

Jody Azzouni: One day I realized it. You stare and stare at an artist's paintings. You wonder: why that unearthly quality? How's *that* being managed? And then you realize. No yellows. There are no yellows anyway in any of the work. What's she got against *yellow*? This is an allegory, I guess. I've just told an allegory.

Part of growing up—part of growing up to be a writer, I mean—is being into particular authors: being into authors the way a child or an adolescent is into something. Totally. This never happens again for the rest of your life. Because if you become a functioning adult (a successfully functioning adult) you're way too busy until you die. (And you can't do it *then*.) But for a while there—for several formative years—you're totally into someone's work who helps point the way, who offers a goal, whose work looks pulled together enough to be called an *oeuvre*. Whose stuff is worth being obsessed with because there are some powerful tools you're being mentored into learning.

For a while there, I read George Bernard Shaw effortlessly and continuously. First the plays. Then, a couple years later, I was into all those *introductions*. But I was fifteen. And something was obviously missing. From the characters, from their motivation, from Shaw's constant chattering at the reader. Somehow there was a thread, an item—a *something*—that wasn't there. A something that *was* there when I looked at the people around me. I kept hitting on the wrong something. Shaw's people talk a lot. More than real people. And they're better at it. For example, Shaw's people all make *good* jokes. (Lots of people make jokes, I'd noticed.) I kept looking for the extra thing in Shaw's work that was doing it.

There are lots of extra things in Shaw's work. He does unusual things with syntax, for example. He works hard at upsetting expectations. At all levels. But none of this was it. Shaw was constantly going on about men and women and what their differences are. His characters were constantly going on about men and women and what their differences are. And he was so proud of how modern he was about romance, how unromantic (how twentieth-century) he was about it. Because he thought what he had to say about it had something to do with his insights about "creative evolution." (But all this was just the next generation of twaddle—as valuable as his weirdo ideas about inoculation: that's how it looks from *here*.)

And then it hit me. (Remember, I was fifteen: I was primed to have this insight.) These people in Shaw's plays—none of them are interested in *sex*. You listen to how the men and women in his plays—especially the early ones—*flirt*. And you realize: no sex, there's no sex here at all. That's not a motive for a single character: not a real motive, anyway. Shaw can't depict an interest in *sex*. He doesn't know where to *begin*.

I don't know *how* an author depicts an interest in sex. On his or her own part, or on the part of the created characters. I suppose there are lots of ways to do it. I imagine an interest in sex—or in anything, for that matter—imprints itself on the prose both in the obvious ways and in subtle ways. In the weave and flow of words—on the surface of one's prose: in ways we don't even understand yet. Whatever needs to be done, Shaw doesn't do it. Not early in his career, not late in his career. Not ever.

I learned later that Shaw and his wife never consummated their marriage. I was so relieved. Shaw *really* had no interest in sex. The best ones, they never fake it. What makes some of them great, often, is how they fill in the holes in their sensibility so that it *looks* complete. So that it looks like there's a fully-rounded whole person there who's talking to you.

The trick generalizes. I read John Cheever's short stories many years later. Something was missing there too. Friendship. No one ever felt friendship, yearned for it, or realized it was absent. His suburban world is a world without friendship the way our visual world is a world without ultraviolet light. You could read this as a sociological insight (on Cheever's part) about suburbia at the time. But I'd counsel against that. At best it's an accentuation of a sociological phenomenon that Cheever could weave into the sensibility of his work by leaving a lot of white space where friendship would otherwise be. Because he didn't know it was white space.

You can push this analysis-strategy pretty far. What's missing in Kafka's work? Well, *a lot* is missing. But one thing that's strikingly absent is any indication that the belief/desire model of human behavior applies to humans. That humans formulate goals, and then struggle to achieve them. At least some of the time. And that they fall into despair when they can't. Some of us read that despair into Kafka's work—into the psychodynamics of his characters. But that's a mistake; that's us doing something we're really good at. Projecting a pattern into something that doesn't really have that pattern.

Cats are interesting. We used to describe them as curious. Maybe some of us still do. But there's no curiosity there. Cats haven't the brains to be curious: it's just a prey module in their brains that's operating on automatic. Run a laser dot around the room and you can drive a cat nuts trying to catch it. There's nothing there to be curious about. An allegory. I've just told another allegory.

Like a lot of Americans, my childhood home had cats. But when this story was developing for me—in the summer of 2000—I still had to do some research. Buy some catbooks. I was also becoming a tea drinker. That may have affected on my prose; it certainly affected how I was writing. *Quarter After Eight* published the story in 2003. They described themselves as having the mission “to provide a space for work that fits neither [poetry nor prose]: a space that demonstrates the tension between poetry and prose.”

The editors of *Quarter After Eight* also submitted the story for a pushcart prize.

Transition to Cat

Originally published in
Quarter After Eight 9
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“There’s this result about goldfish” my wife Irulina (not her real name) tells me “the ok-looking ones you know pretty good figure nice curves ripply fins the stuff girlgoldfish are into—if these ok-looking ones hang out with geekgoldfish you know stumpy discolored fins that dim-witted open-mouthed fish look –”

I have to cut her off: *Goldfish hang out together?* Have a social life? Drink brewskis while watching fishathons? *That’s* what you’re telling me –?

“Cut the sarcasm asshole, that’s what I read the guygoldfishgangs cruise for girlgoldfish” (*Good lord*, I say to myself, *here we go again*. I put my head in my hands and chant mentally. It’s the only way to get through days like this) “and this is the important part” she tells me like that’s possible “the ok-looking goldfish do better cruising with geekgoldfish than with the others.”

You’re asking for something, I tell her back, why don’t you just ask for it.

“He’s a really smart child” she says “I know you don’t respect brains but it really counts these days—and we’ve got him in private school where he’s *among* other really smart kids.”

And?

“And why don’t we put him in *public* school where it’ll be easier for him to lord it over the other kids?”

I guess I'm looking at her funny because she thinks she has to explain herself: "He's *male*" she says "he needs every advantage he can get."

I know I know: *Put her own child in public school?* You must be kidding—there's something you haven't told us yet: He's not really *her* child (evil stepmother syndrome) she's stopped taking her medication she's got a position in public relations at the Board of Education; no no, none of these things, something quite simple really (happens once in a while): *she believes what she reads*.

And she's almost got a point—*mean* as it sounds. You've heard? 83% of the top CEOs are from small towns where they're still phasing out barter. But it's also true some women go sociopathic after they have kids: suddenly they're *pretending* concern with the community the environment—they smile sweetly chat empathically coo and moan sympathetically and *act just like* they're really bonding with the sisters. Men except rarely can't quite manage *this* degree of insincerity because women have 27% more nerves in their *faces* 17% more blood vessels there (extra muscle too); they can be *really expressive* in a pinch (at a snap) "your problems are my problems let us emote together" and all the while they're calculating odds on the best way to *stunt* the opposition squeeze a little more advantage for their near and dear ones over foreign near and dear ones.

You think I'm being cynical, un-P.C. even. No way: We're talking maternal instinct here, and *once it kicks in* Ma thinks *her* child is the most beautiful child ever the brightest child ever the most interesting child ever she will do *anything* for that perfect child, god protect anyone who hurts her child inadvertently or otherwise. We see these child-elevating impulses as *virtues* but think about it: how compatible is rose-coloring of *her children* with being *fair* and *equitable* towards *foreigner children* (the competition) also inhabiting the sandbox?

The day after Darwin hits on the theory of evolution—the very next day, he *cries*. (How do we know? He kept a diary—like all Victorians.)

Ok, here's the problem: *our son* call him Igor (not his real name) isn't ok-looking—not even by goldfish standards—he's a goggle-eyed geek a budding creepster a disturbed runt under an unrecognizably colored woolen skullcap flat with grease. You remember him from school (there's always one): always stared at everyone too long like he was doing anatomy in his head, tortured cats voted most likely to grow up to be Ted Bundy (his science project: boa constrictor sweetly eating live rabbit—pink eyes peering out of an unhinged jaw the last thing you see little nose wriggling *help*); he's the one who couldn't talk on most days except when describing the forty different kinds of parasites who live off human skin. A child only a mother could love. Me, the *dad*, I'm spending a fortune on orthodontics—trick wires scaffolding glinty silver entrapments for the sloppy tongue—so that a decade from now he can impress other inmates with his neat jawline his proud chin.

Because I'm his father I'm often consoled by people whose dead pets I have to replace: they pat my shoulder talk soothingly of unusual *hobbies* offer me drinks while I write out checks tell me he's going through a difficult period. You probably think I sound defensive I'm trying to avoid blame (did you read that book by that chemist Dahmer?: I *cried and cried* the whole time) but I tried to bond with him I really did: someone to play baseball with? no way. Football basketball cub scouts hiking bicycling marathon? no way; stamp collecting coin collecting literature (Twain Hawthorne Melville) no way either. *His interests?* Well he did like *fishing*, but only if he caught something and could poke its eyes out. (We went fishing *once*.) There was also his collection of headless toy soldiers and mauled Barbie-doll-parts hanging from strings in the closet—but he's grown out of that. Now he's got CDs on forensic science, the history of steak,

books on live turtle shell furniture, pamphlets on how to make soap from road kill, some crackpot item about growing prions on Wonder bread, and *anything* he can download about the Genome project.

I don't know what the problem is. *Maybe it's that I'm not allowed to discipline my child.* There are laws: if I spank him I could go to jail for a *really long time*. Concerned guys in prison saying to me: Spanked your kid, eh? Unhealthy focus on that part of the anatomy, don't you think? *We* can help change that about you. (We've helped others get over this in the past, we really have.)

But maybe it's not *his* fault. Given *my* genetic inheritance maybe I shouldn't have had children (but that's what *sex* is for, right? Dilution?) My pedigree: Insanely impractical inventors and drunks: Alcoholism is phenotypically present in me (it's *dominant* as they say in geneslang. Being an inventor is no doubt genetically present in me too but it's recessive—I'm an accountant): I walk by bars crave drinks, credit side of the ledger: tastes good feels nice, obsession satisfied for a moment no dreams that night about sex with bottles, debit side: wake up in strange places without clothes divorce loss of job have to go to AA meetings talk about higher powers. But I'm in control these days. I'm in control. (I chant: C₂H₅OH.)

But this isn't *my* fault either. Think of the ancestors (yours, mine) wandering in small groups marauding over plains trampling grass whooping it up in tribegangs terrorizing lions tigers bears during daylight hours (at night they're cowards whimpering around fires—chanting and shrieking to gods if there's a rainstorm brewing, big cats nearby looking up at the sky going yumyum).

A smelly bunch of us would stumble upon nice meadows clean rivulets beautiful sunset backgrounding it all picture-postcard-perfect, trees bushes mountainview, pleasant sloths

ambling along the bank anteaters snorting up the ground armadillos sunning themselves on rocks a sluggish hippo hooting in the drink; several of us would coo (or grunt or whatever the hell it was we would do when we were responding aesthetically to something) and the rest of us would romp excitedly into the water to take a shit.

And that's the whole problem. You'd think we'd think: nice water clean water let's keep it that way (you know, inborn tendency to establish national parks). In fact no. These animals us our ancestors: try to keep in mind who I'm talking about here—would spit up into the water drag dead animal carcasses through it wipe themselves off (fish gagging below) worst of all bathe, fecal matter index going off the scales not that we had scales but surely even then even Cro-Magnons could see differences between transparent and brown.

Contrast *us* with *neat cats*—different mammalian line obviously—they *bury* offensive material don't leave it around ruining up the landscape. Clearly us—the primates—unsteady on two legs only recently down from the trees learned our awful sanitary habits from the birds: “I'm free; drop it here drop it there” birds don't feel loyalty towards land *or* water—and really, why should they (any more than angels)? But these are really bad practices for *monkeys*—especially monkeys who don't fly or who decide to camp in a place for a while build—oh I don't know—let's you and me and Joe here build *a city*. Hang around a while dump offal into the water. (One prescient primate going: Don't we have to *drink* that? Should we really shit in the rivergod's *face*? Others saying: Lighten up already will you?)

As you might expect potable water (I bet you're thinking: he's really lost it, he's wandered off the topic bigtime, he's supposed to be telling a *story*—but I haven't, I haven't, I am: you watch) potable water becomes a crying need (no pun intended). Everyone is really sick a lot of the time—barfing up (into the river of course), folks dying of dyspepsia dysentery

dystrophy: you'd think a mutation would kick in *quick* like someone born with a desire to be neat (like a cat) leave the river alone, oh no instead we one of *my* immediate ancestors I'm sure invents *alcohol*.

Alcohol kills germs. No doubt you've heard. It's a disinfectant (drunks don't get headcolds for a reason)—so if you use brown river water to brew spirits—ominous streaks and lumps bumping around in it traipsing insects moss-flecked wormy spiral things—if you take this unpromising opaque gunk pour yeast into it do the vat thing you eventually get something very like Guinness: rich body, complex flavors and textures. A beer you can *speculate* about (what was *that* I just swallowed?) make up *myths* about—build a whole *religion* around (“O Great Dionysus, The Suffering God” we can chant while vomiting up during breakfast). The important point?: *It won't kill you* (all the bad bad germs are dead) and it's even kind of nutritious.

They didn't know from antiseptics: but some of them *liked* the vile-tasting stuff, the way it burns its way down your throat the sensuous feel of dissolving mucus membranes, throat muscle spasmings (some kids *like* the taste of leaded paint chips or glue or dirt—same thing); but *some didn't like it*, and the ones that didn't or at least didn't drink it drank fresh riverwater instead *died*. (That's called *natural selection*. Thinking about natural selection, by the way, makes me *cry*.)

It stands to reason, right? We mutated to *like* spinning around in circles for hours groping at babe primates unsuccessfully, landing regularly on our faces, blubbering nonsense, throwing up, waking up near some unfamiliar guttering river, large cat watching us curiously. Other animals *don't* like this sort of thing (try feeding a dog a brewski—they resent you for it later, take revenge under your bed).

The upshot: Me: genetically *wired* to crave alcohol even though it tastes utterly vile, chanting hennessyhennessyhennessy when tense, reproducing during darknighted fondles in car by dashboard light (*very* romantic) with someone similarly inebriated (but otherwise incompatible). Buds from the Bud.

The resulting offspring has interests of course—I've already hinted as much. Irulina uses the soothing word: *hobby*. I know better but god help me I go along with her anyway buy him a Genome Kit (for *Sixth Grade and Up*) **Live Protoplasm Included** pink and quivering on the box I notice, innocent-looking like playdough **Four Color Genome Map! (Breed Your Own Tobacco That Glows In the Dark; Design Two-Footed Pseudopods With Real Toes; Flowers Change Color When You Shout Commands At Them; Blue, Green Fireflies; Make Your Own Dragons for Dungeons and Dragons; AND SO MUCH MORE)**. On the front of the box a photograph of a little geek with glasses I swear it's Igor's clone smiling with braces, foreground: a row of rosebushes studded with barking dogheads, 1950s-looking Mom and Pop smiling proudly. In the background several frightened postal workers are running away.

Is this a *good* idea? *You know it's not*. There should be rules about these things: psychological tests for would-be biologists doctors nurses x-ray technicians. If a student *likes* anatomy classes too much—looks forward to the weekly chop-up of someone's cat, brightly hopes for his first crack at a human corpse, I'd gently steer him into library science. I'd demand psychological tests, I'd require biological science aspirants to be well-adjusted, successful in school with their peers (sleeping around *a lot*), and without quiet revenge fantasies or sullen needs to creatively express themselves via invasive surgery. *You say*: Well that's easy to say *now* isn't it (given what you've been through)? but it was you (*not* Irulina) who actually *bought* young Igor a Genome Kit, right?

Ok ok it's true it's true (*mea culpa*). I was confused about the genre: I recalled (dimly, through an alcoholic haze) a chemistry set during my childhood late in the last century, nice bottles with colored powders in them interestingly-shaped glassware, recipes for “experiments,” tame and yet informative.

Times change. As if in illustration of this truism, some days later I realize something is wrong, really wrong—not lightly wrong in that Leave It To Beaver Brady Bunch No Problem We Can't Work Out Within A Half-Hour (Including Commercial Breaks) sort of way. Oh no not in *my* home: waiting patiently for us *at dinnertime* are a number of indescribable organ meats steaming on plates and bowls languishing half-nude in garnish, drowning in what always manages to look like brown gravy—the kid *loves* this stuff by the way regularly brings Mommy new recipes for brains intestines—and as soon as I sit down (I'm the last one to the table, ambivalence finally overcome) *the food* erupts into a Stephen King uproar: “Oh no” a panicked kidney says “don't tell me you're actually going to *eat* us.” Little mouths forming in the potatoes, crying: “help us help us, we've been *mashed!*” The mouthless drumsticks, on the other hand, are merely jumping up and down (throwing tantrums I guess). Broccoli is trying to crawl away like centipedes: stalk upended, the flowered head suddenly numerous legs, a chatty headcheese—a *lot* on its mind, dark resentments and bizarre recollections—I'm just *telling* you what happened. (Don't try to *imagine* it too closely or you'll get sick like I did.) Something on the table—I don't quite catch what—saying: “we're *dead meat* if we don't *run* for it.”

Irulina, sweetly to Igor: “You're so clever.” Me bolting to the bathroom and then out the front door.

I confess: this episode triggers a binge: Next thing I remember I'm sitting down at a *bar*. My marriage is in trouble, I'm saying while the bartender slaps down a whisky no ice and

without words; I've never been in there before (bartenders—the good ones—they're telepaths). It's a typical bar in other ways too: everyone is sitting around the oblonged table talking animatedly on cellphones while watching a silent mounted TV (its angle of inclination similar to that of a lowflung moon). On HBO soundbites (I presume) accompany what looks like the latest installment of a rerun of the *Eliad*. He wants his son back.

The guy next to me—he's sort of draped on the barstool—looks like he wants to talk to someone local. My mistake: My marriage is in trouble, I say (and it's pretty much the last thing I say). "You and me both buddy" he starts off. He's really really resentful: "I used to be a woman" the guy tells me. (No kidding I say) "Yeah and I was into *all* that feminist stuff. Men: their idea of sensitivity is to hug a tree the penis is semantically hardwired for rape pillage, an intrinsically blunt instrument, you know *that* sort of thing." (Right I say) "Anyway, had the operations switched genders got married really cute girl you'd like her." (Uh huh I say) "Thing is she talks too much." (No kidding I say) "See there's this result men on average mumble their way through thirteen thousand words a day something like that women twenty seven thousand and boy is that oppressive you reach a point I know I did where you say to her Honey? Could you just shut up?" (Yeah I say) "So sitting in the hotel room each night now the way I do hearing the other clientele fucking in their bathtubs I defend myself I say to myself it's not that you were coming up with too many words this is me speaking to the wife you know without her being there" (Uh huh I say) "it's not that you were coming up with too many words—you know what I mean" he says directly to me. I'm having a little trouble keeping straight when he's talking to me and when he's talking to his absent wife and besides, someone else is saying on a cellphone: "CIA makes them designer viruses they affect people *like programs* someone sneezes and like half an hour later there are only turtles in the room. Circe virus, yeah Circe. C-I-R-C-E. Greek myth or something.

G-R-E-E-K. Myth. M-Y-T-H. Em as in Mouthwash Why as in Yellowstone Park Tea as in Thong. Thong. T-H-O-N-G—”

The guy draped on the stool is still talking to me and I’m still nodding (it’s lucky ears don’t have to point in the direction of the person they’re officially listening to, don’t you think?): “It’s statistical” he’s telling me “I know some men not many are like that too I move away when I hear one of them it’s not that I think they’re fruity or anything like that just don’t want to hear too many words. And I tell her this is me talking to the wife again I mean not her really you know in my head in the hotel room” (Um I say) “It’s not that you were coming up with too many words it’s that there’s not a lot of content—sales on boxes of Kleenex how come Martha’s period is so heavy again is that new purple lipstick carcinogenic? I mean can’t we be a little more profound once in a while I don’t mean wow look at those baseball statistics I mean what about some—I don’t know—*metaphysics*.”

Metaphysics. I wake up two days later really sick don’t remember where I am or how I got there. Vague memories eventually return (as I indicated above). Not a good time was had. What a weird difference in verbal output between men and women. That’s a big difference, I say aloud. Four, I add. Boy it’s hard to keep up, I conclude (just for the record). Better put Igor in public school. Resolved to be agreeable, I come back home but no one’s there no evidence I’ve been missed except by Rover—he’s on Irulina’s desk whimpering (how’d he get up there?)—Miss me boy? I ask the ill-tempered chihuahua, and then I realize he’s not focused on me at all he’s frightened of something down below on the other side of the desk out of my line of sight, something that’s *talking*, saying—a really nasal voice, I can’t quite place the familiar tone: “Come on *big* doggie you think you’re so tough so brave so big—*big* doggie—show your stuff come and get it let’s take this outside.” Hello? I say. “Eh?” whatever is there says back. Sticks its

head around the side of the desk, furry ear first, then fullface, looks at me, sizes me up. Kind of like a cat's head. Hi, I say—cautiously, not too confrontational. Out marches something rather cat-looking (Christ! it really sounds like one, I realize). The thing is a bit androidish, shape not quite feline—a little too boxy its movements stiff—"march" is surely the right word here (but still, clearly protoplasmic). Real hair, nicely done—except that it's bright purple. Not a bad job if the kid made it from scratch (which, from the look of things, he probably did.) "Hi" it says finally "just having a little fun with the dog there." Fun? I ask. "Well a one-on-one chat, anyway. It's about time if you ask me—long history here, buddy" it adds, gauging my expression "Wouldn't get involved if I were you. Just between me and the pooch. Him and his kind got lots to pay for. Reparations are a'comin'." I'm suddenly very tired. He's a *dog*, I say, what the fuck are *you*? "I'm his worst nightmare. Here I come. Bow-wow-wow buddy." I don't think so, I say. "Ok let's change strategies then" it says "I'll forgive and forget Mousedog here let's you and me get to know each other a little instead, ok?" I don't think so, I say. "I know your type" it goes on, not missing a beat, moving a little closer "you're way too leftbrain—you're an accountant, did I guess that right? Come on, loosen up, fondle *me* instead." Instead of what? I wonder. No, I say sensibly. But the cat keeps it up, moves still closer: "Sometimes" it says "you've got to relax stop thinking so much reach out and feel. Fur, for example. Lots of friendly petting between friends relaxes *all* the muscles—" it sort of gives a shiver with its body to demonstrate "—better than massage, cheaper too. There have been studies it lowers the blood pressure you feel good I feel good no weird diseases always a plus in today's world. What do you say?" It's gotten alarmingly close to my leg but it's making what are pretty respectable standard cat movements, eyes blinking in that cat-come-on sort of way kneading its paws sensuously into the floortiles purring sounds punctuating the commentary. I reach out—but gingerly—pet it (her?) and it (he?)

coos a little, responds viscerally to my touch. It's ok (nothing to e-mail home about). But then—you saw this coming right? it sinks its teeth into my hand—moves really fast. Hey, I *scream*. It lets go: “Ok, so I'm a little kinkier than what you're used to in the average feline, go with the flow you'll get used to it. What's that leg taste like?” It doesn't get to find out because I bash it with a nearby pile of Real Estate manuals—it mashes easily, and without protest—no death scenes no last words just greenish goo spraying everything. Where are the bones? I wonder.

I look down at my hand. (Rover does too; he's still on the desk still whimpering.) It's not bleeding as much as I expected. Punctures like snakebites. That's weird, I say. Rover growls. “Eep” he growls “Eep Eep Eep.” I'm not sure if I should suck on it or get an injection in the emergency room (but the last friend of mine who went to an emergency room *died*). I go to the bathroom rinse the (rather tinylooking) wounds in water, soap then rubbing alcohol. That reminds me I want a drink. When I come back into the livingroom Rover is still on Irulina's desk growling. Oh *right*, I say, me you growl at. (“Eep” he growls back.) But this bugcat here has you on a desk. Hope you can figure out how to get down yourself. I leave. He's still on the desk, still growling.

I'm thinking about how college students in the 1920s—this is what I heard anyway—used to swallow goldfish whole. “Want anything” the guy asks me. Yes yes, I'm still deciding, I say. “Well you've been at it for almost an hour and that's no exaggeration.” Well I'm a little indecisive here. “Maybe so but you've been watching them in a pretty weird way, if you ask me, like you're *stalking* them or something.” What do you mean *stalking*? Who stalks *goldfish*? Do you harass *all* your customers this way? “You keep following them with your head in these short jerky motions and I'd swear your ears have been twitching.” You know, I don't *have* to buy goldfish. “No one *has* to buy goldfish, right?” he snaps back “but I've always liked the little

critters that's why I work in a pet shop and not at a fish market. Get my drift, *buddy*?" You're insinuating something you really are, I tell him.

He never comes out with it just keeps standing there staring at me like he's never seen my sort of face before. I leave in a huff. I eat two tunafish sandwiches on the way back home some herring out of a can some raw deboned sockeye salmon (no way I'm facing Irulina's cooking tonight—I'm too shook up) and I notice that along with the goldfish craving which is *not* abating women are looking way too buttocky to me—even lanky teenagers. (Wow, I think to myself, what's with this sudden Kate Moss thing?) When I open the frontdoor this noise makes me practically jump out of my skin. Oh it's a vacuum cleaner, I realize. Igor is in the livingroom pushing buttons on his handheld computer something eating something else on the television set, Irulina vacuuming the bedroom. Listen runt, I say, something you made *bit* me. "Dad it says right on the cover you shouldn't *provoke* those things. It says that in the shaded box marked *animal ethics*" (he's memorized the instruction book I realize with awe and fear) "THEY'RE LIVING BEINGS WITH THEIR OWN AUTONOMY AND YOU HAVE TO TREAT THEM WITH RESPECT. That's what it says." Irulina chimes in, the vacuum now yowling lonely in the bedroom: "You *stepped* on it." I *killed* it, yes, I say (correcting her), but that was after it bit me; it tricked me, it asked me to pet it. "Why would something ask *you* to pet it?" Irulina says in that nasty way of hers. But then she stops, stares at me, index finger in her mouth suddenly. Something has struck her, something about me I mean. She's looking *coy*, realizes it (I think) attempts to break the mood. "And you put Rover on my desk" she adds finally "he did something yellowish on my pad of leases." I realize that I hear Rover eeping at me, but from the other side of the room under the couch where it's safe. His head is sticking out: His ears are flat against his skull. (Not an easy thing for a chihuahua.)

We're in the bedroom and Irulina wants it bad. I can tell (this is *weird*—she hasn't wanted *it* bad or otherwise for a really *long* time). “You beast” she says oddly “take me *now*.” (You beast? Take me now? Romance novels do things to people's brains.) Before we stopped doing it altogether we'd been at it the same way for years (maybe that was the problem). I decide to go with my instincts try something different—take her from behind, thinking automatically: doggy-style, and then resentful about it: like *dogs* have a monopoly on this sort of thing—anyway Irulina's *really* into it everything is going well (she comes twice) then I come—it feels it really does that my penis is growing in her getting bigger or something and then I pull out suddenly. God does she shriek. *What the fuck is with your penis?* she's yelling at me, screaming, tears bursting out of her face, leaping up and down on the bed, swinging at me with one hand holding her crotch with the other. I'm looking at my penis while I'm trying to dodge her—it's a little too dark to be absolutely sure but it's gotten *spiky* or something. And what is *this*? foreskin? Wasn't I circumcised once? Hoo boy.

Later, after she's calmed down told me staccatoed by shrieks and slaps “you've never sticking *that* in me again”: *whatever*, I'm thinking, you're way too fat anyway; better see a doctor we both agree during a (short) lucid moment, more shrieking more slapping, eventually she calms down starts to doze (still muttering occasional imprecations at me, but in a positive way). And then something weird happens (I mean—something *more* that's weird). She reaches out: starts to stroke me (half asleep, though). Affection. From Irulina. This is new. Old, actually. Long time ago she had it for me. Stopped for years. No touching, except by accident. I'm impressed. (But at what?)

Next morning: I'm looking at my face in the mirror, trying to shave: what *is* this? what's with the bone structure here? it looks too rounded something's happening. I emerge from the

bathroom, denying to myself that I'm frightened, denying that there's anything to be frightened about, denying denying denying. Igor is nowhere to be seen. I grounded him for a week, but neither of us really knows what that means (we both got it from television). "And another thing" Irulina tells me, out of the blue "you've started snoring." That's not snoring, I say. "Don't tell me it's not snoring. I know snoring god do I know snoring." You have to be asleep to snore, I explain, I wasn't asleep. "How do you know? There have been studies; lots of people are asleep and don't know it." I have no doubt that's true, I say, but I wasn't asleep.

(Did you ever notice how when a marriage is ending your verbal exchanges become ritualized?)

I need a drink bad what with all this frustration still no goldfish no goldfish in the refrigerator at all. (What is this? I didn't have a drink *last night*. I forgot? Well things have been happening, a lot is on my mind.) So I'm in a bar looking at my whisky and this is really weird I'm looking at the whisky and *I can't drink it* (it's kind of repulsive). The guy next to me starts talking and I notice he's got hair growing out of his ears (he can't be more than thirty—doesn't that sort of thing only happen to *old men*? It must hurt like hell when it's waxed).

"Some plan some group something orthodox or orthodox something. I forget what" he tells me "in Brooklyn somewhere or maybe it's Pennsylvania they want to genetically modify themselves every last woman man child everybody so they can't reproduce with any other type of human—" You mean (last night with Irulina is on my mind) modify their penises or something? I ask. He looks at me with evident pity. "No" he says "I mean change their genes add extra chromosomes so that any children they have with the nonorthodox whatevertheyare or with the nonwhatevertheyare orthodox I forget which will be as sterile as mules." Oh, I say, is this bad? "They want to be a different species from the rest of us" he says. Oh. I say. "Yes" he says.

“Orthodox something or something orthodox. I forget which. And what.” Oh. I say. (Then I have an idea.) They wouldn’t be the folks who invented the egg noodle would they? I ask. “Egg noodles” he says. (He’s pondering this.) “I don’t know Maybe. White militarists are thinking about the same thing.” White militarists? I say. “You know, neo-Nazis, whitebread terrorists those guys.” Oh. I say. “Isn’t it great how people think alike?” he asks. People, I say, is it people we’re talking about? “Ha ha” he says. (I notice we’re talking like *men*. Short sentences. Virile. One. Two. Punchline. Hemmingway, or something. Despite the fur starting up all over on me, I feel proud.)

Then he says: “This is just the beginning.” It is? I say. “Oh yes” he says “we’re going to splinter into a thousand different species. In no time.” No kidding, I say (I’m looking down at my hands. Wow, I think, I can retract my fingernails. That is so cool.) “Oh yes” he says “it’ll be worse than Protestantism.” Eh? I say, what’s bad about Protestantism? (I vaguely recall being a Methodist. Pews were involved, I think.) “Big country” he says “People have a fight, they leave start Rhode Island.” This is bad? I ask, Rhode Island is a bad thing to start? “No” he says “but now you have a million sects different beliefs all over the country Protestantism was a religion once now it’s a million cults—like insects.” Um, I say. He’s really lost me. Besides, the poor guy is searching *history* for analogies to this. But there are no analogies to this: Nothing new under the sun? You wish.

That won’t work, I tell him later. He picks his head up off the bar. (I am *so* jealous: my whisky is still untouched.) “What won’t work?” he asks. What you said about new species, I say, being a new species isn’t going to stop anything. These days, I tell him, I could crossbreed with *trees* if I wanted to. “Technology springs eternal” he says.

Have you ever noticed that when you reach a certain station in life—a certain plateau (garnished a certain amount of respectability) all your friends are lawyers? I'm waiting for my friend Charles (not his real name) he's a lawyer he's my friend I called him in a panic, he's come *all* the way from Connecticut to see me: *that's* friendship. Meanwhile, I've been sitting at the table ogling this really anorexic waitress—heroin chic (I am so into it now). Oh wow, I think, she's got no chin. And there's quite a bit of whisker (I'm amazed, just amazed at how my taste in women has changed). I've been trying to flirt with her but something about me is clearly putting her off. I order from the menu (I've known Charles for years: he's never on time so we've got a ritual: I show up late apologize to the waitstaff order a meal eat it he shows up he apologizes to the waitstaff he orders a meal I get dessert he gets dessert I get coffee we leave together, finally in sync). I'm looking around the restaurant (they're looking at me too): strange how people are always moving the muscles in their obscenely naked faces. What is it with all this *expressing*? what's the payoff (if there really is a payoff why would so many people have sex in the dark)? Then I'm thinking about Rover: how sloppy he is mouth open drooling all the time Jesus what an idiot where's his dignity his sense of self? What awful noises he makes: so vulgar. Why must he be cleaned and brushed periodically—why can't he do it *himself*—like decent folk?

Charles has finally shown up. He sits down, looks at me, gives off one of those insensitive low whistles followed by an *oh shit* that people who put on a lot of weight between meetings with friends find so irritating. The cute hairy chinless waitress shows up with the two whiskies I ordered, I wink at her Charles gives me a *huh?* look and then starts to raise an eyebrow in that disapproving way of his at the plural whiskies but his cellphone interrupts him.

“Yellow?” he says authoritatively while I stare at the whiskies in amazement. *What* is this? Why do they *smell* this way? I pick one up put it down pick it up put it down. “You okay?”

Charles asks, closing the cellphone. These whiskies smell funny to you? I ask. “No” he says. Smell, I say. Charles wrinkles his nose several times. “No” he says again. Have you forgotten how to smell? I tell him, put the damn thing up *at your nose* and *sniff*. Is that so hard? “Ok ok.” He does it. “Now what?” he asks. What do you mean *now what*? Does it *smell* funny? “It smells like a whisky.” Oh boy, I say. Charles, I say, this is going to sound really impossible, really strange but you’re going to have to believe me accept what I’m saying be supportive tell me what I should do emote sympathize that sort of thing. (I take a breath. I notice his eyes are getting red, he’s starting to snuffle.) Charles, I say with feeling, I’m turning into a cat.

“So *that’s* what it is” he says “you were bitten by one of those new synthetic cats.” There are *others*? I say (aghast). “Oh yeah” he tells me “neighbor’s?” “Neighbor’s what? I ask. “Was it the neighbor’s *synthetic cat*?” No, I bought a Genome Kit for Igor. “You *bought* it?” he practically shouts. Yeah, what’s wrong with buying things? I ask. “What’s wrong” he tells me “is that you’re automatically bound by contractual obligations with the manufacturer, they do it with thumbprint contracts at the counter, right? You pressed on one of those, right?” Sure, I say, standard disclaimers I imagine. “Right” he says “you’ve agreed to release them from provisions 117, 119, 221, etcetera etcetera, manufacturing defects are the sole responsibility of the injured party, etcetera etcetera.” So? I can still sue, can’t I? I ask. “If you’d *stolen* it” he says “there’d be no problem—then you’d sue—they’d countercharge you with unlawful possession etcetera etcetera, but you’d win of course because changing into a cat is a big deal—they’d settle out of court first not let it get to a jury—you standing there meowing at them—and I mean settle *big*.” And then he adds, thoughtfully “why didn’t you just let your son *shoplift* the thing the way I do when one of my kids needs a toy?” Shoplift? I ask. “I can’t handle the legal risk otherwise” he

tells me “not with the way toy insurance is going through the roof I mean—can’t afford that.”

Toy insurance, I say.

We’re interrupted by the cute waitress bringing me my meal. Charles orders catfish while I stare. These aren’t *potatoes*, I tell the waitress. “Yes” the waitress says “they are.” No, I say (and I admit I’m being *really* condescending), these are green *and* leafy. “Don’t start a fight” Charles says—that’s rich coming from a trial lawyer “maybe they’re genetically altered.” “Yeah” the waitress says, not missing a beat. Genetically altered, I say (and then to the waitress), do they talk too? Can they say *Fuck you*?

The waitress has backed away. “You’re in a really pissy mood” Charles says “just because you’re turning into a cat. Lighten up already—worse things have happened to people.” I resist the impulse to rake his face over once or twice with my fingernails, and plow into my tuna steak instead. The manager has come over wondering if anything is wrong but Charles soothes him by pointing out that he is a lawyer.

I thought Igor just invented the thing, I say to Charles while chewing tuna, I didn’t realize there were other cats biting people. “One of the experiments in the kit has instructions on how to grow one” Charles says “but there’s a bug of some sort in the genes, they’re always a little too aggressive, so there’s been a bit of genetic material leeching into the general population—” Genetic material? like I have different genes now? I ask. “Yep.” Oh boy, I say (and then): how come *you* know so much about this and I don’t? I haven’t heard anything on television about synthetic cats biting people I didn’t even know you could *grow* them. “My firm is working up a class action suit” he says. Oh good, I say, this should be publicized quickly. To protect people. “Brilliant idea” Charles says, like I’m semi-retarded “*no*, we’re approaching this *intelligently*, we’re keeping it under wraps for as long as possible.” Eh? I ask. “Class action suits need a

certain number of people, low thousands at least, to make it worth the while. Luckily the company is handling this all wrong—it's in total denial." Wait a minute, I say, you're allowing more of these things to be made that bite people? "Not us—we're lawyers: we just litigate over the resulting mess. Don't blame *me* that you bought your kid a Genome Kit instead of having him shoplift it like sensible people do. Now you're just going to have to wait until we have a large enough population—a *big* crisis—so we can publicize it bring in Congress to undercut override that contract generate a certain amount of public outrage—" I cut him off: Why can't you do that *now*? "Not enough profit in it for us—need more people for a larger settlement—"

At this point Charles goes into an extreme sneezing fit: I've been noticing all along his eyes getting red—a lot of sniffing—I've been thinking it's his fellow-feeling for me—emotion for his forthcoming four-footed friend. (*I know* he's capable of emotion: we've been to movies together.)

"This thing you've got" he tells me between sneezes "it's not stopping is it?" Why? I ask, what's happening? "Well not a lot" he says "except in the eyes and this fuzz you seem to be sprouting all over—you look a little like Chia pet actually—you remember them?" Fuck Chia pet, I say. "Look" he goes on "I'm really allergic to cats—I'm having *such* a reaction here." He really is. Twenty sneezes later he manages to get out—between spurts I mean—"it's the dander you know?" The what? "The dander—flaking cat skin that's what people allergic to cats are allergic to. Have you considered *Head and Shoulders*?" The implicit suggestion of a shower makes whatever's growing on me stand on end: I suppress an impulse to shriek and run for my life: I'm turning into a *cat*, I tell him coldly, why would *Head and Shoulders* work? "I don't know" he says "why don't you look at the product description?"

I'm thinking—looking at the lawyer's face—*Christ* that's naked I mean *really* naked kind of threatening obscene anyway really creepy and at the same time everything expressed there is totally artificial and fake. Hell, their *ears* don't even turn towards someone when they're supposedly listening to them. That's when I realize: I'm not human not a primate not really. That's why his face nauseates me that's why *whisky* nauseates me. It's a new world for me: *I'm not related to my family anymore*—I'm not related to any of these guys; I'm something new: I'm going to *like* not being a primate. I look at Charles—I don't smile (I can't do that anymore) I meow. And then again, really loudly.

I wish I could say something more dramatic happened. (Charles had some sort of asthma attack—no big deal.) I know you primates like big bang endings: a climax big sharks tornadoes loud noises lots of whooping it up (some evil something hanging dead from a tree—a crowd of *you* triumphantly going apeshit). Sorry, this is real life and in real life there's just change—you go on. I'm a talking cat now. Well that doesn't *quite* describe me it isn't *totally* accurate. I still stand 6 feet 2 inches—but I do have this very cute kittenface. Primates respond they really do: women touch me, touch me *a lot* like to caress me and that's ok as long as they don't try to push the affection thing too far. There's also this Egyptian cult I've stumbled across that worships me—well *all* of us actually: I go along with it because it's good for the ego and pagan rituals involve secret herbs and things but I really shouldn't talk about this stuff here.

There's a class action suit against BioLab which is proceeding *really well*, and although we're allowed to tell our side in interviews in magazines on television in short stories we have to protect ourselves legally, change the names. Resolving the case, apparently, won't take long

because of the way we look—and the way things are going in the biotech industry they might even find a *cure*.

A cure. Some catfolk miss the primate life, but not me—I was never very good at it, although I wouldn't have put it that way then: pretence bonding pretence love and affection, I had trouble keeping up. *Domestic* cats are loners: not much in the way of fellow-feeling or family feeling (except for chorus practice), much more natural.

Lions are fun too—they *have* family-life, but it's an out-and-out *patriarchy*: the lionesses hunt I eat. I like the sound of that—maybe I'll be a lion next. If I ever want to settle down again, I mean.