

## **The Green Couch**

### **Book Three**



### **Gerald Brett**

Mago asked why I spent so much time holed up in my room on days off and most evenings. I told him I relished spending free time working on writing projects, listening to jazz, reading, as well as studying the special artworks from my collection that I hung in this private space. “It’s where I compose, meditate, appreciate, cogitate, and so on. One of my friends refers to it as my chamber. Right now I’m doing a piece for The New Yorker about a meeting I had in Japan with Edward Albee almost 35 years ago. I base it, I think quite cleverly, on his short and obscure play “Fam and Yam.” Know it?” Mago gazed at me with fake admiration. I’d seen him admire a really fine ass scent and knew how he looked when he was sincere. “Now Wow. Pah Pah Guh Why Tah,” he said. “I never said I was a good writer. Wasn’t it Raoul Simkas who wrote, ‘Schreiben sie rechts! Was ist der Unterschied?’? Well said, wouldn’t you say?” We stood side

by side in front of a small drawing by Sue Coe I urged him to analyze for its statement about corporatocracy. For his enlightenment I reprinted an article from Wikipedia, fully expecting a round of questions. “Boh Wee. Mah Goh Soh Boh.” I was sure Mago said that because I’d failed to reach the meat of my lecture more quickly. “Hold your horses, buster, I’m about to discuss Naomi Klein’s book, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise Of Disaster Capitalism*. I wouldn’t budge if I were you.” I checked my watch to make sure I didn’t miss the opening of my favorite radio show, *The Sounds of Brazil*. Something approximating a smile parted Mago’s lips. “Noh Moh Kuh Chu. Gih Mee Guh.” I nodded in recognition of his appropriation of the famous line. “Bravo, my little friend, bravo. But were you aware that quote, attributed to Hermann Goring, actually appeared in Hanns Johst’s anti-Semitic play, *Schlageter*, and it went, ‘Wenn ich Kultur höre ... entsichere ich meinen Browning!’” Mago said, “Fuh Mee.” He followed me into my room lackadaisically. I switched on the FM tuner and sat in my desk chair. “This afternoon they’re featuring the latest recording by Rosa Passos, called the female Joao Gilberto by aficionados of Brazilian bossa-nova. She hails from Bahai, in northern Brazil, the birthplace of many of the nation’s greatest musicians.” Mago seemed too restless to sit. He angled toward the door. “Pah Pah Dih Leh Tah,” Mago said. I tried to laugh off his remark, but it stung me. “Who’re you calling a dilettante, you wiseass motherfucker? You name it and I’ll run circles around you.” He picked at a tuna flake stuck between two teeth. “Goh Heh. Pah Pah Goh Noh Weh. Soh Wuh.” He walked away before I could explicate the theory of passive art, *Beobachter Kunst*, alluded to in the mid-century German text of the same name. I ran after him, slipping in an odorless piss puddle he deposited in the hallway.



I caught Mago blabbing to Tamara about my drinking “Pah Pah Geh Soh Hai. Now Wow. Hee Wai Noh.” I could see my wife’s face, suffused with contempt and self-pity, holding onto Mago like she was the widow and he an orphan of my addiction, all because of two to three glasses per night when nobody was watching just to ease me into the black train assured of my chosen seat going to the same paltry destination. “He’s a weak man, Mago. Never be like him, please. He’s given up the fight as all the losers do. I can’t stand to watch it. That’s why I put him out of my bedroom 10 years ago, and why he knocks on the door before entering. Would a strong man knock on a woman’s door before entering?” Why the fuck did Mago need to hear that his father had no mettle? Plus there were other circumstances to my leaving. Should I reveal to Mago how unendurable I found her breathing pattern, its irregular rhythm and bubbly popping, like a corpulent antiquarian book collector sucking on his moldy pipe? Or how she disturbed my passage when her leg gently lifted the blanket in order to discern the scent of a personal gas acquittal? “Pah Pah Noh Gai. Why Mah Mah Noh Goh?” I’d burst into the room without tapping on the door if I thought it would accomplish anything. “I laugh when he calls himself a man. My father was a man, my son is a man, and you’ll be a man someday, Mago. It’s more proof alcohol has addled his mind. He calls himself a man? Why doesn’t he claim he’s an Olympic gymnast while he’s at it? Be up front, Mago, and never disguise who you are.” Only a hollow wooden door separated me from the calumny directed at my pith, dulled as it might be. Would they speak so boldly if they knew I hovered within earshot, unexpectedly returned from

the liquor store with a fresh bottle of Malbec from a special wine-growing region of Argentina, El Valle de la Impotencia para Diabéticos. “Noh Guh Bee Soh Wee. Pah Pah Noh Roh Mah.” I chose to be Nabi’s role model, not Mago’s. Why else did he die an impaired Jew, acquiescent at the tethered end, free of amour-propre, stolid and detached, unarousable but malcontented, more pitiable than pitied, the butt of jokes even in deceasement, mourned most by his killer if Tamara were right and even if she weren’t mourned most by the one that stuffed his brain with gobs of ethereal sour cream? “He reminds me of Hong-Seok,” Tamara went on, “the old drunken shoemaker accused of raping an American soldier on that Korean soap, ‘Story of an Unethical Hunchback in Modern Day North Korea.’ His only defense was he couldn’t stick his foot in an empty shoe even if he sat down on a silk-covered chair and a naked middle-aged woman lifted his leg to help.” I clearly explained to her at the time the metaphor had to do with missed opportunities in Korean rapprochement. I started to lightly knuckle her door, but instead I went to my room and hid two Malbecs.



Mago nudged a piece of paper in front of me as I filled the empty slots in my weekly pill organizer. “Goddamnit Mago, can’t you see I’m busy? How’d you like it if I had a heart attack and died because you diverted my attention while putting my meds in order? That would be a heavy burden to carry for the rest of your life.” I glanced at the off-white sheet of heavy duty

bond he'd stuck under my nose. There were queer scratches, overtly neurotic in a sacred way, creating a deep unsettlement beyond murky. "See Mah Goh Pih, Guh Pih?" I studied it, vexed in every pore, searching for one thing about which I could offer a remark. "I see it's a picture. People shit on toilet paper and it's a picture." Mago sighed, coming off girlishly. "Nah Shi, Pah Pah Shi. Soh Shi Eee." Mago whooshed his sketch to the edge of the table and caught it as it floated toward the floor. The commotion upset my pharmaceutical kit, popping open the lid atop Tuesday, spilling a white capsule, a blue tablet, and a pink gel cap. Tamara walked in and shrieked. "Don't you dare give Mago your narcotics," she said, "how many times do I have to tell you?" Mago ran up to her with his drawing. "See Mah Goh Pih." She accepted his art with both hands and studied it for a few seconds before handing it back to him. "Did he feed you his drugs?" Tamara said. "Tell me Mago so we can pump your stomach." Mago snatched his piece back and faced us angrily. "Mah Goh Sho Yue Pih. Yue Noh See Pih. Why?" Tamara crouched down on all four and scanned the floor for more pills. She moved like a robotic vacuum cleaner, not missing a square inch. "Here's the pink one," she said, "and there's the blue one." Mago cleared his throat and spoke while staring at Tamara's rump. "Mah Goh See Mah Tah. Mah Tah See Mah Goh." Watching Tamara on the ground began to make me seethe, but as angry as I was I couldn't help hearing Mago's immature plea for the spotlight. "Okay, you see matter and matter sees you. No one asked but you've defined your art more or less like every phony artist in town. Now that you've gotten it off your chest would you mind telling Tamara you didn't ingest my dope, please?" Mago continued to hold his sketch, pointing it at us in turn. "Yue Tue Noh See Mah Goh Pih. Why Yue Soh Duh?" Tamara propelled herself up off the floor lustily displaying a white pill in her thumb and pointer finger. "See," she said. "Great, that's the one

that helps me excavate my bladder, though I see it more in terms of affording my dick a little comfort. Can you tell me what harm that'll do Cy Twombly over there?" Mago took my statement to be more of an insult than I intended. "Fuh Yue. Yue Noh Geh Mah Goh Pih. Yue Noh Geh Mah Goh Ahh Nee Mah." A blurry abyss filled the room. Mago carried his artwork to the living room and attached it to the wall with a stick pin, ripping it down before I had a chance.



Mago pissed in the face of a toad through the screen door to the patio. "Pah Pah See Mee? See Mee Pih Ihm?" I told him I saw the whole thing. He nodded excitedly, coaxing me to go on with my commentary. "Yeah, that was pretty good. It's something I've heard about, but it's the first time I've seen it done." Apparently I said the words Mago wanted to hear. "Pih Ihm Guh, Huh? Pih Ihm Onh Hih Heh." I walked over to the screen door and wiped off collateral urine with a dish towel. The toad remained curled up looking like a large serving of boiled green squash. "I can't tell if he's playing dead or you killed him. I hope you didn't have asparagus for lunch." Mago unleashed a volley of swift air jabs and finished off by high-fiving the Madagascar Dragon Tree beside the sofa. "Hee Soh Boh Ohh," Mago said. "You'd be bowled over too if you were doused with a stream of fluid waste, don't you think? Just about everybody wants to take a leak on a toad but I'd be surprised if many toads know that when they're born into this world. Think about it, Mago." He didn't give pause to reflect on my admonition,

though no one had to explain why. Name the American towhead that wouldn't trade places with Mago in a heartbeat, and I don't think you'd find many adult males who wouldn't leap at the chance. "Soh Guh, Now Wow, Fuh Mee." I was the first to catch sight of the amphibian's moist body begin to quiver. The good Hebrew in me wanted to see him get up, shake off the humiliation of being urinated on and leap back into the carefree existence written about with elegance in the Ukrainian folk tales. On the other hand, seeing Mago so highly spirited tugged at my heart. Wasn't a lad's happiness worth the loss of a life here and there? "Mago, don't look now but your prey seems to be sneaking away. Yours would be the first piss a toad ever survived, or at least that I've heard of." Mago stared icily at the warty frog, dazed and degraded, struggling to stand; before our eyes we were witnessing an **ironic** ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny but in reverse, every homeschooling Christian's worst nightmare. "Mah Goh Pih Ihm Aah Geh." He ran to the screen door, secreting along the way, his lips muttering invectives. "Hoh Ahn Fuh Toh." The toad upsprung in slow-mo, its dorsolateral folds undulating rhythmically, Mago scratched the metal mesh and hissed. "He's getting away, Mago. Fuck, he's heading for Nabi. Oh God, cut him off and hose him." Before Mago made it outside **the** bricks atop Nabi's grave began to shake, dirt covering the burial site floated skyward, and a hatch from the tomb opened. "Nah Bee? Pih Ahn Toh, Nah Bee." The toad dived into the gaping fissure and then it closed. "Hee Deh?"



I walked in from the garage door and Mago said, ““Hewō, Now Wow, Hewō Hewō, Ohh Wow.” The biggest mistake I ever made was encouraging Mago to speak English. If I’d put the same enthusiasm into him using a computer or playing ping pong then his life and mine would have been so much better. When he and Nabi began to sprinkle their utterances with English I considered their effort as a charming distraction, bemused by the truly bizarre prospect of the two brothers, impoverished orphans of a fire that killed their family, coming to Tamara and I without even a rudimentary educational background, and picking up a parlance entirely foreign to their backgrounds, like common houseplants stumbling into and daring to remain in a Botanical Garden. I wanted to know more about their wretched lives and acknowledged that the best albeit most preposterous way to hear their story required their employing my mother tongue, while laughingly aware such a metamorphosis constituted a miracle only occurring in low-grade Hollywood screenplays. The first time Nabi said, “Hewō,” my mind’s archive recalled the joy when Yulia took her maiden steps and later when Tarik started articulating barely discernible words. From that day until his death Nabi greeted me with, “Hewō,” always at the appropriate juncture of our encounter, as succinctly as a native speaker, neither reluctantly nor self-consciously. As I told him at the time, English suited him like Corinthian leather gloves. Alas, it suited Mago the way a sock fits a rooster. “I wish you spoke the language the way Nabi did. He was terse without seeming abrupt, like a minimalist painter allowing a dot to say everything on his mind. You spew, you don’t express.” Mago looked hurt, like my critique really stung him. “Now Wow,” he said, his words slimy with sarcasm. “That’s what I mean. That’s what I mean right on the fucking button. You heard that stupid phrase in a stupid TV commercial and now it’s your fucking bon mot for every fucking situation. I never heard Nabi say crap like that, nothing



so low brow, stolen from a fucking infomercial.” He walked to the kitchen counter and swiped off half a blueberry scone from a paper plate. “Nah Bee Guh, Soh Guh, Soh Guh Why Dhy?” The scone fell to pieces when it hit the laminate. “Behold, another contrast between you and Nabi, you fucking punk bastard. Look, don’t eat off the floor, my God, what do you think we carry in on our shoes, tuna juice?” He didn’t stop and I couldn’t suppress my disgust. But then I realized my revulsion was his motivation. “Soh Guh, Soh Soh Guh.” He consumed the pastry very slowly, one eye on the treat and the other on me, rhapsodized by his display of pluck. I refused to reveal my emotions facially or anywhere else. “You know, I get a real kick seeing you enjoying yourself. Here, let me pour you some milk.” I dumped a glass on his head. He kept eating. I added a bowl of cantaloupe chunks into the mess. He began to shit and so I pissed on him.



I got home from Izzy’s Bagels with a half-dozen plains, still giving off motherly heat, but before putting them away my attention drifted to sounds coming from the back of the house, a grating voice uttering a chant. “Bee-boo-bau-bau-bau-boo-bah-bau-boo-bah,” the speaker said. “Bee-boo-bau-bau-bau-boo-bah- bau-boo-bah.” While alarmed, the voice suggested neither crime nor violence, more a private passion, unpleasant to overhear, like someone ending an anal dry spell. From the hallway I crept slowly toward my study, from where the noise emanated.

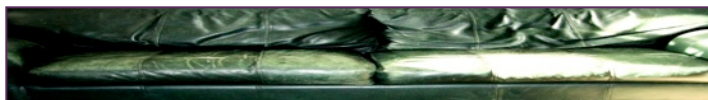
“Bee-boo-bau-bau-bau-boo-bah-bau-boo-bah,” came the intonation once more, each syllable punctuated with a discernibly percussive edge, “Bee-boo-bau-bau-bau-boo-bah-bau-boo-bah.” I found Mago seated at my computer wearing headphones watching You Tube singing to Miles Davis’ *Seven Steps to Heaven*. “It’s a very fucking nice scene with you there, though I confess I fail to recall granting you permission to use my computer. Did you bother to save the document I was working on, mister? It just happened to be an editorial I was writing for the Palo Alto Weekly in which I name names, the worst of the worst, and some of them were just barely off the tip of my tongue, and so if they’re lost then they’re lost.” Mago gave no indication he knew I stood behind him holding six cooling pieces of donut bread. “Bee-boo-bau-bau-bau-boo-bah-bau-boo-bah.” Half of his body covered the keyboard as he squirmed to get as close as possible to the monitor reminding me of stoners draped across the foot of a stage trying to lick Janis Joplin’s sweat. “I’m beginning to figure this out, yes, I see what you’re getting at. This is all about Nabi, sweet Nabi, whose ass you want to sniff again, no offense. Yes, this is very moving, and you couldn’t pick a better piece of music. I’d say if there were an eighth step to heaven it would be listening to this masterpiece by Miles. The only correction I might suggest relates to your scat; strictly speaking, it should be: ‘Dee-doo-dah-doo-dee-doo-dah.’ One-two-three-four-five-six-seven. See, it’s seven steps, not ten. The last three are just for balance, but not part of the theorphic proscriptum.” Mago clicked replay before I had a chance to recommend Andy Narell’s steel drum version. “Bee-boo-bau-bau-bau-boo-bah-bau-boo-bah,” he sang. “If you’d like I can tell you the seven steps. It starts with your no-bullshit acknowledgement we’re all different brands of fertilizer. Step two you kiss off any plans to go out with a smile, never forgetting this will be your last punch line. Next I suggest you run up at least \$100,000 on a new

American Express card. Four is you start doing every taboo you can think of, which in your case I'm sure will be more rectal than penile. After that you write an editorial to get things off your chest, don't worry about libel, and in fact aim for it. Number two is making sure everyone gets your thinking. The last one should be a blur because you're so whacked on beaucoup de medicins and two bottles of \$11 Malbec." He looked up when I handed him a glass of the red wine.



Watching Tamara cut cantaloupe into perfect chunks captivated Mago so much he insisted on being alerted whenever she carved and when she did he stood transfixed, awed by her mastery, as well as by the melon's elegant yet vulnerable orange hue. Tamara sliced one in under 90 seconds from start to finish, blind to Mago's admiration. "I'm not even sure she's watching when she cuts. Believe me, you couldn't find a better practitioner at the culinary institute. I think her Dad was one of those cutlery warriors you read about in the history books." Mago took it in breathlessly. "Now Wow," he said. "Guh Kuh." He bounced on the balls of his feet like a groupie and looked more salacious than usual. The next time Tamara chiseled a cantaloupe he stood directly by her side in silent adulation. She entered a Zennish state, her German-made stiletto dissecting the juicy rind in a whirl, the golden blocks plopping into a handmade ceramic bowl. As a treat she spiked a piece and flipped it off the tip of the blade toward Mago's mouth.

Seeing a piece of the scaly gourd hurtling toward his head made Mago's knees buckle. He collapsed to the floor; the nugget bounced off his eye and slopped at his feet. Tamara stabbed at it with the point of the knife, almost nicking Mago's middle toe. He looked at her with horror and ran away. I found him gazing at Nabi's grave, huddled in the corner behind a round-topped table. "Why Mah Mah Wahn Kih Mah Goh?" Mago said. His eyes were two-quarters shut. He shook his head like someone much older, wearily, without irony. I finally understood what the leaders mean by a teaching moment. "Mah Mah Wahn Mah Goh Deh?" he said. I refused to intrude on the long silence that followed, pushing it to stretch on, overjoyed at what he must be thinking. Mago pondered the specter of life with an assassin, a prospect never crossing his mind until the incident moments ago. "Pah Pah Noh Why?" he said, lips aligned unevenly. I did not answer and made my eyes look away furtively. "Pah Pah Wahn Mah Mah Geh Mah Goh?" Recognizing his desperation I stared at him with a blank expression, not allowing my body to move an iota, stopping my breathing to enhance the moment's frozen distress. Mago faced me sullenly. His head nodded slightly, cajoling me to answer his query, which I did not. "Now Wow," he said. "Noh Guh. Soh Noh Guh. Soh Fuh Uuh." Mago directed his wretched appeal to Nabi, whose silence overwhelmed mine. I stood up to go. Mago remained still. Tamara sang one of her unidentifiable songs. I wondered if retelling this in verse would make it even more ludicrous.



Mago entered my room after midnight carrying a dish of leftover tuna, a small jar of mayonnaise, and crackers. He sat at my desk in the dark without turning on the computer. After a short pause he began eating, more slowly than usual, but methodically; a bite of tuna dipped in thick white sauce followed by half a cracker. When he finished he whirled 180 in the chair and departed without once turning to look at me in bed. I found the dirty dish and mayo the following morning beside my door. He looked sluggish at breakfast. "Is there something on your mind, Mago? You usually dive into your cereal like a homeless guy's breathing down your neck." He looked up with a pained expression. "Tuh Mee Noh Guh," he said. "Can I get you a cracker with tuna and creamy dressing?" I watched him the rest of the day, most of which he spent glaring at me. That night Mago returned at around the same time with Korean seaweed, a big ball of rice, and juice. I hid the desk chair in the closet and after searching lackadaisically he pushed away the keyboard and sat in front of my PC. With robotic precision he broke off a small portion of rice, rolled it in seaweed, shoveled it into his mouth and washed it down with his drink. After letting out a volley of belches he left, leaving an empty cup on the desk. I sniffed it; the oily tuna fluid almost made me retch. At breakfast I did the glaring. "How's your bucking felly? I see you've gotten into liquefied seafood. And you finished off a whole can of expensive Korean seaweed." Mago looked at me uncomprehendingly, lifted his elbow to his nose and sniffed, a horrified expression followed. "Put on too much cologne?" He vomited a bucket of black and white stuff saturated in an odor with which I'd never crossed paths. I didn't want to see him in my bedroom that night and locked the door. At the usual time I heard a scream from Tamara's room. When I got there Mago was out cold on the floor by her door. Next to his head sat an empty carton of French vanilla ice cream. "This is a new trick in the little guy's bag. I fear

if we awaken him he might croak. Have you dickered with any of his medications lately?” We let him sleep there, quietly removing the trash and a sticky spoon. He greeted me as the early morning sunlight shot through my blinds. “Hewō.” I acknowledged him with a nod and returned to sleep. “Hewō,” he said again. “If you throw up on me I swear to God I’ll light you on fire. Cup your hands under your mouth and step away from the bed. When you’re safely out of my room go apologize to Tamara for eating her ice cream. She’s as pissed off as I’ve ever seen her. Go now, Mago, and deal with what you’ve wrought.” He looked confused. “Whu? Why Mah Mah Pih?” I got out of bed and carefully walked him into the hallway. “Mah Goh Guh Boi, Noh?” If I looked any sterner I could make him cry.



“Goh Mah,” Mago said. I ignored him, continuing to drift back and forth between the Dodgers game on TV and an article in The New Yorker about reverse anthropomorphism observed in Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphins. “Goh Mah.” The phone rang and I spoke for 10 minutes with Tarik, not communicating to him Mago’s greeting. He was standing beside me as I hung up and once again said, ““Goh Mah.” I turned away, pleased to see him do the same. “Goh Mah,” he said, his back to me. Was I commanded by some natural law to respond? He perched himself in front of the kitchen table and said, “Goh Mah, Goh Mah, Goh Mah, Goh Mah, Goh Mah.” Only because the Dodgers were in the process of blowing a five-run lead did I swivel my

head in his direction. “My name is not Gomer, Mago, so give it a rest because I’m not going to let you rile me. Yes, I accidentally gave you the wrong medicine and I’m sure you don’t enjoy your urine turning green, not to mention how the burning sensation has gotten even worse. This was my mistake, but if there’s a silver lining, it’s the forewarning to you about the potency of today’s pharmaceuticals. Just drink a lot of water today and bite the bullet when you have to whiz, okay? And enough with the name-calling, do we have a deal?” His stare had granite, an open-eyed corpse’s stare, my smile as impotent as dry grass in a controlled fire. “Goh Mah,” Mago said, spitting the fallacious syllables. “Okay, my friend, say it a few more times and get it out of your system. I can understand how you feel. I mean, not a day goes by you don’t have the ordeal of shitting pebbles instead of stools. You’d think a normal piss isn’t too much to ask. And then I screw up your medication and give you an old antibiotic that must have artificial coloring. My bad, okay? The bottles look alike and they were next to each other on the shelf. I’ll be more careful next time. Won’t you give me another chance?” He stamped his foot and said, “Fuh Nō, Goh Mah.” I shrugged, and then I retrieved my magazine. I discerned a splashing sound behind me and when I turned a drop of aquamarine waste matter splashed onto my eyelid. Mago leaned against my exercise bike, discharging secretion, a good-sized emerald puddle gathering at his feet. “You fucking pile of fucking ass shit. I’ll kick you so hard your dick will pop out of one of your ears, you fucking dipshit fucker.” Instead of apologizing he ran into the living room, piss squirting out of his hidden pecker, leaving blue-green stains on everything it touched. Insane with anger and lacking confidence Mago grasped my concern, my mind switched to a rarely used mode and I spoke duck in the Donald style. My mouth contorted, my tongue curled, I got big lips. “Oh boy, wait till I get my hands on you.” Mago ceased excavating. “Wait a second,” he

said, also using duck spoken in the Donald style, “do you speak duck?” I eyed him with disgust. “I’m speaking it, aren’t I, flaflaflafla flaflaflafla.” Mago said, “That’s duck in the Donald style you’re speaking, maybe a little weak on the pronunciation, but duck in the Donald style nonetheless. I can’t believe my ears, flaflaflafla flaflaflafla.” I was sure I was dead and went to bed.



“At the university I had a really sharp philosophy professor. He was a short Jew who spoke with a British accent. Funny thing is I knew his brother and he sounded like the rest of us. I had a semester in his class and barely understood anything, even though I sailed through Will and Ariel Durant’s *The Story of Philosophy* when I was in junior high. All he talked about was David Hume and British Empiricism, he unleashed a flood of arcane concepts, and what made it worse was that a girl in the front row got everything down pat and she was also beautiful, like a young Brigitte Bardot. Dr. Standish, his first name was Mel, short for Melvin, smoked four or five cigarettes per class, pacing back and forth in front of us chugging smoke, always dressed impeccably in slacks and a sports coat, very Savile Row, which maybe explains the King’s dialect. I’ll never forget one thing he told the class toward the end of the year.” Mago leaned against the coffee table dodging my kicks aimed for his ribs. “Wuh? Bow Deh?” he said. “No, it wasn’t about death. He explained how he carefully matched his socks with the color of his



trousers, no matter whether he had on black or brown or even white shoes. The vast majority of men just go by their shoes; black on black, brown on brown. This guy was an authority.” We both started when a large crow swooped into the yard, crashing into the highest branch of a mature Eucalyptus tree above Nabi’s grave, flying off before touching the ground beneath it. “Whu Bow Deh? Deh Guh, Noh Guh?” I sent a foot at his side, catching him in the shoulder. “That was an eye popper, something I grapple with to this day. For example, what do I wear with faded jeans? Where in the hell do you find light denim-colored socks?” A boisterous chorus of fanatical crows passed over our side of the street. “Deh Soh Dah, Why Deh Soh Dah?” The sky blackened with large ravenous winged beasts screeching in cacophonous unison. “Gah Dah Soh Deh Dah,” Mago said. “Or maybe death is dark and so God is dark. Who the fuck knows chicken and the egg shit like that? I’m giving you topflight wardrobe advice and all you can blather about is gloom? You’ve got death on the brain, mister, and I wish you’d cut it the fuck out.” The black roar from above bounced off the windows. “Deh Noi.” He looked over his shoulder. My eyes followed his. On the brick floor at the other end of the yard a crow’s body formed a heap. From the sky patch above came dispatched bellows of grief at their fallen cohort. “Deh Guh Wei Goh.” Talk about a stupid comment, I thought, like wearing brown socks with a black suit.



“Mah Goh See Poh Noh?” Mago said. “That’s a good one. If I wrote a story maybe I’d open it with that line. But fuck, you’ve got to go somewhere with it and it better be pretty out

there. Like Chekhov said, if you show the audience a pussy or a dick in the first act then you'd better make sure at least two people fuck by the last. And then you add the pedo-part to it, holy shit, Mago, you're in Todd Solenz territory, but I've got to tell you, I like it. Have you thought about what kind?" Tamara walked in carrying an orange kitten someone stuck in her purse when she wasn't looking, which probably didn't matter because it appeared dead. "Quick, get me an enema bag," Tamara said, "unless you know another way to flush out a contact lens." Mago looked to me for what to do next. I couldn't take my eyes off the orange ball in Tamara's hand. I first thought she'd folded her tangerine-colored mittens together into a furry little pile, though I had no idea where the blood came from, that is, until I saw the scratches on her fingers when she stuck the fur-ball onto the kitchen countertop in the middle of a small pool of Malbec. "Now Wow," Mago said, bouncing on a couch cushion while holding on to the armrest. "Deh Hoh." I tried to muffle my smile. "Deh Hoh." Tamara turned livid, picked up the wounded animal and glared at me the way she did when we were newlyweds. I got the message, oft-putting as it was. "Mah Goh See Deh Hoh Puh See." Tamara ignored Mago and she hurled the kitten at my head, bouncing it off my neck. A moment before it plopped onto the hardwood floor Mago threw his body beneath the cute and gentle mass. It tumbled onto his groin, and there it remained until I noticed a slight rotation of Mago's hips. "Now Wow. Deh Hoh Fee Guh." Tamara and I stood next to the wall by the living room entrance. "Not now," I heard her say, which always meant the opposite. "Now Wow," Mago said. The kitten's eyes opened feebly. "Fla Fla Fla," it whispered. Mago and I both uttered, "Fla Fla Fla." Tamara said, "Fla Fla Fla," and I realized Mago told her about speaking Duck in the way of Donald. We were all on the same wavelength. The kitten spoke first but with so little volume I had to put an ear as close to its mouth. "The fact

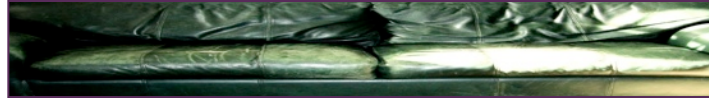
is, it was she who ran over me,” it said. Mago and I turned to Tamara. Mago said, “Do you have any sisters?” The infant’s death rattle sounded more like an old man wheezing. “Back to the subject we were talking about, what kind of porno were you thinking of, or was it just the generic x? Nowadays the variety spans the globe, so to speak. I keep it close to home and favor the mature stuff, but I can see you into bestiality, especially after what I just saw.” Out of the corner of my eye I saw the kitten sneak off with Mago giving chase.



As a trick I awakened Mago from his afternoon nap and told him that his mother was at the door. To heighten the excitement I blasted him with a shot right between the eyes from a condensed gas duster. The idea of including a bucket of sheep blood crossed my mind. Instead I filled a large shallow metal bowl with fish innards and put it where I guessed he’d step. I knew I had concocted a grand prank and so I set up my camcorder to record the whole thing. “Mago, wake up, your mother’s here to see you. She’s alive and standing in the vestibule. Don’t make her wait, Mago, she’s come from far far away.” Everything went as planned and as a bonus the moment I uttered my announcement Mago began to weep uncontrollably. “Dee Ohss Mee Ohh!” He rolled off the bed and his feet plunged into the raw stew composed of salmon liver, gonads, intestines and skin. “Sah Kah Meh Deh Ah Kee.” He slopped through the goo and his attempt to

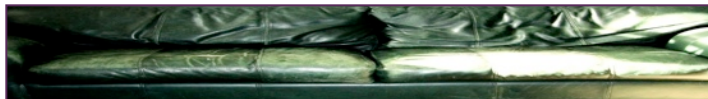
flee only agitated the slush, ending with him collapsing into a pathetic lump. When I told him it was all a harmless joke he pretended to have an epileptic seizure. “Poh Keh? Poh Keh Mee Uh Dah?” That night I told Tamara how Mago went completely daft while I joshed with him. “I hope he’s all right,” she said. “Maybe it was another one of your sick Jew jokes that contributed to Nabi’s death.” What if I mentioned that the gags I played on Nabi were just that: Gags? Or that many times he instigated them. However, to respond would require I legitimize her line of reasoning, which I rejected to my core. “Look, before you go off the handle, I’ll show you the video. Don’t expect big belly laughs. It’s more on the conceptual side.” I watched her expression during the short movie and noted with delight her cheery response in exactly the right places. “What’s Mago saying?” she asked. “It sounds like Latin. Do you think he’s possessed?” I marched into Mago’s room. He was in the corner flat on his back looking at the ceiling, more asleep than awake, and his lips were moving as if he were chanting. When he saw me he curled into a self-protective ball. “Goh Weh,. Goh Fah Weh.” I smiled at him in an understanding way before spraying the bottoms of his feet with a discharge from the powerful duster. He took a swipe at the can, dislodging the trigger from the nozzle. “Hey, you little asshole, I just bought this. Say, Tamara and I were reviewing the tape of this afternoon’s stunt. It was a classic, I’m sure you agree. One question: Were you talking in tongues, or did the prospect of seeing your mom after all these years garble up your speech?” We watched it together and I poked him in the rib cage each time he closed his eyes and turned away. “Okay, for example right here: What the fuck does ‘Dee Ohss Mee Ohh!’ supposed to mean?” Mago spoke without looking at me. “Ohh Mah Gah. Mah Mah Tah Ess Pah Noh.” I could not believe my ears. “You’re Mexican?” He

turned to me with a beatific smile. “Kue Bah Nah. Hah Bah Nah Mee Hoh Gah.” I deleted the video. “Nice try, you little fuckhead.”



“I’m pleased to hear you have interest in the ongoing history of the Jews, Mago, just like Nabi before you. Our story picks up at the end of the Second World War. A summit of winners and losers convenes in war-torn Germany to decide what to do with the Jews. Admiral Karl Doenitz, the leader Hitler appointed as his successor, recommends that the Jews take the region around Stuttgart, called Baden-Württemberg, which includes the Black Forest. Allied powers help them settle in and six months later the sovereign state of Jewtopia officially stands among the family of nations. Within two years Jewtopia gains admittance to the United Nations and in the 1948 Summer Olympiad in London a female shot putter from Jewtopia wins a bronze medal. Jewtopia soon becomes a hub for movie-making, legal studies, psychiatry, finance, and creative management. A team of investors collaborates with a cabal of noted big ticket impresarios and in 1949 they open Jewland, an entertainment nexus. Jewland reveals the lighter side of Jews and becomes an overnight sensation. One whole section of rides and exhibits is devoted to important Muslims in Jewish history, and the two historically-connected peoples form a tight bond. Say, did you know that Rabbi Isaac Hertzberg of the Miami Talmudic Union was born Muhammed bin Selmi and that most of his family remained Muslim?” Mago hung on every word, though without the appearance of suffering that came naturally to Nabi. “Now Wow. Wuh Neh?” he said. “Hold your horses, because the Jews’ rich saga takes a turn. In 1956 a husband and wife

team of Jewish scientists discovers a way to turn sand into water. They are immediately awarded Nobel Prizes. As a gesture of goodwill, the government of Jewtopia urges the inventors to share their know-how with the inhabitants of Palestine. They immediately accept and, in a symbolic marriage, all of the citizens of Jewtopia wed their counterparts in Canaan. The desert populace flourishes and, with Jewtopia's assistance, vast new sources of water make the Middle East as fertile as Eden. By the mid-1960s an international poll is conducted and Jewtopia is chosen the most popular country in the world. Christian leaders secretly thank the Jews for maintaining their rigid exclusionary rules, but still millions of people seek to convert to Judaism. A rabbinical purity council rejects 99.8% of applications, only allowing those able to document a comedian in their family tree." Mago's jaw dropped in wonderment and he shook his head. "Soh Kah Kee," he said. "You might say we were on Cloud Nine. In the 1980s it's all about the Pope moving the Vatican to a suburb of Hymietown, the capital city. When the population begins to expand the people of The Ukraine unanimously vote to join the Jewtopian Empire, but still there are only 11,312,044 Jews in the world. See my tattoo. I'm number 9,720,856." Mago examined my forearm so closely his fishy breath made the vegetable dye run.



Mago learned how to wield the Kodak pocket video camera in no time, though I had to act out several sections of the manual. I demanded there be no showboating, that he stick to my

instructions down to which finger to use when pressing the record button and he swore I'd be proud of him. "I'm not looking to discover the next James Wong Howe. You're an extension of my vision, not the other way around, so don't go film school on me. I establish the shot, direct the actors, cue the music, I signal when to roll and when to cut. Comprenez?" Mago said, "Noh Sweh." That morning we did several practice runs. I had him set up from the window of my bedroom and videotape Tamara leaving for work. Perching the camera on the top of my dresser, Mago caught her locking the front door with her key, shaking the handle several times to make sure it was locked, walking up the brick path in the direction of her car, coming back and retesting the door, leaving again, returning once more to be sure the door was both closed and locked, and then heading for work. Minutes later we reviewed Mago's work. "Are you sure you didn't do camera before? This is one minute of pure gold, Mago, a classic eyeball on a casebook disorder. Bravo, my boy, and now we're ready to move on." Mago said, "Mah Goh Weh Dee." I stationed him near my bedroom door while I stood in front of an Ikea dresser facing the window to the front yard. I told him to start the camera when I tapped the chest. I leaned over to hit the play button on the CD and kneed the woodsy cabinet. After a pause the crunching detonation of a bass guitar resounded through the room and the beat did not relent, nor did my body. "Well, did you get me for the whole 68 seconds? If you didn't we can do it again. I'm tuckered out but I'm ready to go another round. Say, how did you like my back-to-the-camera dance? I bet that was something you never expected to see me do." Mago handed me the camera. "Why Pah Pah Goh Soh Hoh Moh...", he began. "So gay? Is that what you're saying, you motherfucker?" Mago shook his head. "Noh, Soh Hoh Moh Geh," Mago said. "You think my dance has something to do with my being a homogeny?" Mago said, "Pah Pah Soh Jue Eee."

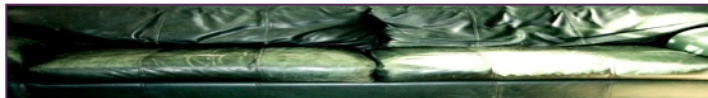
I stepped back and looked at him with admiration. “Mago, my God, you saw it, didn’t you, you little pisher, you saw it.” He said, “Now Wow, Soh Jue Eee Mah Goh Geh Sih.” I laughed joyously and clasped his shoulder. “It’s the first installment of a website I’m doing, [www.JewGem.com](http://www.JewGem.com), and I don’t have to tell you who it will reach out to.” Mago pointed at my nose. “Ohl Jue,” he said. “Yeah, it’ll be an amusing station for light-hearted Jews my age or even older.” Mago said, “Moh Ohl Jue? Moh Ohl Jue Deh Jue.” I asked him to leave my room so I could take a second nap.



Tamara made a doctor’s appointment for Mago. When she told him he ran into her room and slammed the door. A moment later a chair crashed to the floor. “Fuh Dah.” He kicked the wall and rammed his shoulder against a sliding closet door. “Dah Goh Heh.” Tamara prepared Mago his favorite tuna dish and called him to come and get it. “Noh Wah Foo. Mah Goh Wah Boo.” I stood outside the door. “Did I understand you to say you’d like a glass of Malbec?” Mago said, “Mah Beh, Pee Noh, Boh Ooh Geh.” I poured V-8 fruit juice in a wine glass and brought it to him. His eyes opened wide when he saw it. “Foh Mah Goh?” I put it on top of the dresser. He took a sip and looked at me. “Guh. Mah Beh?” I shook my head. “It’s a pricey Pinot Noir from the Isle of Cranberry. It’s very popular with Christian boy groups, especially Jesus’ Dick. Have you heard of them?” Mago drank some more. “Foo Tee,” he said. “I’ll say,



and I hope you'll notice it doesn't have an offensive nose." He said, "Nah Soh Jue Eee." I lost my appetite for coddling him. "You Jew-baiting little motherfucker, why do you always have to throw that shit in my face?" He pointed at my nose. "Nah Mah Goh Fah." He finished his drink and pushed the glass in my direction. He appeared stunned when I nudged it back. "Wuh? Noh Moh Pee Noh?" I wondered in my heart how I could raise such an insensitive boy, unable to discern when being anti-Jewish lost its appeal, when it was as inappropriate as talking about an enlarged prostate in front of your son's fiancé, which derived from feeling comfortable in her presence and wanting to explain why I sometimes crossed my legs like a little girl and waddled to the bathroom. Would Mago curtail his callousness if I didn't say anything to him? Or would he wallow in the mistaken belief he had the right to be tough on Jews as Jews tend to be on their fellows? "Mah Goh Sah Wee. Mah Goh Huh Pah Pah." Yes, he had hurt me, but it didn't seem lost on him. I was very proud of him and felt a twinge in my eye. "I'm good with you Mago, so don't worry. Before I get you another glass of Pinot Noir I want you to tell me why you're making the big stink about going to the doctor." He looked into his empty glass, slowly raising his eyes level to mine. "Dah Puh Fih Guh Dow Mah Goh Poo Hoh," Mago said. "Are you sure it was his finger?" Mago's ears grew erect, pulsating and brisk, engorged but cautious. "Whu Mee?" he said. "It was probably a medical device. He was looking for early signs of prostrate. Listen to me, Mago, take care of your apparatus, such as it is, do you see what I'm getting at?" His mind seemed to drift off. "Ooh Geh. How Bow Moh Pee Noh?"



At breakfast Mago asked me why I had so much affection for Mao Zedong, citing my collection of fabric works depicting him at monumental stages of his storied life, the medals in three sizes, ceramic works with his image, the shelf of books, fiction and factual, as well as my constant references to him. “Pah Pah Kah Mee?” I winked at him but then I reprimanded him for leaving out Madame Mao Jiang Ching, the Great Leader’s complex wife, and a lightning rod during his reign. “While not a student of history, far from it, for I abhor anything so hearsay, not to say malleable, I consider Mao the giant among giants for forcing China out of colonial status in the first half of the 20th century to the world’s leading nation by its end.” As an afterthought I mentioned I lived with the heroic couple in Southern California during the summer of 1961 when I was 13. “Now Wow. Pah Pah Guh Kah Mee.” I explained that ideology made up only a fraction of my admiration, and while I concurred that a hybrid-Marxist form proved ideal for China at the time, above all it took a philosopher-warrior like Mao to guide China to its place in the sun. “I don’t think scientific socialism is merely an incidental aspect of the transformation, however I argue for the man over the plan.” Mago chewed on his cereal, followed by a mouthful of water. “How Bow Meh Kah?” I put milk in my coffee and watched the two liquids interact. “America is America. We like to pretend we elect our dictators. Above all, I don’t think Chevron Oil or Walmart possess the farsightedness to accede to a Mao.” He mulled my words with an artifice of understanding. “How Bow Ohh Bah Mah? Ohh Bah Mah Kah Mee?” First I smiled and then I scowled. “Yeah, Obama and Roosevelt before him, they’re both guilty of interposing the government to save capitalism.” I looked into his eyes to see if my irony hit home, but all I saw was doubt. “Nah Wuh Mah Goh Kah,” he said. “And what did you catch?” Mago said,

“Ooh Bah Mah Kah Mee, Muh Lih, Keh Yuh...” I nodded with each new accusation. “Right, Obama’s a commie, Muslim, Kenyan, and how about Zionist?” Mago’s ears twitched. “Mah Goh Wah Fah Nue. Mah Goh Noh Ooh Bah Mah Heh Why Pee Poh.” I signaled for Mago to join me and he complied. I dragged him to the family room and tied his body to a chair. I turned the TV to the hate channel for the stupid, the uneducated, the mean-spirited. I went to work and came back six hours later. Mago’s tongue hung out from the side of his mouth. “Noh Moh Fah Nue. Noh Moh Fah Nue.” I appreciated the way he toned down his discourse. “This is a house that celebrates the Maos, Herbert Marcuse, Naomi Klein, Katrina vanden Heuvel, Bernie Sanders.” Mago nodded. “Now Mah Goh Ooh Lee Wah Kah Mee Sho. Kah Mee Jue Sho.”



“Okay, who drew the swastika?” There were only the three of us. “Which one of you cut a pitted Manishevitz prune in half and smeared the slur on my bedroom door with fucking prune meat?” Tamara stood up stiffly. I knew she didn’t do it. She would never stoop to something so obvious. “You’re a neurotic paranoid,” she said, grabbing her purse and leaving for work. Before closing the door to the garage she looked back at me. “Who knows, maybe you did it yourself.” She paused because her intrinsic politeness compelled her to allow me time to respond. I shocked her by shrugging. “Okay, it’s forgotten, I’m sure whoever did it was only kidding around. Anyway it’s more anti-German than anything.” I heard Tamara’s hard steps out

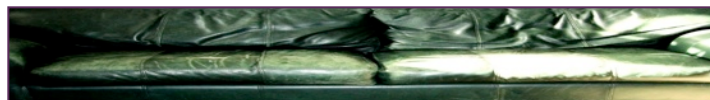
to her car. “Mah Goh Nah Aah Tee Jeh Mah.” I looked out the front window to make sure Tamara was gone. Mago sat on the green couch appearing primed. “I’m going to kill you for that swastika a few minutes from now.” I went into my bedroom, slipped out of my bathrobe, dressed for work, and came out for breakfast. “If it’s wrong for me to kill you so be it.” I finished one quarter of a cantaloupe flawlessly cut into square chunks. “Call me rash or call me cold-hearted, that’s your right.” I sipped coffee while taking bites of homemade banana bread. “At least I’m telling you before I do it.” Mago sauntered away, tossing me a half-glance. “Why Kih Mah Goh?” Goh Kih Nah See.” I sustained a calm demeanor to rattle him even more. “Kill a Nazi, Mago? Do you really think it’s that simple?” He pivoted in a half-circle and smiled wryly knowing it would rile me. “Guh Jue Kih Nah See. Whu Soh Hah Geh?” If I had a Styrofoam cup I would smash it against my forehead. “What’s hard to get, Herr Arschloch, is whether you’re seriously saying it was a Nazi that used fruit pulp to paint that vile hook cross on the portal to my chamber?” Mago’s head and hips gyrated sarcastically. “Muh Bee Nah See. Hue Ess?” I had him on the defensive. “Who else? I’ll tell you who fucking else.” I leaned toward him in a way intended to look menacing. “Kah Dow.” His expression made mine look puny. “Don’t tell me to calm down, you motherfucker, or I’ll kill you without another word passing between us.” He didn’t look intimidated as I’d hoped. “Kih Kih Kih. Kih Nah See, Nah Poh Mah Goh.” I took a butter knife from the utensil drawer. “I’ll be killing two birds with one violent stroke.” He said, “Wuh Mih?” I advanced toward him. “The idiot and the Nazi are one and the same.” He said, “Goh Kih Nah See.” I sat on the coffee table in front of the green couch facing him. “That’s what I’m about to do.” I did a *Clockwork Orange* with the blade between my eyes measuring him for the kill. Mago stood suddenly and pointed. “Nah See!” he said.

“What? Nazi? Where?” I jerked to my feet, craning my face every which way to see the escaping Nazi. “Hee Goh!” Mago jumped up and down on a cushion, upsetting a bowl of prunes. “Now Wow. Hee Goh.” I ran toward the hallway, slipping on a spill of water crashing to the floor. “Now Noh Moh Nah See.”



Mago pushed a box of tissues in front of where I sat, staring impatiently, his nose glistening. “Ohh Peh,” he said. “Fuck off. You open it. What am I, your butler?” He shrugged, standing pat, inhaling obstinately, believing me easy to steer, the kind of man one can wait out until he teeters. We sparred on this point before, Mago and I, and either my memory was better than his or he had misinterpreted my response. “Ohh Geh. Puh Wee Ohh Peh.” I cupped my hand over my ear. “What kind of dickhead runs his whole life down a dark alley? I told you before, you little asshole, that I don’t open machine-encased containers. Why is that so fucking hard for your pea brain to grasp? Should I spell it out in bio-fluids?” Mago kicked the box to the floor. “Why Ohh Peh Bah Soh Fuh Kee Bih Dee?” Mago said. “You’re the one making it a big fucking deal, you twat. Tell Tamara to get the kind of Kleenex that opens up when you sniff its asshole, why don’t you? Anyway just wipe the snot off on your body, and lick it off later when it suits you, like maybe right before you sit down for dinner.” Mago’s mood veered from its surly path and I saw him smile. “Pah Pah. Mah Goh Bee Bah Mih Vah.” I looked at him like

we were both drowning in the same genital juice. “You want a bar-mitzvah?” He said, “Pah Pah Gih Nah Bee Bah Mih Vah?” His eyes bulged with self-pity. “Does it not bear pointing out how often sibling rivalry kindles the global bonfire that is anti-Semitism? No, Mago, Nabi and I didn’t plan for him to be bar-mitvahed.” Mago said, “Buh Why?” My nod acknowledged that I considered his question a good sign. “We’re not a bar mitzvah family, Mago. You know me; I’ll fight anti-Semitism tooth and nail, but your presumption I planned a bar mitzvah for Nabi is in itself a little anti-Semitic, if you don’t mind me saying.” Mago said, “Wuh Mih?” I thought of a piece of music by Bartok, maybe for the first time in my life. “Isn’t it a fallacy to conjecture all Judean males are sons of the commandment? Does being Sikh guarantee a dip in the Ganges? Is it a rite of passage to grow pubic hair?” Not a male in my father’s family went through the ritual going back 150 years to Eastern Europe, which on my mother’s side, Europeans from a little to the West, most did stick to custom. By my generation everything completely reversed and the bulk of the religious ones, none of whom moved to California, were my father’s people. “Pah Pah Guh Jue? Mago said. “Fuck, I hate that question, but it’s a fair one. I hate the fucking tribe, like I hate my lousy putz, but fuck, I don’t hate it too fucking much, I mean, it’s my dick.” Mago said, “Now Wow. Soh Heh Bee.” I winked. “Heavy-shmeavy, it’s the way I see it. So let’s have no talk about Bar Mitzvahs, okay buster?” I tried to open the Kleenex box for him but gave up after 10 minutes.



Tamara was the first to suggest a pet for Mago. She worried he spent too much of the day alone, though I had the impression he passed the time pleasurably enough. We agreed to observe him for a few days before deciding. “Another idea would be to get you pregnant again and give Mago a baby sibling. I’m game if you are. If we have twins we can let him have one for his own.” The next day I pretended to leave for work but hid in a hall closet under a moldy comforter. Mago stayed on the other side of the house without once budging, rendering my day a bust. I tried again the following morning, climbing on the roof and peering down at him through a skylight. For two hours I watched him nap on a chair under a swatch of sun rays washing across the living room. Resting on a weather-beaten towel, I nodded off and when I came to he was gone, though I soon discovered him standing behind me. “Why Pah Pah? Pee Pee Tah?” If I called my father a peeping tom he’d have belted me in the kisser. “No, you little prick, I’m checking for meteor corrosion. Do you want to pay a professional to do the inspection? Say, do you come up here often?” Back in the kitchen I sliced a bagel and made Mago a tuna sandwich. He immediately converted it into an open-face and asked for bonito flakes. I told him to feel free and turned away to avoid retching. “Soh Guh. Wuh Suh?” I gestured in the negative. “You’ve always had a special place in your heart for fish, haven’t you Mago? Have you ever contemplated the Darwinian implications?” He took small effeminate bites, though he didn’t seem to mind displaying a mouthful of tuna while speaking. “Dah Wih Kah Mee. Gah Kih Dah Wih.” I already knew he filled too much of his free time watching Fox News. Would a pet divert him from the hate and greed channel? “Your mother and I have been talking about getting you a pet. How about if we fix you up with an aquarium filled with colorful fish? Would you like that? You can give each one a name and invent unlikely

biographies.” Mago’s eyes turned a shade of green. “Mah Goh Eee Fih. Soh Guh. Now Wow.” For someone wanting God to kill the man who invented survival of the fittest, Mago sounded like an evolutionist. “Or a bird, maybe one or two, a couple of parakeets or two birds of different feathers? Birds make more noise than fish, though often their movements are jerkier. Don’t you think birds will make better companions than fish?” Mago didn’t stop eating, treating me as dining diversion. “How Bow Dah. Doh Beh Meh.” A bonito flake sticking to his nose flapped every time he breathed. “No dogs, and especially no Dobermans. I don’t want a pet with a dick bigger than mine. Any interest in a lizard?” Mago said, “Noh Weh. How Bow Poh Nee?” I went to the closet and crawled under the comforter. Mago ambled up and kicked the door. “How Bow Koh Ree Ahh Beh Bee?”



Into the serene part of the night’s reverie the billowy object fell atop me, a slight concussion. It was malfortunato tracking me down for another round, this time arriving alone. What satisfaction was to be garnered choosing me yet again? I considered fighting back this time but a fishy smell held me back, though not as much as the prospect of being beaten to a pulp. Lucky is the man who loses at life to a scent of spring at her dawn. “I know who you are as well as you know who I am. You’ve only come because you think there’s something left of me. You always make me feel numb while you’re here, but when you leave I’ll be worse off



than before.” Before a single treachery occurred I noticed Tamara standing above me with a queer look in her eyes. “Mago just jumped on me,” she said, “and then he passed out cold.” We walked down the hall toward her room, the bubble wrap encasing my feet popping with each step. Mago lie splayed out on the bed in the spot I used to occupy. “He just looks asleep. Are you sure it wasn’t a dream?” Tamara told me that right before Mago plopped down she felt a shapeless mass envelop her, noting that it seemed similar to one I’d described to her years ago. Had this one not been told I no longer slept in that bed, that I was down the hall, and did that explain why I got my call after Tamara? “Did it feel like a woman’s naked body, brimming with warm flesh, outstanding breasts and engorged nipples? I’ll go even further: Was it in its mid-thirties, a Brazilian a good five or six inches taller than you of an African-Mediterranean mix, quite exquisite to look at, not how the so-called malfortunato generally appear? I can show you on Facebook.” Tamara accompanied me to my room and in no time I found photographs. “Maybe,” Tamara said. “It all happened so quickly.” Those true words reminded me I had had the visitor in my arms, but now I was alone with my wife. We headed back to her room. “Fucking Mago, he wrecked a good moment, damn him, for the both of us, the little ass-imbiber. I hate to sound a cynical chord but who knows if and when it will happen again? Hey, Mago, you little fuck, wake the fuck up.” I poked him with the TV remote but he resisted awakening. I blew breath in his nose and he sneezed, spraying a sticky gel on both lenses of my glasses. I rushed to the sink. “Nah Bee?” Mago said. “Nah Bee?” Tamara rushed to his side and held him like he just swam the English Channel. “Did it fall on you, too, Mago? Were you frightened and is that why you ran to my room?” I stood behind her and gesticulated my thumb knuckle up his feces gorge. “Nah Bee Fah Ahn Mah Goh. Mah Goh See Nah Bee.” I started to cough up an

Ambien, two Tylenol PM, and a fair Chilean Carmenere. “That was not fucking Nabi, do you hear me? Should I say it again? That was by no fucking means fucking Nabi.” Tamara cradled Mago and sang him a lullaby. “Drop him on his head or I swear I’ll sever my fallopian tubes. Do you think I’m kidding, the two of you?” The odd one out went back to his room, pop pop pop.



Mago displayed signs he might be planning to commit suicide; most notably he grew increasingly isolated, spending hours alone in Yulia’s room sitting on top of a multi-drawer cabinet looking out the window at the house adjacent to ours. At Tamara’s insistence I stayed home from work one day to keep an eye on him. Not wanting to reveal the real reason I was hanging around in my pajamas I made up a story about a pedophile in the neighborhood. Mago appeared skeptical until I told him the suspect was an old pederast known by all of the children as Uncle Rectum, a name that failed to ring a bell. Mago’s memories were somewhat stirred after I reminded him of the time in his early youth when this exact pervert gave him a wedgie, which he didn’t remember until I reassured him he had been victimized in a rather shocking manner, citing the day, time, and place to enhance his sense of history. “Wuh Mih Weh Gee? Hee Tuh Mah Goh Dih?” I told him I wasn’t there and so I didn’t want to speculate about a matter of such gravitas, but that in all likelihood he did precisely what Mago feared. “I want you

to know I'll protect you from anyone dedicated to doing you harm, so don't worry. Tamara and I have nothing but warm feelings for you, do you hear me? Remember: You were an orphan, assuming that's a true story, and you've found a home with us, unless we learn the whole conflagration drama was just cooked up by your agency. Now get the hell out of here and go play like we never had this conversation." I counted to 10 before creeping outside and hiding under a bush below Yulia's window. Mago climbed onto the cabinet, his eyes trained on the modest house next door, separated from ours by a wooden fence a few feet from where he sat for hours on end. Tamara pressed me at dinner if I learned anything about Mago's state of mind and I told her what I saw. "He just stares at the side of the Liu's place. Is he having a flashback to something in his deep tribal past? What do we really know about Mago? It could be he's Oriental." Before turning in I peered down the hall, noticing shaded light spilling out of Yulia's room. I slipped into the garage and went outside through the front gate, eluding Mago's attention. My back pressed against the wall, I walked along the side of the house and spotted Mago crouched low gazing at the window across the way. Out of his view I climbed over a broken trellis into the neighbor's yard. To remain unseen I inched along on all fours, finally reaching the spot that held Mago's rapture. I looked up carefully, apprehensive about what I might find, utterly taken aback when I saw Elder Sister Ming Liu doing tai chi in her panties and bra. "Now I know why you're off by your lonesome a lot lately. I think I'd keep the mature Asian thing under your hat, you know, to Tamara. But I'll tell her to call off the suicide watch." We shared a fist jab.



Mago told me he dreamed of flying and I seized the opportunity to exhort him. “Don’t just stand there with your pinkie up your nose, Mago. If you dream it then you should do it, simple as pie.” To give him a taste of flight I flung him onto Tamara’s bed from the other side of the room. “Now Wow. Soh Guh.” I got the ladder from the garage but before goading him to the top rung I wrapped him in two pillows held tight with one of Tamara’s belts. He plopped like a smuggler’s suitcase, bounced awkwardly and fell headfirst to the floor. “Fah Oww. Veh Wee Fah Oww.” I howled at the sight of him struggling to his feet, weaving like a funhouse mirror, miming a stroke victim. “Bravo! Okay, now we’re ready for the big one, and by that I mean from the top of the house onto those mattresses we’re getting rid of. Are we game?” Neither of us enjoyed hauling the mattresses out of the garage or climbing onto the roof, which was slippery with wet leaves and moss, plus a fresh crow carcass. I instructed Mago to go back down, open the garbage container lid, come back up, fetch the bird, and discard it. “How Bow Pah Pah?” I pretended to get a pain in my side but when he made it down to the ground I smacked him in the neck with a soggy bird’s nest. “Let’s get the lead out, Mago, or does getting airborne sound boring to you. Maybe you can go snorkeling in the bathtub, you lily liver. Now come back up and chuck the damned crow in the trashcan.” Mago teetered on the edge looking down at the padding 12 feet below. I cushioned his head with Yulia’s old Wonder Woman bicycle helmet and fashioned a neck brace with a rolled-up towel. “Mah Goh Hab Koh Fee.” I delivered a hard shove before he could turn and run. He improvised a swan dive until an oleander branch

snagged a hole in the pillow case, causing him to rise back up and flip off course. “Wee. Wee.” I regretted not being at ground zero to meet him and deflect his fall. He touched down mere inches from the bedding, crashing onto the wood deck, giving all appearance of succumbing. “I’m not giving you mouth-to-mouth so you’d better snap out of it. Just get up and walk it off, Mago. Sometimes we have to play hurt.” Concerned as I might have been, I turned to the sound of Tamara’s arrival home. I leaped off the house, landing on the front lawn and I reentered from the side. Tamara held Mago like a Nicaraguan quake survivor. She glared at me in greeting. “I’ve just been out rescuing a stranded deer. My God, is Mago okay? What the hell happened?” Mago’s eyes opened a little at a time. “Now Wow. Mah Goh Foh Geh.” Tamara brought him water and took off one of the pillows to rest his head. “It looks like you were trying to fly off the roof. You’re a regular daredevil. I have new found respect for you. You really showed me something today.” Mago emptied the glass and Tamara went to refill it. The dead crow clambered out of the receptacle and flew away. “Why Pah Pah Puh Mah Goh?”



I took a day off and woke up late. The house was empty and both cars were gone. My keys were where I left them, but the spare was missing. I searched through the neighborhood on bike until a cocker spaniel chased after me and I raced home. I spotted my Saab with two occupants taking a left at the intersection near Shitad Park. I gave chase, waving my arms as much as safety permitted. The driver seemed to have limited control, weaving in and out of lanes, either texting casually or choking. They stopped to let an uncle and unidentified child

cross the street, peeling away before I caught up, leaving the smell of lurid rubber. At last my car pulled into the driveway of a rundown cottage. I parked the bike in a roughage garden. The broken front door stood open to an unkempt room with a vile futon on a threadbare carpet. I rang a bell sounding like a scientology chime. A teenage girl stepped out of a wall closet. Her hair looked purposely tousled. I recognized Mago's Burberry muffler around her neck. "Is he here? I saw him pull up in front. Would you ask him to come here, please?" She cocked her head as though she had trouble hearing me. I took a step into the room and she fled. A torn poster of Samuel Beckett half-covered a large, wine-colored stain on the wall. I heard someone release the kickstand on my bike and pedal off. "Wow Wee Zow Wee Now." I walked in the direction of Mago's voice down a hallway past the kitchen where a black-haired woman in a nightgown held a baby whose face was swathed in dirty gauze. "Get your ass out here, Mago, you motherfucking car thief." A Turkish man in a purple robe with a dangling Kool emerged from the bathroom carrying a copy of Downbeat. "Someone helping you?" he asked. "Me? I'm waiting for Mago." Before going back to the toilet he hollered, "Mago, there's an old Jew asking for you." The hardwood floor squeaked in the far corner of the tiny house. The man in the john moved his bowels and moaned, while the bandaged baby suckled a slender breast, sighing mannishly. "'Mago's back there,'" a shirtless 10-year old said from beside the refrigerator, pointing backwards with his thumb. "Here're five bucks. Go back and tell him he has a choice: Return my Saab key or get his fucking fellow thief to give me back my bicycle. Here's another twenty bucks. Wait, all I've got is a fifty. Fuck, go ahead and take it." As he passed through a spray painted door two orange-haired women emerged. "Are you Mago's boss?" one of them asked. "He told you he works for me?" Mago and the kid came out of the room. "Now Wow,

How Dee Now.” We all seemed to tip into the kitchen. The Turk exited the crapper without his pants. The mother and her infant rolled away in a desk chair. The girl I met at first came out of the hall closet, holding the butt of a boy with a bowl cut, her face small and sweetly lascivious. “Wee Wah Tee Bee? Gih Mee Duh Ree Moh.”



A tangled night, leery morning, painful confusion about oxygen and fire, another humiliation episode, loopy, more verité with each rerun, all attributed to chemical disorder, natural or ingested. My thoughts turned to Chairman Mao as I trudged onward from the bathroom, how high a man might rise, limited only by tremens. Gathered around Mago on the green couch were candy wrappers, a dish with the remains of bleu cheese dipping sauce, tiny pieces of cauliflower crowns, half a dozen naked Buffalo wings, an empty Malbec bottle, and a torn bag of tortilla chips. “Now Wow. Mah Goh See Deh Wih.” His onerous voice made me nauseous and I wanted to pluck out his fucking cords. “A death wish, you say? Where do these cockamamie thoughts come from, out of the same place you download your waste matter? What have I ever done that would prompt such a loony statement? Let me remind you: I was a City Commissioner for 11 years.” Nabi never questioned my groove, preferring to mesh with me in an equitable way, culling, puzzling over, akin to Maimonides seeking to prove God. I suggested to Nabi that the best way for him to understand God was to understand me, a lightning bolt; some

might call it an epiphany, allowed and never doubted. We often discussed the 13 Tenets of Faith, one by one, like the cherished parts of a beloved ebony body. Nabi wanted to know if I truly possessed foreknowledge of his actions. I told him I did. “Pih, Wee, Mah Beh. Deh Wih, Noh?” I flamed under the collar, resulting in a tepid sweat trickling in the itch points, causing a rash of umbrage. “I take pills prescribed by my primary care physician, the weed is also a prepared remedy, and Malbec is a bargain compared to a comparable Bulgarian wine.” Mago didn’t give the impression of listening closely. “How Bow Gib Mah Goh Pih, Wee, Mah Beh? Ooh Geh? Now?” Was Mago so selfish he failed to grasp the parameters of my sovereignty? When Nabi learned I shared omnitude with God he took it the wrong way at first and for one hour he attempted to find a way to supplicate in my presence. When he got my drift everything returned to normal and within a few minutes we were again chortling over the principles. “Sure, I’ll give you a taste, Mago. I suggest a refitted brownie to start with, followed by a half-glass of Malbec, continuing on to a Vicodin, the two play well together, capped with the rest of your vino.” Mago said, “Guh, Soh Guh. Goh Geh Ihh” The phone rang before I served his first course. When I returned I caught him standing on a chair reaching into my wine stash. I hurled my slipper at his head; had it been a Bowie knife it would have sliced off an ear. Mago let out a cry when the suede mukluk slammed into his face and he tumbled to the floor, retribution of evil, pure Maimonides.





While I stewed at work Mago changed the desktop wallpaper on my computer to a photo of Nabi, one I didn't recall seeing before. It had a context unrecognizable to me, but it simultaneously possessed a vague familiarity. Shot at mid-range, I couldn't make out the background, adding to my sense of the ajar. Nabi died a few months after turning four, the end coming so swiftly no one had a chance to linger on his sickness. Why did the picture unsettle me? "Hey Mago, you fuckhead, why'd you tamper with my computer?" Mago faked shock, though I knew he bore responsibility. "Now Wow," he said. "Don't 'now wow' me, you asshole." Mago ogled the image of Nabi with noteworthy earnestness. "Nah Bee Luh Guh," he said. "And I'm sure you'd like it even better if it was a snapshot of his anus. That's not the point." Nabi's deadpan face filled the upper half of the screen looking even fatter than I remembered, though without his trademark moroseness. He appeared ruddy, as if he now resided somewhere in the northern hemisphere. "Hee Gah Heh Bee." I looked at Mago and nodded. "I had the same thought. His cheeks look puffy. Where'd you find this shot?" Mago maintained his act, a tiresome spectacle without subtlety, flying in the face of everything true. "How Bow Nah Bee Tuh Mee. Hee Buh Dah?" I looked around to see if Tamara heard Mago's sacrilege. "I was thinking Rush Limbaugh." Mago patted me on the back in appreciation. "Hee Hee. Guh Joh." I got as close to my monitor as I could. "What's that shit on his ear? Say, this looks like a fucking Christmas card." Mago elbowed me for space. "Buh Nah Bee Jue. Noh?" I took a tissue and wiped off a little dust from Nabi's image. "False call, fuck, what a relief. Nabi celebrating Christ's birthday even in death would make me puke. Do you hear me, Mago?" I chose not to bother interpreting his herky-jerky christiany gesture. He exhibited joint flexibility of a high order, making crosses and supremacist signs; I pictured Jesus giving someone a hand-

job. “Mah Goh Noh Jue?” A smile parted my lips. “I’ll read the transcript later, but did you just say you’re no Jew or did you say that you know Jew, ungrammatically meaning you understand Jews, which is complete bullshit. You don’t know Jews, Mago, and you never will because you’re too damned sprightly, not to mention the asshole proclivity.” Mago frowned. “Mah Goh Neh Buh Bee Jue. Ooh Geh. Noh Bih Shi. Mah Goh Guh. Soh Guh.” I hated it when he overstressed a point, especially his rejection of the tribe, though I couldn’t say it was a bad decision. “Okay, very interesting, now let’s return to the most pregnant question, and that is where in the fuck did you get this photo? If you don’t tell me I’ll inform Tamara of this standoff and she’ll hurt you in ways I can only dream of doing.” Mago motioned me to push the keyboard in his direction. “Goo Goo. See?”



I got home from the primary physician’s office earlier than expected after he called me an asshole, suggesting the time might be right for me to find someone new even after I told him I agreed with him. “We both know that. Surely you’re not saying I just now became an asshole. It’s not like eating something that gives you gas, though I recognize the proximity. Is it because the pain jumped from my back to the neck?” I walked in on Mago stretched out half-supinely on the green couch, the room dark, a swarm of light images flickering around his face like dust in sunlight, the TV on. Mago turned the volume so low I strained to hear a male character with a

towel around his beefy girth exclaiming, “The water made it shrink.” I thought at once of Ron Jeremy, though to my knowledge nothing would make his shrink. One of Tamara’s aprons covered Mago’s lap. A roll of paper towels lay on the coffee table, a single wettened sheet extended over the lip, slopping limply. Next to it sat a jar of mayonnaise and one of her fashion magazines, turned to a photo essay on fur panties aimed at middle-aged women. A mini-sized portable vacuum cleaner rested on its side beside Mago running almost noiselessly, the main hose missing and leaving a sucking cavity. I detected a musky scent in the air and opened the sliding door. A pair of soiled panties hung from a nail on the neighbor’s side of the fence. I surveyed the space filled with disgust, surprised to see an old episode of Seinfeld on the screen. “Well this brings tears to my eyes, Mago. I’m very happy to see you’ve followed my advice and I think you’ll see that Seinfeld isn’t all that Jewey?” The last half-year of his life Nabi saw at least one hour of Seinfeld every day, explaining that it gave him a sense of self. In the segment in which Elaine claimed to be a Gentile he threw up on the remote. “It’s just a show, Nabi, don’t take it so seriously. Believe me Elaine was circumcised like everybody else.” Mago steadfastly maintained his loyalty to Korean home dramas, though when I asked him to comment on the dearth of Jews in the genre he offered no plausible justification, other than to express antagonism for an exclusivist tribe simultaneously demanding its inclusion into another closed group. “Why Jue Soh Mee Mee Mee?” I explained to him that, as one of history’s doormats, Jews yearned to exist without contamination from the outside, while at the same time they craved being part of society. In the face of this historic hostility I gushed that Mago watching Seinfeld on his own moved me deeply and he gave me a querulous look. “Mah Goh Wah Jue Sho.”



Mago caught me expunging in the kitchen sink. “Wuh?” I finished up, splashed water where I’d gone and returned to the green couch. Mago hesitated before joining me. “Now Wow. Noh Guh.” I pretended to consider his remark. “You’re referring to maybe seeing me do something into the sink just now?” He eyed me incredulously. “Soh Fow.” I’d rather he hadn’t seen me and regretted my assumption he and Tamara were asleep. It was well after midnight when the urge got the better of me. I’d be correct to blame the anti-inhibitors I took before bed, the ones that eased me into and through the treacherous nightly crossing. “Are you having trouble staying asleep, Mago? What got you up? Was it when I knocked over the marble sculpture in the vestibule?” He continued to gaze at me coldly, eyeballs fixed with the intensity of a plastic surgeon solicited for a harsh appraisal. I shifted in my seat, while he did not. “Why? Soh Loh. Soh Soh Loh.” Mago broke his stare, but only for a split-second. The dark holes in my stomach, hopping and afloat, unsettled me. I recalled a similar reaction the first time I saw a faceless man driving a white Chevy. “Are you sure you saw what you think you saw? I wouldn’t be so sure if I were you. If you’re even 1% doubtful then I would suggest you hold back. Don’t asperse for something even you doubt seeing. See?” The shrubs closest to the house kneeled lower so that the bushes in the back could see better. “Noh Guh. Fuh Noh.” The faceless motorist struck an eerie chord because a friend also observed him and we crossed paths with him again and again that night. “Say, should I flip on the tube and we’ll watch The Chappelle Show? You may not know this but there were only 28 episodes produced, not

counting four mixtapes and a music jump-off show. I've watched every one of them at least thrice and some even more. For my money no comic comes close. He's my favorite by far. Und du mein Freund?" Mago jumped off the couch and planted his glare inches from me. "Guh Wun? Uh? Fee Guh?" I smelled tuna on his breath. Only boiled egg halitosis comes close in repugnance. Mago's oppressive ire reminded me of someone else's. "Say, did I ever tell you about the guy with two dicks. It's all everyone talked about a few years back. The end of the story is the guy sold one of his dicks to a well known woman, a celebrity who wanted his extra dick, and who paid to have the de-dicking performed at the best clinic in the world. The night before he was about to give up one of his dicks his girl friend said, 'What if something goes wrong and they destroy your good dick?'" Mago's body tilted forward. "Weh? Wuh?" I flipped on the TV. "Turns out the guy only had one dick just like the rest of us. They call man the deluded animal. Flaflafla?" He walked off without a peep.



Mago finished a bowl of Italian cereal and burped with no attempt at suppression. When I scowled he smacked his lips. "Uh Kuhn Tah Tuh Ihn Mah Mow." Tamara walked in and he repeated the lame-ass line like he just thought of it. When she left I dragged him by the arm all the way to the small green couch and I sat opposite him. "What the fuck was that all about? Have your wisenheimer proclivities hit a new tack? What's this, 'A cantata in my mouth,' shit?"

You know I specifically deplore lines like that, yet you persist. Anyway, do you know how stupid you sound? ‘A cantata in my mouth,’” Mago appeared to fidget, proving again his inability to receive one of my infrequent admonitions with a sincere ear. From whom did he acquire this flawed trait? Nabi, who rarely required my counsel, nonetheless absorbed any and all criticism, whether aimed at him or not. When I told Mago to stop projecting his recently evacuated ass in my face Nabi began to self-quarantine for 30 minutes after a bowel movement, though he had never once tried to force-feed his anal hole on me or anyone else. In time he learned to use toilet paper with the flair of a cheerleader. Another time I complained about the excessive nap time by certain occupants of the household, meaning Mago. Without a word Nabi began to circle the house for hours on end, which also caused him to slim down. A critique blossomed into a thousand flowers in Nabi’s world. “Fla Fla Fla?” Mago said. “Fuck no. The last thing I want to hear is your side of the story in a free-flowing form. You know all I want from you?” Mago ran up to me and planted his feet so close to mine our toes touched. “Bee Nah Bee?” His eyes arched ironically. “Noh Guh?” I took what he said personally and took a step backward. He advanced toward me. I looked for a weapon. The moon floated above the neighbor’s pricey garden. Images from my first marriage caused my thigh hair to ripple. Mago ran to the green couch and stood on a cushion. “Mee Nah Bee. See Mee?” I decided to play along with his mad game. “Hi, Nabi, how are you? How is the afterlife treating you?” I expected him to take a shit just to piss me off, or vice versa. “Ooh Geh, Mee Nah Bee, Oh Geh?” Mago said. “Yeah, I got it already. You’re Nabi, not Mago. So how the fuck are you, you old bag of bones, are you still in that hole in the backyard? Say, you know that asshole brother of yours, he’s turned into a bigger dipshit than I ever anticipated.” Mago collapsed in a heap onto the cushion, bounced several

inches into the air, and rolled onto the floor, his body landing on its side, a position I assumed indicated he died. I stared at his motionless shape, a little unsettled in its death form. When Tamara asked me I told her Mago was near the green couch. I napped, my eyes gazing out through the blinds at the moon drifting off on its way.



Tamara skunked me at gin rummy as resoundingly as she did at ping pong. The anguish was worse because I taught her the game with the calculated purpose of never being beaten. For one thing, I didn't show her how to cheat. Her exclamations of triumph as she shut me down almost made losing worth it, at least the first 10 times. As a man schooled on the secrets of gin by a legendary shark I couldn't fathom getting shellacked by a novice who had trouble holding all her cards in a fan. If she dropped a card on the floor I'd make her skip a turn as a penalty and when she reached down to pick it up I'd check out the next five cards in the deck. Yet somehow she caught every suit or number she needed to trounce me, sometimes before I had my first suit. I finally unearthed carefully inscribed notes from years before when my dad showed me how to count and angle, induce anti-social indigestion, and corkscrew the tally. I challenged Tamara to a final, once-and-for-all winner-takes-all match swearing I would never ask again. She reminded me we played our last two rounds under the same agreement. "Anyway, I'm rereading the microwave manual. We should have had a pro install it." I located Mago in the family room

sleeping with his head precipitously near a waste sphincter. “You care to engage in a little trump?” He awakened slowly, probably reemerging from the rich fantasy of an anus garden. “You remember that card game I taught you? The one my old man and I used to play. It’s the perfect diversion for a quiet evening at home with the family, yes or no? Let me suggest we play for a small stake; the loser has to clean your crapper, how’s that?” He stretched a little too pleasurably. “No Fuh,” Mago said. “Whattaya mean no fun? Okay, forget the wager, just pure athleticism.” He got up and let me deal him a hand, stupidly failing to demand I reshuffle the deck. While Mago received only deadwood my draw was Platonist. “Take it easy, Mago, we’re just two guys enjoying a little sport. So do you have a good hand? Mine is like waking up with your nose in somebody’s rectum.” Mago’s eyes faced me but his concentration rendered him sightless. “Noh Guh. Kah Kah.” Though I knew not to gloat I made my lips curl south while I gloated. Mago stopped to pick a dead ant from under one of his nails. “Maybe you can step it up a little, s’il vous plait. Don’t try to schmooze a schmoozer, okay?” He put his cards on the table face down, spread them out, packed them back together, picked them up, shuffled them twice, and then he arranged them in a perfect half-moon. “Mee Goh Now? I signaled for him to proceed. “Jih?” he said. “Right, we’re playing gin, now pick a card and discard a card, get it?” Instead he reticently displayed his cards for me to see. He had three perfect suits; four queens, a spade run of one to three and three eights. “Mee Goh Jih.” I fell asleep moments before my head touched the pillow.





Over a one week period I set Mago up for a series of falls. Each time I spoke with him or beckoned him for any reason I called him Nabi. “What do you want for lunch, Nabi, tuna or chicken?” This was like asking my Uncle Irving if he wanted a plain bagel or a ginger bread man. I brought up Nabi as often as possible. “Nabi reminded me of an existentialist character in an old French novel. I’m not sure if he’d have been a gangster boss or a revered judge. And man, did he not have Alain Delon eyes?” If Mago or Tamara mentioned Nabi I fell to my knees and sobbed, cursing the jangle of life for taking him from my arms, needing a glass of Malbec to resuscitate my emotional balance. “Life, your name is Katrina.” From under Mago’s door during his nap time I summoned Nabi, curling my voice spasmodically, adding whistling sounds meant to suggest fog and menace. I locked Mago in his room after midnight and rigged a revolving lamp with flow-through cheval glass to project images of Nabi on the wall. “Mago, it’s me in the hallway, is there anything strange happening in your bedroom because in the family room there appear to be angry airs, I can’t explain it any better, all I can tell you is that the wind has a face that looks like Nabi, I swear. Say, did someone in there just say his nuts need stimulation?” I left for work and sneaked back unseen but stayed outside, using a golf club covered with an expensive chamois to knock on the front door. I saw the shadow of Mago’s feet on the floor inside the vestibule. I removed the cloth and covered my mouth, speaking with a never-used accent. “Someone here going by the name Nabi? I got a telegram says your birth father’s turned up at a shelter in Birmingham. I’ll get back to you later to confirm receivership.” Later that day I faked a phone call to Mago. “Hewō,” Mago said. “May I speak to Nabi?” Mago said, “Nah Bee Deh.” I sat in my car parked around the corner from the house, hiding my face in the soft

leather, wearing a stretched out white tee shirt, a large bandage peeling off my forehead revealing a scabby wound, blood dripping like juice from a little girl's popsicle, a small tangerine orange cell phone in hand. "Nabi can't be dead. I saw him. Mago's the one that died I heard. This is about his father." Mago said, "Mah Goh Ohh Geh. Wuh Bow Pah Pah?" Hearing the concern in his voice made me giggle. Didn't Mago divine snooker when it punched him in the eye? For some reason I lost interest in the game we were playing. I mentioned this to Tamara, knowing full well I would be scolded and reminded my cruelty played a major part in Nabi's death, but instead she looked tickled. "I've been doing the same thing to him for the last few days," she said. Mago walked into Tamara's room and glared at us. "Look," Tamara said to Mago, pointing above the backyard fence, "there's the little angel now."



"Pah Pah, Wuh Puh See? Puh See Guh?" Nabi and I tinkered with this topic a few months before he died. Mago not bringing it up over the intervening period convinced me he and Nabi already covered it. "Pah Pah Hab Noh Puh See." When Tamara and I adopted the two brothers I knew the day would come when I sat them down and went over the all of the pertinent rules; little did I know there would be such a maturity gap between them and by the time the baby of the pair got around to inquiring about the birds and the bees the elder one was already sharing a dirtland with worms. "How Bow Mah Mah?" With our own kids we skirted the issue

without even trying. Sadly they both headed out before transmitting what they knew to Mago and Nabi. I resented having this dropped in my lap and regretted more than ever our agreeing to accept the two orphans. “Now Wow. Wee Goh See Puh See, Ohh Geh?” Nabi approached the matter in his customarily taciturn manner. We were watching a newly digitized DVD of Oshima Nagisa’s *In the Realm of the Senses* when Nabi observed a woman’s small forest for the first time. He asked me to pause the film so he could look more closely. “Ooh Geh? Wee Goh Now See Puh See?” Nabi stood one inch from the screen; I’d never seen his eyes as illuminated. He reached up to touch Eiko Matsuda, playing the role of Abe Sada. When he found the middle of her body he froze. “There you are, my friend, the center of the universe, more jarring for a man’s eyes than the hidden gorge of a prehistoric lake. It’s something you’ll come to admire.” We talked in this same way when we discussed mortality. I told him that both were marvels for which we should be thankful. Nabi only nodded, for he rarely spoke, unlike his brother. “Buh Wuh Puh See, Pah Pah Wee See?” The day after Nabi encountered the image for the first time I saw him dreaming he was fondling Abe Sada. Nabi’s intellectual tweak followed its own formulae, always internalized, never forthcoming. He and I had symmetry and detachment, a vaporous bond. “Wee Goh Pah Pah Cah? Mah Goh Geh Kee?” Nabi paced through the house shaken by his new knowledge, unsure how to respond, excited each time the image of Abe Sada flashed in his mind. I recalled my own discovery, that day in the swimming pool at the West L.A. Jewish Community Center when the bold girl asked me to join her in the boy’s restroom. “How Bow Mah Goh Goh See Poh Noh? Poh Noh Hab Puh See, Ohh Geh?” Nabi collapsed under the weight, just as I had before him while Mago seemed to luxuriate in this new twist,

titillated as if it were a novel strain of tuna whereas for Nabi it constituted another cause for concern, a heavenly cave with hairy consequences. “Goh Goh Goh. Now Wow. Yow!”



Mago greeted me warmly when I walked out of my bedroom in the morning. “Hewō Pah Pah. How Bow Pah Pah Dih?” Mago trailed behind me as I navigated the hallway carrying an empty wine glass, cookie wrappers, a large Mao medal, some cauliflower crumbs, and a soiled silk handkerchief. I took him aside before I headed out for work. “Mago, I know you mean well, but I would prefer that you not inquire about my dick each morning.” He looked confused. “Buh Why? Mah Goh Hab Dih.” It took all of my will power to avoid looking below Mago’s virtually undesignated waist. I put my wallet, keys, watch, and a can of soup in a clear plastic bag. “It’s the wrong kind of question. Do you ask Tamara about her body parts?” Mago took a step back and then one forward. “Hewō Mah Mah. How Bow Mah Mah Hōh?” I giggled appreciatively until Tamara stepped out of the hall into the middle between us. She quickly faced me. “This is exactly what I mean about your perverse influence on this child. I’ve always suspected you of coarse inclinations, ones I don’t want to talk about in front of a minor.” Mago pretended it was he she was scolding and bowed his head. “Mah Goh Sah Wee,” he said. “You’ve got it all wrong. I was trying to teach Mago a point about polite salutations, but it seems he missed my meaning.” Tamara turned away without acknowledging my innocence,

patting Mago on his head, uttering sounds with implications that made me gasp. “Hold on there. Aren’t we guilty of a little rushed judgment concerning responsibility for one of Mago’s frequent affronts? I didn’t tell him it was acceptable to grill you about your genital canal.” She looked at Mago with a frown, opened the door and started down the brick path to her Volvo. I followed her for a few steps, pivoting to confront Mago one more time. “We’ll talk about this some more when I get home.” Mago smirked. “Tah Bow Whu? Tah Bow Pah Pah Dih?” My hand reached out involuntarily to grab Mago’s shoulder and shake it. He reacted as if I’d begun by sticking my fingers in a piss pot. “Look, you little fucker, I’ve got a dick you can only dream about. My dick has seen more action than yours, Nabi’s, and your whole family put together, so don’t go knocking my dick, see? At least 20 guys I know are just waiting for me to die so they can lay claim to my dick. If my dick were a country they’d call it Swaziland. Henceforward I think you should refer to it as Mr. Richard.” I had no choice but leave in a huff, but instead I nearly collided with Tamara and our letter carrier, Imelda, who handed me the mail. Mago took advantage of a pause in the action to slide free from my grip and sidle up to the women. “Pah Pah Toh Mah Goh Hee Hab Bih Dih. Mah Mah See Pah Pah Bih Dih?” I closed my eyes and shook my head back and forth until everyone left.



“Now watch me. See, I take a Kleenex and blow my nose, and then I use the same tissue to clean the wax from my ear, and I use it once more to stop the bleeding where I scratched my nose this morning with the corner of a Nordstrom bag. Okay, now here’s another paradigm. Move back and give me a little room. Okay, I take an arm’s length of toilet tissue, maybe six or eight squares, and I blow my nose again. It’s always running because of my medication. Okay, next I fold the sheet into a tight little number more or less the size of my vertical crack, I do my banking, and I wipe up any portion that failed to evacuate. I hope you can assimilate what I’m elucidating because methinks you’re wasteful, and I don’t like it, nor does Mother Earth, but mostly me.” At first I believed he had me tuned in but I realized his ears were perked to make sure he heard Tamara when she called him to dinner. “But then maybe the two of us have different ideas about what constitutes wastefulness. From your angle it’s a waste when someone’s asshole really stinks and you don’t stick your nose in it.” I walked on the sides of my feet to the kitchen. Mago was already there with Tamara, but she ignored him. “Gih Mee Kuh Kee. Ohh Geh?” I’d never considered him more Philistine than at that moment. Begging for food at his age foretold moral evaporation. If I were Tamara I would stuff the corner of the biscotti down his ear to leave an impression. “Mago,” Tamara said, “I’m tired of your whininess. You’ll dine at five like the rest of us.” We all flinched when a spate of rough winds hyper-jetted out of the north accompanied by icy rain. Mago looked up at the skylight, wincing as water bullets struck, cascading across the roof. I ran to my room and turned on the noise machine full blast to the channel with thunder-and-rain. Mago arrived a moment later. “How Bow Ohh Peh Wih Dow.” I parted and slid them all the way, the same with the blinds, and last I switched my digital fan all the way up. A frothing gust shot past the birch tree in front through the screen and

left us chattering. To our backs the fan generated robust contrary action. “Wee Ihn Noh Poh. Now Wow, Wee Geh Koh. Mah Goh Goh Geh Pah Jah Mah.” He left and came back in 30 seconds ready for bed. To his surprise I had put on my flannel bottoms and a tie-died long-sleeve tee. We sat in the center between battling tempests; the air grew hostile, chilling. “Dih Fuh Koh. Now Wow. Poo Hoh Fuh Koh.” I grabbed the comforter and wrapped it around us. “It is very fucking cold.” “Noh Shi.” “My nipples are getting taut.” “Noh Guh.” “No good?” “Whu Nih?” “Why in fuck are you asking me what a nipple is if you don’t like it?” “Doh Noh Juh Noh Guh.” “You can joke about your asshole but my nipples are taboo?” The wind and rain halted, fading out as fast as it struck. I flipped off the fan and sound replicator. Mago and I glanced at one another awkwardly. “Dow Poh Soh Guh.” “Nothing like a good nor’easter.” “Goh Beh Now.” “You’re all wet.”

