

SIMEON BERRY

Ampersand

& stop thinking about why every morning, you must awaken to the sound of Elvis wincing over his guitar strings. He was sexy and contrite, and his pockets brimmed with kibble for hellhounds. You rise from your bed as if from river mud, and straighten your psychic string tie. Though you will be largely ignored, you are occult with fact behind the scorched creases of your prep school uniform. You can tell anyone anything, except why you stumble into your dorm bloody from running through the woods. Your roommate looks you over, unscrews his computer for the green ganglion of Acapulco Gold hidden behind the motherboard, and for once you spark up that gray treble clef of smoke. You bleed meditatively onto the ridiculous aqua comforter your mother gave you, holding your breath forever with runner's lungs. It is the only talent he envies you for. You go off in the ill-fitting tweed of your free will to classes where your nervousness makes you seem thoughtful: *Yeah, I think A Tale of Two Cities is about impotency... All right, maybe not totally.* Long, intense silences follow, which you endure by staring out the window at a lawn so deeply green it looks botanically assassinated &

& struggle to hold reasonably still. At 4 a.m., you watch the wind on the moonlit field make silvery math of the grass, and you sense someone: a person with no face waiting to replace you. This impersonal menace needs to be explained again to the benign x-ray of Cassiopeia, where your father says everything anyone has ever felt or said is traveling still, broadcast like the sadness of an antique vaudeville joke on a radio show. Every night, just before you fall asleep, other voices start talking amongst themselves in the monochrome waters at the deep end of your brain. Your senior thesis argues that the astral plain is a theme park for religious hallucinations, and your advisor lets you know the other faculty think you're a bit non-traditional for a scholarship kid, meaning: *inappropriate and highly weird*. The white Rastafarian says they don't understand that you're kind of a mystic. He's wrong, of course, but it's sweet of him to say. The classics teacher asks everyone to update the epic, and your extemporaneous hero complains in the underworld: *The problem with the dead is that they don't fucking listen!* Your dramatic reading and the subsequent detention make you briefly semi-cool &

& this only adds to the suspicion that your classmates are secretly interesting and funny when you're not around. Your lab partner impulsively asks you to the prom, and you ride together in what she terms *the ambivalent limo*. In the kitchen of the convention hall, she cries on your shoulder as she finishes the last of the smuggled champagne and her mascara runs to tribal marks. Her last prom date locked himself in the bathroom for two hours because he said he had to make a *delicate adjustment*. Her classmates took this as evidence that she breaks boys. You're not certain, but you're pretty sure everyone's evening is not ending in tears. Outside the window, iced branches click emptily in the wind, and you are careful not to kiss her, or lick the gold slick of champagne from her lips. Instead, you impersonate the dorm mother telling the two field hockey captains to *Break it up, folks* when she caught them in bed wearing only their moderately festive plaid skirts. She laughs. In hotels throughout the city, some girls are crawling under beds to get away from their dates, some are doing shots off Ouija boards, some are trying to explain away the lightly stunned look of the very drunk. In here, you have tried to do a good thing &

& you suspect you've gotten away with it. Tomorrow, when your advisor calls you out of lunch to tell you that your uncle and his flight instructor ran out of gas and crashed their Piper Cub in an empty field, you take your glassy composure out into the red voltage of oak leaves receding into the streets. You say quietly to no one, *This is probably going to hurt a lot later*. You are seventeen, and he is a word burning in dry grass. You become quite alert, and write very small things in your diary with a great deal of precision. Across the hall, the lacrosse star alternates steroids with LSD, wandering into your room to talk about geometry in an angry and unspecific way. After Parents' Weekend, he trashes his room while tripping with the aid of a latent psychosis, which is loud, but not unexpected. Eight weeks pass in silence, and your father sends you a desperately casual letter with blanks for you to fill in: *Are classes going well?* _____ *Enter correct address here:* _____ *Other things you would like to tell me about:* _____ When he asks what you've been doing, you reply, *Thinking about the Sumerians*, because you don't want to seem lazy. His follow-up questions make you almost musically confused &

& you resolve to punctuate your sentences better. You find yourself devoting a lot of energy to subvocalizing your comments. You go shopping to relax, and buy a box of diminutive Twinkies because they are cheap. You eat four, then can't bear the sight of their blonde ingots. Matt says no new Twinkies were made after 1978. They begin to resemble tan, spongiform tombs in which your spontaneous qualities are interred. Despite this, after a series of thoughtful glances, Jessica from History slips a note into your chapter six: *So—for the most part—I think you're infinitely intriguing*. Over lunch, she reveals she's never really had to masturbate because there was always someone there to do it for her. The practicality of this appeals to you. She writes you a series of haiku detailing the mystical importance of Montana. They highlight her most disquieting metaphor (*sperm on toast*) and contain a number of assumptions about your willingness to try new things. She is wry, but kind. Whenever she asks about your family, you say they run a lint collective in Provo, Utah, and she nods as if this is supposed to mean something. You hope to be so calm that you approximate a walking coma &

& try not to complicate things in intriguing ways. After midnight, you meet her in the smoking grove, among the vague, diacritical marks of used condoms, and you speak briefly about the panic attacks you're having. You look up at the lit disaster map of Mare Imbrium and Tranquilitas, and feel startlingly unattractive. She shrugs, but is intent upon your silhouette. *You're afraid of... exactly...?* The grove looms in the half-finished light like the burned church of an idea, and you feel like your moon-occluded bodies belong here. Jessica blurs the spent hexagram of cigarettes and withered latex with her sneaker, as you explain in progressively smaller words how the fear is not so much a force, but a way of inscribing the world with style. She smiles. *It's going to be a little inconvenient if you plan to live past thirty, you know: this habit of being terrified and wise, even for fun.* She's right. Your job, as you saw it, was to be the one who watched—while immune—for the possibility of aurora borealis around each person who was in doubt. You liked it when they decided to be lined in that animate fire and forget who they were. To act, not be acted upon. As you should now. You abandon the metaphor &