull of a woman who, too many years before to matter now, once had luster and bounce and hope and potential and grace and dreams, all of which, like mayonnaise gone unused and forgotten, transformed from elixir to toxin, that she, the youngest daughter of this doddering mother, found as her only source of sustenance during the winter of 1974.

Janice did not wish nor desire to eat four-year-old, moldy mayonnaise while sitting on a paint-chipped and rusting spring-metal trash-salvaged chair in front of a wobbling and turtling linoleum top table, stained over the years with drops of diluted red punch mix and spilt grape juice, while gazing at her toothless mother too out-of-touch to wipe the splotches of spoiled mayonnaise from her whiskered and mole-speckled chin but who had not only birthed her some twenty-six years ago but who also had birthed several like her who now are gone or dead or something. No, she desired to feast on T-bone and sit on red velvet covered, down cushioned, ornately carved chairs at candle-lit tables in fancy restaurants with handsome men paying her attention and offering her love, devotion and champagne. Janice's mother did not wish or desire to serve her youngest and sole acknowledged child nothing but pungent, tepid mayonnaise in a cold house with frozen pipes and no electricity and no working automobile and a dead horse too old and mangy to slaughter even if it hadn't died in January and froze solid before she ever found it with its tongue stuck to the frozen water in what was the drinking trough and even if she had had a saw sharp enough to

cut the frosty old mare into chunks, she would have had no kettle large enough to boil the horse's quarters. No, she desired and hoped to be warm and nourished and nurtured and loved before she forgot what she desired and toppled into the realm comprehended only by those who go and which can never be escaped and reported on to us who are not there.

Three days before Janice began consuming nothing but mayonnaise, she had found, behind a drawer in the banged and scratched, auction-rejected corner hutch with busted-out glass showcase doors which secured and displayed and protected no real china or anything worthy of a hutch for that matter, a bag of Brach's candy corn, made with real honey, which had to have been originally purchased as some Halloween night treat to be handed to goofy children in costume but obviously was more than was needed and therefore stashed in the drawer until the next year but that must have been nearly fifteen years ago because Janice couldn't remember giving treats to witches or even answering the beggars' knocks on the wooden door since the bastard died from falling down, or was he pushed down, the curved and steep and narrow staircase after he went looking for an old girly magazine that he swore he had stored in Janice's drafty garret room in an old liquor-store box with several other adult magazines and sexual paraphernalia. But even after fifteen years the candy corn tasted good especially to Janice who hadn't eaten much of anything since the old woman's stepson stopped sending her cash which actually wasn't altogether true for in reality the old woman had stopped receiving the cash and had even stopped receiving the fourth-class resident parcels from her mailbox at the end of her half-mile lane for truthfully she simply forgot there was such a thing as mail and Janice, never being involved with such matters and never before in her life receiving so much as a piece of junk mail with her name on it, did not know nor wonder where the money came from when they had it nor where it was when they didn't have it and so with seeing the mailbox stuffed full of bulk mail and a few cumbersome plain white

envelopes addressed with the penmanship of a child, the postal carrier simply began to return to sender any returnable mail addressed to 1414 North Co. Road 135 about the same time that Janice ate every candy kernel one by one until the bag was empty some fifteen minutes after the find without sharing so much as one kernel with her tired and hungry mother who desperately needed food even though Janice, selfishly self-preserving, figured her fat matriarch had plenty of sustenance stored in her camel-hump behind to survive for a good three months while she, Janice, almost always as skinny as rain which the bastard use to say when he was alive and looking at her naked body, needed every edible morsel she could find and that is exactly what she ate until the bag of candy corn turned out to be the last edible morsel in the entire dilapidated house aside from the rancid mayonnaise her mother had been saving which Janice eventually resorted to eating.

It is at this point when one must pause and wonder whether it was hallucinogenic mayonnaise or the lack of wholesome food or the fifteen-year-old candy corn or the memories of the bastard or the time when she was not skinny as rain or the crazy, obese mother or the lack of worldly contacts or the ignorance of the U.S. Postal Service policies and regulations or a combination of some or all of these influences which caused Janice, one night as she rested naked under a heap of dirty sheets and tattered blankets and old coats, on a stained mattress that had no cover sheet to protect it, nor bed frame to hold it, to dream metaphor instead of image — a metaphor which at first she had forgotten immediately upon awakening but which on the fifth night of consecutively dreaming the same metaphor she had unavoidably memorized as: *In the chaos a one-horned red clay goat molded into a travel poem of a rocky road hammered upon by steel-working bloodhounds — crossbred from trees and ink — until evolving into a one-horned redclay goat molded into a travel poem.* Janice did not consciously realize she was dreaming metaphor for she knew not what a metaphor was but she did know she was dreaming words and not pictures which she

at first thought was strange and bothersome but which soon became as routine as winking or breathing or walking or sitting which are all skills that Janice could perform well for there was no one to tell her otherwise and since there was no one to tell her otherwise it naturally followed that no person explained to our naive, soon-to-be heroine that dreaming words, metaphor, instead of image was unusual, and soon Janice altogether forgot she once upon a time dreamed image and unwittingly began to recite verbatim her recurring metaphor dream to her senile matriarch who spooned rancid mayonnaise onto food-stained Corelle saucers while she only appeared to be listening because she could not appear any other way since she had developed the dementia-induced habit of obsessively nodding her head and mumbling *ya ya ya ya ya*.

Being no genius of insight nor even very literate for beyond spelling her name which she practiced over and over again, writing with a broken ax handle in the snow drifts outside her home in the winter and in the mud she made in the summer with the garden hose before the well went dry or the pump broke or for some other reason water stopped coming through the hose, Janice was not so much as even functionally illiterate. Besides this crude carving of her name and the words which came to her in her dreams which for a purpose as cryptic as the dreams themselves she could read and remember although she could not understand, for beyond knowing what a one-horned red clay goat would look like if she had one as a pet stabled in the frame of the old barn that had long ago lost its siding and slate and knowing that there were two goats in the metaphor and that in reality the forlorn farm in its best year would have barely yielded enough foliage to support one, she really didn't understand it at all in fact she most likely would have never understood it if her senile mother hadn't started repeating *full circle full circle full circle full circle full circle* the day after Janice's verbatim metaphor recital instead of her typical *ya ya ya ya ya* and hadn't Janice, for

the first time in a long time, paid attention to the senseless ramblings of an old senile woman who used to be her mother.

With full intuitive understanding of her first metaphor dream and no desire to preach it nor possibility of a congregation to which to preach let alone ownership of a soapbox on which to stand while preaching, Janice closed her hungry eyes against the light of a bare bulb which illuminated the room as it hung from the rafters in her attic bedroom in which she could not sleep without light without recalling and reliving and refeeling the bastard's naked, drunk body on top of and behind and under her own naked and filthy, almost always emaciated, living corpse, and fell asleep only to dream a new metaphor which like the last she quickly forgot each morning for the first several mornings she dreamed it until the fifth morning when she awoke and could recite it verbatim which, over a bowl of boiling snow for the supply of mayonnaise which so inspired the beginning of this tale had not only then been expired but later was depleted and thus replaced with three meals a day of boiling snow which caused Janice considerable confusion as to whether she should eat the innocuous and inodorous substance with a spoon or a fork or both, she did tell to a decrepit obese once-upon-a-time mother who had never once so much as whimpered a noise of protest when the bastard ascended the attic stairs, nor when he tumbled all the way down those same stairs to death or as Janice hoped to hell and who merely nodded her crazy head while listening to her daughter whom she no longer knew nor even realized she did not know reciting: *We are but gentle mountain streams to the tired and thirsty who must from polluted water avoid drinking*, while her mumbling changed from *foolcircle foolcircle foolcircle foolcircle foolcircle* to *cholera cholera cholera cholera cholera*. Janice had never before heard the word cholera from her mother's mouth nor from anyone's mouth for that matter and further she had no idea what the word meant, but like her ability to walk and eat and sleep and breath, the word, be it its denotation, its repetitious articulation, its trisyllabic rhythmic pronunciation or all or

a few of the word's characteristics, somehow magically allowed Janice intuitively to understand her metaphor dream, but unlike the previous which she swallowed into the iron box which became her soul about the same time the bastard became her violator, this metaphor was a call to action of which Janice had little experience but now the motivation and therefore immediately, in nothing but the torn and filthy six layers of hand-me-down shirts and her stained Salvation Army rejected long underwear bottoms, and without shoes to cover her double-socked feet and with more lice about to hatch on her scalp and without finishing her second helping of boiling snow which she had decided to eat with a fork since although it was called boiling snow by the corpulent bag of a once submissive wife who now was nothing but an empty shell with no propane with which to boil the snow which therefore was served uncooked and thus was actually raw boiling snow but just the same it was not necessarily unhealthy like raw horse meat might have been if prepared by such a chef, and with no money nor any understanding of the use of money, and without the experience or the social skills necessary to evoke such a calling, burst through the wooden door of the sordid central Kansas homestead and was struck unconscious by the iron-barred screen door which had been waiting to fall on somebody for over three months now but which had had no opportunity to do so until this sudden and unlikely occurrence of Janice gaining motivation from a metaphor dream led to the situation aforementioned and thus to Janice falling face first into a bank of snow which had blown two-feet deep with a heavy wrought iron screen door, a door the bastard had installed toward the end when his paranoia became greater and his insistence of the presence of the driver of a black Camaro lurking on their front porch waiting to kick in their door and slay them all prompted tighter security measures, atop her back pinning her beneath. Looking like a large version of the sandwich which she would have killed to have eaten, Janice remained the thin slice of liverwurst nestled between a slice of white snow and a thick slice of iron door for several hours

all of which time her mother did nothing but grab a rusty spade from the shed beyond the house and shovel the snow from around her daughter's fallen body into five gallon buckets so that she could have a better supply for her upcoming three-course meal of boiling snow while mumbling *no oil no oil no oil no oil no oil* which Janice must have heard subconsciously for when she finally did awake and toss the iron door from her back and examine her ruined fingers consumed with frostbite and the numb red splotches on her face and neck which she could clearly see mirrored in the snow beneath her which her body heat had reduced to a puddle of reflective rain she repeated verbatim her metaphor dream which occurred to her during her black-out and which went like this: *Today's mountains are deforested into tomorrow's steaks which may serve, if prepared properly, as yesterday's doctors.*

Sometime ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson perceived, probably between hard-cider drinking bouts with Thoreau who was lustfully eying armies and ponds and Mrs. Emerson while spitting green beans on Hester Prynne as she attempted a difficult double-helix water-ski maneuver while being pulled by Moby Dick's ire directed at Melville who was, like the little gnat that he is, pestering the great white with minor yet annoying harpoon plunging, that all men are poets, but Janice had she ever even so much as heard of Emerson certainly would not have understood the connection between verse and metaphor for the obtuse vision which this narrator has created for our heroine allows solely for the occurrence of the metaphor not the literary analysis to be written later and published posthumously in the Chelsea Literary Series, and although we, the so-called knowers, the academics in our ivory towers, who love to read and write about the sordid rebels and the psychopathic antiheroes and the naturalistic underdogs, who no matter how hard they toil or how long they struggle all succumb to the weight of the apple cart like Jude and Ethan and Emma and Edna and Jurgis, understand the possibility of all words being metaphors, Janice, had she been presented with the ideology would have not been able to care less.

But Janice, with blistered face and frostbitten fingers attached to frail hands and emaciated arms which swung from her sides as awkwardly as a two-tailed cow's tails would swat at flies and small mind which had never imagined much more than a good man and a clean house and nice things and good food, with nothing going for her and the universe her enemy, raised the tongue of that apple cart gloriously up and immaculately up and majestically up until every last stinking retched apple tumbled out the back of the two-wheeled wooden wagon and yet she continued her affirming tilt of the wagon until its tongue was high above her tiny head, and there stood Janice, with those long long long beautiful arms stretched high above her head, with towering legs and tip-toed surefootedness, exposed, naked, open to the world, breasts and vagina and ass all there and all radiating power and beauty and perfection as the displaced apples flooded the ground around her feet and came to rest in the snow like drops of blood in the bastard's semen and for that instant it all came back to Janice, all the ugliness, all the pain, all the fucking unfairness and cruelty and that one sliver-image, that one pinhole of reality was enough to crush our wonder woman and immediately, before knowing what had happened, Janice was back under the apple cart, nude and unprotected in the cold cold cold snow which had already taken her fingers and now was working on those very things that only a few lines previous were the eminence of the sublime supreme everything. And that crazy mother now with a straw broom sweeping away the remaining snow, too scattered to be shoveled, for yet more meals, stumbled upon the naked and dying frame of her daughter and would have cooked her for her daughter's lunch if she had propane or a saw sharp enough to quarter the bony hunk of meat which was as of yet unfrozen at her feet and instead shed a tear, for somewhere deep in her senility world she knew that poor Janice would have to eat boiling snow once again and that she could not serve boiling snow forever for what would happen in the summer, there would be no snow to boil even if there was propane by then, and that tear ran down the fat cheek of the matriarch and fell



onto Janice's lips and as the mother's womb had so lovingly caressed the child in its early days of development, that motherly tear spread across Janice's body and formed an odd sort of human cocoon offering protection from the snow and the cold and the mayonnaise and all the other evil elements of the world in which we live and allowed resting and sleeping and healing while the fat lady went looking for her mother who she surely could hear calling from somewhere behind the dilapidated Chevy, calling *Brenda, Brenda, Brenda* and offering to drive her to Paula's house for a pajama party. And so with the mad woman sitting uncomfortably at ease in the back of the rusted out late-model sedan which had been parked behind the shed for a good twenty years and which had no floor nor rear window and a big spider-web crack in the windshield and a bent steering wheel and concrete blocks under the axles for the rims and tires had long since disappeared along with most everything else of value long before the bastard tumbled down the stairs, Janice lay and metamorphosed.

## II.

Several months later, with our butterfly heroine fully emerged from her teary cocoon, the cocoon maker's fat and decrepit body still in the back seat of that old Chevy but unlike then when it sat in anticipation of Paula's slumber party, it now sat rotting and decaying and nourishing maggots and rodents and a small family of one-horned red clay goats on an isolated niche of Kansas land which years and years ago some crazy old ancestor thought would make a nice little place to raise a decent family and a small herd and so he settled where until thirty years previous when Sherman and Custer and the likes popularized saying such as the only good injun is a dead injun, the Sioux hunted the great buffalo and where, call it the curse of Red Cloud or the will of God or poor planning or down right bad luck, that old-time homesteader raised more family than crops and more trouble than good and that trouble passed on and never dissipated in fact it accelerated through the generations

until finally it hit Janice like a hurricane that had been gathering strength at sea for the past hundred years and that now had barreled ashore drenching Janice in a tumultuous outburst of misfortune and despair. But where is our recently motherless and mayonnaise-eating Janice, that she, after being so pampered and protected by the tear of her gone mother, could not at least respect her parent enough to drag her stinking, fat body from the back of that blocked-up car and into a drainage ditch or the basement or somewhere where it could receive even the smallest amount of protection from the wildlife which now fed upon it better than Janice fed while her mother lived.

Janice was in Youngstown, Ohio.

The journey of a thousand miles starts with one step and that one step Janice took while her mother still lived, if one can call eating raw boiling snow while sitting, during a Kansas blizzard, in the back of a rusted-out old sedan with a cracked windshield, believing your mother who died even before the old-time homesteader did is coming to drive you to a pajama party or wait maybe it was to a church social or somewhere but simply waiting and never growing impatient or tired or cold but instead bubbling over with the enthusiasm of a little child on Christmas eve, living, but certainly the old woman was breathing when Janice took that first step and certainly she remained breathing well into Janice's thirty-fifth step at which time the old woman finally understood what she had never read but always known that the reason for living is getting ready to stay dead and dead is how she stayed well into Janice's fortyish and seventy-fifth and so-on-and-so-on steps and dead she stays as you read this mayonnaise-inspired once homespun but now travel tale of a heroine's search for what it is she intuitively is questing, for her holy grail, for her green light, for her suicide sled, mustered on by that conniving, domino-playing creature known to us only as metaphor.

But why Janice was then in the now dilapidated and unemployed former steel-mill-driven town with its Irish, Italian and Slovak bars is a good question to ask and even a better question to answer after the journey of a thousand miles which started several lines ago is detailed in order to create the adventure tale and not the regional piece full of local color and vernacular for it was local color and vernacular which either Janice was overflowing with or what those she occasioned to meet on her journey were lacking which caused her, who was so used to eating boiling snow and expired mayonnaise, to vomit everything she consumed from the kindness of strangers from their generously given cans of warm soda to their discarded, fully cooked and properly prepared and seasoned fried chicken although the latter was harder to come by and was usually a bit cold when picked from the dumpsters of Kansas City and St. Louis but often it was pleasantly warm and dripping grease when she found it but could not digest it in the Indianapolis garbage bins. So the once mighty Janice, who had hoisted the tongue of her apple cart for that split second way way above her head and who for a moment beat down all the shit and all the pain and all the memory and all the lack of everything she had not been offered, found herself to be a dumpster diver with walking blisters on her now sockless feet and sunburn blisters on the red splotches of her once frostbitten face and unable to consume when for the first time in a long time she actually had something to consume. Thus, like Kafka's Hunger Artist, Janice who of course had never heard of Prague, yet alone the dung beetle, fasted, but unlike Kafka's Hunger Artist not because of not finding any food she liked to eat but in reality because food found no place it liked to be digested within her system which of course led to Janice being tossed out of many a vomited-in-vehicle onto the pavement of I-70 East not only once in Missouri but also twice in Indiana where the second toss nearly landed her in front of a speeding diesel tractor pulling a corroded and dirty stainless steel tank filled to the rim with unpasteurized milk which Janice would have considered risking staying in

front of had she known the truck was carrying bovine juice and not New York City trash or liquid toxins or atomic fuel but since Janice had no way of knowing what the truck was carrying she rolled out of its way, thus avoiding the crushing blow of any of its eighteen wheels. And it was experiences like these that Janice survived and trudged through to reach her Vatican City some four months after her first step away from the land which she had never left and to the land which she had not been, the great unknown, the land from where that crazy old dreamer migrated years previous with good dreams and high hopes and a friend named Bigot and a battered wife and children raised with a rod who knew to speak only when spoken to and from where one of those eight children came the man who was also friends with Bigot and who married Janice's grandmother and beat her and raised his children with the same rod which was good enough for him so that they too knew only to speak when spoken to and from his nine children of which four died in infancy, two simply faded away, and two ran away or were sold or were sent away or beaten away or something, and one became the bastard who also beat his mother when his father finished and who embraced the long time family friend named Bigot and who eventually married Brenda who once sang soprano in the church choir to much acclaim but who everyone knew, including the traveling-choir director when he crossed her name off his list of candidates, was destined soon to be hitched to the apple cart and so subtly discouraged out of the choir and overtly encouraged into the halter of marriage she too was battered and kicked and swapped and bashed until and after she delivered the only child whom she could carry full term, a curse of which her staunch husband never forgave nor forgot and verbally and physically often reminded her and as that later crazy old battered woman had predicted with her seemingly senseless mumbling of *full circle full circle full circle full circle full circle*, Janice was now back and the past was somehow gone in the world of things which had never happened or which had only been dreamed to happen as opposed to the world of things which really did

happen such as the disappearance of the one hundred percent pure Florida orange juice which Janice believed she had not consumed when the clerk at the carry-out said she had and although his only proof was the empty carton, guilty he found Janice and seeing that she was without monetary means to pay for the former contents of the obviously drained beverage container decided that although she wasn't Miss Iowa 1965, she was a female and would therefore do and she did do and much to his pleasure she did, as a matter of fact this homely, grimy, road-weary traveler did like she was used to doing a lot which further enhanced the clerk's pleasant surprise and the clerk, who could not really believe his luck that over a quart of orange juice he was so easily receiving one of the best physical experiences of his life, an experience which he had no doubt dreamed of and fantasized about and heard other clerks discuss but which he never really believed would happen until now, found himself thanking his lucky stars right up until Janice burped and spewed orange juice all over his erected manhood at which time, shrinking both in stature and in kindness, he stopped thanking and began cursing the diamonds in the sky as he kicked the whore in the chest with a vomit-covered black Chuck Taylor tennis shoe causing Janice to topple into a row of snack-food items, popping many bags and crunching potato chips and pretzel rods and nacho chips and such beyond saleable condition, where she rested and recovered for a second or two before the clerk, grabbing her by the hair, tossed her out onto the deserted four AM sidewalk where Janice, our heroine, cracked her head on the gum- and tobacco-infested concrete and blacked out of reality and into a new metaphor which, unlike the other metaphors, burned in blue neon letters so intensely and for so long that when Janice did come back to reality after a strange fellow wearing leather gloves hoisted her up to her feet and shook her until she opened her eyes, all she had to do was close them tightly again to read a negative image of the metaphor: *A six-fingered hand from heaven, severed from its arm at the wrist and cauterized, cascades upon a skull causing a contusion which will not mend,*

branded on her retina. And all she did for the rest of that day and well into the next was sit on that sidewalk, after the strange fellow in leather gloves dropped her back to the ground, and close her eyes tightly and gaze upon the metaphor which she could not comprehend but which was displayed so magnificently that she could not stop looking at it until the rain came and cooled her burned retinas and the metaphor slipped into her lost mind with most of the other images and information and people and things and events and memories of living.

### III.

In a murky, doorless, circular cavern, a man wanders, his only light being that which he himself is able to emit. In the middle of the cavern is the center of an open pit with no discernible bottom and no slope to its sides. This pit's opening or mouth or hole stretches evenly toward the cavern's walls so that barely is there a path wide enough to walk or even stand on without falling into the dark abyss. For years, for eternity, for as long as the man can remember, he has struggled to walk this looped path of the cavern. Fearing the rim of the pit, he has continually pushed himself so tightly against the cold, sloping stone walls to avoid the one slip that would cause him to hurl down into the great unknown that his right shoulder has all but eroded away so that, looking like some Darwinian-evolved man, the right side of his body now fits a bit less awkwardly on the path. He has dropped many things into the pit while walking its rim fruitlessly searching for an escape, but he always consoled himself by romantically embracing the old Russian ideology that to live, no matter under what circumstances was always better than to not live, that although he has lost many things including his hound and his bay horse and his turtle dove, he has avoided falling in himself, that he at least still has his life, limited as it might be. And in such a state the man perseveres until one day he foolishly but inevitably drops his name into the pit and soon after drops his hat down the hole, followed by his love and his hope

and his word which all tumble in and at which point as the “e” in hope vanishes from sight, even the consolation that his feet have not failed him is not enough to cheer the man who finally slips on a rock wet with his tears and falls into that nothingness. And who’s to say, for who has been there in this poor soul’s shoes, but the rumor is that on his long descent down into that pit he saw Janice riding a winged apple cart and that she blew him a kiss and a net. Janice, however, if asked by the truck driver who gave her a lift from that smelly old Terre Haute sidewalk all the way to Richmond without so much as grabbing her breasts or asking for any services to be rendered, would deny the validity of any such foolishness actually happening and instead would merely amble under the huge WELCOME TO OHIO sign stretching across I-70 east as she continued her quest, and that is exactly what she did and soon that ambling lead her weary and almost always emaciated body away from the hard pavement of the road and the unbearable noise of the traffic and the awful smell of exhaust and the intolerable glare of the rising sun and down a mild grade to a ditch designed for effective drainage of the highway and had Janice thought about reclining in that ditch at night and had she viewed it as some sort of primitive waterbed, she would have seen the stars, but she did not recline in that highway gully and did not therefore see any stars but merely passed through the trench muddying her already filthy feet and ankles and knees and lost traction as she attempted to scramble up the steep grade of the opposite side which thus directly caused her crushing fall face-first into the filthy highway runoff and thus not seeing any stars but instead seeing water insects and larva and a dead muskrat and four partially crushed Budweiser cans and soupy, muddy water covering her entire body which, resting in this primeval spa, soaked up its crude nutrients as her rags disintegrated as if the spirited muck were acid designed to attack unnatural coverings and expose the core of all with which it came into contact, and nude in the slime, Janice’s pores became like tiny vacuums as they sucked in the mystic sludge and her hungry orifices gapped to receive firm sensual

ooze and her mind fissured to allow a slime fall of grimy scum to pour into the basin of her skull and Janice consumed with passion and vigor orgasmically embraced the goop and sludge and filth as if it were a rare delicacy presented at Zeus' table or a liquid aphrodisiac offered to the frustrated eunuch in some nasty bad joke or a bottle of prohibition rye waved in front of Dean Moriarty's long-lost father sitting against the wall of a post-World War II Denver whore hotel on some skid-row alley where booze is gold and life is unfathomable and like that rye which Dean's long-lost father would have gobbled until his liver exploded and his life ended, Janice, overwhelmed by the strangely erotic pleasure ditch, would have stayed in that moment of addictive saturation until she too exploded from overindulgence had not the live muskrat, the one she did not see, assuming Janice to be her mate's murderer, or her evening supper, or the family's perfect godsend Christmas present, or something, sunk its gnawed and jagged teeth deep into Janice's middle toe, detaching it, and carried it in its rabid mouth out of the ditch and up the embankment and onto the interstate road where the water rodent and Janice's toe were quickly struck and flattened and smeared and steam-rolled by several tires attached to several vehicles which did not so much as swerve to avoid the animal's path most likely due in part to the drivers suddenly viewing a naked, almost always skinny as rain, sludge-covered, erotic, bloody, leech-infested Janice standing ankle-deep in the muddy ditch and staring in wonder at the very road on which lay smashed and dead her severed toe juxtaposing the smashed and dead muskrat which saved her from her ecstatic suicide, and as these drivers and riders, men and women and children alike glimpsed our heroine, they all began entertaining thoughts of bondage and molestation and succumbing to innate urges to grab their penises and vaginas and breasts and asses and squeeze and slap and pinch and insert and fantasized about slamming the brakes and laying out the slimy creature right there in that drainage ditch and assaulting her with pleasure and



pain and greasy tire irons as they continued to run over Janice's detached toe and her savior while speeding on to their homes and families and lives and deaths.

IV.

On the average, twelve people a year jump off the five hundred thirty-four foot high white-faced cliffs at Beachy Head and plummet to their deaths in the violent sea and mist below often without so much as a note indicating what and why and who but one can safely assume that these melancholy divers are embracing the romantic ideal of the aristocracy by honorably ending their lives the proper and dignified way and one pauses to wonder what must go through the mind of that nicely groomed fortyish lady during the slow decent to the end which must be painful for at least the split second of the crash and which must be part of those thoughts which are going through her head along with the pain of lugging the apple cart which would have to be weighed as greater than the imagined pain of the impact for imagined pain can never seem as difficult to endure as real pain to the fortyish lady who is flying to her demise enveloped in misery and despair unlike Janice, who almost joined the fortyish lady in whatever comes next, if anything comes next, whose attempted suicide or attempted accident was enveloped in pleasure and ecstasy and who had never been to southern England or to the edge of a five hundred thirty-four foot high white-faced cliff and who had not even imagined the existence of such a cliff and for good reason for had Janice imagined the existence of such a cliff, she surely would not have imagined the big yellow signs warning of the dangers of cliff erosion and thus would have walked to the edge only to be dropped to her death along with fifty yards of cliff line which separated from its foundation at the same time Janice would have imagined walking to its edge and thus dying.

One of those drivers in one of those cars which maliciously crushed Janice's toe and the poor little muskrat which arguably saved Janice's life did stop and although he

did not know Janice from the fortyish woman who plunged to her death off the cliff at Beachy Head, he did know he could not waste his time on the dead and thus left the crushed and gruesome image of the once well-groomed fortyish lady by the light house on the channel shore, and he did know he had to know Janice which ironically was not at all what Janice was thinking if she really thought at all for what she was thinking was how good expired tepid moldy mayonnaise would taste about now or even how refreshing would be a big bowl of boiling snow served raw in a bottomless dish and beyond this thought, Janice had no real reaction to the man who stepped from his car, walked toward her and hoisted her over his left shoulder like a sack of whatever would be carried over one's left shoulder and paying no attention to the mud or slime or leeches or smell held Janice's naked and frail body firmly in the grip of one raised and wrapped left arm about which Janice although not exactly comfortable like she was while she rolled and exploded in the mud at least was secure and happy not to have to put her four-toed foot on any surface other than that muddy muck in which she had been standing while the fortyish woman crashed into the rocks and splattered to death on a coastline which being used to these things quickly turned up its tide and soon washed itself clean which Janice had no desire or even any thought of doing for her filth now seemed natural, so natural in fact that she did not even realize she was covered in filth but the man with his fingers tightly grasping her flank knew she was covered in filth, as a matter of fact, the man most likely would not have even stopped had she not been covered in filth for he too was covered in filth only he was far too weak to stand on that scaffold and expose his scarlet letter which to his zealot mind Janice was so good at doing that he had to stop her from furthering the guilt she imposed on all those repressed and hypocritical adulterers and sinners and thieves and liars and abusers and heathens, for the imposition of guilt after all was his job on Sundays and holidays and what kind of congregation would the poor preacher have if this two-bit slut was permitted to advertise her repentance in such a way that the

church was not needed and therefore the spiritual leader of the church was not needed either and after all the ancients said that if you saw someone climbing to heaven by their own good works you should grab them and pull them off the ladder; thus, without too much concern for the suit which he was ruining as he carried the girl we know as Janice back to his car and tossed her in his trunk, on top of a set of jumper cables and two old boxes of free Bibles which the minister passed out to those he felt deserving of such a gift, which consumed Janice in a tomb of sweltry darkness not at all like the cocoon of her mother's tear which offered nurturance and security for this tomb offered odor and a yearning to be freed which did not happen until the sedan, several hours later, skidded to a stop in the gravel lot of a bar in the industrial section of Akron at which time the preacher, opening the trunk, waving away the foul odor which flooded out of the cavern, and placing one hand between Janice's legs and the other in the tangled mess of hair above her head, lifted the greatest threat he had ever seen or imagined to the existence of his Christian experience from that tomb and dropped her onto the coarse gravel lot where cinders and pebbles struck her as the preacher's vehicle spun away and you the reader might imagine that Janice received nothing but a ride in a trunk and more scrapes and bruises from this man of God but yet Janice did receive one other item of importance and that being a slightly muddy but still very usable Bible which her hand had grabbed while she rode in that trunk and which it had not ungrabbed while her body was tossed for better or worse onto the Akron gravel and it was that very Bible which, although she could not read, allowed her to sleep comfortably behind the bar as it served as her pillow far into the rainy night which washed and cleansed and healed our heroine and in the morning while the sun gloriously rose over the blimp hangar, Janice felt its early rays and bathed in its warmth and friendship and after wiping herself with those inner pages of the Bible which had served her so well and covering herself in a trash bag she had pulled from a dumpster, emptied and tore a opening in for her head to pass through,

Janice, walking out into the Akron day, for the third time in her life felt the weight of the apple cart to be slightly bearable.

V.

In a church, in a small western Ohio community, stands a man, in a dark blue suit which is slightly stained on the shoulder, gazing upon his congregation as the collection plate is passed amongst them, contemplating the exposing of his chest and wondering if anything would be there if he did succumb and rip open his shirt, if anything but hair and nipples and gut and pecs would be exposed, if any secret offense would be shown, if he too had the courage that that slimy girl had, and the preacher's left hand slowly rises from the hip which it had been holding, and gently its fingers insert themselves into the slight gap between the front flap and under flap of his elaborate clerical robe and the preacher feels his heathenish skin and the grip of his fingers tighten enough that merely one quick yank will cause the contemplated exposure and as the treads holding the gown's gilded buttons begin to strain under the pull, the preacher releases his grip, folds his hands together in front of his chest and closes his eyes and prays to God who most likely was not listening due to being distracted back there while looking at Janice who was dressed not in fashion but in enough decency not to be arrested, for the trash bag was more than large enough to cover her almost always skinny as rain body, although not really more than clean enough seeing as it did once contain the discarded napkins and paper towels and an assortment of cracked or busted beer bottles and shattered pilsners and how everything was covered with a flaky ash from the hundreds or thousands of cigarettes smoked in that bar the night previous, but Janice shook most of it out and, if it's possible, Janice actually looked as if she was supposed to be wearing that garbage-bag, as if it had been tailored especially for her, as a matter of fact she looked extremely natural in her garbage bag dress, at least more natural than the decked out

ladies at the opera last night was what he was thinking as he braked his vehicle to a halt and offered her a lift, certainly more natural than his wife and her goofy Matilda necklace and real fur-collared velvet cape that her great aunt made in 'twenty-seven to wear to a ball or a prom or something and which was passed down to her because no one but she would ever want such a gaudy piece of fashion and why wasn't she more natural anyway like this beautiful young lady to whom he was about to offer a ride for it was obviously this woman's naturalness which caused her to radiate life and all that is good about life, and vividly to contrast his wife who was known for the powder she used heavy below her right eye to de-accent her scar which was the constant thorn in her side poked in by her kid sister while the two were still girls and living dangerously with bikes and it wasn't her sister's fault really that she was short and agile enough to duck under the barbed wire while she, the older and considerably clumsier of the two, wasn't, but it was really her sister's fault that she wasn't there to console the marred beauty queen when they called her names like "scarface" and "cracked," but it wasn't his fault either and how long will he possibly need to pretend like he cares that she feels self-conscious about her scar and how long will he have to tell her she's beautiful when he really thinks she looks like a cheap whore gilded in bustle and gauntlet and corset and all the other shit which she wears to hide under and minimize her scar and how many more rainstorms will that damn black cartwheel hat, the one she always wears slightly tilted with the belief that the shadow is hiding the right side of her face and her ugly soul, survive the torrents of and tempests of and when if ever will she be like her, the natural one, the one of his dreams and his visions, the one who as she takes a seat in his vehicle suddenly is recognizable as the very same cerebral cherub who flew into his open mouth last night and spray-painted graffiti on the walls of his chamber, graffiti which he had completely forgotten until she glanced at him saying, "Youngstown," and he, looking back, recited verbatim to a woman, clad in a dirty industrial-green plastic trash bag,

sitting exactly where his wife had sat last night and who not even so much as acknowledged with a wink his oration of the metaphor which went like this: *Imagination and imitation and creation have recently been learned and copied and stolen from the thief who stole them from me after I stole them from you who stole them from the thief who owned them originally.* Even if Janice did hear her taxi driver recite the metaphor which was doubtful since she no longer heard but only smelled, and even if she had, without spray paint nor means by which to acquire it, somehow really painted those words on the stone walls of that guy's mind, she truthfully made no reaction to the man's strange recitation because she did not care what he was saying for for the first time in her life Janice was close to accomplishing a dream, a goal, to killing her great white and so in silence and with one male hand high on Janice's thigh, the man who hated his wife really because he had to and not because he wanted to, drove Janice the remaining fifty-odd miles to Youngstown and thus back to the present which unlike the first section which ended in unconscious transformation will end in joyful rejuvenation.

VI.

And after leaving that desperate man's car and leaving that neon bar where she was dropped off and long after leaving that house and that now dead mother and that then dead father and after leaving that vision and that life and this life and this vision, Janice, finally found herself in front of the temple of her destination and without hesitation entered the forsaken and forlorn Republic Steel mill which had so gently been calling her all this time, the same steel mill where sixty-six years ago my grandfather's best friend and drinking buddy, Joe Dilveki, was accidentally cremated when he fell, or was he pushed, into the fiery inferno of a molten-iron-filled ladle as he stood on a teeming line during the long shift and lost his footing while hurling shovelful after shovelful of coke into the thick liquid to play his part in the alloying

and thus to be part of the big machine and like a part of the big machine, when he broke, his remains, fused with molten iron, were dumped on the memorial pile and he was quickly replaced by some Slovak who had a letter of introduction from a guy who worked in the mill which he showed to the hiring-boss who stood in a small booth under the Market Street bridge and inspected the letter and in broken English told him to go over there to mill four and that he would be working on a teeming line because they needed another guy which really meant that they needed a new part to make the machine run well, and that Slovak worked Dilveki's former line merely for a few weeks until he stopped coming in and a rumor spread that he drank too much and fell down a flight of stairs and so he, the part, was replaced again and that part again and so on until Republic Steel finally collapsed and shut down and was left empty and cold which was exactly as Janice knew it would be and exactly as she also knew, there, in the corner of some long-abandoned industrial office, covered in dust and grit and slime was a spray can full of orange paint that simply needed shaking in order to be used and shaking is what Janice did to the spray can before she walked to a dim corner of the number four mill and, after painting some words on the wall, aimed the spray nozzle at her opening mouth and pushed down the nozzle and dreamed more metaphors than this simple third-person narrator can know.

VII.

Several years later, when the Jasgo Company sent some well-dressed executives through the forsaken plant with hopes of positive comments about its potential use in the construction of commuter and charter jets, Janice's orange-tinted bones were discovered under a crudely painted poem which turned into a Ph.D. dissertation topic and an upper-level seminar favorite for dissection and scansion and which was judged by many to be Miltonesque yet judged by just as many to be Shakespearian but equally judged by many to be crap and maybe that is what Janice wrote on that wall of that

forgotten and now demolished Republic Steel mill, a bunch of crap, a jumble of words constructed and tossed together in a random and cryptic order to give one the appearance of deep truth or universal enlightenment or stylistic genius when in reality really merely being the deranged nonsense of a crazy woman wearing a garbage bag telling the tale of the mad and signifying nothing.