

[illegible][illegible]

When you told me that I sound like Eric now, I felt my eyebrows raise beyond any measure of control and the corners of my mouth twist with a flavor of amusement that some would call a “twisted pleasure.” The feeling came over me unexpectedly, so all of a sudden I was watching myself, us. Seated by the door in a bar crowded with others, we were on our fourth or fifth round, and I had just struck our small bar table with my fist. Of the others, we cared little for any of them, yet there was an undue part of us that suggested: though we were not drinking with them, we were still drinking amongst them, a fact we had to accept. Partly due to their roar and also the ringing in my ears, if I was not shouting, my face red, I was listening with intensity, perhaps too much, as our conversation proceeded from casual mumblings to solemn vows and my roars in outrage. Even as I agreed with you, you shook your head no. Where was my humor? Was I serious? What did I say that made you to tell me I sound like Eric now? I can only remember that the conversation, as it reached its pitch of anxiety, was sublime, surpassing all material casings of friendship that bound us. Certain forms of humiliation can only be achieved among friends. Why were we even talking about Duchamp, or Burroughs as I at times like to call him, when like a cubist collage their faces and mysteries merge into one superbeast of myth and art. To that end, what else is there, and the point? Bang. My fist. In a toast without us, our glasses clinked, or shuddered under the impact. Was that satisfaction with their content’s effect on us, a message of warning, or a shiver of fear at their impending break? (Not beyond me in this state; you would know this.) But Eric? With my halt in speech, you called for a toast. We raised our three glasses in inspired automation, the type which is incensed in friends who agree too much on the nature of things.

Every inch of the bar was covered in it. Ogre faces looked on and putrid hands with peeling skin reached out from behind layers upon layers of greyish-white webbing. The undead decorum enlivened us patrons with a devilish temperament that only several centuries of age hidden behind the face of a handsome twenty-something could produce. Somehow we gained a brief immunity to the trappings of time; birth and death were not the same, but bred similar cool feelings. Our grinning joy was the antagonism we aroused in each other that night in that cocoon, where we were as caught flies but vampiric in our ecstasies. I told you how I liked the sense of freedom that our surroundings produced. At the bottom of this ancient arachnid’s nest, we could flap around helplessly or assume more alchemic postures. It was as if we were drinking down in the web’s old city, musty as it was, a special terrain of debauchery long forgotten by the ancient spider, who was miles away upward, toward the crawling surface, were fresher meats than our soggy thieves bodies could be enjoyed. When you told me I sound like Eric now, and I

wanted to smile, I knew I had lost, that it was forever. Eric was not mentioned again, nor did you ever explain. Perhaps my face, softened with blood and alcohol, betrayed my limit, or perhaps it was not me at all that made you stop short of explaining. Was it the spider's scratching you heard, when all I could hear was ringing? Though that beast is still very far away, if not already dead, it continues to appear in long shadows and essences, like the faint bursts of a supernova in 4 billion year intervals. From these bursts brief conditions to seem like Eric emerge. Then the moment crawls back into the creases of our brains. I quieted. The fissure had lifted and in the aftermath, the black ash hung. It would settle awhile later, but preternatural vesuvians like us could surely forget these poisons.

I wouldn't know about Eric's debate methods, because Eric and I never argue. Sometimes we would talk about his problems. In this way he seemed to me like everyone else, so I defended him. Now that I sound like him, I wonder if we traded more in our conversations than I let on. He did not deviate from his submission to confusion, and he acted upon psychosis with a subtle accuracy. He had my empathy, as the difference between heaviness of exhaled smoke that is sucked upwards into the vacuous sky, and smoke that hangs around one's head in sagging loops before disappearing.

Encouraging him to ash on the floor, blind to our own pleasure seeking, on another October night shortly after, we bought our first succulent, a frown of thorns with one wilting, fuchsia flower. Placed on the floor of the living room, its life would be short lived at the center of our world, the apartment. Eric wanted to snuggle with it, and between our freakish fits of laughter, we managed to sputter, "Go for it." He picked up the cactus and pulled it into his chest. He looked to be in actual love for a moment before stumbling back, he dropped the plant, and screamed his skin was on fire. Never did I see someone's love turn to terror in such a flash. Usually it is slubbed, refined and twisted, before it penetrates the needle. The next morning, I received a message from you that Eric had messaged you. He was feeling very ill. You could not go, so I volunteered and went alone. It was evening by the time I got there and ducked into the gapping cellar door to your cell-like collection of memorabilia and paraphernalia. It sounded like there was a car on the inside. Your radiator was revving and hissing, and the scent of oil, oil pigment, permeated the air, becoming stronger as I approached the toes that I hoped were yours. Whatever rest of your body, I had yet to know, was obscured behind the large boiler, which dominated the room in size and with its heat. I inched forward and could see you were on a bed composed of newspapers and cut-up stuffed toys, barely clothed and skin fully coated with black paint. The bottoms of your feet, palms and eyelids were a cold, pale green, as though the vitality of your blood was slowly retreating from the surface. I thought you were dead, but you open your eyes, when you heard me sputtering for breath before you. In my shock, I turned from you and into the bathroom, a foot to my left, falling into it. I groped for the light, but there was only an exposed socket. In the arc of light from the boiler room, I saw the infaustus

container of substance that covered you, a 16oz can of Gamblin ivory black. On the sink there was your toothbrush and a large bottle of Ivory dishwashing liquid.

I returned to you in the other room. Your eyes were still open. When I appeared over you, your playing dead eyes repositioned their gaze on me. Your lips were glued together. I could see them weakly trying to part, pulling at the embrasure. I held your feet at first and pulled. You moved, dragging a few headlines and stuffed parts with you. When I had room to position myself behind you, I hooked under your arms, swiveled you around, and pulled you backwards into the bathroom. Your shower booth was raised and narrow, and I lifted you into it from behind. This required me to go in too, before you. Only your seated torso could fit in with me, so I released your arms to climb out. I planned to swing my leg over your slumping body and make a single, long step to the sink. Halfway out of the shower, my arms braced against two opposite walls, as I teetered in half light, I felt you grab my ankle and hold me there. Your grip was stronger than one would expect for someone in your condition. Surprised and held in this position for several seconds, unable to breathe, again the dance of flesh, smoke and disappearance with which you made up your circles flashed in my mind. With a hard flick of my foot, your hand was thrown off and dropped awkwardly in your lap. I pushed your knees into your chest, and folded you into the shower. Taking the Ivory dish soap, the only solvent or cleanser I could see, I told you, "Shut your eyes," and covered you in the clear, stinging fluid. I turned on the shower, looked on as you began to foam, and left the bathroom. Grabbing the torso of a medium sized, pink creature from your bed I returned to you. Your eyes were still closed, and your skin had begun to emerge from beneath the black pigment oil. I took the stuffed torso that was bursting from one end with soft, synthetic fibers and used it to wipe your face and body free of the thick paint, till you were at last a faint grey. On your chest were the marks from the cactus, purple and greenish, as well as several cigarette burns, and a small hole in your shoulder. When I had finished and stood up, though your eyes remained closed, you spoke, murmuring, "Make sure you send all my pens to the pen man." I turned off the shower and looked for a towel for you, but all I could find was a used sheet hanging on your wall. I put it on you and tucked it behind your shoulders with great effort, because though you were alive, your weight was still dead. "Eric," I said, not sure why. Perhaps it was a simple reminder for both our benefit. At this your eyes opened wide, and you began to laugh. "So the people have spoken! They want my approval! I approve! I approve!" You coughed, sinking back into the plastic tub that made a long screech against your tacky skin. In the mirror I saw I was as black as you. The chill of the rigid, green coma, which you remained in for several days I am told, was settling in my bones. I left for home. Walking, the yellow and black streets were mostly empty, except for a few bodies which darted far off from one curb to another like rats you almost forget are there. I passed, as inside the bars friends spoke between flickering candles that dizzied me, or the friendless sipped quietly, their backs turned. Was I in Eric's loop or

yours? The real thought had begun, the one which had been on the tip of my tongue when you told me. But as quickly as I had been grasping at it, it was lost to me, as an ambient, haunted likeness. Like a black balloon escaping upwards, or a long decay, the real thought had begun, and would not come until long after my death, and how could I know it then?