

I. CALIFORNIA FUCHSIA

Amid anthems of blood and war,
He clambered up the side of a mountain.
Only later could they his heart recover,
While draining the swamps of Babylon.
Boy, you better get back home . . . home again,
Back where you belong.
Tear down the temples of Nowheresville,
Baptize 'em in the blood of Babylon.

Whitman's Lilacs, "The Swamps of Babylon,"
Look What Crawled out of the Swamp (1990).

Many cities of men he saw and learned their minds,
many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open sea,
fighting to save his life and bring his comrades home.

The Odyssey, Book 1. (7th century BCE)

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Her name was Estrela Gomes, and for whatever reason, she reminded him of his past life.

As he waited for her, Whitman Whitaker gazed out the window of his cramped office. Menacing clouds hung low over the great lawn, where the sprawls of California fuchsia now slumped, soggy and forlorn. Four days since he had embarked on that bender without any sign of it ending, and now the November rainy season in Santa Clara had begun. He couldn't recall seeing such billowing swells since the thunderstorms of his youth in Florida.

Give it a rest, he told himself glumly. *You're finished with all of that*. Exhausted, he buried his face in his hands, using his fingers to massage his aching forehead. He reminded himself of how much time had passed. How it was almost twenty-five years since Stephen's death. As he had done so many times before, he resolved to leave his past behind.

Through the fog of the hangover he was nursing, Whitman became distracted by something stirring outside his office. Then he heard her enchanting voice.

"Are you ready for me, Professor Whitaker?" she said.

In the moment before she entered, he found himself marveling at how familiar Estrela's voice sounded. Frowning, he tried to banish the thought. Estrela was his student after all: one of the best third-years in the poetry seminar, one who could turn a phrase in a way that made him sometimes believe there was some purpose behind what he was teaching them. But he couldn't help also recalling scenes from his previous life, voices and sounds from bouts of hedonism that once seemed ubiquitous.

Then Estrela appeared before him, and as he searched her eyes, waves of embarrassment washed over him. He shook

his alcohol-soaked brain awake. This was his office after all. There off to the side was his desk, where he ate his solitary lunches. He was the teacher, this place a university, and here before him stood a student not so different from any other.

And yet on that afternoon—a particularly dreary and overcast one, Estrela's appearance felt more like the visit of an uncanny apparition than anything else—a vision of his wayward past come to settle a long-overdue balance. Normally she dressed down—in jeans and a loose sweatshirt, but he noticed that this afternoon she appeared in heels and a formal black dress and cardigan, her dark hair cascading over her shoulders, her face and lips accentuated with cosmetics. He glowered again, and Estrela noticed.

She sat down abruptly across from him. "Sorry I'm late," she said, exhaling, smiling apologetically. "My boyfriend wanted to take some photos of us—of me in the arboretum. But with this weather . . ."

Minutes later Estrela was reading her poem aloud: "The Train Wreck," about waking up in a dark wood, after which a disoriented speaker describes a brisk hike through a forest glade which ends with a discovery of unspeakable horror. The grisly aftermath of a train derailment! At least, Whitman had noticed that much, but by the time Estrela had finished reading, he had long given up on the particulars.

"It's a personal poem," she announced unprompted, seemingly unaffected by the gory scene she had just described. "Inspired by the Robert Frost stuff we read. If the speaker had taken the road less travelled, he would have avoided all that suffering."

"I think you may be misreading Frost's poem," observed Whitman, his mind overcome with fatigue, taking the opportunity to return to more familiar terrain. "If you read that poem closely, you find that the two paths are pretty much the same."

"But in my poem, there really was a better path," she said

wide-eyed, as if she were about to divulge some deep dark secret. "You see, my dad was on that train. Before my parents divorced, they lived in Miami. My dad couldn't get a flight to Jacksonville so at the last minute he took the train."

Through the hangover-induced fog, Whitman looked over, curious. "Are you from Florida?"

"Yes," she exclaimed. "I was born there!"

"Really?" said Whitman, navigating the haze of centrifugal energy he perceived emerging in the space between them. He experienced a frenetic urge to stop up his ears, but it was already too late for that. "Anyway I guess it's the part about the speaker's encounter with the train wreck that I'm not sure about."

"Oh," she huffed. "I know it doesn't work, but I'm not sure how to fix it."

He had retained only the bare contours of what she had read to him, and now he wanted to slap himself awake. Without the particulars, he would have to resort to a script he had rehearsed hundreds of times over more than a decade of teaching.

"You could try reimagining it all as the speaker—your father, I assume—first experienced it," he proposed, cautiously. "Before he had time to process it."

"Well, it's true that my mother says that it was all he could talk about for years," she whispered, her voice pensive, trailing off. "But it wasn't the actual wreck. It's what happened afterwards. He had stumbled onto something in the grass. It was dark—he was disoriented, but eventually he found it was this girl. Her body had apparently been thrown from a sleeping cabin. My dad couldn't help her. He couldn't help any of the survivors . . ." Estrela was struggling to hold back the tears now. "Later he became scared for me and my sister. 'She could have been my own daughter.' I'd heard my dad mutter it without knowing what it meant. Now I know . . ."

For a while, Estrela remained silent, apparently mulling it

over, with Whitman expecting her to continue. Then she burst into tears.

"Oh, now I know!" she cried, her voice ringing out. "I'm sorry . . ."

"Don't be sorry," he gulped.

"Oh," she sobbed. "This class has been my favorite of the semester, and now I'm so embarrassed for you to see me like this." The tears were streaming down her face. "Oh my God," she cried again, fanning herself frantically. "I'm so sorry!"

The familiar stupor, now mixed with this new stimulus, seemed to have infected the very synapses of Whitman's brain. His eyes stumbled upon a box of tissues sitting on his desk. He reached out for the box, awkwardly fumbling it before offering them up to her.

"Thirteen years ago, when I was eight, my mom brought us out here to live," Estrela continued, sniveling, ignoring his gesture. "Now I know Florida only as a tourist."

She reached down to remove her phone from her bag to show him an image: Estrela and a fragile bespectacled man—her father, Whitman assumed—standing alongside a row of wilting pomegranate trees, their faces sunburned, drenched in sweat. They looked miserable.

"But I read somewhere you grew up there, right?" she asked, wiping the tears from her face. "What's it like? Growing up in Florida."

"I suppose it was like . . ." he began, feeling slightly unsettled by her question. "Like anywhere else."

"Florida's definitely not like any place else," remarked Estrela, her voice now resonating with renewed confidence. "At least any place that I've been."

"Or maybe like nowhere and everywhere else at the same time," he said, trying to smile but managing only a grimace.

"That's a funny way of describing the place where you're from." Estrela had somehow regained her composure—more quickly than Whitman would ever have fathomed possible. "Funny and also kind of sad, if I'm gonna be honest."

"It's not really my home anymore," he explained blushing. "Anyway, I spent most of my time there fantasizing about how to get out of Gainesville."

Her cheeks now darkened with running mascara, Estrela looked up and smiled. Amid the encroaching shadows, the effect was otherworldly. "And now having attained fame and fortune, Professor Whitaker misses his roots," she announced as if reading a press release. "And he can't wait to get back! Am I right?"

"Not exactly," he muttered, distracted by a murky glimmer filtering through a break in the clouds at the window. Amid the shadows pervading his office, Whitman sensed the ominous return of uninvited specters.

"Like Kansas or the Fountain of Youth, right?" Estrela was on the edge of her seat now, leaning towards him, assuming a dramatic pose. She reached out magician-like, making a gesture of pushing him away, and he felt her fingertip brush his left hand ever so gently. "Or maybe like Donnie Darko or something, am I right?"

He could feel a tingling all over his scalp when Estrela touched him—an electric current traversing the surface of his skin, running down his spine, settling in his abdomen. He knew he was blushing, and he knew that she saw it. Their eyes locked, and she smiled again. He withdrew his hand, flustered.

"I guess that place doesn't exist anymore," he explained, drawing away from her. "That place is lost in time. And in any case, fame and fortune have got nothing to do with my story . . ."

He felt himself lost for words, as waves of vertiginous scenery from the past converged to overwhelm his sodden mind. All at once he wished to be alone in his office. He noticed his hand trembling. He forced himself to look away.

"My mom has always told me I could be famous if I wanted it enough," she remarked, apparently oblivious to his em-

barrassment. "My mom used to be a model, and I do want fame and fortune, I guess, but it can't just be skin-deep. That's why I'm here at Saint Ignatius!"

"Well," he heard himself saying, still delirious. "I think you made the right choice . . . a wise choice."

A long uncomfortable silence followed.

She sighed breathlessly. "I should go."

Then she was standing before him, her exquisite features radiant—her cheeks still flush with emotion.

Whitman stood up unsteadily, bracing himself against the edge of his desk, his mind still reeling with the after-tremors of delirium. He sensed that Estrela expected him to provide some final words of wisdom, some summary remark about the train wreck poem she had read him, but he could think of nothing more to say.

"Oh, here's your midterm project," he said, finally seeing it there. He took it up from the desk. "One of the best in the class," he muttered absently.

She took the pages from him and flipped to the back for his comments, making a spectacle of reading them. A smile broke out on her lips. Then she looked up at him, her face taking on an enthusiastic expression. She was blushing.

"Oh, you are so kind," she said, pointing emphatically to the page before her. "I love what you wrote here!"

Still smiling, Estrela took a step forward, extending one arm to him in a benign gesture of embrace, when all at once, a smoky penumbra seemed to envelop them. He sensed himself stumbling forward, and something seemed to catch him there, with the world shifting on its axis around them, the specter of another time, another place hurtling towards them from a distant horizon. Time slowed down, stood still and went slanted—his past life screaming out to him, reminding him of better days.

From the very core of his being, he sensed the drone of a guitar, and he felt himself wholly transported: up on stage

again leaning against the microphone stand, with throngs of adoring fans stretched out before him, belting out his lyrics.

*Get back home . . . home again,
Back to where you belong.
Dive into the depths of Nowheresville,
Drown 'em in the swamps of Babylon.*

And he hummed and sang along with them, sensing himself swaying to the rhythm.

Looking up, he noticed cloud formations shifting overhead and a solitary shaft of light reaching down from the sky to the undulating crowd below. In the distance something shimmered with a fragile luminosity—metallic, pendant-like, held aloft by someone in the crowd.

But then he found his gaze distracted by a female fan who had somehow managed to climb over a barrier, her face glistening with sweat and enthusiasm. Now she was up on stage with him, laughing and singing in his arms! By the time Whitman turned again to look for the glimmer, it was gone—

“Ugh,” he sensed a female voice gasp from somewhere far away. “Enough!”

He experienced a sharp pain in his shin and felt his consciousness hurtling back across time and space. And there before him stood Estrela, extending her arms in a martial stance, warding him away. As he awoke from the spell, he registered her expression. She was clearly flustered.

“Um,” she muttered, pursing her lips, her eyes wide with alarm. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Oh,” he rasped, overcome with bewilderment, now stumbling, now doubling over to catch his breath. “Oh,” he muttered again, the edge of his vision opaque, darkening. He felt himself falling forward and reached out for balance. “I’m sorry.”

“No!” said Estrela, misunderstanding his gesture, raising a fist up as if to strike him.

"What happened?" he gasped recoiling in fear. "I guess I shouldn't have been singing like that—"

"No," Estrela interrupted him. "You shouldn't have."

"But it was just singing," he pleaded, only half-conscious of what had transpired. "We were just singing along, right?"

"Oh my God, are you drunk or something?" she snickered uncomfortably. Looking cautiously over at him, she said, "I think I should go."

But Estrela did not go. She stood there motionless, a solemn picture of beauty, and he watched as by infinitesimal degrees, the expression on her face began to change, eventually settling somewhere between pity and disgust.

"You're the trainwreck!" she gasped, as one does on discovering the deepest of profundities. And to punctuate the meaning behind her words, she abruptly leaned down and grabbed her bag.

Then all at once, they became aware of something stirring outside his office. He thought it might be the cleaning crew, but he couldn't be sure. Estrela heard it as well, and now her face wore an expression of frightened alarm. He turned away, still struggling to catch his breath, steadying himself at the edge of his desk.

Whatever had come over him—the alcohol binge he had been on for the past few days, or the scent Estrela wore, or this new terror now overtaking him—he suddenly felt dizzy, as if he were about to pass out. When he managed to turn back, she was gone.

"Oh, Christ," he whispered aloud. "What have I done?"

And with that ghostly encounter, Whitman's troubles at Saint Ignatius University began.

On the way home that afternoon, the spirits from Whitman's past life seemed poised to make yet another unwelcome appearance. With his beleaguered mind still swirling with the possible consequences of what had just occurred, his eyes fixated on a battered gray truck swerving in and out of traffic directly behind him. For several seconds, he studied his rear-view mirror, perceiving something hauntingly familiar slung from a chain behind the vehicle's windshield. With the regularity of a metronome, what looked to be an oblong-shaped medallion swung back and forth, glimmering in the waning sunlight. Something about that metallic glimmer transfixed Whitman's consciousness, raising the hairs on the back of his neck.

He realized too late he was about to miss his turn. "For crying out loud," he grumbled. "Not again."

Still hurtling forth at full speed, he abruptly veered from the left lane into the thoroughfare to the right, eliciting a deafening discharge of car horns from behind.

He stopped at the liquor store and purchased two bottles of Jack Daniels. When he got home, he ordered Chinese take-out from a nearby joint, which he scarfed down in front of the television. He wasn't hungry, but he forced himself to eat before he started drinking because he knew what could happen otherwise.

Later that night, he overheard bits and pieces of himself talking with his friend and colleague Terrence Wilks over the telephone. It was as if he stood at one end of a tunnel, trying hard to listen to Terrence and himself talking at the other end.

He kept getting distracted by a familiar voice emanating from the television. A prominent politician from the California hinterlands was droning on about swamps that needed to be

drained. The voice repeated the phrase “draining the swamp” several times in quick succession, and Whitman looked up as if his soul had been summoned. The phone slipped from his hand.

“Oh, Christ,” Whitman said aloud. “It’s all happening again!”

Later, in the early morning hours, when Whitman realized he was awake, he would recall subjecting Terrence to a muddled confession of the events that had occurred that afternoon: confessing everything he could remember, starting with how gorgeous Estrela Gomes was. He had recounted as best as he could the transcendent moment he had experienced in his office, trying to nail down the details, hearing himself singing, sensing his body swaying side to side. Finally, he had told Terrence about the disturbance outside his office.

“Maybe it was the cleaning lady,” Whitman recalled himself muttering. “Or maybe Estrela’s boyfriend, I guess.”

Now, Whitman lay upon the floor of his living room staring up at the dark ceiling, the Jack Daniels tucked under his arm. For having drunk three quarters of the bottle, his mind was inexplicably lucid—painfully so.

“You know that line that even a moron knows you don’t cross?” The memory of Terrence’s raised voice was coming through in excruciating waves now. “I mean, don’t you know you can’t abuse the customer?” Terrence had said, slowly articulating every word for Whitman’s benefit. “For the love of God, just tell me you didn’t try to kiss her!”

“NO!” Whitman now swore aloud at the ceiling, shuddering. Only then did other aspects of Whitman’s ecstatic vision come into focus. He recalled there being a microphone stand wedged between himself and the phantom girl who had climbed up on the stage and his lips brushing the grated surface of the microphone itself. “Maybe that was Estrela’s shoulder,” he breathed aloud, now beside himself. “Or her forehead. No, Estrela’s quite tall so I must have been singing into her shoulder . . .”

He made one last Herculean attempt to rehearse in his mind's eye the lifelike vision experienced the previous day in his office, but something a music executive had once told him and Stephen in the long-ago kept reverberating through his consciousness: "You know, despite your best efforts, you guys have led something of a charmed life," the executive had observed frigidly. "Why not try to live it so you don't have to apologize? Rather than being hell-bent on sabotaging your relatively cushy existence at each and every turn. It's just an idea."

Your damned lips, Whitman now thought to himself, recalling how the guys in the band had sometimes joked that Whitman looked like he was making out with the microphone. And where exactly was the microphone? On his lips, of course! And WHAT was the microphone?

Was it Estrela's shoulder? Or was it her forehead?

"It makes a difference!" he said aloud, before giving up, unable to pierce through the mental fog. "It was always those cursed lips that betrayed you in the end!"

Oh, how could he have done something so foolish?

All at once, Whitman sensed something landing with a thud on the floor beside him—some semi-corporeal presence—which now seemed to shift its weight to one side and groan unsteadily. Frantically wiping the tears from his eyes, he looked over to find himself face to face with what appeared to be Stephen, lying in a pool of his own blood, his shattered left hand—his strumming hand—extended in agony.

Don't close your eyes, Whitman told himself, holding his breath. Then his vision blurred, and the presence disappeared into the ether.

Whitman resolved to go on as if nothing unusual had occurred. In the path of the hurricane that might or might not be converging on him, he experienced his entire being go on automatic pilot. The next day, he made a point of throwing

out what remained of the Jack Daniels. Then on Friday, he taught as he had always done.

He even made a real effort, but later that morning, sitting before the students in his American poetry class, he found himself still struggling to break the spell that had come over him. It was ten minutes till the end of class when he acknowledged too late that his bout of drinking was still taking its toll.

From the surface of the desk before him, he took up the cup of coffee, spiked with the hair of the dog, and drank. Then he took measure of the files and musters of the youths assembled before him. Most of them seemed bored out of their skulls.

Two minutes before the end of the hour, class was spontaneously adjourning among the burnouts who sat at the back of the auditorium. Among the male students, a chorus to a popular rap song had broken out. They were singing the chorus to Childish Gambino's "This Is America," which Whitman recognized as something his daughter, Caelia, had been listening to.

After class, Whitman sat alone in his office, his mind spinning back to a scene from his past—a scene somehow related to the one that had just played out before him. It must have occurred shortly after Whitman had gotten the position at the university.

In those days, his students were still familiar with his old music. They could hear the Lilacs on the radio, and some still bought entire albums. They still considered Whitman Whitaker something of a celebrity. The Lilacs had once had a devoted following, and many of his students were the younger siblings of their original fans. In their unspoiled minds, the untimely death of Vernon Stephen Crane still counted as a notorious urban tragedy.

He remembered having spent the period discussing a Wallace Stevens' poem, and at the end of class, one of the wide-eyed ones at the front mentioned song lyrics, asked him what

it was like writing them. And he remembered trying to explain the difference between music and poetry: how the music puts additional demands on the words. “Music acts as the constraint the poet never faces,” he had told them.

Then as class drew to a close, some students in the back began bellowing out a familiar chorus. Before long the rest of the class chimed in:

*Chasing down a runaway train,
Not a dollar or a dime or a red cent to my name,
And now I’m praying to Saint Christopher.*

They were singing the lyrics to the Lilacs’ first hit — among the first tunes he and Stephen had written together. It was the ultimate tribute!

Where has it all gone? he asked himself. The whole scene seemed lightyears from the half-comatose response he had just received during today’s discussion of “Mowing” by Robert Frost.

In the midst of coming to this depressing realization, some unfamiliar presence loitering outside his office caught Whitman’s attention. The door being ajar, he leaned back to see a student named Jia Marcus standing outside in the hallway. She had apparently followed him there from class, and now she noticed him watching her and she smiled and waved. Sensing he had no choice, he stood up and opened the door.

“It’s about my lyrics,” Jia said brusquely. Noticing his confusion, she grinned and explained, “Last week you suggested I get my lyrics together, remember? My best ones—for my submission to your poetry writing seminar?”

Whitman had only the vaguest impression of the conversation in question.

“Well, you know Estrela Gomes . . .” she began before stopping herself in response to whatever she perceived in his expression. “She’s in your seminar now.”

"Oh," he said, struggling to suppress the visceral panic now taking hold of him. "Oh, yes."

Jia went on. "Well, Estrela told me that you don't really like people submitting song or rap lyrics. But unfortunately, that's all I have. I do performance, not poetry."

"Okay."

"So those will have to do," she explained. "Last week you suggested including works by some of my favorite poets too, so I'm trying to get those together now. Anyhoo, I hope I make the cut."

"Oh, yes," he replied. "The cut—"

"Professor Whitaker," she said, looking him in the eyes. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Yeah—no," he responded embarrassed. "I'm okay."

"Because you look like you saw a ghost or something."

"No, I'm okay," he explained, now conscious of her gaze. "And, Jia, it's not that I don't like song lyrics. It's just been a long time since I've thought about them. I guess it's just been a long time, is all . . ."

Whitman had been telling himself that some measure of solace would sooner or later turn up. He figured maybe it would come with his daughter, Caelia, whose plane was scheduled to arrive late Friday evening. But at half past six on Friday, while sitting at the bar a few blocks from his house, Whitman got the grim news.

"She says she can't get on the plane," explained his ex-wife Sandra over the background din of the Los Angeles Airport. "She's in the restroom. She's so nervous. She won't leave the stall."

"What should I do?" he muttered, half to himself. "What do you figure I do?"

"I don't think you should come," she answered. "It's a six-hour drive, and then the LA traffic. You won't find anywhere nearby to stay on such short notice, and you'll have to drive back the next day."

What more could he say? He found he couldn't summon up the courage to ask whether he could sleep in the spare bedroom at the cottage in Culver City where Sandra and his daughter had relocated after the divorce three years earlier.

"Listen, she's too embarrassed to talk now," explained Sandra.

A long pause followed.

"This isn't your fault, Whitman," Sandra sighed. "You may be at fault for many things, but don't blame yourself for this."

He could try not to, he told himself later. But he would be lying to himself. For somehow, without him ever knowing he had passed it on, Caelia had inherited his fear of flying, and now she could not choose other than to return the gift to him. Whether a mind-virus or a malign stamp within the mysterious code passed from father to daughter made no difference. The result was the same: he would have a little more of her attention and a lot less of her presence.

Caelia had been thirteen when the agency had promoted Sandra to full partner. A few months later, Sandra decided to relocate to the old Los Angeles neighborhood where she had grown up. A month after that, she filed for divorce. Caelia had initially made quite an impressive protest about the inconvenience of it all, but in the end, she had followed her mother to her new home.

Had it ever been realistic that she would remain in the Bay Area with her father? Not really. According to her mother, her father could hardly take care of himself. And so, submitting to the inevitable, he had let her go with her mother, and that was that. Whitman's responsibilities at the university were all that remained.

Caelia had taken her strikingly good looks from Whitman's mother, Brett—the grandmother she never met, the one cursed to pass from this life before Caelia was even born. Whitman now thought maybe Caelia took a few other things from her grandmother as well.

Late the next morning, Whitman sat before his work computer in the living room, its screen displaying in vivid colors the video image of his daughter with Rufus, her cat, balancing on her lap. Caelia still apparently felt guilty for letting her father down, so for the first time in weeks, she spoke to him without the usual measure of irony taking over. They talked about the school dance scheduled for that night. At least she wouldn't miss it! Then they talked about the cancelled trip, and they talked around her issues with flying.

She was giving her reasons, working herself up to an apology. Then she mentioned something about her favorite teacher Max Telemonde who taught physics. Something she said caught Whitman's attention—caught him off guard.

Whitman had been trying to explain how some people actually enjoy travelling. According to Max Telemonde, however, travel would soon be rendered redundant. "You're so old-fashioned, Dad," Caelia remarked. "Soon we'll be living most of our lives as second selves—avatars in what Mr. Telemonde calls the bio-digital ether."

"Hmm. And all those people that choose not to live in a bio-digital ether? What happens to them?" he asked.

"Mr. Telemonde says the bio-digital ether will be too compelling for you to resist," she explained, "because if you don't feel at home in one world, plenty more will be available for you to choose from."

"Well," he remarked, "at least I'll have some choice."

"Everyone will be a creator or artist if they choose to be so," she explained. "Because inside of these bio-digital worlds, you'll be able to create other worlds to visit. Our entire sense of self will transform. No gender and no sin and no religion, either. All physical relations will go the way of the dinosaur. Because when we all live as virtual gods, we will have intimate relations with anyone we want—just floating around in the ether."

He looked up, scrutinizing her face on the screen. "This is what you talk about with your physics teacher?"

"Why not?" she replied. "They treat us like adults at Oakwood Prep."

"Maybe stay off the internet for a while, would be my advice. To Mr. Telephone. And to you, too."

"It's Telemonde," she sighed. "I don't think you're getting it, Dad. Think about all of Stephen's problems in this world. Mr. Telemonde says just by activating the synapses of the brain, a genius like Stephen would be able to generate the musical notes. If a bio-digital world had existed in the nineties, maybe you could have saved Stephen—saved his talent—"

"I don't know," interrupted Whitman, shaking his head. Her mention of Stephen had taken him by surprise, but he knew enough not to let her know it. Not so long ago, before her teenage rebellion, she had idolized her father's musical past. But lately he found that in spite of all his efforts to shield her from it, Caelia had somehow divined the parts he had omitted. "I guess I just prefer a physical world," he observed, "of flesh and bone and even concrete to the digital one."

"Ugh, you sound just like our French teacher, Mr. Roche."

"Well?" he asked her. "What's wrong with Mr. Roche?"

"He's clueless," she said, snickering, "hopelessly old-fashioned. And he's also a disgusting creep!"

"Well," he said, "maybe stay away from Mr. Roche." As soon as Whitman said it, it occurred to him that perhaps some infinitely more serious version of the same conversation was playing out among his own students, regarding his recent blunder with Estrela Gomes.

"Easier said than done," Caelia explained. "I have French class four days of the week."

"And what happens the other day?" Whitman asked, trying to change the subject.

"Ugh. Phys Ed!" she responded, with a scowl. "Mr. Philips is the biggest creep of all."

For the first time in a long time, he felt the instinct to defend his daughter, to come to her rescue. "Are these teachers bothering you?"

"No, Dad, are you kidding?" she said, pouting in disgust. "They're just dorks."

Later that afternoon, while sitting at the bar, Whitman had just finished his second shot of bourbon when the full weight of his daughter's words hit him. What do you do during those four days of class with Mr. Roche? Whitman knew his daughter, and he suspected some measure of adolescent exaggeration in her descriptions of Mr. Roche and Mr. Philips, but what if she wasn't exaggerating? What if this were the real thing? That was the problem that maybe Estrela figured she faced on an infinitely more intimate scale.

Whitman's next conference with Estrela was scheduled for Monday afternoon at four. *A sincere apology is the only solution*, he resolved finally, setting his drink down. And if Estrela demanded it, he would even offer to turn himself in—to the office of the provost!

Terrence called and suggested Whitman come over that evening to help him organize his fishing gear in the shed. Terrence's wife ordered out for dinner, and afterwards, Terrence suggested they go out on the patio to talk more about Whitman's "situation."

Terrence had once been the golden boy of the department, with even the university marketing crew promoting his monograph on some arcane aspect of medieval cosmology. But what particularly impressed Whitman was Terrence's knack for getting on the wrong side of every single institutional priority of the university administration without drawing the wrong kind of attention to himself. Whether it was hosting midnight readings of *American Psycho* for Banned Book Week or sponsoring the radical speaker series of the West Asian student collective resisting American imperialism or

writing inflammatory op-eds on the architectural aesthetics of restored Christendom for some obscure Opus Dei publication, Terrence's political pivots seemed designed to skirt the limits of university decorum without inducing institutional aneurisms.

Now since obtaining tenure, Terrence had for whatever reason developed a manic obsession with fly fishing. And since fishing remained among the only things inherited from the swamps of Whitman's youth that he would still publicly acknowledge, Terrence often dragged him along to enjoy the streams and waterways of Northern California. Although ten years younger than Whitman, Terrence's amorphous frame and his receding hairline gave him the appearance of a much older man.

"That's not gonna send ol' Florida boy off on another bender, now is it?" Terrence asked, clearly amused, offering Whitman the bottle. Whitman examined the label silently: light beer.

They'd been mulling over the details of what had transpired in Whitman's office on Wednesday for a second time, and now Whitman was in one of his taciturn moods—mentally preparing himself for Monday afternoon when the conferences with his creative writing students, Estrela among them, would commence.

"I have a question for you," scoffed Terrence, interrupting Whitman's reverie. "Is it Florida that makes someone go insane or is it just that every insane person chooses to go live there?" Terrence laughed, but something about the joke made Whitman look up.

"The insanity that did Stephen and me in," began Whitman, his mind still in that far-off place, "was in Los Angeles California." Then perceiving Terrence's confusion, Whitman muttered, "Then again, insanity's no doubt contagious. I mean Florida, California? It's all a great big world. And at least now I've come to a decision in this world. I've decided

to apologize and turn myself in. To the dean. Or to the office of the provost."

"Well," Terrence remarked, looking down pensively. "If you're serious about that, you start with the chair. I mean, if you want to go by the book, these inquiries always begin with the departmental chair."

"There doesn't need to be any inquiry. I'll confess and if Dominic thinks it's appropriate, I could resign before any inquiry took place." In his mind's eye, Whitman imagined Dominic Rose, the English department chair, shaking his head in disappointment.

"So, you're determined to confess without having been accused of anything yet? And what are you going to say? That you hugged one of your students?" asked Terrence. "Are you also going to say anything about what you think might have happened? Are you going to say anything about your lips?"

"I told you what happened," he said nervously. "I was remembering this girl—a fan—that once got close enough to give me a hug. I guess I turned my head. Maybe I touched her forehead, maybe her shoulder."

"And you figure they'll believe this story?" asked Terrence, his eyebrows raised. "This story about—what is it? A blackout? A hallucination? A freak bout of lycanthropy?"

"It happens to be the truth, Terrence!"

"I mean, I'm not even sure I buy it," muttered Terrence, ignoring Whitman, shaking his head in disbelief. "And you think they will?"

"Exactly. You're right," said Whitman, thinking it all through. "No one would believe it, especially with Estrela being . . . Estrela. So I'll say that I may have crossed a line—abused one of their paying customers."

"And you figure you're the only person that may have crossed that line? I'm just asking."

Whitman remained silent, thinking.

"Do you know that a professor who sits on the committee

that reviews these sorts of things is currently sleeping with one of his students? Has been doing so for the past two years?"

Whitman frowned. "How do you know that?"

"I served on the committee on faculty misconduct for three years as my service commitment," said Terrence. "I know everything about the members of that committee."

"Well, why doesn't anyone do anything about it?"

"No one's made a complaint. And I doubt anyone will. They've been spotted together in some of the gay clubs around the Castro. They seem to be a couple."

"So it's different."

"You're right. It's different," remarked Terrence. "This guy's been observed spanking one of our paying customers in an S & M club, whereas you . . . what is it you did again?"

"You know I come from a totally different world than that guy probably does," explained Whitman. "Hell, the only reason I have this job is that some of my lyrics impressed a few oddball music critics. And then there was the dean at the time—that crazy old priest—convinced that I knew Peter, Paul and Mary."

"For God's sake, you guys opened for Tom Petty," hissed Terrence. "Hell, didn't they compare you to Bob Dylan?"

"Obviously they were wrong!" Whitman held his head in his hands, trying to hide this new paroxysm of emotion now coming over him.

Terrence grimaced. "Look, what you did isn't a crime, Whitman," he explained, emphatically. "It's that you have a problem! A DRINKING PROBLEM!"

"Don't I know it," whimpered Whitman, the tone of his voice rising in alarm. "I was off the sauce for a good long time too. At least until a month ago. I know I have a problem. It's something I'm working on . . ."

"If there's an inquiry into this, it will be an exercise in ritual humiliation. Nothing will be learned, nothing gained. If redemption is what you're looking for, you've come to the wrong place."

"I'm not sure I can face my daughter without doing what I think is right on this thing."

"For her to have to watch you resign in disgrace?" Terrence exclaimed. "That's going to be better, is it?"

"Didn't I cross a line here?" Whitman asked pathetically. "Didn't you say so yourself? What I did was wrong."

"What you did was stupid. It may be wrong too, but only if this girl says it's wrong. It's been four days now. The more time that passes, the better. Maybe we'll find this girl's not seeking the scalp of her professor. For the sake of your daughter, why not give it a few more days?"

"Okay," breathed Whitman.

"Your next meeting with Estrela is Monday, right?" asked Terrence. "Try to keep it together. Don't apologize. Don't try to explain yourself. From now on, do everything by the book."

Whitman massaged his aching forehead. "Okay."

"Now repeat after me: nothing's actually happened!" chuckled Terrence. It was some post-modern prattle Terrence enjoyed reciting before his graduate students. Post-modern, or maybe medieval, Whitman could never remember which. Terrence thought it hilarious. "Signs and portents of the non-event. Proof that nothing ever happens!"

Whitman resolved to begin by spending Sunday morning safely ensconced on his couch. Overcome with nervous fidgeting, he felt himself getting up every so often to go to the kitchen for the Jack Daniels, but then he would remember that he had thrown out what remained from his bout on Wednesday night, and he could not summon up the energy to search out what might make a good substitute.

In this state of sobriety into which he found himself involuntarily thrust, he had at least arrived at a decision. Terrence seemed to understand the institution better than anyone—he lived and breathed the university argot, and Whitman considered Terrence's advice sound. But Whitman also knew that Whitman Whitaker was no Terrence Wilks.

He had resolved to issue a sincere apology to Estrela—with all his heart and soul behind it. He felt genuine remorse for what he had subjected Estrela to in his office, even if he wasn't totally sure what it was that had occurred there. He himself had a beautiful daughter after all, and he could not bear to face her without at least trying to do the right thing.

Eventually, he fell asleep on the couch, but when he awoke a little after 4 PM, he felt overwhelmed with fatigue. His phone had five incoming calls and three voice messages. *Estrela*, said a voice in his head. *The jig is up! She's filed her complaint.*

On closer inspection, however, it was Terrence who had called to check in. Caelia had also been attempting to reach him. Her first message conveyed that something had happened the night before at the school dance, and she wanted to tell him all about it.

Groggy with fatigue and worry, he imagined the worst. "What happened at the dance, honey?" he asked when he reached her. "Did someone do something bad to you?"

"Are you kidding, Dad?" she said. "Nothing ever happens at the Oakwood Prep fall dance."

"Oh," he said, the world coming back into focus. "Okay."

"I wanted to tell you about Max!"

"Who?"

"Max Telemonde, the teacher I told you about?" she said excitedly. "I was bored so I spent the night talking to Max. Max was one of the chaperones at the dance. You're not going to believe this, but he's a musician. He plays the lead guitar. He also plays the drums, and he sings."

"Max a musician?" said Whitman, still struggling to get his bearings. "I thought Max was the bio-digital physics teacher."

"Max teaches physics, but his real ambition is to be the singer in a band like you."

"But I'm not a musician. I teach. I'm the teacher."

"Well," she continued, ignoring him. "Max knows every-

thing there is to know about your band, Dad. He's like a musical historian. He knows all about why you guys fell apart. About Stephen's suicide. About the Lilacs and Gainesville in the late eighties and nineties!"

"Are you supposed to be calling your teacher *Max*, honey? I mean, isn't he the teacher? Isn't he Mr. Telemonde?"

"Teachers at Oakwood ask us to address them by their first name, and besides, Max is barely out of college," she explained. "He adores Southern Rock: Lynyrd Skynyrd—Molly Hatchet—The Outlaws. Max knows everything!"

"I'm not sure I like the sound of any of this," muttered Whitman, his anesthetized mind crawling along in slow motion. "I mean, what about everything you said about Mr. Roche? What about Philips?"

"Ugh! Roche and Philips were there last night, too, creeping all over the underclass girls," Caelia said, sighing. "But what does Max have to do with those two losers?"

All at once the floodgates opened, and the questions began bubbling to the surface, but Whitman didn't dare to ask any more of them. *It all makes sense now*, Whitman remarked to himself, with tears streaming down his cheeks and waves of fear and anger washing over him. Time and space obviously had a circular shape, and the cosmos moved according to a logic incontrovertible, but somehow he still couldn't get his head around it.

Then he remembered what was coming for him during Monday afternoon's meeting with Estrela Gomes. *But if the same things keep happening, he thought, then why is it that I can't see what is coming for me tomorrow?*