

## *The Free Brutalists*

Rav Grewal-Kök

At twenty-nine, the writer and bartender Joseph Antonio Borg-Olivier still believed that greatness, or at least fame, could one day be his. Alone on a Saturday afternoon in his apartment on Brooklyn's northwestern tip, sitting on the couch with a cup of bright wine and a book that pleased him, he might have paused, surveyed the history of his youth, and out of those years of clamor, pain, and tedium assembled enough moments of modest triumph to convince himself that a pattern had formed—one of careful progress despite the setbacks—and that there remained a path forward. Indeed, on his last birthday, the judges in a contest sponsored by the *Indiana Review* had granted one of Borg-Olivier's short stories an honorable mention, though they'd declined to publish it. In earlier years, six of his stories had appeared in online magazines. He'd once composed a daring set of responses to the emailed interview questions of a literary blogger whose website enjoyed consistent, if limited, weekly traffic. The women with whom he went to bed—at long intervals, it was true—were young and artistic. Writers and editors invited him to parties. The pretty waitress on the afternoon shift at his favored coffee shop sometimes touched his forearm or shoulder when she asked him if he wanted his cup refilled. His apartment may have been narrow and poorly ventilated but it was also a three-minute walk from the East River, and on his nights off he had only to stand on a pier and look toward the magnificent city to remember that the world was awash with wonder, that he was not old, and that he still had hope.

He could not point to a single event that marked a turn. There was, rather, a succession of such events—the old tedium, in other words—but without the triumphs. He worked on his novel, drank, ate, and added fat. The years passed. At thirty-three, and one-hundred-and-ninety pages into a draft, Borg-Olivier realized that the novel was doomed and gave it up. Two weeks later he began another, which he abandoned shortly after he turned thirty-four. He'd been tending a Williamsburg bar where the cocktails sold for twelve dollars but lost the job when he drank himself insensate on consecutive shifts. Afterward the only position he could find was far to the east, on the unfashionable side of Bushwick, where a paired shot and beer went for five. His take dwindled, his wardrobe suffered. The women who were still willing to have sex with him were almost middle-aged. His old friends had moved on. His new ones were all tired waiters or pot-bellied barbers who'd once been musicians. The pretty waitress had vanished, the favored coffee shop too. No one invited him to parties. His apartment, whose rent was rising, smelled ever more strongly of the gas he suspected was poisoning important regions of his brain. When Borg-Olivier returned to New Jersey for family celebrations, his father looked at him with an expression of permanent terror. Thoughts of the future filled him with sadness.

One evening, in this diminished state, Borg-Olivier found himself alone with one of his regulars under the bar's yellow lights. It was the beginning of spring. The day had been mild. Now, with night falling, a colder wind had cleared the streets. The tables in The Black Pig's front room were empty. Farther back from the counter a young couple, their heads close, drank spiced rum in the shadows. Borg-Olivier had just served the regular, a hulking, untenured professor of literature, his fourth round of house scotch. He looked out to the

warehouse across the street, its façade darkening around the silent barred windows. Inside The Black Pig, the door and the panes rattled. Borg-Olivier, who wasn't drinking, felt the chill.

"This is a scene Hopper could have painted," he said, after first turning over the phrase once or twice in his mind.

The professor, whose name was Lachine, looked up. His forehead was creased as if he'd been thinking through a tactical puzzle from a chess match or was suffering from a muted but inescapable headache.

"Please," he said, rubbing his face. He swallowed the rest of his drink.

Borg-Olivier filled Lachine's glass. The whiskey had a bitter scent—diesel, scorched grass—that reminded him of the lost summers of his boyhood. His father used to pay him five dollars to cut the front lawn and ten to cut the back. Sometimes the neighbors' daughter, a college girl, would lie out in the sun. As he pushed the mower down the yard, Borg-Olivier would see her blue bikini flicker through the gaps in the fence.

"That one's on me," Borg-Olivier said, as he put the bottle back on the shelf.

Lachine nodded. He took a sip that left his mustache wet.

"I'm tired," Borg-Olivier said, after a few moments. "I might give up."

Lachine had read the occasional chapter Borg-Olivier brought to the bar. He'd said that Borg-Olivier's prose wasn't bad, that on occasion a sentence or phrase was actually quite good. From time to time Lachine tried to help, lending Borg-Olivier novels from his own shelves.

"Did you read the Houellebecq?" Lachine asked. "Did you read Duras?" He emptied his glass.

Borg-Olivier said he had. He'd liked them, he said, Houellebecq for his intelligence and cruelty, Duras for her ability to confess without self-pity. They'd given him ideas but he seemed to have lost the will.

Lachine shook his head. "Read the books again." He signaled for more scotch. "You should strive to be one of those for whom writing is a kind of freedom." He went on after Borg-Olivier poured the drink. There were two kinds of authentic writers, two kinds of genius, really. Flaubert on the one hand, Shakespeare on the other. The one struggled over every word, for the other writing was as natural as breathing. The first would leave a few books after decades of toil, the second would fill an entire shelf. "What I'm saying is banal. This is nothing new. You are, of course, no genius. But perhaps you are trying to be one kind of writer when instead you are the other."

Borg-Olivier confessed that he had read neither Flaubert nor Shakespeare in some time.

Lachine rolled his eyes but the crease had disappeared from his forehead. Indeed, his face was glowing. "Then I'll be blunt. Writing doesn't have to be sacred. Stop whimpering. Look out into that overwhelming darkness and write the truth. Don't make it pretty. Don't be a fraud. Write like you fuck."

Borg-Olivier felt his ears go hot. He turned from Lachine to pour himself his first drink, reaching for a bottle from the middle shelf.

"Write a new story and bring it here tomorrow night," Lachine said.

The next day Borg-Olivier woke early. He'd drunk a great deal after Lachine left the bar and now had a headache. Though he could feel the cold coming in, he opened the window against the smell of gas. He sat at his desk with a bottle of water and four aspirin. He hadn't time to

invent a plot. If he were to have any hope of finishing a story in a single day, he would have to write from his own life. For a few minutes he didn't move. Then he swallowed three aspirin, left the fourth to dissolve in his mouth, wrote some notes on the pad beside his computer, and, with the last pill now leaching an acrid paste down the base of his tongue and into his throat, began to type.

His narrator, "J.," had just turned thirty. He was a writer, marginally employed. One day he learned that his great-uncle, who'd been a renowned orthopedic surgeon before succumbing to dementia, had suffered a massive heart attack beneath the orange groves of his nursing home in Naples, Florida. The only witness, an attendant who had been resting in the latticed shadows of the security fence, said the great-uncle had not made a sound as he collapsed face-forward into the soil. After the great-uncle's more significant bequests to his children and grandchildren, and to his old medical school for the endowment of a chair in his first wife's name, his will granted ten thousand dollars to his only grand-nephew. On receiving the inheritance, J. immediately booked a trip to an unnamed Greek island. It would be his first foreign vacation in years. But in Greece he was as unhappy—despite the grilled squid, sun, and sand—as he had been in New York. He could not forget himself, though he tried, through a series of desperate, humiliating, and, finally, repulsive situations. Over the course of the story's eleven pages, J. ejaculated thirteen times (ten times through auto-eroticism, twice into a Dutch woman he'd met on the ferry ride from Athens, and once, at her invitation, onto her); vomited with frequency and force, including on three consecutive nights in the bathroom of the same tourist bar; endured a daylong bout of diarrhea, during which he defecated in the shared guesthouse bathroom, in the bushes bordering the lane between the guesthouse and the beach, and, while breast-stroking thirty yards from shore, into the cloudy waters of the island's main harbor; failed to visit the classical ruins; and spent the final full day of his vacation in a traveler's clinic, seeking relief from an excruciating anal fissure. The story ended with J. on the dock, his shorts bloodied, his frame reduced, gazing at the eastern horizon as he waited for the return ferry to Athens. Perhaps he found some tiny measure of redemption in the salted breeze and the impossible colors of the Aegean dawn?

It wasn't for the writer to say. Borg-Olivier, exhausted at six in the evening, went down to the corner bodega for a ham sandwich. That night his shift would begin at eight.

At The Black Pig, Lachine stroked his mustache over a glass of scotch. Borg-Olivier walked over to him after he'd wheeled his bicycle into the storage closet. Lachine held out his hand. Borg-Olivier shook it.

"The story," Lachine said.

Borg-Olivier exhaled, shuffled through his satchel, and brought out the manuscript.

"It's called 'Sugar and Sack.'"

Lachine frowned at the title but began to read at once. By the time Borg-Olivier had checked the register and receipts, relieved the early shift bartender, taken his place behind the counter, and poured out pints for two customers who just came in, Lachine had finished.

"Already?" Borg-Olivier said. "It's too rough, isn't it?" He had his fingers on the neck of a bottle of Jim Beam, three hours before he'd normally have his first drink.

Lachine swished a mouthful of scotch from one cheek to the other. He sat upright on his stool. The drink had put color into his face. With his huge, stubbled head, mustache, and thick brows, he looked like a lumberjack or a pirate.

"The story is not great," Lachine said, "but it is real."

Borg-Olivier took his hand off the bottle. “I was worried you were going to say it was callow, derivative, pornographic, et cetera.” He smiled.

“It’s all those things. Still, there’s truth in it. Send it to the magazines.”

Borg-Olivier asked Lachine if he had any edits. The professor only waved his hand, swallowed the rest of his drink, and walked out into the night.

Borg-Olivier submitted his story liberally. For two months he heard nothing. He continued to serve drinks six nights a week at The Black Pig. Lachine continued to take his place at the bar on four or five of those nights. Occasionally they talked about literature. Lachine lent Borg-Olivier *The Thief’s Journal*, *Storm of Steel*, and *The Immoralist* but said that rather than worry about books, Borg-Olivier would do better to eat less, run along the river in the mornings, and try to have sex once in a while.

The rejection notes for “Sugar and Sack” began to arrive with the first, humid days of June. Most were boilerplate, but one editor at a journal affiliated with a large midwestern university wrote, in red ink on the slip she enclosed in Borg-Olivier’s self-addressed stamped envelope, “Please, never send us anything again.”

By the end of July, seventeen rejections in hand, Borg-Olivier had lost whatever faith he once held in Lachine’s judgment. His nights at the bar were again a chore, the rest of his life a desert. Lachine, ape-like on his stool, counseled patience.

The breakthrough came on a suffocating afternoon in the middle of August. Marisel Collins, fiction editor of *Prince Rupert: a new New York Quarterly*, wanted to publish “Sugar and Sack.” In her email Collins wrote that she’d appreciated the rhythm of Borg-Olivier’s prose, his vivid physical descriptions, and, most of all, his “unmistakable courage.”

Borg-Olivier told Lachine that night.

“The first shoots of a late spring,” Lachine said, regarding the celebratory measure of Cutty Sark that Borg-Olivier poured for him with great tenderness. “Now let’s see if the world has a response.” He drank the whiskey in a single, savage swig. He pulled back his lips after he put down the glass to reveal a set of teeth that, though stained, were long, pointed, and intact.

*Prince Rupert* launched its ninth issue at the end of September, at a gallery in Dumbo. Borg-Olivier wore his best pants, read the opening pages of “Sugar and Sack” to laughter and applause, limited himself to five glasses of sparkling wine, and went home with a green-haired poet who was younger than he was.

The next day, after he’d left the poet’s apartment and returned to his own, Borg-Olivier decided he was ready to begin writing a new novel. But first, on checking his email, he found a message from a woman he didn’t know.

Dear Joseph Antonio (if I may)—

I heard you read last night. I was troubled, moved—I recognized myself. I could not sleep. This morning I texted Marisel, who is an old friend, to ask for your email address. Can we meet? I have things to say. I would have approached you last night but you were occupied.

Yours—  
Amélie Bon Sant

Borg-Olivier, intrigued, invited Bon Sant to see him at The Black Pig that night.

For once, there were dozens of customers when Borg-Olivier began his shift. It was as if he'd walked into some other bar in a more fortunate neighborhood. Amidst all the jostle and noise, but looking unhappier than usual, Lachine loomed silently at the counter. He showed his wolfish, yellow teeth as Borg-Olivier poured him a scotch. Turning to the rest of the crowd, Borg-Olivier looked out over an unfamiliar mass of waving arms. The customers shouted their orders at him. Borg-Olivier had to hop from the counter to the shelves or register and back. He poured beer, vodka sodas, and tequila shots. Liquor splashed over his forearms. When he wiped his brow, his eyes tingled. He accepted the occasional shot for himself, if the customers offered. All the while the bar grew more crowded. Borg-Olivier soon sweated through his shirt. His face was flushed with labor and drink.

An hour into his shift, he noticed a tall woman in a milk-white blouse signaling to him from the far end of the counter. Even from a distance she looked out of place, and not only because she was older than the others in the room. There was a gray streak in her black hair that glowed in the bar's weak light. She wore an expression of sadness, even suffering, on her face. But she was also striking in her sleeveless blouse, silver necklace, and long silver earrings. As Borg-Olivier moved closer he could see that she must once have been very beautiful.

He leaned over to her to ask for her order. He smelled pipe tobacco and cinnamon but not perfume.

"I am Amélie Bon Sant," she said, with a tremor in her voice. "But it appears you're busy tonight." She raised one of her long, naked arms to pull a strand of hair from her eyes. A thin white scar ran from her brow almost to her neck.

Borg-Olivier apologized. The bar had never been this crowded, he said. "If you stay, I promise we can talk later."

He continued when Bon Sant didn't reply. "Let me introduce my friend Lachine," he said, speaking quickly. "He's also a literary man. He's helping me to write." He beckoned to the professor to approach.

Lachine stood reluctantly from his stool to walk to their end of the counter. He shook Bon Sant's hand without speaking.

Borg-Olivier offered them a round on the house.

Bon Sant asked for a cognac, which Borg-Olivier didn't have. She shrugged when he told her, looking weary. Borg-Olivier poured two whiskies instead.

Others were calling. He had to move away. He filled glasses, wiped down the counter, and made change. From time to time he looked over at Bon Sant and Lachine, who were still standing where he'd left them. Although at first they seemed hardly to speak, they soon began to talk more intently. At one point, after Borg-Olivier poured six shots of Jägermeister for a group of young women draped in tinsel and party hats, he saw Lachine lean in so close to Bon Sant that his face almost touched her own. Borg-Olivier brought them two more whiskies, which Lachine acknowledged with a nod, all the while speaking softly into Bon Sant's ear. Twenty minutes later, Lachine looked up, his wetted mustache shining, to signal for another round. He paid for the drinks without turning his eyes from Bon Sant. After Lachine put the change in his wallet, Bon Sant rested her hand on Lachine's own, which he'd now curled into a

fist on the counter. Immediately Borg-Olivier understood, with a desolate taste in his mouth, that the two of them would become lovers.

When next he looked over, Lachine and Bon Sant had moved to a table, leaving their empty glasses on the bar.

The rush ended after midnight. All at once the noise lessened, space appeared in the crowd, and the air cooled. For the first time in four hours no one was calling out an order. Borg-Olivier touched his breast pocket. He might have made three hundred in tips. From behind the bar he looked around. Lachine and Bon Sant were no longer at the table they'd taken. Borg-Olivier walked to the back room, which was also empty. Lachine and Bon Sant, it seemed, had disappeared.

Lachine didn't come to The Black Pig the next night. Perhaps that would not have been so unusual, but when he didn't appear the following night, or the one after that, Borg-Olivier began to worry. After the absence had stretched to a week, Borg-Olivier called the English Department at Brooklyn College. The man who answered the phone said, with evident irritation, that the department did not maintain a message service for adjunct faculty. The email Borg-Olivier sent to the address he found on the college's website bounced back to him. When Borg-Olivier wrote to tell Amélie Bon Sant he was sorry he'd been so busy on the night she'd come, he received no reply. At least Waverly, the green-haired poet, hadn't vanished. They met twice for lunch, and once for a drink on Borg-Olivier's night off. Then Waverly visited him at The Black Pig. As usual, there were few customers. They had ample time to talk. Waverly stayed an hour and a half. Before she left she gave him a slender anthology of lyric poems translated from the Arabic. Borg-Olivier read the book at home after his shift ended, through the last hours of the night. Most of the poems were frank expressions of erotic yearning or despair, though Borg-Olivier suspected that in some the beloved's body served only as a metaphor for the divine. The darkness was lifting as he finished the volume. Alone on his bed, he felt weary and a little sad. But as he waited for sleep, he also understood that he was finally approaching one last, hidden frontier.

Two weeks after Lachine's disappearance, a minor scandal flared in the literary world. The *Times* had refused a full-page advertisement a new publisher wanted to place in the *Sunday Book Review*, on the grounds that the language and sentiments it contained weren't fit to print. This refusal, of course, spurred broader interest. Commentators and bloggers freely distributed the text online. Borg-Olivier read it on the internet the Monday after it would have run in the newspaper.

### **Writer(s) Wanted**

He is a mestizo with a thirteen-inch penis. He is losing both sight and mind to syphilis. He drinks bitter coffee and dark liquor with the oysters he steals from the fish market. He is stupider than an ox and more hungry. He despises metaphor only a little less than he despises his own life.

She has hair black as tar. As a child, she refused her mother's milk. She has been thirsty ever since. At eighteen, overcome by laughter, she seduced her uncles, cousins, and teachers. Now she moves through adulthood like a vampire or a wraith. She recognizes the differences in form, but not kind, of fiction, poetry, drama, memoir, semen, and sweat.

Are you this writer? Do you sense, in the stinking pellets that fertilize the garden of letters, the truth of your own existence? At your desk, do you taste iron, sewage, and dirt? Do you disgust yourself? Is Archilochus—bastard, mercenary, spurned lover, and the first lyric poet of the West—your father? Do you whisper his fragments to yourself, as others might recite their supplications to a vanished god?

149  
Seam of the scrotum.

219  
What a behind,  
O Monkey!

268  
Voracious, even,  
To the bounds  
Of cannibalism.

Give us a novel of this, a novel that will land on our skulls like a block of concrete, a novel that will harm us—the first Free Brutalist novel—and we will publish it. Until then, send us your stories, poems, and excretions.

*The Free Brutalist*  
Amélie Bon Sant, Publisher  
Pierre Lachine, Editor  
[www.thefreebrutalist.com](http://www.thefreebrutalist.com)

The months passed, the seasons. Borg-Olivier read novels and poems, saw Waverly, and took his shifts at The Black Pig. On occasion he checked *The Free Brutalist* website, but it contained only a copy of the manifesto (which seemed more opaque, even absurd, each time he read it) and an address, a postal box, for submissions. He continued to work on his new novel. To his surprise, he discovered he was writing an animal story. His central characters, two monkeys with the same father but different mothers, lived in a remote forest. As infants they shared their mothers' teats. Later they scavenged together for fruit, played in the trees, and watched for the snakes that hid among the vines. As they grew older, however, one monkey became tall and strong while the other remained short and frail. The stronger monkey began to distance himself from the weaker. The captain of their band, who was in fact the

father of both young monkeys, invited the stronger on his raids against other monkey bands. The weaker monkey, left to scavenge alone, wondered if he were destined to starve. He wasn't certain that he was still a member of the band that seemed now to despise him. But one day he met a ragged she-monkey who, like him, had become an outcast. The two of them fell in love. They shared the insects and seeds they found on the forest floor. They picked the louses out of each other's thin, sparse fur. They drifted away from the other monkeys into unknown regions of the forest. They were hungry and often sick but they had also, at last, found something like happiness.

Waverly read the drafts of Borg-Olivier's chapters as soon as he finished them. Often she wept. One late-winter night in Borg-Olivier's apartment, as snow fell gently outside onto the silent street, she told him it was as if he were writing the novel for her alone. "You poor boy," she said, stroking his face and hair while he lay with his head in her lap.

Lachine returned to The Black Pig on a Tuesday evening in early spring. He wore a pinstriped suit tailored closely to his massive torso and thighs, and a soft, cream-colored shirt whose top three buttons he'd left unfastened. His mustache had thickened, and his head, shaved to the scalp, gleamed. Yet for all of Lachine's luxury and grooming, Borg-Olivier had the impression that he was ill. His hands, with their thick, manicured fingers, trembled when he rested them on the counter. His eyes, which he lowered to meet Borg-Olivier's own, were swollen and red.

"Hello, professor," Borg-Olivier said, in a quiet voice.

They were the only two people in the bar. Lachine leaned over the counter. He looked at Borg-Olivier without blinking. For a moment, Borg-Olivier was afraid.

"I've missed this place," Lachine said. He laid a magazine on the counter while Borg-Olivier poured him a drink. "Issue number one of *The Free Brutalist*." He began to cough.

Borg-Olivier put Lachine's glass on a coaster. He picked up the magazine. On the front cover, beneath the heading, "How Bodies Fit Together," was a photograph of a dead tree that cast no shadow on a barren, rock-strewn landscape. A single branch extended from the tree's splintered trunk. It took Borg-Olivier a moment, upon flipping the magazine to its back cover, to understand what it was that he was looking at: an erect penis, taken in such an extreme close-up that the entire organ did not fit the page. Tiny yellow spots and a single weeping chancre marked the skin. Two green veins ran from stem to hood, beneath a beet-red glans. The word "sickness" appeared, in tiny red font, at the bottom. Borg-Olivier turned the magazine back over, opened it, and began to read.

The first story, A. A. López's "Beast Days," took place in a town or village by the sea. There were enormous houses, well-groomed lawns. Steaks thawed in the refrigerators, plastic rings floated in the swimming pools, and fresh towels lay on the patio furniture, but there was no one to be seen. It was as if all the inhabitants had fled from a nuclear accident or zombie attack. The unnamed narrator, who seemed to know nothing about the place, broke into one empty mansion after another. He didn't steal but left his mark in other ways. He ripped canvases from the walls, urinated on the carpets, and in the bedrooms defecated between the sheets. Sometimes he heard the sirens of police cars or ambulances, but always he managed to escape unseen into the woods. Finally, in the largest mansion of all, which stood alone in a cove at the town's farthest limit, he met someone else. A young woman with Slavic features walked into the house. She wore an apron and rubber gloves, and carried a cleaning brush. In an unplaceable accent, she said her name was Linda. When he didn't tell her his own name, she slapped him across the face. Then the narrator and Linda, whose vacant expression never

altered, undressed without speaking. They walked into the bathroom of the master suite. Before a large mirror, which covered most of one wall, they lowered themselves to the tiles. The lights on the ceiling and around the mirror were dazzlingly bright. For a moment the narrator wondered if he had walked onto a film or stage set. Linda was on all fours, with her back to him. She looked at him over her shoulder and nodded. The narrator rested his hands on her hips. He recognized the smell of detergent, first, and then of shit. He thought of his childhood as he entered her.

Lachine had finished his drink. He watched Borg-Olivier through his blood-rimmed eyes. "And now, do you see?" After a brief pause, he said, "Yes, I think you do." He asked for another scotch.

Borg-Olivier poured the drink before he flipped through the rest of the magazine. López's story, at six pages, was the longest in the issue. The others covered only a page or two, while the poems, which filled the magazine's latter half, were limited to a few lines, single phrases, or fragments. Over the final pages the words disappeared entirely, giving way to a series of pictograms: first, a set of thick black waves of varying depth, then a sequence of inverted triangles, then a column of squares. On the last page, a small shaded circle appeared at the center of a larger circle. To Borg-Olivier, the design suggested a target or an anus.

Lachine, having finished his second drink, stood up. "I can't let you keep this," he said, taking back the magazine. "But come to Friday's launch party and get a copy then." He dropped a silver-embossed invitation onto the counter. "I'm glad we met, Joseph Antonio," he said, before he walked away.

"I'll try to make it," said Borg-Olivier, in a voice that was hardly more than a whisper.

Lachine, already at the door, didn't look back.

At one in the morning it began to rain. Borg-Olivier cleared the register, locked the safe, and turned out the lights. It was earlier than *The Black Pig* usually closed, but there were no customers. Borg-Olivier took his bicycle out of the storage closet, through the side door, and into the alley. The pavement was slippery and dark, the wind cold. Borg-Olivier lived half an hour's ride from the bar, but on that night, alone on the abandoned streets, wet and a little frightened, the trip seemed much longer.

The rain had soaked him down to his underwear by the time he reached his apartment. He undressed, dried himself with a towel, and opened his laptop's browser to *The Free Brutalist* website. A clock, counting down in large red digits on a black background, had replaced the manifesto. It showed two days, eighteen hours, and eleven minutes. Borg-Olivier watched as the seconds diminished. Nothing else happened, and yet the screen exerted a strange, urgent pull. Meanwhile, the showers outside had grown into a full-blown storm, with the risen wind smashing the rain against the windows. Borg-Olivier was too tired to walk to the kitchen for a nightcap. Instead he watched the countdown for an hour, passing into and out of sleep in his chair until, finally, he left his desk to collapse on the bed. The wind roared into his dreams. He woke early on Wednesday, feeling as if he hadn't slept at all. The wind still rattled his rain-smearred windows. He tried, without conviction, to work on his novel. Soon he reopened his browser to check the countdown clock. Its timer had slipped under two days and twelve hours. Borg-Olivier visited the website again fifteen minutes later, and again a few minutes after that. He realized it was futile to pretend to write. He left his laptop open to the countdown until it was time to leave for the bar.

In truth, Borg-Olivier already knew his novel had failed, even as he'd reached the final chapter of the draft. In clear and vivid language he'd depicted an elemental world. He'd found its cornerstones: warmth, milk, safety, and touch. But, writing always for Waverly, he'd held himself back in his darkest hours. He'd never let his characters succumb to despair. Now he would never find what lay beneath. The question of publication seemed to lack all significance.

He took the bus to work through the rain and, afterward, a taxi home. He slept poorly, passed the next day in a state of anguish and fatigue, and on Thursday rode the bus to work again through the storm's last, fitful showers. Finally, on Friday, with only hours to go until the launch, he called Waverly. He told her he wasn't going to work that night. He invited her to come with him to the party. She said her restaurant was short-staffed and she couldn't give up her waitressing shift. Borg-Olivier felt a brief, sharp thrill at her words.

With an hour and a half remaining on the countdown clock, Borg-Olivier rose to shower and iron a shirt for the party. He checked the clock for the last time before he left at a quarter to seven. Fifteen minutes remained until the launch. Outside, the rain had stopped, leaving the sky an astonishing shade of orange. The invitation directed Borg-Olivier to a warehouse in a nearby industrial zone. He walked south along the river. The air reeked of sewage. Soon his feet were wet, the liquid thickening his socks as if not only floodwater but the slime that lay in the deepest recesses of forgotten pipes had seeped into his shoes.

Clusters of people dressed for a party chatted on the sidewalk outside the warehouse. From some hidden recess, a projector beamed a film clip onto the building's façade. The camera followed a tall, dark-haired woman, naked to the waist, as she walked on a beach or desert dune. The video, which was only a few seconds in length, looped endlessly. Borg-Olivier watched it play four or five times before he walked into the stairwell. Alone, he followed the arrows taped on the walls up to the third-floor landing. He pushed open the fire door to enter what must have been a vast room. It was entirely dark inside, yet the walls seemed to shimmer with a hidden energy of their own.

"Hello," he said.

No one answered him. He thought he heard voices, but they were muffled and faint, as if they reached him from behind a wall or several layers of heavy cloth. He put his hands in his pockets only to realize, with horror, that they were empty. He took a step forward, then more steps. When he looked up he couldn't see the ceiling. For a moment he felt that he'd walked out from the city into a distant, barren night, a Viking or Mongol night, with beasts lurking on a fireless plain. Farther inside, the room smelled of chlorine, and Borg-Olivier was returned to the warehouse. Although he sensed—through some softness, some murmur—the presence of other bodies near his feet, he could not see them.

The air grew warmer. Borg-Olivier stumbled on what must have been a human hand or foot. He could hear now a trickle of water. In the distance, faintly illuminated from below by what must have been the only light in the room, Borg-Olivier discerned a man lying naked on a platform. A mesh screen enclosed him. As Borg-Olivier moved closer, he saw that the man's large, hairless body shone with oil or sweat. Although a mask obscured the man's face, Borg-Olivier knew at once that it was Lachine. A rubber tube, hanging out of the darkness above the platform, was attached to Lachine's nose or mouth. At short intervals, the sound of the trickling water rose to a cascade, as if a bucket, concealed from view, had filled and now tipped over. Each time this happened Lachine's body convulsed in pain or ecstasy. Borg-Olivier had himself sweated through his shirt.

He stopped walking. Carefully, he took off his clothes. His muscles tensed as he lowered himself to the floor, which was hot and damp. He could smell mildew beneath the chlorine. He heard soft moans or grunts. He knew, long before they reached him, that other bodies were moving in. There was nothing else to wait for. He had arrived at last.

