

THE BEARDS.

by Jonathan Lethem

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The Heavenly Music Corporation --

(1980-82, Mom dead.)

"No Pussyfooting" is an album by the guitar player Robert Fripp and the keyboard player Brian Eno. The album consists of two songs, or compositions; there are no voices on the record, no lyrics. Unlike other recordings by Fripp and Eno, alone or as members of groups, "No Pussyfooting" doesn't involve studio overdubs. Although the music provides a fullness, an illusion of depth, the two cuts appear to be long improvisations between the players, conducted in real time, within simple boundaries. Side one is made up of aching long tones, swells of sound that rise and fade. In vocal terms, the instruments groan or wail. They kee. On side two, the tones are frantic with ripples, oscillations. In vocal terms, the instruments ululate. Or orgasm.

Side one is called "The Heavenly Music Corporation." Side two, "Swastika Girls."

I bought "No Pussyfooting" in 1979 or 1980, at the record store on the eighth floor of Abraham & Straus, a palatial department store on Fulton Street, a few blocks from where I lived. My friend Jeremy and I had been going there regularly to browse the long sections of Frank Zappa and Kinks records, and to dare ourselves to spend money on some of the mysterious products we couldn't have investigated otherwise. I was curious about Brian Eno because he was the producer of the newest Talking Heads record. I imagine I selected the two Eno records I bought--"Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy" and "No Pussyfooting"--on the strength of the jacket art, which was alluringly dark and strange, and which had a resemblance to gallery art, as did the jackets of Talking Heads albums.

I also liked the name Eno. It sounded vaguely alien, bliplike, like the names of some of the writers I'd begun to idolize: Lem, Kafka, Poe, Borges.

When I got those records home, "Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy" turned out to be a sequence of songs in conventional rock format, three to six minutes long, mostly with guitars and drums underlying their creepy, synthesized sound effects and ominous, gnomic lyrics. Perfect, in other words. "No Pussyfooting" was this other thing: a pair of fuzzy electronic suites, which absolutely refused to beguile. I should have filed it in my collection and forgotten it, gravely disappointed, as I'd imagine most

of its teen-age buyers were. Instead, I decided I loved "The Heavenly Music Corporation," and hated "Swastika Girls."

I had a room to myself, on the top floor of our house. My bed was on a loft, built above a hivelike construction of desktops and storage spaces. Directly below where I placed my pillow was a wooden compartment that neatly held my amplifier and turntable. I had a set of headphones--absurdly heavy, ear-clamping muffs, connected to the stereo by a mushy, coiled rubber-coated cord, twice as thick as a telephone's.

Late at night, when I was done reading, and had turned off my light, I'd wear the headphones and listen to the twenty-one minutes of "The Heavenly Music Corporation," or as much as I could before it lulled me to sleep. I memorized each swell of guitar and synth, anticipating the moment (which, I've since confirmed, occurs exactly at the ten-minute-and-thirty-second mark) when the synthesizer's repeated plunge toward a certain note suddenly seems to persuade the guitar to follow, so that the second half of the piece becomes a long finishing, an ebbing away.

Some nights, whatever teen-age anxiety or fear thrilled my body kept me awake through the whole piece. So I'd lean over the edge of my bed, still wearing the headphones, and place the needle at the start of the track again. I'd mastered the art of nudging the monstrous phones off my head as I launched into deeper stages of sleep, and I'd wake to find them crammed between the mattress and the wall.

Fripp's long guitar solo was a human voice I grew to know better, most likely, than its maker. His thinking, audible as he tested the surf of Eno's synthesizer, was like a morality only I understood. I covered it in sleep, then bore it out into the day with me, a surrogate brain wave with which to respond to the world.

The Man Who Fell To Earth --

(1976, Mom out of hospital.)

My mother and her boyfriend took me to a midday showing of the Nicolas Roeg film "The Man Who Fell to Earth" at the Quad Cinema on West Thirteenth Street in Manhattan. "The Man Who Fell to Earth" stars David Bowie as a gentle and moody alien visitor to our planet, one who, upon encountering man's inhumanity to alien, becomes increasingly bitter and self-abnegating, until he ends up a decadent and drunken pop star. This was the bowdlerized American release, missing the blatant sex scenes that have since been restored, though David Bowie's attempt

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to present his "true self" to his human lover, played by Candy Clark--shedding his disguise, he reveals goatlike slit pupils, and a smooth, doll-like bump in place of his genitals--was shocking to me.

As we three stepped back out into the daylight of Manhattan, I was deeply immersed in the spell of the film. I'd been reading Ray Bradbury's "Martian Chronicles" and a handful of other classic science-fiction stories, and alien equals alienated was a rebus I grasped. Any one of these people I see walking around me, I remember thinking, in astonishment, as we made our way back to the subway, could be like him. By "like him" I meant, or thought I meant: a secret visitor from another planet. But my wonder at the film was really wonder at the force of my identification with the figure of the misunderstood alien. I didn't for a minute imagine that I wasn't an earthling, so what I really meant was: Any one of these people I see walking around me could be like me. Could feel like me, just as I felt like Bowie. That is to say, subjective, sad, and special.

Wish You Were Here --

(1979 or 1980, Mom dead.)

The party was in the apartment of a man named Louis (some of these names have been changed), who wore his hair in Rastafarian-style dreadlocks, and whose shelves were full of paperback science fiction of the saga variety--Frank Herbert's "Dune" books, and Philip Jose Farmer's "Riverworld." In the middle of the living room stood a hookah, surrounded by low cushions. I'd been inhaling marijuana from one of the tubes of the hookah, a surprisingly easy thing to do quite a lot of. And I'd been feeling very much a part of this party, which consisted entirely of adults, men and women in their twenties, all of whom seemed to have accepted me as a given in their circle, despite the fact that I'd never been to Louis's apartment before and many of the people there were strangers.

Yet I wasn't mistaken. This mutual comfort was an extension of the degree to which I'd been adopted into the company of my grownup friend Michael, who ran a used-book store on Atlantic Avenue, a few blocks from my home. I'd wandered into Michael's shop one day, attracted not only by the used books that had already become my passion but by the oddness of a ramshackle enterprise that surely reminded me of my parents' milieu. For, improbably, the bookstore on Atlantic was also a puppet theatre, and the home office of a moving company, each in partnership with Michael's friend Larry.

I made myself an immediate sidekick to Michael and Larry,

and insisted on apprenticing myself in all three of the trades they ran from the single storefront. I painted backdrops and collected receipts at the puppet shows. (I also rounded up local kids to help make an audience.) I joined them on small moving jobs, more than once mooring the guide rope on a block and tackle as we shifted a couch through the upstairs window of a Brooklyn apartment. And I immersed myself in Michael's bookselling knowledge. Before long, I was opening the shop by myself, on those days when Michael didn't feel like making the trip from his Upper East Side Manhattan apartment. I was apprenticed to Michael as a reader, too, aping his interests in John Cowper Powys, Colin Wilson, and Thomas Berger, and I took home my pay from the shop in books, not cash.

It was in the shop, then, that Michael's friends got to taking the presence of his fifteen-year-old acolyte for granted. Nevertheless, I must have seemed a bit adrift that night, on my pillow at the hookah, grinning and smiling at the women in the room, trying to follow or perhaps insert myself into nearby conversations. I'd inhaled more pot than I ever had before, more than I knew. So Bob, another of Michael's friends, made a small intervention.

Bob was a tall, elegant black man, an actor and a jazz musician--a trumpet player and scat singer, to be exact. That night, at Louis's party, Bob had seen something in my eyes as I sat at the hookah which made him wish if not to rescue then to divert me. He tapped me on my spaced-out shoulder and made me follow him to Louis's bedroom. There he sat me on the edge of the bed and placed a pair of headphones on my ears.

"Listen to this," he said.

"What?" I said.

"Just listen."

Bob pressed a button on a cassette deck. The music that flooded my ears was sensual, ominous, and infinitely protracted, oceanic. The record was Pink Floyd's "Wish You Were Here," which begins with the band's fourteen-minute "Shine On You Crazy Diamond, Parts 1-5," a suite I'd later discover was a beckoning tribute to their former bandmate Syd Barrett, who was lost to drugs and schizophrenia at the end of the sixties. The album is recorded for stereo with such pinpoint hallucinatory clarity that its effect on headphones, in my stoned condition, was to suggest that I'd plunged out of a landscape of two aural dimensions into one of three, or five, or twenty. I felt able to place each of the notes in a precise place in the air before my eyes, to watch them flicker and pulse and vanish like embers.

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Bob had given me a gift. It was as though he'd said, "Jonathan, the time for you to pretend you are an adult among adults is through for the night. You're a charming kid and we like you very much, but the strain is showing. So quit pretending you understand things you only half understand, and return yourself to wonderment, to masturbation, to dreaming."

In recollection, the shiny, self-pitying grandeur of Pink Floyd is among the uneasiest tokens of my teen-age tastes. A year or two later, I'd give myself to the band's paranoiac epic "The Wall," memorizing and debating lyrics in the company of friends my own age. With my pals Joel and Donna, I made a pilgrimage to the Nassau Coliseum to see Pink Floyd play the double album live while sharing the stage with a fake wall, which was destroyed at the show's onset by a fake airplane and rebuilt throughout the evening. Then we slumbered in a stoned fever, heads lolling on one another's shoulders, as we rode home on the Long Island Rail Road. Yet Pink Floyd was at odds with the musical tastes I'd cultivated, those more along punk lines, and requiring Talking Heads- or Elvis Costello-style ironies to deflate the sort of hippie pieties that thrived, unmistakably, beneath Pink Floyd's wounded rage.

Such self-conscious posturing (my own, I mean, not Elvis Costello's) doesn't stand a chance against the kind of helpless love I still feel if I play "Shine On You Crazy Diamond, Parts 1-5," especially on headphones. This was a group that had lost its genius and its spiritual center, and had had to carry on. And, paradoxically, its masterpiece (for that was what I believed "Shine On You Crazy Diamond" to be) had been achieved without his help, but in his honor. Syd Barrett wasn't dead, but "Shine On You Crazy Diamond" was memorial art. It suggested that I didn't have to fall into ruin to exemplify the cost of losing someone as enormous as Judith Lethem. My surviving Judith's death would in no way be to her dishonor. I'd only owe her a great song.

Sauve qui peut (la vie) --

(1980, Mom dead.)

My father's sometime girlfriend Hannah and I went out to see the new Godard movie, "Sauve Qui Peut (la Vie)," or "Every Man for Himself," at the Quad Cinema, on an evening when my father was out with another woman. The film had been widely reviewed as a return to form for Godard, who for most of the seventies had renounced the poetry of his sixties style in favor of Marxist agitprop (or, anyway, that was the received opinion). I'd been watching his sixties films at repertory houses, and loved the ones I (partly) understood: "Breathless," "My Life to Live," "A

Woman Is a Woman," "Band of Outsiders," "Weekend." This would be the first time I'd seen a new Godard film at the moment of its release. Hannah was a young painter, sharp and funny, as near my age as my father's. I treasured my friendship with her, even at a time when my anger at my father for surviving my mother was at its very worst, and my treatment of him consisted largely of sullen avoidance.

I didn't understand "Sauve Qui Peut (la Vie)." I only recall an undertone of political and sexual disappointment that was beyond me. No major shame in that, as Godard can mystify plenty of adults. I did sense the film's beauty, the beauty of a pure cinematic voice that, even in its pensiveness, evoked grand, unnameable emotions. At fifteen, though, I wasn't at a point where I could trust art that baffled and enraptured me. I needed to feel that I'd encompassed it. Perhaps if I'd gone to the movie alone I'd have kidded myself, but in Hannah's company the incompleteness of my response was exposed to me.

We returned to my family's home, an odd move, given the situation. There we smoked pot together at the kitchen table, a provocation (by both of us) to my absent father, but also an invocation (by me) of my dead mother. It dawned on me that I was being used, a little. Hannah was staking out my dad, seeing if he came home alone, or at all. But that was O.K., because I was using Hannah to taunt my father, whether he knew it or not. I wanted to feel that I was out on a date with Hannah. The flaw in my game became clear soon enough. As I tired, Hannah grew angry, and my insufficiency as a surrogate became annoying to us both. I wasn't interested enough in this drama, because it wasn't about me, so I went to bed.

Something was quietly wrecked. Hannah generously treated me as an equal, so it wasn't her fault that the evening had stripped away part of my disguise, in terms both of Godard and of my father. I'd have to go farther from home for my companions; that was the lesson. And "Sauve Qui Peut (la Vie)" became a farewell to Jean-Luc Godard as one of my primary tokens of identification. He'd betrayed me by belonging more to the adults in the full auditorium at the Quad than he had to me as a teen-ager sitting in mostly empty repertory houses, alone.

The Sorcerer's Apprentice --

(1978-86, Mom dead.)

In the years following my mother's death, when I was fourteen, then fifteen, then sixteen, I forged a series of friendships with grown men, all of them teachers or artists or bohemians or seekers of one kind or another. There was Michael. There was Paul, a Quaker/hippie/Army

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dropout, whose book of poetry I illustrated. There was Ian, my math teacher in high school, with whom I'd stalk the streets of Greenwich Village after school, engaged in deep talk of existentialist resistance to bourgeois life. More briefly, there was Mr. Newman, a refined young painter frustrated at being trapped teaching English in a high school for aspiring painters; Rolando, a gay black painter and ballet dancer, who gave me a glimpse of New York's homosexual demimonde while leaving me untouched; Mr. Greenberg, my sensitive, bearish sculpture teacher, for whose pleasure I momentarily became a prodigy at marble-carving; Steve, a British hippie and world-traveller-by-bicycle, for a time a boyfriend of my mother's, with whom I would stay up all night inflamed by mystical, Gurdjieffian dialogues.

There may even have been others, but it would be a mistake to class any others with these principal three: Michael, Paul, and Ian--call them the beards. Each wore a beard, like my father. And it was their beards that made it unmistakable (to my eye) that my friendships were with adults, and so I must therefore be an adult myself, just as it was their beards and my lack of one that must have made it unmistakable (to other eyes) that a kid was hanging out with a grownup.

With each of the three I talked about books and movies of the outsider variety, smoked pot, complained about the dullness of school and the limited perspective of my peers, and escaped the role of teen-ager in a house wracked by my mother's death. To each of them, I suppose, I delivered the flattery of my reverence, nicely hidden inside the outlines of genuine friendship. Not one of these three (nor any of the others) ever hinted at anything paternal in his feeling for me. I would have rejected it irritably, and, anyway, they weren't the type.

For those outward similarities, the flavor of a day in the company of each of these three was violently dissimilar. Michael cultivated a misanthropic air, but drew people to him more compulsively than anyone I've yet known. In his world, parties were always breaking out. That Michael adored people as much as books helped keep me from making too firm a choice between the two, even as he became my idol as a reader and collector. Time spent with Paul was a little more hermetic and spooky. We'd get hold of the keys to the Quaker Cemetery, in Prospect Park, and creep around and take drugs inside the grounds. Paul's taste, in his reading and his own writing, was for exoticism, secret knowledge. He measured not only literature but also drugs and sex for their value as doors to higher realms. I savored Paul's frank talk of experiences he'd had and I hadn't, and tuned out what stumped me. As for Ian, his wild-man math classes were a legend at our high school--he'd drop the lesson and glower, or inform us we

were fools to think doing well in math class meant anything in the larger scheme--but I was the kid who followed him home. Ian, talented at whatever he touched, had enthusiasms that fell on him like illnesses. He'd spend a month or two writing sonnets or mastering the newest theories in particle physics, disdaining as futile what he accomplished--it seemed to me--effortlessly. I couldn't keep up, but I found my place as sidekick and sounding board for both fevers of inspiration and rages of rejection.

Why should a kid who has lost his mother seem to be in search of a replacement father instead? Michael, Paul, and Ian weren't offering me sympathy, at least not a brand of it that cast me as the bereft child I partly was but didn't wish in any way to be. A grown woman might threaten to do that. A few of my father's girlfriends had, in fact (not Hannah, but others). If Michael, Paul, and Ian had one thing in common, it was their apparent disinterest in home or hearth. Their values reinforced my notions of a happy bohemian solitude, in which entanglements with women were a siren song of distraction.

This wasn't who I really was, or am now. But, at that moment, forgetting my mother seemed to entail forgetting my father, forgetting childhood (I became weirdly blind to the existence of my younger siblings, whose sadness would have mirrored mine back to me), and possibly even forgetting women per se. I threw out most of human life in favor of a handful of unconventional men of the kind I felt I needed to be.

My identification with the figure of the artist was total, yet I couldn't make safe use of the primary totem available to me: my own father. I had to define my distance from Richard Lethem, not only for the usual reasons but because he was a parent and I refused to be a child. Or perhaps those are the usual reasons, amplified to a scream.

Fear Of Music --

(1970-present, Mom well/sick/dead.)

I read all the Narnia books. I read "The Lord of the Rings." I read every book by Ray Bradbury. I read every book by Raymond Chandler. I reread every book by Raymond Chandler. I read every book by Kurt Vonnegut, including "God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater." I read every book by Richard Brautigan, then Norman Mailer. I kept a complete set of the stories of Guy de Maupassant on the edge of my loft bed, and tried to read one a night until I finished it (I failed). I saw every movie by Stanley Kubrick, except "Killer's Kiss." (Later, when I ran the film society at college, I arranged a screening of "Killer's Kiss" there.) I tried, hopelessly, to see every movie by Jean-Luc Godard and

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Francois Truffaut, sitting alone at afternoon showings of "Jules and Jim" and "Tout Va Bien" and "The Bride Wore Black" in the repertory houses of Manhattan. I watched "Star Wars" twenty-one times in a single summer, largely alone. I sat alone at the Thalia, on West Ninety-fifth Street, and watched "2001: A Space Odyssey" three times in one day. Philip K. Dick became my favorite writer, and, spellbound by forty-odd titles listed in the front of a Bantam edition of "Ubik," I swore to find and read them all, and succeeded. When I was twenty-five, I had a miniaturized version of the dust-jacket design of the first edition of "Ubik" tattooed on my left arm. Italo Calvino became my favorite author, and I read every book by Italo Calvino. Don DeLillo, same thing. Patricia Highsmith, same thing. Thomas Berger, same thing.

I played the third album by Talking Heads, called "Fear of Music," to the point of destroying the vinyl, then replaced it with a new copy. I memorized the lyrics, memorized the lyrics to other Talking Heads albums, saw Talking Heads play any chance I got, and, when I arrived at college, put up a sign in the wing of my dormitory with an arrow pointing down the hall, where some Grateful Dead fans lived, which read, "Dead Heads"; another arrow, pointing in the direction of the room I shared with my simpatico roommate, read, "Talking Heads." At its peak, in 1980 or 1981, my identification was so complete that I might have wished to wear the album "Fear of Music" in place of my head in order to be more clearly seen by those around me.

I turned John Ford's "The Searchers" into a ritual and a cause. I bought approximately two hundred Bob Dylan bootlegs. I tried to see every Howard Hawks movie, every Orson Welles movie, every film listed in the "Film Noir Encyclopedia." For years, I calibrated my record collection against the grades in Robert Christgau's "Record Guide: Rock Albums of the '70s," jotting dissenting views in pencil in the margins: Marvin Gaye's "Here, My Dear," given a B-minus by Christgau, got an A-plus from me. "Here, My Dear," a tormented account of Gaye's divorce, was a record I was introduced to by someone who thought it was only pathetic and funny--I began defending it from scorn before I'd finished listening to the first side. I regularly fell asleep to a cassette of "Here, My Dear" on Walkman headphones for a few years in college. In my late twenties, I lulled myself asleep to Chet Baker records for a while, and at the peak of my Chet Baker obsession I owned more than fifty Chet Baker CDs, though I was never satisfied, because I knew someone who had more than a hundred Chet Baker CDs.

I rarely listen to Chet Baker anymore. I haven't read Vonnegut or Bradbury or Brautigan since I was a child, partly because I'm afraid of what I'll find, partly because they're in my DNA, and have become inscribed on the

inner surface of the eyes through which I read others. I've rarely read Don DeLillo since the binge years, when I feverishly read and reread every one of his novels, and now, when I do, I find myself stirred but confused. The moment Don DeLillo became in any way fallible to me, I experienced a rupture I'm still traumatized by, one that colors my ability to situate him reasonably in my internal landscape of "contemporary letters"--he's either as great as I thought he was when I thought he made all other writing look silly or he's a total disaster. I still think "Barry Lyndon" and "2001: A Space Odyssey" are great films, but my notion of Kubrick-as-favorite-director became bewildering after I allowed myself to feel disappointment in "A Clockwork Orange," "Lolita," and "Full Metal Jacket." Impossible to place in relation to my "grownup" pantheon of favorites, like Kurosawa, Ford, or Cassavetes, Kubrick floats unfixed in my sky, mooning my awestruck teen-age projections back at me.

I couldn't bear to listen to Talking Heads records, even the ones I'd previously revered, after "Naked," and after David Byrne's early solo records. That subsequent music seemed to my fierce acolyte's heart a betrayal of the idea of Talking Heads, as though David Byrne were an unworthy steward of the art he'd partly created. All their music became poisonously embarrassing to me the moment I realized it wasn't as good as I'd claimed it was (and no band is as good as I'd claimed Talking Heads were in the years I adored them). I suffered other similar, if milder, divorces: from the surrealist painters Magritte and De Chirico, from Jean-Luc Godard, from Brian Eno and David Bowie. These lesser disappointments I managed to modulate; the artists are less like ex-lovers than like friends I keep in my address book but call less often than I used to. It was my splits from Talking Heads and Stanley Kubrick and Don DeLillo that left me as indignant, ashamed, and unmoored as breakups with a girlfriend or wife, wondering who'd failed whom.

Attempting to burrow and disappear into the admiration of certain works of art, I tried to make such deep and pure identification that my integrity as a human self would become optional, a vestige of my relationship to the art. I wanted to submit and submerge, even to die a little. I developed a preference, among others, for art that required endurance, that mimicked a galactic endlessness and wore out the nonbelievers. By ignoring my hunger or my need to use the bathroom during a three-hour movie by Kubrick or Tarkovsky, I'd voted against my body, with its undeniable pangs and griefs, in favor of a self composed of eyeballs and brain, floating in the void of pure art. If I wasn't afraid of this kind of dissolution, I shouldn't be afraid of death, so I'd be an evolutionary step ahead.

By trying to export myself into a place that didn't fully exist,

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I was asking works of art to bear my expectation that they could be better than life, that they could redeem life. I asked too much of them: I asked them also to be both safer than life and fuller, a better family. That, they couldn't be. At the depths I'd plumb them, so many perfectly sufficient works of art became thin, anemic. I sucked the juice out of what I loved until I found myself in a desert, sucking rocks for water.

This was especially true of anything that assumed a posture of minimalism or perfectionism, or of chilly, intellectual grandeur. Hence my rage at Stanley Kubrick, Don DeLillo, Jean-Luc Godard, and Talking Heads. The artists who seemed to promise the most were the ones who'd created art that stirred me while seeming to absent themselves from emotional risk--so these were the ones that were capable of failing my needs most violently. It was as though in their coolness these artists had sensed my oversized needs and turned away, flinching from what I'd asked them to feel on my behalf. I blamed them, anyway. My declaring a writer or musician or director my favorite, it seemed, contained a kind of suicide pact for my own enthusiasm. The disappointment artist was me.

Slow Train Coming --

(1979-81, Mom dead.)

Bob Dylan belonged to my parents, specifically to my mother, who had even known him very slightly in her days on the folk scene. He was as obvious and omnipresent in our house as the Beatles, but, for a child, nowhere near as alluring. Dylan's songs spoke to me without my paying attention, until my mother's death forced me to parse her record collection for her traces. Then he became crucial in a series of ceremonies that extended also to Nina Simone, Cream, and Carly Simon.

In the same year, I befriended Michael, who loved Dylan in the manner that he loved his favorite writers, with the same ready disdain for anyone who didn't get it. This was 1979, when Dylan was seen by most liberals to be in dishonor for his born-again Christianity, another sixties illusion smashed. Anyway, for teen-agers Dylan was a part of what punk had supposedly swept away. So, listening to Dylan became a token of the perversity of my tastes, like wearing jodhpurs to school in order to be branded eccentric. I championed him ironically to my peers, who would shake their heads. In this way, I brandished Dylan as a fetish until I could safely love him honestly.

Philip K. Dick was even more of a stealth operator. I liked science fiction, but the science fiction I'd located up to that point wasn't hip or funny or dark enough for my tastes. Dick's profile as King of the Paranoids, which is how I

understood it from the jackets of his books, suited me so well that he was almost my official favorite writer before I'd finished a single book. Yet he was no Eno or Kubrick, no David Byrne. Dick's work had a yearning and homely undertow, a self-doubting quality, that made him infinitely richer and more disturbing than I'd assumed. Franz Kafka, another idol who survived my teen-age years, was like Dick in concealing personal art within a Trojan horse of paradox and paranoia. As with Dick, I came for the dystopian world view, and stayed for the self-disclosure.

Oddly enough, at that very moment, at the start of the eighties, Philip K. Dick was also publicly converting to what appeared to be some creepy version of Christianity. His spiritual desires, like Dylan's, on the one hand repulsed me. Yet in both cases the work that resulted from their religious questioning embedded such elegant uncertainty about the likelihood of a life's full sustenance in art and ego that my own solipsism was slightly eroded.

I'd backed into each of these loves against my teen-age tendencies in hero selection. Rather than being figures of authority, these guys were like fraternal companions, stumbling through their own ups and downs. Dylan and Dick created bodies of work so contradictory and erratic that they never seemed to have promised me perfection, so they could never disappoint me. Here were artists who hung themselves emotionally out to dry, who risked rage and self-pity in their work, and were sometimes overwhelmed by those feelings and blew it.

Bob Dylan and Philip K. Dick (and, eventually, others who resembled them in this way) also led me back to my father. For he was, of course, the artist from whose imperfections, and revealed vulnerabilities, I'd originally flinched. For years, I'd chosen against my father by idolizing artists who hid their face behind glossy, impassive surfaces. Yet those figures had proved brittle--inadequate against the untidy barrage of my feelings. They'd refused to meet me where I needed them most, at some emotional substratum down to which I'd excavated and found nobody home. Dylan and Dick, by their own unwillingness to hide their clumsiness and variability, to protect me from an awareness of the fallible processes behind even their masterpieces, seduced me into sympathy for the artist whose process was, as I grew up, so particularly naked to me. And, needless to say, I had to begin to forgive my father for being human before I could begin to write.

Mr. Natural --

(1978-86, Mom dead.)

In "Broadway Danny Rose," Woody Allen plays a theatrical agent whose star performer, a married singer, is carrying

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on an affair. In order to protect the singer, Allen escorts the girlfriend around town, allowing them to be mistaken for a couple in order to provide his client with deniability. When this leads to disaster, and threats of death (the girlfriend is a mafioso's ex-moll), Allen begs off. "I'm the beard," he says. "I'm only the beard!"

Allen's use gave new currency to this vivid term, often used to describe the heterosexual escort of a secretly gay movie star: the beard. A cloak on passions that those who required a beard might be unwilling to discuss or even consider, the beard was itself a figure of power and mystery. For we are revealed not only as our disguises slip or are abandoned but in the nature of the disguises we choose. Pretenses are always insufficient, overcompensatory, or both. Masks melt into our faces and become impossible to remove precisely at the instant we realized they were transparent all along.

More generally, my obsessiveness about books, songs, and films was a beard on growing up, which I didn't want to catch myself doing. I wanted it behind me even as it was ahead of me. This exertion of will--if I'd seen more Godard films than any adult I knew, or read more books by Norman Mailer, then maybe I'd have proved something, even if I didn't understand them--was also an act of sensory deprivation, of self-abnegation. The two--will and deprivation--were weirdly compatible. I tried to obliterate my teen-age years in movie theatres because my teen-age years both embarrassed and saddened me. Between double features of French films, between putting down one book and picking up the next, I'd glance at my wristwatch to see if I was in my twenties yet.

in My Room --

(1974-present, Mom, etc.)

Every room I've lived in since I was given my own room, at eleven, has been lined with books. My employment in bookstores was, and is, continuous with my private hours: shelving and alphabetizing, building shelves, and browsing--in my own collection and others--in order to understand a small amount about the widest possible number of books. Such numbers of books are so constantly acquired that constant culling is necessary; if I slouch in this discipline, the books erupt. I've also bricked myself in with music--first vinyl records, then compact disks. My homes have been improbably information-dense, like capsules for survival of nuclear war, or models of the interior of my own skull. That comparison--room as brain--is one I've often reached for in describing the rooms of others, but it began with the suspicion that I'd externalized my own brain, for anyone who cared to look.

The simpler, and perhaps deeper, truth lies in the comparison more obvious to others: that the empires of data storage make up a castle or armor or hermit-crab's shell for my tender self. My exoskeleton of books has peaked in baroque outcroppings and disorderly excess at times of lonely crisis. After my mother died, I acquired a friend's vast paperback collection, and the overflow shelving in my room consisted of books balanced on planks unfixed to any wall or support, so that no one apart from me dared lift a book for fear of calamity. Between marriages, I've reached such fevers of acquisition that I twice resorted to sleeping on mattresses laid not atop a box spring but on a pallet of cartons, the only way to disguise the excess without resorting to storage. Moving the books off-site would have been tantamount to putting my arms and legs in hock.

The work I've chosen bears a suspicious resemblance to the rooms themselves. My prose is a magpie's. Perhaps anyone's writing is ultimately bricolage, a welter of borrowings. But, of the writers I know, I've been the most eager to point out my influences, to spoil the illusion of originality by elucidating my fiction's resemblance to my book collection. I want it both ways, of course. At fifteen, I wished to be like Michael, who drew admirers into a bookstore that he seemed to be exhibiting almost grudgingly, as a private museum of his interests. My rooms might have been armor, a disguise or beard, but I wanted millions of admirers to peek inside and see me there, and when they did I wished for them to revere and pity me at once. The contradiction in this wish tormented me, so I ignored it. Then I became a writer and it began to sustain me.

The Collected Works of Judith Lethem --

(1978-present, blah-blah-blah.)

My mother, because of her verbal brilliance, and her passion for books, was taken by her friends as a writer-to-be. She sometimes spoke of writing, but I doubt that she ever tried. A mother at the age of twenty, and a mother of three by the time she began to die, at the age of thirty-two, she never had much chance. It is impossible to know whether she would have made anything of the chance if she had.

Her gift to me on my fourteenth birthday, the last while she was alive, was a manual typewriter. The summer after her death, when I was fifteen, I wrote a hundred-and-twenty-five-page "novel" with the typewriter, mostly on torn-out blue-lined notebook paper. In that same year, I typed poems, of a fragmentary and impulsive sort. In truth, they more resembled song lyrics, since I wasn't a reader of poems then. I recall one that spoke of my mother

THE BEARDS.

and the possibility of her writing. "You can't write when you're sick in bed" was its much repeated chorus; I don't remember more. This poem was, on the one hand, sympathetic. I knew, at least consciously, that my mother's illness was involuntary. So I offered forgiveness: she couldn't be blamed for not having written. Yet it was also an admonitory poem--admonitory to myself.

Since then, I believe it would be fair to say, I've been in a hurry. Writing is another meditation that's also a frantic compensation. As if wearing headphones, I'm putting some of myself to sleep, rushing to the end of my days: there's a death wish in reducing life to watching one's fingers twitch on the alphabet. I'm as pathetic as that kid watching double features alone, but also as vain. Writing's an aggression on the world of books, one reader's bullying attempt to make himself known to others like him. My heroes Greene, Dick, and Highsmith left many dozens of novels; I'm on pace to write, at best, ten or twelve of the things. Still, I'm building my shelf. Like the comedian Steven Wright, who said, "I have a large seashell collection, which I keep scattered on beaches around the world," my teen-age room is still expanding, like the universe itself. If writing's a beard on loss, then, like some character drawn by Dr. Seuss, I live in my own beard.

Really, what's one supposed to say when the mask comes off? Is there an etiquette I'm breaking with? John Lennon recorded a song, for his first album after the breakup of the Beatles (what a grand beard that was, art and companionship blended together, and the worshipping world at his feet!), called "My Mummy's Dead." I suppose this is my version of that song. I sing it now in order to quit singing it. Mine has been a paltry beard, anyway, the peach-fuzzy kind a fifteen-year-old grows, so you still see the childish face beneath. Each of my novels, antic as they sometimes are, is fuelled by loss. I find myself speaking about my mother's death everywhere I go in this world.

Someone once said that every good poem's true subject is death, yet to write more than one poem you'd better find a way to forget you heard that. If life itself is, after all, only a beard for death, why couldn't the reverse be true as well?