

A m e r i c a n .  
Q u i n t e t *Ramick*

I  
Allegro.Maestoso  
*The Abyss*

He.the he I love and loathe.he whom I distrust and wish to advocate and protect[I'll ramify ashy end from snowy birth].doesn't know who he is.has never known who he is.won't ever know who he is.not in this life.not as flesh and blood.not among gods gone silent.he is too old to shine.too young to quit.it isn't his time to die.that much he and I know. know with our guts.so he has unslept himself[I'll densify his nature]and we're going travelling.our good road trip.he and I.along with his.Phantom. his.Ghost.his.Love.his.Enigma.and his.Figment.he took them for a ride. let's leap into the future.without fear.so that I might speak of the past. so I can tell this with the echo-authority of memory.not just the supposition of hope or now-into-next imagination.he kept his shadow.his reflection. his aura.his conscience with him in the driver's seat.and I was there.too. the whole time.or as close to the whole time as I knew how to be.he and his.Love.carless as they were.needed wheels.I found them an American Rambler.assembled not long after he was born.a Rambler American.I should say.copper-colored and stout of engine.not precious.not mint. but tidy and reliable.on fresh tires and with every gadget and gauge in working order.with sparkly upholstery and oval dash and cursive weather eye.with locking glove compartment and wing windows.with the steady touch of confidence in all conditions.he drove.his.Love sat next to him. next to her sat his.Phantom.who often slept.head back and mouth open.not the most dignified pose for a phantom.though he didn't snore. the seats resembled those of diner booths.his.Enigma sat in the middle. back behind his.truestLove.with his.Ghost behind him and his.Figment behind his.Phantom.at one point he thought to bring his.Compatriot along.but that would have meant a sextet with double cellos.would have necessitated a Rambler station wagon with someone consigned to the

very back.as if a dog.his.Love is his lone cello.he always knew his hauntings should form a quintessential star.so his.Compatriot stayed elsewhere as a comrade of words sent spinning on the wind.there was.decisively.no sex with any but his.Love.and his.Love was the lone mother among the four females.and his.Phantom was no sire.they.we.set out for nowhere.but nowhere never lasts.

We drove the old highway.whenever possible.whenever he could.not the new highway.with our windows down and our wing windows ajar.happy whistled the wind.the air allured.the time was ours.there was some talk.some scratchy radio broadcasts.some ambient silence.his.Ghost could babble.pixie-babble.as could his.Enigma.possum-babble.in response.most always in response.and his.Love's watery chatter could flow.and the sound of the engine and the wheels on the asphalt were essential.and his.Phantom would sleep or make witty remarks.and his.Figment watched the scenery.laughed politely.or genuinely.or made logical corrections to conversations while wondering why she had to be on this unproductive road trip.though it was.at times.fun.and everyone was smart.and the landscape was resplendent and color-pizzicato and receptive to her inclinations to daydream.all six agreed.or all seven[I'll speak for myself as cardinal adornment]:the landscape held imaginative melody and majestic force.it might have been three days.it might have been twelve or forty.his expansive imagination at play with his fantast.landscapes rolled by.desert and sporadic forest.as if real.as if the product of thousands or millions of unfathomed time-frames.this leading to that and that to this.upheaval and ruin.erosion and growth.perserverence and giving up of the ghost.but he wouldn't give up his.Ghost.nor his.Phantom.nor his.Enigma.nor his.Figment.and his.Love was.for all intents and purposes.his very own soul.though this isn't the way the world works.when they stopped for the night.he shared a room with her.and the rest shared another.his.Ghost and his.Enigma in one bed and his.Phantom and his.Figment in the other.awkward.there was some awkwardness.but travellers must sleep.and funds refuse to be unlimited.even within fantasy.and this was the arrangement that made most sense.most of the time.to him.

One day he drove them to the Abyss.this was no ordinary abyss.but the abyss of all worldly abysses.more than a canyon.far more than grand.no river flowed at its bottom.if bottom it held.the land dropped off into nothingness.or near-nothingness.close enough to nothing to be more nothing than something.or only something in terms of its powerful mimicry of nothing.a smattering of winter tourists stood at the edge

and stared down into a false night sky devoid of stars.though some visitors across history have sworn they could see pinpricks of light twinkling in the Abyss.as if there existed distant tribal settlements in possession of fire.somewhere way down there.or luminescent creatures of the black air.or as if the Abyss cut through the whole planet and one could.out of one's daylight.see through to the other hemisphere's nighttime firmament.all of this was nonsense.of course.since scientific inquiry had thus far found nothing deeper in the Abyss to quantify but more nothingness.people occasionally flung themselves into that big empty.some after careful consideration and note-leaving and putting of affairs into order.and some in spur-of-the-moment insanity.the darkness of the Abyss being too alluring for their searching hearts.too compelling not to want to swim or fly for some portion of eternity in its airy waters.flying down and down till perhaps down becomes up.some even hurled their surprised children into the darkness before following them without audible apology.it was an abyss.not a void.this must be made clear.there are many who can peer into an abyss.but I've never known a self capable of staring down a void when confronted with the absolute.

They.we.couldn't afford rooms in the posh and angular Resort at the Edge of Eternity.so they.we.all stayed at The Precipice Motel.a pink and baby-blue monstrosity perched on the brink of nothingness.while we waited for the keys.while his quintet stayed in the car waiting till they knew there were rooms for us.he told me he would walk.without hesitation.the entire perimeter of the Abyss with his.Love.its whole month-long unnatural circumference.if a private stretch of the north rim weren't closed to the public.but he didn't know whether he could follow her into the Abyss.if that was what she asked of him.I told him not to worry.she would never ask that of him.he glanced out the motel office window at the Rambler and its occupants.his.Ghost wasn't the tomboyish towheaded girl.wasn't the snow-she.was his emotional conduit to his.Love.as portal to the God.mechanism or fate-pleasure.unavailable in all the right ways.unmoved by his spirit's tempest.her laugh crossed his abyss.could cross prairies of belligerent solitude.blocks and blocks of self-city indifference.she was pale.properly pale.that blanch of death's proximity.hair neither tallow nor sallow nor yellow.if not quite white.centric with her compassion.unlike his.Love.unlike his cellos.but like all those higher-strung violins and violas.his.Enigma wasn't the solution.wasn't the finer echo.neither some extraordinary broadcast of an ordinary message.nor an extraordinary broadcast from some ordinary message.she wasn't the arm-in-arm comrade of making vim.she was

her own dervish of vigor.her own force of spin.her own maelstrom of nervous curiosity.he was strong enough to lift her into his arms.but not strong enough to drop her into the Abyss.his.Figment.naturally enough.didn't always stay where he left her.wasn't often there when he needed her.but sat next to his.Enigma in the back seat of the car now.closest to him.staring off as if into nothingness.her cheekboned angularity better suited to sense and elegance than to this heart-sprung adventure out of his imaginative discomfort.

After unloading the car.while his.Love called their.Prize to let him know they'd arrived at the Abyss and were staying at the Precipice Motel. he and his.Phantom strolled down to the railing at the rim of the Abyss.ghosts are restless.enigmas are unsolvable.figments aren't tangible.loves are forever.or at least till the permanence of death.and most phantoms are illusory.but his was wistful.the day had already slipped on its twilight robe.and the cliffs on the far edge of the Abyss were done with their blushing.and the panorama was worth expanses of silence.he and his. Phantom stood staring into the black below.that well of immensity. probably empty.waterless.bottomless.not as dark as actual death.but plenty dark.soon the sky above would be half as dark with stars.we watched as down the way his.Ghost and his.Enigma were laughing and throwing something over their shoulders into the immeasurable pit.coins for luck.or coins for wishes-to-come-true.he didn't know what those wishes were.since he made-believe his fabrications autonomous.his. Ghost's hair was the brightest sight.his.Phantom's eyes shone watery blue even in the disappearing light.his.Phantom could have spoken about the weariness of breathing.the fatigue of motion in any realm of ideas.or he could have spoken of individual gardens in individual heavens for spirits without aspirations.or of the chilling air rising from the Abyss.or of the warmish air that also rose in wafts.but he stayed silent and he also stayed silent and I thought them beautiful.that inadequate word.in all their untalked sympathy[I'll mouth them out of memory].they listened to the happy voices of his.Ghost and his.Enigma and his.Figment.who had just joined them.as they kept tossing objects of inconsequence into the Abyss.then.his.Phantom gasped and his.Ghost screamed.his.Enigma had leapt over the railing as if confident in her rights to do so.he was bemused for just a moment before his surprise shifted to fury and he stomped about in his confusion over his control and all of their freedoms. his.Love had just come down from the motel and he burst into tears in her arms.she told him he couldn't allow the event.her love wouldn't let him.and his love shouldn't let him.and his.Love simply wouldn't let him.

Now it was pressing dark.the Abyss sent them away.night had fallen and his.Enigma had to be ungoned.he bent his will to the task and put her to bed in the motel room and requested a rollaway for his.Ghost.his.Enigma insisted her leap could never have been undone without her compliance.and thus she felt no duty to express gratitude to him or his love or his.Love and her love.she said she knew the Abyss couldn't hold her.and he said she didn't abandon them.they just failed to not stay where she wasn't.exhausted.he retired with his.Love to the adjoining room.sometimes.when driving in the Rambler.he'd see that he was alone with his.Love.that he was lucky to be alone with his.Love.and that her love couldn't save him but it was the next best thing to being saved.now.in the motel room.he saw there was no door to any adjoining room.he let it go and remembered roaming across this giant land with his.Love and seeing her aglow as she rode shotgun in the lowering sun.he felt her still-trembling legs against his and stared the ceiling to sleep.

Morning brought the same unfathomable Abyss to the edge of the Precipice Motel.and at breakfast.at the (Good to the) Last Swallow Diner next to the motel.his.Ghost said she thought that overnight the Abyss had moved a tiny smidge closer.she laughed her laugh.nobody spoke about his.Enigma's leap the evening before.breakfast was the only meal he never forgot to eat.break the fast after dreaming and then break the fast again tomorrow after dreaming and then snack in the car while driving.the way the Abyss and its darkness absorbed sunshine forced the diner to stay brightly lit even in broad daylight.it gave the diner that odd look of colorized postcards.and the pies in the display case looked as if they'd been painted.they.we.heard the sound of a helicopter carrying tourists down into the Abyss.daily flights into pitch darkness.and even with the copter's intense all-directional floodlights.he'd.we'd.been told.nothing whatsoever could be seen.not worth the expense.he'd just ask his.Enigma what it'd been like for her.those moments in the Abyss.when they were next alone together.if he ever again thought it wise for them to be alone together.the thought of being alone with anyone but his.Love.or their.Prize or his.Compatriot.or a fire-in-the-belly comrade. or me[I'll stand by him as his to-the-death and among-the-embers witness].agitated him beyond simple discomfort.he paid the bill.left a too-generous tip.gave his quintet equal allowances for the gift shop.and went down to sit with the Abyss till it was time to check out of the Precipice and get back on the road.the Abyss welcomed his company.or paid him no never mind.however one wishes to look at it.he watched clusters of tourists gather at the Abyss railing and marvel at the darkness and joke and pose

for photographs.he watched an elderly gentleman with a terrier on a leash.and he wondered whether non-seeing-eye dogs were allowed on park premises.a family speaking a language he didn't recognize were excitedly pointing at something in the Abyss.a helicopter.those phantom lights.he couldn't tell.he squinted and peered but couldn't see anything.the elderly gentleman picked up his dog.kissed it on its snout.hugged it with obvious emotion.then heaved his terrier into the utter black.he.my he.was as taken aback as he'd been when his.Enigma had made her possum-leap the evening before.the elderly gentleman was now attempting to climb the railing.but the father of the foreign family had already moved to intervene and now grabbed the man by his waist.together they half-stumbled and fell back onto a bench opposite the railing.the elderly gentleman was in tears and distraught.inconsolable.some foreign school girls gathered and they fussed over him and held his hands.there was confusion.some talk of the elderly gentleman's dog having pulled the leash from his grasp and leapt into the Abyss.and the man had tried to climb the railing to save his four-legged companion.people were gazing into the Abyss as if the dog would still be visible.a small crowd had gathered.someone had gone for a park guard or ranger.there was a lot of nervous chatter amid feelings of a minor event.when the ranger arrived.as she was trying to get the story of what had happened from the foreign family and the school girls.the elderly gentleman was forgotten just long enough for him to stand and slip around them and hurl his old body with surprising agility into the Abyss.a hullabaloo ensued.the park ranger tried to tell everyone to calm down.these things happen.people will do what people will do.they will.and the gentleman had chosen to follow his beloved dog.out of uncertainty.into uncertainty.that's all.move along.she said.unlike the canyons and caves and wells of our world.she said.the Abyss never gives back its dead.people are free to do what they will do.he.my he.walked away from all that public turmoil and intimacy.the elderly gentleman was outside his control.he couldn't coax or command him.nor his little dog.out of any abyss.his quintet was hurrying down the path toward him with their souvenir purchases in their black gift bags.he told them it was time to pack up the Rambler and go.they wanted to show him what they'd bought.none of them had been able to resist the small wooden view-boxes that contained actual air from the Abyss.with a porthole of glass through which one could peer to one's heart's content.while at one's office or home.into that contained.yet still infinite.dark nothingness.his.Enigma had found a t-shirt that said I survived the Abyss on the front and Will you? on the back.his.



Love had postcards split-screened with a recent photo of the Abyss and one taken over a hundred years ago, showing that photography had changed, but the Abyss hadn't. It bothered him that his imagination couldn't come up with anything better than these curios, or that the gentleman just had to have been elderly and anonymous and gentle, and just had to have brought his doomed terrier along with him, and that there must be drama in this world for the movements of the tops of trees to be moving, his need to invent annoyed him, a holy aspect he'd yet to purge, golden silence, even silver silence, of the tongue and of the mind, had eluded him, kept eluding him, as it does most everyone across every lifetime.

The Blue Portal is a roadside attraction not far to the west of the Abyss, it is purported, by some, to possess strange energies within its ancient sandstone archway, his, Phantom and his, Ghost pleaded with him to stop, even though they'd just got underway and he wanted to settle into his long afternoon of driving into the sun, with his copper or brass silence, without surfacing till arrival at Chance City, their evening's goal, the billboards for The Blue Portal, along the two-lane highway, promised mystery and transformation, they showed renderings of visitors walking under the arch as it emitted some sort of awesome electric surge, an eerie blue glow from the mineral electrum, with its magical properties of conductivity, its timeless properties of elsewhere and blueness, his, Love and his, Enigma agreed the billboards were almost enough in themselves, the actual portal would undoubtedly disappoint, his, Love knew he hated to stop once he'd pointed the Rambler toward the horizon, but his, Phantom rarely asked for anything, he wished to make him happy when he could, so he steered the American, Rambler he liked to call it, down the graded road to the gravel parking lot that held only three vehicles, and one of those sat deep amid weeds of neglect, he paid the disinterested teenaged girl at the turnstyle-booth for his and his, Love's tickets and we, all seven, made our way down the flagstoned path to the sacred site of elsewhere and blueness.

He kept one eye on his, Enigma, she might take this portal lore to heart, he thought, he couldn't afford to lose her, or any of his quintet, his, Quintet, before they stood among the giant trees, then, if they must go, they must go, he'd let them, all but his, Love, he wouldn't let go of her, not in ten thousand everthings, the arch stood as tall as a house, the arch attendant, looking like she might be the ticket-girl's mother, said the arch was older than its constituting earth, that's what she said, we heard her, or perhaps constituent earth is what she said, his, Phantom asked



how that was possible. she said the portal had existed in space before the planet formed around it. his. Figment rolled her eyes. under the sandstone pulsed a suspended arc of electrum. or something much more rare and wonderful. something disguised as electrum. remarkable in itself. but only the façade of something far more marvelous and beyond understanding. something living. in some universal sense. her tribe wouldn't let science experiment upon it. her tribe considered it a live being. and it had healing properties. or properties of enticement. she might more properly say. many. not all. of those who walk under its ancient span experience a momentary jolt of memory. somewhat resemblant of that long-winded cookie-tale of lost time. an instantaneous remembrance of life before life. and just an inkling. not much more than an inkling. of life after life. still. even an inkling was worth another pittance. another donation to her tribe. stewards of its powers. he sighed. this woman. he thought. doesn't speak for any tribe. he smiled. he paid. for himself and all of his. making jokes of individual doom. and tittering. his. Ghost half-walked. half-danced. under the archway. he saw the woman shift her weight behind her stone podium. the air around the portal crackled and sizzled and shone. as blue as electrified sky. his. Ghost squealed and flew in a panic to his arms. everyone laughed. his. Phantom and his. Love stood enamored of the color. as it diminished. his. Enigma took a step toward the portal. but he clasped her by her belt-loop and wouldn't let her go. instead. his. Figment. she of the rolling eyes and the skeptical bent. strode under the arch's influence. again the woman shifted her weight. again there came the crackle and sizzle of awakened electrum. again the astonishing blue was let loose into the air. again his. Ghost squealed and held him tight. again his. Love and his. Phantom were enthralled by the unspeakable color. a color not to be spoken of beyond saying it partook of blueness while shaming all blues except the blue of the sky at its most profound. his. Enigma burst into tears. and now his. Figment emerged from that blue energy an altered figment. a figment who suddenly believed in the palpable resonance of all figments. a figment who'd been given the rare gift of some memory of a precedent life. and a vision. an inkling. of life beyond death. existence as ongoing. past time's gaze. into time's hiddenness. her cheekboned austerity. her coolish gray eyes. had been blued into radiance. they all stared at her as if she could tell them something of her experience. unlike his. Enigma's encounter with the Abyss. as if insight were now hers to impart. but she couldn't speak. she stood teary-eyed. even as his. Enigma and his. Ghost stood in our midst teary-eyed. all for different reasons. the Blue Portal was again but a sandstone arch of

current antiquity.a product of wind and cohesion and shape.a tourist trap.his.Enigma.on their way back to the Rambler.stopped at the gift shop and bought a toy model of The Blue Portal.complete with a metal switch that made a friction-powered blue light flicker in an arc below the arch.this souvenir.this toy.this molded archway.with its earnest approximation of a wired sham and also an actual mystery.would soon. for his.Enigma.prove fateful.

They.we.drove in sober silence.the silence he inhabited.all afternoon toward the lowering sun.and on into evening and night's glare.the lights from Chance City lit up the desert sky from hours away.he squinted into oncoming traffic.thinking of it as travel-family.still believing he carried the most valuable cargo[I'll map his arrogance and despair.his mortality and obviousness].his weak hand on his.Love's known knee.everyone else slept.except his.Enigma.who stared at him in the rear-view mirror.though he couldn't see her unless headlights from behind lit the mirror.or headlights from the opposite lane lit her face.she liked and resented her role on this trip of his.she was his.onlyEnigma.and she would eat his heart.if she were hungry enough.if she could ever get it in her hands.next to her.his.Figment dreamt of blue snow on fire.

## II

### Presto.Luminoso

#### *Chance City*

A.Six to one against.Q.What were the odds they.we.would find a suite in a glitzy hotel in the heart of things.and not a seedy set of rooms in the American Motel at the far end of the strip.Q.What were the odds it was the Americana Motel.not the American Motel.with the third and last neon *a* unlit.and he.we.didn't notice till daylight.when.while waiting to cross the street toward a pancake house.while his.Love photographed the sign.he pointed out its absence to us.in a poor try to accentuate the charms of our crude accommodations.A.Four to three against[I'll stand in the storm-field to break the deadlock].Q.What was the vote whether or not to ride the Spiral to Polaris in a steel faux-rocket of tracked thrills. A.his.Ghost and his.Phantom.Q.Who among his.Quintet wished to gamble their breaths away for unlikely treasure.or noisy entertainment. Q.Who.among we seven.besides his.Enigma and his.Figment.and even. secretly.his.Love.hoped to stumble across someone of recognizable fame. A.He.and he alone.Q.When an angel of the heavenly host appeared between machines of grotesque unlikelihood.shining of elsewhere with a pure white beyond any blue.without intent to speak.with strict purpose of wordless visitation.who among us.besides myself[I'll peer him into forgetfulness].observed said angel.Q.Who among us felt the awful isolation of random fate.the authorial disgust of third-personned deflection risen from observational distrust.A.She deflected her will to persevere into hand-wringing obstinateness and flighty refusal to show him substantive verve.Q.How did his.Enigma behave within his empirical imagination.Q.Why did she.his.Enigma.prod his melancholy into ordinary annoyance.as if the enigmatic were ever the beloved.Q.How did his.Figment react when she got wind of his abstract inclinations.substituting clench-jawed avoidance for hand-wrung obstinacy.and practical kindness

for flighty agitation.and followed her instincts to temper the situation for deflected her will to persevere.refusal to show any special fondness intact.A.She also never quite loved him.Q.What.besides her pallor.put potency into his.Ghost's hauntings.spoke of her strains to reciprocate. A.Thickful urge.thinful pulse.Q.Were there words[I'll coin his wishes into tangibles]in his bloodstream through his heart-field for the ensemble sounds of his.Quintet.A.There weren't any.the meaning of the world lies outside the world.Q.What were the odds he.we.they could've made sense of Chance City's excessive delights after only a night and a day. Q.Should he.we.have been mindful of the fairest standards of influence. A.Luck and chance aren't commensurate.nor.obviously.are love and desire.Q.What was he thinking while I watched him watching his. dearQuintet.their movements through casino after crowded casino after casino.restrooms with attendants offering towelettes for tips.the overwhelm.the sensory assault.the silly swirl of hopes.A.A miracle to one.Q.What are the odds his obsessions.anyone's obsessions.can be understood through analysis.through sympathetic attention.through paintings on cavern walls.Q.What are the odds his lesser wishes will come true in this travelogue version of his self-telling.coins tossed into the Abyss or no coins tossed into the Abyss.wishes of skin and duality and recognition and trust.Q.Would it be a miracle to all or a miracle to many or a miracle to one if his.God were to show in the flesh.A.No one. without call for pity.Q.Who among his.Quintet.besides his cello.besides his.Love.and who among us all.besides me.and perhaps his.Compatriot. or his and his.Love's.Prize.treasured him through and beyond his disappointments.through and beyond his high-stakes failure.Q.Who in this whole wide world.who in all of glorious or all of tarnation.raised a hand out of respect for his romantic abstractions.his schoolboy yearnings for melodious violet motifs.his belief in contemporaneous and untouchable kismet.A.Four to three against[I'll raise my hand to spare him his imaginative embarrassments].Q.What was the vote whether or not to ride the Handbasket to Hades in a steel faux-hamper of cabled joys. A.Three cherries in a row.three cherries in his life's bowl.Q.his.Phantom aside.in what ways.if he were a different sort.might he objectify his higher-pitched violent perfect-fifth strings.A.Americana.Quixotica. Q.What happened when he put coined words in her slot and she pulled his handle.A.his.Love's love.Q.What most humbled him.Q.What most terrified him.besides his.God's casualness.besides his.God's causality. Q.What.in his experience of Chance City.most enthralled him.beyond the geysering fountains timed to enormous music.beyond the pervasive

electric output of all colors and sounds and at all heights and distances, beyond the throngs of glassy-eyed tourists streaming everywhere. A. Along his. Figment's throat and collarbones, along her acutes and obliques. Q. Where was his gaze rambling, while I watched his. Phantom study him as he watched his. Figment reluctantly test her betting prowess for several spins of a roulette wheel, at his. Phantom's insistence, and lose his, his. Phantom's, last chips, she of his, my his, composite make, of his kindergarten imprint, his stranger-in-paradise template, his aloof tower of private glissando. A. The object of affection is indifferent to our heart, is as cold as a stack of nickels. Q. What happens when we concoct ideals. Q. What happens when we seek graces beyond our grace, when we peer past our favorite books on the shelf toward some new-fangled statue never sculpted for us. A. His. Ghost's singular shrill laugh of merriment as she kept rolling sevens at a craps table. Q. What shook him from his reverie and made him realize his. Love and his. Enigma were nowhere in sight. A. He stepped outside to stare at the sky, there weren't any stars visible to wish upon, though the night was clear, so he went back inside and wished upon all the fake stars strewn across the firmament of the casino's ceiling. Q. Whatever did he do next. A. He found his. Love and his. Enigma sitting together on his. Enigma's and his. Ghost's bed, and she had red eyes from crying, and she had red eyes from crying, and he thought this would be as good a time as any to apologize for all his failings, but they stopped him before he could build momentum and told him none of this concerned him, this was about abysses and prizes, he frowned and said he knew a thing or two about prizes and abysses, I could tell they weren't impressed, and I whispered to him that we should leave. Q. What did he find when he stepped through the other door of his room at the American Motel. A. Figments arise from imaginative spaces as real as anything else in our empirical realm, they storm through our mind, his mind, she cut swaths of emptiness through his self-harvest, he took me with him to the top of the Zenithsphere, yet another thrill-ride and view-restaurant just down the block, and threw us off to our deaths, or he considered doing it, anyway, without actual seriousness, taking the chance gravity might not claim us, but why risk violating an innocent patch of cement, why persist in corporeal form if the spirit holds trump, why not see what tomorrow holds, no matter what [I'll stay with him, no matter what, I'll suffer alongside him, no matter what]. Q. If, some day in the wide-open future, I couldn't remember what I'd been thinking, as I'd stood beside him on that motel balcony, or what had taken place next, what would I tell myself I'd been thinking, what would I make-believe

had taken place next. A. He hadn't a clue. Q. Why, if he were truly grateful for all that was his, and he was doubtless grateful for all that was his, did he fiddle with his destroyer-loneliness, and why, if time were impactful to his heart, did he nevertheless expect to feel lonely forever, and why, if his, most omniscient God allowed for chance, and he couldn't understand chance if he weren't free to misunderstand it, did he believe he'd never been the victim or beneficiary of chance in his whole life. A. Her clarities and obtuses, her once-gray eyes still agleam with electrum-blue, her too-tight pony-tail of control, her persistent need to underwhelm romantic wanderlust, roamantic wonderlast, her reluctance to yet fully trust in her own mystery. Q. When he dreamt of his, Figment that night, what images and naggings meandered through his subconscious. A. At dawn, or not long after dawn, not long after another breakfast at the pancake house across the street from the American Motel, he drove them, us, away from the nonsense of temporal hedonism, from his throbbing boulevards and artful dams toward landscape austerity [I'll ride with him through his low points, his lowest point, his sorrowlands and ridge-beauties, his long stretches of ordinary competence and banal fortitude, I'll keep him from passing slow trucks when it isn't safe, or from not stopping at overlooks often enough to satisfy his Love, or from thinking he knows what's what, or from forgetting he might know some crucial smallness of what's what]. A. His Loves's skin-lake-verve. A. He splashed water into his eyes, and stared into his inadequacy to stare past his inadequacies, his mortal dilemma that resembled anyone else's mortal dilemma, his feeling that a good ramble was all he ever wanted from the world. Q. What purpose did the sun bring, what gets him up most mornings, what did he do after surfacing from his Chance City stupor, after waking out of neon-immersion overload into the ever-renewable promise of desert star-wash.

### III

#### Lento.Malinconico

#### *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*

Out where rivers fail to run and flash floods wail as gorged wraiths into impoverished basins.out beyond the darker deeps where the winter sun graces the lavender and buff and sage-colored stones the summer sun whitewashes.out among the rifts and bulges and secrets of a vast unique valley.an American Rambler.our Rambler American.held the backroads to itself.rolled along with its fabricated passengers of pixelated sentience.and curved the curves with longing.

Severe weather awaits us all.our exposed living under its fierce hands.our need to cease.his.Quintet.and I.knew him to be a sentimentalist.and they whispered together behind his back.he knew of their whisperings but allowed them.one can't halt one's brakeless slide into recognition.and fair weather awaits us all.our hearts ricocheted to light's touch upon our wills to persist.our wish to be mortal without unexisting.our sense of home as elsewhere.his.Phantom half-dozed.squinting into the day's ordinary strangeness.they'd.we'd.passed an abandoned mine on the ridge.just at the crest before descent.his.Ghost had wanted to stop and explore.she always wanted to stop and engage whatever the world was offering.but his.Enigma had protested.saying she didn't want to look into any more stupid holes.his.Phantom agreed.this landscape was empty enough.treeless.baked into submission.shrouded in the melancholy of what was long gone.the end.his oblivion.didn't intrigue him as did individual moments about to disappear.always on their way toward disappearance.those insistent shifts of liquid time.all things come to go.his.phantomhood was good.and not yet gone.almost as good as sleep without harsh waking.his affection for him.my him.wouldn't ebb away as primordial sea.but had dissipated into some umbral haze of nostalgia.he.he whom I cherish and disrespect.let his.Phantom imagine his death.



my him's death[I'll ramp up trust to codify loss].to grant him.his.  
Phantom.a taste of catered grief.he.his.Phantom.imagined his death.  
the death of his phantom.my him as his.Phantom's phantom.happening  
as accident.zestful and innocent.not as a Rambler-wreck in snow.not as  
a Rambler-leap off a cliff.possibly a burst belly from too many cherries.  
or a heart-stopping acquiescence to the feminine spore.or a fragment of  
star through a penetrable skull.his.Phantom imagined his phantom's  
body lying on a lawn of immaculate trim.he sat in solitude beside the  
shimmering form.and from above that tender grass flew his spirit.the  
air-fluid increments of shifting existence.his.Phantom envisioned this  
scenario as his phantom drove them.us.along the winding asphalt  
through formidable landscapes of basin and range.his.Ghost was now  
speaking in her pixilated sentences.of bends too bent to ever uncurl.

Here comes the other side of life.the way things once were.but since  
forever haven't been.the vanquished soul of a moderno.romantico boy.  
the Rambler as dreamship.if his impasse hung high with choir.if the  
wayward wind kept his ground unknown.he understood he should now  
steer his attitude toward bottom-out humility and stock-taking private  
lowlands.his sub-sea dry-rot underworld strata of permanent word.his  
wish for sound-storm.

His.Ghost and his.Figment didn't care about his death.impending.  
inexpressible.inevitable.marginal.not beyond their measures of fondness  
and curiosity.not wanting him.or anyone.to suffer.no need to witness the  
event or imagine its colloquialisms.but his.Enigma.her thoughts were  
different.to her.even in his presence.he was already as good as dead.  
minus some historical categorization.she might wish for him a hanging.  
a drowning.a poisoning.an unstoppable bloodletting.in a tub.or on an  
outcropping.or at the verge of the wrong spring spotlight.she could also  
grant him a shooting[I'll untrigger him toward cancer-fade].if it were  
aimed straight at the sorrow-source.or a waterless asphyxiation.if the  
eulogy were self-authored.or a mystical rapture.if the spin were true.

There goes our life of tedium and woe.the prodigious senses and  
the abstract reach.gone for the weary.not for the young or enduring.the  
Rambler as thought-coffin.his scrambled minimis of future gravity.or  
the cooled magma of the most local eruption.what he didn't understand.  
still doesn't understand.won't ever understand.was never.not even for one  
solitary sharpened moment.meant to understand.was why the choice of  
autonomy.as if it were some self-imposed elegiac regimen.would allow  
one to drive one's altitude toward one's lowest esteem[I'll speak of his  
deluges.rare and sincere.seldom and fraught.his too-sensitive tempests].

At the far end of the valley rose dunes depressing to his. Quintet. his  
viols and his. Prize's abrogated origin. all appreciative of green life. and  
floral promise. or everything-is-coming-our-way hope and growth. dunes  
composed from the debris of lost humanity. nobody but he. my he. wished  
to go climbing among the granulated bones of the long-forgotten. but  
he wouldn't be dissuaded. not even when he pulled the trusty Rambler.  
the copper-colored American. off onto the road's shoulder. and they stepped  
out into a clear and blustery day. there wasn't a single tree in the whole  
valley. by which. from within the Rambler. they could've gauged the swirl  
of the wind. they. we. all trudged across a flat space of wasteland toward  
those massive marrowless hills. those dunes resembling huge piles of  
hourglass sand. tall enough to rival the pyramids of our death-cultured  
world. or the natural monoliths of more oft-visited vales. they struggled  
to ascend the sliding mass of a small hillock of white glare. and they felt  
enervated by even that modest effort. none of them wanted to conquer  
a grander dune. he. my he. was disappointed with his. Quintet. those mounds  
and mountains of petrified. blown. collected scree weren't about to give up  
any of their secrets to his road-tripping chamber-clutch of specters. his  
boy-next-door earnestness. or my wordsome log. if they. we. were to be so  
easily discouraged. if they. we. lacked the spiritual fortitude for pursuance.

These allegorical diversions unsettled him. I told him he brought it  
all. brought most of it. upon himself [I'll make intimate his shortfalls. I'll  
animate his spirings]. and his. Love said she was willing to go farther. if  
he wished. but everyone else was glancing longingly back at the car.  
when a sudden updraft blew grit into his eyes. scratching the weaker. he  
couldn't keep it open. without blinking pain. he sought refuge in the  
Rambler. his. Love. he said. would have to take over the driving. his viols felt  
badly for him. they did. but they also felt vindicated. having all thought.  
every one of them. that a windy hike in the dunes-of-the-dead had been  
a lousy idea from the get-go. he sat uncomfortably between his. Love and  
his. Phantom. he. my he. held a folded bandana. dampened with bottled  
water. pressed against his closed eyelid. there wasn't any suitable lodging  
throughout the soon-to-be-shadowed valley. so as the sun began to drop  
behind a jagged peak. they. we. settled into a long night of climbing out of  
the lowlands. crossing a wintry pass on a cloudless. but blowsome. night.  
before descending into the citrus groves of a coastal valley. a jumping-off  
spot on our eventual way back into the high country toward the giant  
trees of the oldest forest. he felt awkward. he admitted. not sitting behind  
the wheel. he tried. at first. to alleviate his mild claustrophobia by chatting.  
with open confidence. about the labyrinths of personality compared to the

personality of imagination.when that failed.he tried dozing on his.Love's shoulder.but he worried it would disturb her driving.so he tried sleeping upright.till he slumped over against his.Phantom's shoulder.with the damp bandana pressed between his eyelid and his.Phantom's shirt.in his half-sleep he wondered from whose gone body had come the grain of bone that had scratched his eye.and in his half-sleep he dreamt one of the star-pointed quintet of dreams he dreamt and death-creamt that night[I'll tell of his dreams.those dreams.like all dreams across our slumberworld.that can't be told.that won't be told.not by their dreamers.not by their dreamers' dreamers.not within time].

Before telling something of the dream he dreamt while he half-slept against his.Phantom's shoulder.let me tell something of the dream he dreamt while he slept on his.Ghost's shoulder.throughout the night.while he slept and dreamt.while his viols also slept and dreamt.his.Love drove and drove.without stopping.as if the night could only be got through by driving straight through it.and while she drove and drove and the Rambler's amber dash illumined her wakefulness.his dreams fueled the engine.and I imagined her thinking of her byways and heydays.her gifts and her givings.when he.my he.wearied of trying to sleep against his.Phantom's bony shoulder.he switched out his.Phantom with his.Ghost.bringing her to the front right and putting him in the back left.but his.Ghost's sweated shoulder was just as bony as his.Phantom's shirted shoulder.and so after he was through dreaming upon her shoulder.he switched out his.Ghost with his.Enigma.whose blousy shoulder was only slightly less pointed and uncomfortable than his.Phantom's and his.Ghost's.though his dream upon her shoulder was more perplexing than his dream upon his.Ghost's.if not as perplexing as his dream against his.Phantom's.but when he switched out his.Enigma with his.Figment.his.dreamspentEnigma with his.dreampotentialFigment.he insisted his.Figment shed her sweatshirt.under which she wore a sleeveless blouse.so that he could press the lid of his damaged eye.his bandana was now dry and had been abandoned as a poultice.skin-to-skin against the warmer flesh of her too-slender arm.

He dreamt four violent dreams.

While sleeping on his.Ghost's shoulder.she didn't wake when he switched her out with his.Phantom.he dreamt he was walking with her in the big city.the biggest city.and they were drinking milk from paper sacks.she wanted to go hard drinking and soft dancing all night long.but he had to go home to feed his roaches and silverfish.and to take off his clothes.she waited for him reluctantly in his apartment lobby.standing

all-nervous-like in her pixie dress.she told him to hurry.she was worried the archetypes.with their claws and snouty-snouts and pointy teeth.might get her.might get her good.and sure enough.they did.they dragged her out into the street and tore her whiteness apart while he watched naked and ineffectual from atop the brownstone steps.and angels fell like rain.and the gutters of his big-city neighborhood.his biggest-city neighborhood.ran pink and milky till he woke.

While half-sleeping on his.Phantom's shoulder.who half-slept himself.and who tried to keep as still as possible so as not to wake his phantom.he.my he.dreamt he and his.Phantom were parked on a suburban street overlooking the sea.somewhere in their younger days.in his.Phantom's brother's sky-blue Rambler Ambassador that he.his.Phantom.normally never drove.it was twilight.the city lights were twinkling.the ocean had gone from steel-blue to burnished gold to purple to black as they watched.he knew his.Phantom didn't have a brother.and so his brother couldn't have an Ambassador.of any color.and this made him suspicious that the curiosity-car was portentous and that something cataclysmic was about to happen.and sure enough.it was.restless and unmassed photons from a nearby streetlamp brought their cutting amplitudes with them through the windshield.creating a warm slit through which his phantom wistfully disappeared from his.Phantom's realm.

While sleeping on his.Enigma's shoulder.he spun a dream he couldn't unravel.though she was annoyed at having been roused from her backseat slumber.she liked getting to sit up front.she was still somewhat sleepy and rested her brow against the coldcold glass of the passenger window.with all that night beyond.she didn't enjoy cuddling or snuggling.not of any sort.and she sure didn't want his damaged head weighing down her weaker shoulder.she tried to shrug him away but his subconscious will was strong.and he clasped her bicep with his hands.he dreamt they stood together on the prow of a garbage scow.crossing an ocean of antiquated pursuits.he stood behind her and cupped her sweated breasts in his palms.as if trying to coax solace or resolve from them.her apricot aroma outsmelled his mental trash.he trembled as he proposed a dual assault on the ivory palace.that old-world fortress she knew was unassailable.and that held no treasure for her.or them.or him.or anyone alive.she gave him a dark particle of her mind as a souvenir for his boyish bungling.and it became a wave.a twilight wave.a tidal wave that swamped his small ambition and sunk their craft and drowned him in the choral entanglements of a too-populated lee shore.his lungs filled with the mistaken ferment of her words.abyssal utterances meant for someone else.

While sleeping on his.Figments's shoulder.he dreamt of a ski-bicycle for two.a strange tandem contraption of pedals and planks.she was the least receptive of all his viols.his.Viols.to his shouldering sleep.but was too stoic to be anything but long-suffering.she clenched her nordic jaw and endured.he dreamt they were riding his ridiculous invention down a steep mountain of burning blue snow.she rode in front and steered.so that most of the fresh-ash-powder blew into her goggled face.her happy flushed face.he sat behind her and pedaled.as if he understood nothing of gravity.he dared not touch her hips.or waist.or jacketed girlish chest.so he held onto his dignity instead.and was nearly thrown off at every mogul.when they reached the bottom of the slope he kept pedaling.and the planks propelled them toward the spruce woods.she yelled for him to stop.stop.stop!he pretended he didn't hear her and kept pedaling.she stiffened her legs in front of her and dug her boots into the embering snow till the ski-bicycle halted.she leapt off.furious.and stomped a short distance away.waving her arms and shouting at him.he saw that her ponytail was too tight.he tried to put the kickstand down.but it was a warm candle.and it melted the snow.his bike fell over.and its impact brought an avalanche rumbling down the mountain to consume his.outragedFigment.he dug around in the frozen cinders in an effort to keep her but she was gone.

At daybreak.his.Love.weary of the wheel.began looking for a place to stop for breakfast.she drove around a secluded man-made lake and came upon the astoundingly.quaint Knotty-Pine Diner.they.we.all piled into a booth.he ate clumsily while holding the redampened bandana against his hurt eye.he was embarrassed by his shoulderings and his dreams and didn't want anyone to talk to him.so they chatted about knick-knacks and kitsch and smalltown spunk.they.we.were allowed to check in early to the attached.quiet.off-season.Reservoir Motel.he sent his.Viols on a long walk around the big lake.stripped his.Love down to her natural beauty.loved her to shakes and shudders.then let her sleep her deserved daysleep while he pressed his now inflamed eyelid to her navel and dreamt his star-finishing dream.his.Love's breathing lifted and lowered his head and he dreamt they were on a rustic raft drifting across a lake of immense purposelessness.amid the sparkling body of gracious water they came upon a granite outcropping and moored their craft.they lay in the sun of their company.and in a crevice of the outcropping they found a treasure of unexpected potency and charm and heartswell.one day they took their treasure for a drive in the sheephills of his childhood fascination.the day was moody with fog and eternal around its edges.lone trees stood scattered about in noble autonomy.boulders

squatted where they belonged.wintergrass was tawny and clean.the road twisted and dipped into hollows and rose to run along ridges past barns and outbuildings and walls of stacked stones.the sun was a movie's drive away.they saw no one out and about.he felt his happiness rarify.he felt at home.the treasure was a prize and the prize had a warm wit.death was a waking.his dream with his.Love would end and he'd know at that moment that meeting her was his jackpot.not against the odds.outside all odds.nothing to do with chance.and the champagne hills trickled away into the citrus groves of his youth.and their.Prize picked an orange from a low branch beside the road.and when he began to peel it.a white moth flew out and dust from its wings blew into his.my his.eyes.and if he ever truly were to.he will have awakened before he wakes[I'll lose him to his subjunctive history.his future-perfect nostalgia].his.Love stirred on the motel bed.he stared at her.she was older.as he was older.this road trip of theirs was on its downslope.and she was far dearer to him than those champagne hills or white moths or any of his outburst fetishes.he studied the shape of her space.he blinked a painless blink.his eye was healed.

## IV

### Adagio.Quieto

#### *Lost Grove*

They.we.ascended.the next morning.into sierra-snow.into the hushed realms of the giant trees.he put chains on the Rambler's tires.and the road wound up and up into that skyward splendor.the wintry conditions kept most tourists away and he and I and his.Quintet had the immense cinnamon colonnades to ourselves.these were neither the tallest nor the oldest trees of his experience.not too far to the north.along the moist coast.stood their slightly taller.slightly younger.slenderer.ginger cousins.and not far to the east.near the valley of the shadow of death.hunkered older trees.millennia older.trees twisted into themselves from too-long living.but these red ancients before us now were the most magnificent.

His.Viols and his.Love stood amid the groves in reverence and awe.he marveled at the majesty of the trees.and he watched and studied his loves and his presences.his hand-picked.fate-delivered.ensemble.his.Ghost.time moving inside her.with her laugh that could ride breezes through sequoia-crowns.his.Figment.with her blue spark of extant life still shimmering around her edges.and around the girlish kernel within her too-careful austerity.his.Phantom.with his nascent belief in transmorgrification.his sweet cynicism.his.Enigma and the tumult of her emotional swamp.her teeming intellect of quagmired merit.his.Love.and her daily trust in the creation of halcyon moments.her anthemic empathy.these had been his constant companions on this road trip with himself.but he missed their.Prize and his.Compatriot.they.we.he drove from grove to grove.the roads were snow-packed and almost deserted.he imagined the Rambler into a horseless sleigh and he imagined himself content.a mad king in his elemental woods.light snow fell.his world was idyllic.but black bile rose unexpectedly into his heart.they.we.stopped at the loghouse museum.hewn long ago from fallen trees.he stepped away



from his.Quintet and called his.Compatriot to his side from across our nation.he.my he.spoke of his congenital loneliness.his.Compatriot told him.my mostHim.he.my mostHe.was living his dream.and that silence wasn't his enemy.so steady as she goes[I'll echo outward.he was living his dream.silence wasn't his enemy.steady as she went].

In the far corner of the museum.his.Quintet had gathered around a rudimentary display of sex and fire.these red giants.with their thick and fibrous bark.with their towering crowns of limbs and foliage.unlike their neighboring trees.the cedars and the firs.could withstand forest fires of significant intensity.prior to human intervention.they relied upon lightning to provide the spark that created the flames that generated the heat that released the tiny seeds from their cones into the exposed mineral soil where the seedlings could take root.and they relied upon fires to open holes in the forest canopy.allowing sunlight to reach the growing seedlings.nothing lives in fire.but life comes from fire.I could hear him thinking.obvious in its potency.biologically and metaphorically.I could hear his myriad thinking[I'll disseminate his thinking.if not his thoughts.the sounds of his mother's footfalls down the hall.if not his mother herself].fire and reproduction.not sex and fire.sex was animal and psychic and spirit-filled and individual.desire.not fire.his confusion.as living simpleton.as sciocco.immaginativo.

They sleighed again in his Rambler-sled.wing windows ajar so that the alpine air could winter-thrill their lungs.they rounded a bend and came upon the Lost Grove.a cluster of giants scattered up a rise along a frozen stream.nobody was around.he found a tree hollowed out by fires long distant from his pulse.he felt his time leaving him.he knew his.Quintet was dissolving into his poor memory.so he conducted solo chats in the tree-hollow with all four of his.Viols.as if to compensate for the inelegance of his shoulderings and dreams.these tête-à-têtes were strictly private.I wasn't invited to observe or listen.but I saw them as they emerged from the black hollow.his.Ghost and his.Figment looked half-bored.half-flushed.his.Ghost was ready to be back with her cocktails on her bird-deck.and his.Figment was eager to get back-to-work solving our planet's ills.his.Phantom looked bemused and resolved.his gardens awaited him.his.Enigma went last.and as she and he came out into the white together.bewildered.unwildened.he caught her glance.this time she stared back as if she knew him.but she didn't know him and he didn't know her.not as she actually was or as he'd reconfigured her.she wasn't his secret love or his friend.he wasn't her brother or her judge.and she didn't ever want to relinquish her status as enigma.something in the

lost grove.something beyond her ken.told her she didn't belong.not here.not now.not with this misfit band of fantast.so she held her Blue Portal toy out in front of her and tugged the switch.the friction lit the fake electrum and a small blue arc shone out into the grove from her troublesome hands.his.Ghost.and his.Phantom.and his.Figment.flickered as images.and faded back into me.his.Love stood at his side.their.Prize stood nearby.pressed against a tree.gazing intently up into its heights.he.my he.saw that his.Enigma had disappeared.and he supposed she was somewhere back in the Abyss.still falling.

He stood against one of the giant trunks and peered up toward the heavens.hoping to sense some strength or purpose not of his own making[I'll abyss his stumble-into-self failing.his still-life travails and rambling objectifications.his who-cares-about-any-one-man's-heart's wishing-well.his flying-too-deep vertigo.his limits and his processes and his wrecks.and I'll sky his strive-out-of-self flailing.his imagination's lone-mined cairns.his trust in tomorrow's winds.in the spooky whiff of the grave].any one of those gnarled branches way above was older than he would ever be.the tree itself was far older than his nation.older than his familial religion.older than the singular word-works of any of his very dead guides.the trees didn't need his attention or affection or admiration.they simply needed him to leave them alone.to go about his business of breathing and action and muse and perishing[I'll figment the sley of her skin to slay him in his reveries.she didn't arc.didn't blue.to his euphorias.ghosts don't need sweat.weight.collapse.phantoms don't require realizzazione.spiritosa.enigmas don't want morning cock-crow.or evening tongue-settlement.love seeks love.finds love.holds love.keeps love.till love is lost in lyrical forgetting.I'll son him into his.pride.his warm wit of playing life].he knew these trees didn't need his knowledge.and he knew his try-to-remember season was through.it was time to go.

The drive home was lovely.but uneventful.