

## **WRINGING BLOOD NEW SELECTED LONG POEMS**

Two staff members were at the front desk, when last he'd seen them, out of sight now and too far away to hear the crooning. Junior had been waiting at the doors when the library opened, and thus far he'd encountered no other patrons..Embarrassed, Kathleen stopped singing, but to the other woman, Nolly said, "It is a lovely voice, isn't it? Haunting, I think." "When you didn't answer the doorbell, man, I just knew what must have happened," Chicane told Junior..He surprised himself by sitting up in bed and shouting, "Shut up, shut up, shut up!" "it totally destroyed four towns, as if they were hit by atom bombs, tore up parts of six more towns, destroyed fifteen thousand homes. That's just the homes. This thing was black, huge and black and hideous, with continuous lightning snapping through it, and a roar, they said, like a hundred thunderstorms booming all at once."..Shortly before three o'clock, Thursday afternoon, in a state of agitation, Barty raced into the kitchen, where Agnes was baking buttermilk-raisin pies. Holding Red Planet open to pages 104 and 105, he complained urgently that the library copy was defective. "There's twisty spots in the print, twisty-funny letters, so you can't just exactly read all the words. Can we buy our own copy, go out and buy one right now?" "Not only coal miners. Old as you are in some ways, you're still too young for me to explain. I will someday." "Besides, I still live by my vows as much as possible, though I've had the longest continuing dispensation on record." A smile on that cracked countenance could be touching, but an ironic look now worked less well; it gave Kathleen a chill. "Vanity is a sin I've more easily been able to avoid than some others."..Daylight had retreated from the windows. Winter night, wound in scarfs of fog, like a leprous mendicant, rattled out a breath as though begging their attention beyond the glass..In the late-afternoon light, on this Christmas Eve, Barty was no ghost, no illusion..Two high-quality deadbolt locks. Sufficient protection against the average intruder, but inadequate to keep out a self-improved man with channeled anger..Junior forgot all about seduction. "And she--what?--She adopted her sister's baby?"..Junior poured half the vodka over the corpse, splashed some around other parts of the kitchen, and spilled the last on the cook top, where it trickled toward the active burner. This was not an ideal accelerant, not as effective as gasoline, but by the time he threw the bottle aside, the spirits found the flame..Arriving home, he hesitated to open the door. He expected to find Vanadium inside.."You're one to talk," Celestina said. "Who was it told us they were sitting hand in hand on the front-porch swing."..Although he found Magusson's face sufficiently disturbing that he avoided looking at it more than necessary, and though Magusson's bulging eyes were so moist with bitterness and with need that they inspired nightmares, Junior shifted his gaze from his half-numb hands to his attorney. "Luck? I lost my wife. And my unborn baby."..their work, tears were followed by reminiscences that brought a smile and soothed, and hope was always found to be the flower that bloomed from every seed of hopelessness..She was forty-three, so young to have left such a mark upon the world. Yet more than two thousand people attended her funeral service-which was conducted by clergymen of seven denominations-and the subsequent procession to the cemetery was so lengthy that some people had to park a mile away and walk. The mourners streamed across the grassy hills and among the headstones for the longest time, but the presiding minister did not begin the graveside service until all had assembled. None here showed impatience at the delay. Indeed, when the final prayer was said and the casket lowered, the crowd hesitated to depart, lingering in the most unusual way, until Barty realized that like he himself, they half expected a miraculous resurrection and ascension, for among them had so recently walked this one who was without stain.."Love you," Wally said, and Celestina repeated it, and he said, "I'm gonna stand in the hall till I hear you set both locks."..He already had the pistol he had taken from Frieda Bliss's collection, but it didn't come with a sound-suppressor. He was preparing for all contingencies. Focus..At this extreme end of town, no streetlamps lit the pavement. With only moonlight to reveal him, he wasn't likely to be recognized if anyone happened to glance out a window.."Possible complications include cerebral hemorrhage, pulmonary edema, kidney failure, necrosis of the liver, coma-to name a few."..When he was baking, the world seemed to be a less dangerous place. Sometimes, making a cake, he forgot to be afraid..The blue vault above, cloudless now, was the most threatening sky that Edom had ever seen. The air was astonishingly dry so soon after a storm. And still. Hushed. Earthquake weather. Before this momentous day was done, great temblors and five-hundred-foot tidal waves would rock and swamp the coast..He didn't bother to press Vanadium's hand around the weapon. There wasn't going to be a wealth of evidence for the Scientific Investigation Division to sift through, anyway, when the fire was finally put out: just enough charred clues to allow them an easy conclusion..All right, yes, it had tiny hands and tiny feet, rather than hooked talons and cloven..These kids were the same age, yet listening to them was akin to hearing Angel do her charming shtick with an adult who had a lot of patience, a sense of humor, and an awareness of generational ironies..Nevertheless, his sense of violation grew as he paced these now songless rooms, mystified and frustrated. On April 19, the unmanned Surveyor 3, after landing on the lunar surface, began transmitting photos to Earth, and when Junior stepped out of his morning shower, he again heard the eerie singing, which seemed to arise from a place more distant, more alien, than the moon..His first word after mama was papa, which she taught him while showing him pictures of Joey. His third word: pie..Rolling onto her side, fumbling in the dark, Celestina White snared the phone on the third ring. Her hello was also a yawn..For a while, Junior half convinced himself that the quarter in his cheeseburger, in December '65, was a meaningless coincidence, unrelated to Vanadium. His short tour of the kitchen, in search of the perpetrator, had given him reason to believe the diner's sanitary standards were inadequate. Recalling the greasy men on that culinary death squad, he knew that he'd been fortunate not to discover a dead rodent spread-eagle on the melted cheese, or an old sock..The sight of her sister's blood and the persistence of the flow made Celestina weak with apprehension. She was afraid she had done the wrong thing by delaying hospitalization..Maria arrived early, expecting to assist with final details in the kitchen. Though

honored to be a guest, she wasn't able to stand by with a glass of wine while preparations remained to be made..She felt that she had failed her sister. She didn't know what more she could have done, but if she'd been wiser and more insightful and more attentive, surely this terrible loss would not have come to pass. "Cancer," he said, because that was more tragic and far less suspicious than a fall from a fire tower..Mustering all her hostess skills, Agnes gradually turned the conversation from disastrous explosions to Fourth of July fireworks, and then to reminiscences of summer evenings when she, Joey, Edom, and Jacob..She was astonished and moved. "I'm a hopeless throwback to the nineteenth century. How could you realize what's been on my mind?" "Couldn't carry these three ladies," he said. "Svelte as they are, they still weigh more than a backpack." He wanted an explanation, but no one could give him the one that he needed, because nobody but he himself knew the significance and symbolism of the quarter..Halted by the unmistakable meaning of the expressions on these women's faces, Paul was grateful that Nellie was briefly stricken mute. He didn't believe he had the strength to receive the news that she had tried to deliver..With a nervous twitch of his avian head and a wary frown, the watcher broke eye contact and slipped into the chattering crowd, lost as quickly as a slender sandpiper skittering among a herd of plump seagulls..He might not have this future-living thing down perfectly, but he was absolutely terrific at anger..Focus. Get Ichabod all the way inside. Act now, think later. No, no, proper focus requires an understanding of the need to ize: scrutinize, analyze, and prioritize. Get the bitch, get the bitch! Slow deep breaths. Channel the beautiful rage. A fully evolved man is self-controlled and calm. Move, move, move! "Sure. There's lots of places where he didn't get shot, but there's places where he got shot and died, too." "I'd give anything if it hadn't happened," he said earnestly. And now a tortured note wrung wet emotion from his voice "I only wish it had been me who died." The cord wasn't long enough to allow Celestina to take the telephone handset with her, so she put it down on the nightstand, beside the lamp..In the kitchen, Barty sat at the table, and Paul's heart pinched at the sight of the boy in padded eyepatches..Perched on a chair with two plump bed pillows to boost her, Angel extracted one crisp strip from her club sandwich and asked Tom, "Where's bacon come from?" He repressed the scream, however, because he sensed that if he gave voice to it, he wouldn't be able to silence himself for a long long time..He found it difficult to make a painful personal revelation sound sincere when delivered in a shout, but he managed well enough to bring a shine of tears to her eyes: "Part of my left foot was shot off in this upcountry sweep we did." As the last of the flan was served and Maria's girls took their seats once more, Barty blinked at the candles and said, "Gone now," even though the tiny spectrums still shimmered in the cut crystal. He turned his full attention to the flan with such enthusiasm that his mother soon stopped puzzling over rainbows..EARLY CHRISTMAS EVE, gallery brochure in hand, Junior returned to his apartment, puzzling over mysteries that had nothing to do with guiding stars and virgin births..Junior took one of the boxed guns, a 9-mm semiautomatic. Months would probably pass before she noticed the pistol missing from the back of her closet, and by then she wouldn't know who had taken it.. "I'm no hero," Paul insisted. "I just got your mom out of there in the process of saving myself." "Not really. I love you, Mommy." He yawned and dropped into sleep with a quickness that always amazed her. And then everything changed in one stunning moment. Changed profoundly and forever..Later, at home in bed, after Nolly proved the value of oysters, he and Kathleen lay holding hands. Following a companionable silence, he said, "It's a mystery." A table candle glowed in an amber glass. To Nolly, in this glimmering light, Kathleen's face was more radiant than the flame..Perhaps his sister intuited what Edom was about to say, because she didn't let him get started..Tossing the knave onto the table, Agnes said, "Barty doesn't seem too impressed with this devil." At home, after phoning her folks, Celestina made a ham sandwich. She ate a quarter of it. Then two bites of a chocolate croissant. One spoonful of butter pecan ice cream. Everything was without taste, more bland than Phimie's hospital food, and it cloyed in her throat..Wonderful. Oh, perfect. So Neddy, a friend of Celestina's, knew that Junior, reputed to be a vicious sadist, had attended this reception under a false name. If Junior really was a sleazy pervert of such rococo tastes that he would be shunned even by the scum of the world, even by the deranged mutant offspring of a self-breeding hermaphrodite, then surely he was capable of murder, too..madness or a brilliant deductive insight: Naomi, the hateful bitch, she poisoned me!.He was a virile young man, desired by many, and life was short. Poor Naomi, her lovely face and her look of shock still fresh in his memory, was a constant reminder of how suddenly the end could come. No one was guaranteed tomorrow. Seize the day..With his refreshed drink, studying Celestina's photograph in the brochure, Junior returned to the living room. She was as stunning as her sister, but unlike her poor sister, she wasn't dead and was, therefore, an appealing prospect for romance. From her, he must learn whatever she knew that might help him in the Bartholomew hunt, without alerting her to his motive. At the same time, there was no reason that they couldn't have a fling, a love affair, even a serious future together..After a long time the door opened and several men came in. He could do nothing against them as they gagged him and bound his arms behind him. "Now you won't weave charms nor speak spells, young'un," said a broad, strong man with a furrowed face, "but you can nod your head well enough, right? They sent you here as a dowser. If you're a good dowser you'll feed well and sleep easy. Cinnabar, that's what you're to nod for. The King's wizard says it's still here somewhere about these old mines. And he wants it. So it's best for us that we find it. Now I'll walk you out. It's like I'm the water finder and you're my wand, see? You lead on. And if you want to go this way or that way you dip your head, so. And when you know there's ore underfoot, you stamp on the place, so. Now that's the bargain, right? And if you play fair I will." The water shut off, and Junior heard the ratcheting noise of a paper-towel dispenser..Professional magic was not a field in which many Negroes could find their way to success. Obadiah was one of a rare brotherhood..St. Mary's social workers did not arrive with dawn, so Celestina was given the privacy of one of their offices, where the wet face of the morning pressed blurrily at the windows, and where she phoned her parents with the terrible news. From here, too, she arranged with a mortician to collect Phimie's body from the cold-storage locker in the hospital morgue, embalm

it, and have it flown home to Oregon..Leavening his tortured voice as best he could with shock and hurt, as though deeply wounded by the need to speak these words, Junior Cain said, "You ... you think I killed her, don't you? That's crazy."The hall was deserted. Then a woman came out of one of the offices and walked toward the gallery, without glancing at him..His entire body throbbled from his neck to the tips of his nine toes. His legs were the worst, filled with hot twisting agony..Junior tipped his head back and gazed up toward the section of broken-out railing along the high observation deck..Less cautious than the typical accountant, perhaps mellow in this season of peace, Prosser opened the door without hesitation..Now Junior threw back the covers and sprang out of bed. In double briefs, he restlessly roamed the hotel room..No doubt thinking about the land of the big bugs, into which she had pushed Enoch Cain, which was exactly what Barty had suddenly thought about, Angel said, "Honey, this is amazing, it's wonderful, but you've got to be careful."..She might have attributed his problem to eyestrain from all the reading he'd done during the past few days. She might have put drops in his eyes, told him to leave the books alone for a while, and sent him into the backyard to play. She might have counseled herself not to be one of those alarmist mothers who detected pneumonia in every sniffle, a brain tumor behind every headache..He doubted the Studebaker would ever be found, but successful men were, without exception, those who paid attention to detail..Having been an object of Thomas Vanadium's fixation, Junior felt fortunate to have survived. He shuddered..Grace and Celestina fell at once into the rhythms of kitchen work, not only brewing the coffee, but also helping Agnes with the pies..At 3:22 in the morning, December 13, following a busy day of conducting ghost research, seeking Bartholomews in a telephone book, and working on his needlepoint, Junior awakened to singing. A single voice. No instrumental accompaniment. A woman..Kneeling at her side, Junior placed the decorative pillow over her lovely face and pressed down firmly while Frank Sinatra finished "Hello, Young Lovers," and sang perhaps half of "All or Nothing at All." Victoria never regained consciousness, never had a chance to struggle..WHILE THE SLATS of ash-gray light slowly lost their meager luster, and sable shadows metastasized in sinister profusion, the sentinel silence remained unbroken between Junior Cain and the birthmarked man..The galerieur's icy demeanor thawed marginally at this proof of taste and financial resources. He either smiled or grimaced at a vague but unpleasant smell-hard to tell which-and identified himself as the owner, Maxim Coquin.."Peach, raisin, walnut pies," Agnes said, "with regular bottom crust and a chocolate-crackle top crust."..He was wrong about this. On the final Friday of every month, in sunshine and in rain, Junior routinely took a walking tour of the six galleries that were his very favorites, browsing leisurely in each and chatting up the galerieurs, with a one-o'clock break for lunch at the St. Francis Hotel. This was a tradition with him, and invariably at the end of each such day, he felt wonderfully cozy..Furious, he squeezed off two shots. Passing the living-room archway, Tom saw Jacob in the armchair, under the reading lamp, slumped as if asleep over the book. His crimson bib confirmed that he wasn't just sleeping..During the first months, the journeys were eight or ten miles: along the shoreline north and south of Bright Beach, and inland to the desert beyond the hills. He left home and returned the same day..Angel, as if in God's own hands, stared with round-eyed wonder at the physician.."If he gets back within the next hour, better ring me at his place so I can scoot."..Jacob scared people. He was 'Edom's identical twin, with Edom's boyish and pleasant face, as soft-spoken as Edom, well barbered and neatly groomed. Nevertheless, on the same mission of mercy as Edom, Jacob would leave the pie recipients in a state of deep uneasiness if not outright terror. In his wake, they would bar the doors, load guns if they owned any, and lay sleepless for a night or two..For a while, leaning forward in his chair and staring at the floor with an intensity and an expression that could not have been inspired by the insipid vinyl tiles, Tom mulled over what she'd told him. Then: "The connection is there, but it's still not entirely clear to me. So he took perverse pleasure in raping her with her father's sermon as accompaniment . . . and maybe without his realizing it, the reverend's message got deep inside his head. I wouldn't think our cowardly wife killer has the capacity for guilt ... although maybe your dad worked a sort of miracle and planted that very seed."..He'd never had a chance to read this to Perri or to benefit from her opinion. Now, as he scanned the lines of his calligraphic handwriting, his words seemed foolish, inappropriate, confused..On Tuesday, January 2, Junior met with the drug dealer who had introduced him to Google, the document forger, and he arranged to purchase a 9-mm handgun with custom-machined silencer..No mystery here. No reason to leap to the ceiling and cling upside down like a frightened cartoon cat.."Even when I was a young boy," Tom continued, "the world felt a lot different to me from the way it looked to other people. I don't mean I was smarter. I've got maybe a little better than average IQ, but nothing I could brag about. Flunked geography twice and history once. No one would ever confuse me and Einstein. It's just, I felt ... such complexity and mystery that other people didn't appreciate, such layered beauty, layers upon layers like phyllo pastry, each new layer more amazing than the last. I can't explain it to you without sounding like a holy fool, but even as a boy, I wanted to serve the God who had created so much wonder, regardless of how strange and perhaps even beyond all understanding He might be.".."Fear?" Kathleen asked, more interested in Vanadium's words than in his prestidigitation. "You said you're offering fear to Cain ... as if that was something he would want."..Thanks to his intelligence and his personality, Barty's presence was so great for his age that Agnes tended to think of him as being physically larger and stronger than he actually was. As the scent of grass grew more complex and even more appealing, she saw her son more clearly than she'd seen him in a while: quite small, fatherless yet brave, burdened with a gift that was a blessing but that also made a normal boyhood impossible, forced to grow up at a up faster pace than any child should be required to endure. Barty was achingly delicate, so vulnerable that when Agnes looked at him, she felt a little of the awful sense of helplessness that burdened Edom and Jacob..The big trees on Vanadium's property also stood bare, allowing a relatively unobstructed view of the house. The back of the residence as dark, but a soft light warmed two windows at the front..Celestina indicated to Tom that he should sit at the head of the table, facing Agnes at the foot. As Wally lowered himself into

the empty chair to Tom's left, Celestina picked up two items from the sideboard and put them in front of Tom, before sitting to his right. In the three years since Perri's death, he had walked thousands of miles. He hadn't kept a record of the cumulative distance, because he wasn't trying to get into Guinness or to prove anything. Spinning off the stool, he had also spun out of control. Second by second, twin storms of anger and fear whirled stronger within him. "Thanks, Sparky, but not tonight. I'm thinking of taking a look around downstairs if old Nine Toes isn't stuck at home tonight with a case of paralytic bladder." In the sermon that brought him a moment of fame that he'd found more uncomfortable than not, Daddy had used the life of Bartholomew to illustrate his point that every day in every life is of the most profound importance. Bartholomew is arguably the most obscure of the twelve disciples. Some would say Lebbeaus is less known, some might even point to Thomas the doubter. But Bartholomew certainly casts a shadow far shorter than those of Peter, Matthew, James, John, and Philip. Daddy's purpose in proclaiming Bartholomew the most obscure of the twelve was then to imagine in vivid detail how that apostle's actions, seemingly of little consequence at the time, had resonated down through history, through hundreds of millions of lives—and then to assert that the life of each chambermaid listening to this sermon, the life of each car mechanic, each teacher, each truck driver, each waitress, each doctor, each janitor, was as important as the resonant life of Bartholomew, although each dwelt beyond the lamp of fame and labored without the applause of multitudes. "I know Edom and Jacob have been a burden," said Vinnie, "you having to be responsible for them." The hospital room was softly lighted, and shadows roosted on all sides like a flock of slumbering birds. Frowning, Agnes said, "Yes, those stories. Sweetie, when Uncle Edom and Uncle Jacob go on about big storms blowing people away and explosions blowing people up ... that's not what life's about." The two men introduced themselves. The physician was Dr. Jim Parkhurst. His manner was easy and affable, and his soothing voice, either by nature or by calculation, was as healing as balm. In her campaign to keep her weight gain to a minimum, anorexia was her ally. She learned to find pleasure in hunger pangs. Filled with the songs of swallows that evidently preferred these precincts to the more famous address of San Juan Capistrano, this mild March morning was perfect for pie deliveries. Agnes and Grace had produced a bakery's worth of glorious vanilla-almond pies and coffee toffee pies. "I don't like the old crazy doctor," she said, still drawing. "I wish it was about bunnies on vacation—or maybe a toad learns to drive a car and has adventures." Antihypertensive drugs were administered intravenously, and Phimie was confined to bed, attached to a heart monitor. "I'm Sister Josephina." She slipped Celestina's purse off her shoulder—"You can trust this with me"—Junior kept a file on each man, nevertheless, in case instinct later told him that one of them was, in fact, his mortal enemy. He could have killed all of them, just to be safe, but a multitude of dead Bartholomeus, even spread over several jurisdictions, would sooner or later attract too much police attention. Unerringly, in the darkness, he found her face with both hands. Smoothed her brow. Traced her eyes with fingertips. Her nose, her lips. Her cheeks. Celestina hardly knew Paul, and although he'd saved her mother's life, his offer raised a look of doubt from her. "I was never Cary Grant, to begin with," said Vanadium, still ceaselessly rolling the quarter across his fingers, "so I had no big emotional investment in my appearance. Cosmetic surgery would have added another year of recuperation time, probably much longer, and I was anxious to get after Cain. Seemed to me this mug of mine might be just the thing to scare him into an incriminating mistake, even a confession." On the drive home, Junior dropped the knife down a storm drain in Larkspur. He tossed the gloves in a Dumpster in Corte Madera. When together in Agnes's company, Edom and Jacob were brothers, comfortable with each other. But together, just the two, no Agnes, they were more awkward than strangers, because strangers had no shared history to overcome. So runs the water away. The nurse raised her eyes from Agnes to this other person. "Yes a chip of ice would be all right." WHEN DR. JIM PARKHURST made his evening rounds, Junior didn't continue to feign sleep but asked earnest questions to which he knew most of the answers, having eavesdropped on the conversation between the physician and Detective Vanadium. One of the gifts of power is to know power. Wizard knows wizard, unless the concealment is very skillful. And the boy had no skills at all except in boat-building, of which he was a promising scholar by the age of twelve. About that time the midwife who had helped his mother at his birth came by and said to his parents, "Let Otter come to me in the evenings after work. He should learn the songs and be prepared for his naming day." Paul Damascus had gotten numerous invitations to dinner. No one thought that he should be alone on this difficult night. AS MEANINGFUL AS Jacob's death had been within the small world of his family, Agnes Lampion never lost sight of the fact that there were more resonant deaths in the larger world before 1968 ended and the Year of the Rooster followed. On the fourth of April, James Earl Ray gunned down Martin Luther King on a motel balcony in Memphis, but the assassin's hopes were foiled when, because of this murder, freedom grew more vigorously from the richness of a martyr's blood. On June 1, Helen Keller died peacefully at eighty-seven. Blind and deaf since early childhood, mute until her adolescence, Miss Keller led a life of astonishing accomplishment; she learned to speak, to ride horses, to waltz; she graduated cum laude from Radcliffe, an inspiration to millions and a testament to the potential in even the most blighted life. On June 5, Senator Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated in the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. Unknown numbers died when Soviet tanks invaded Czechoslovakia, and hundreds of thousands perished in the final days of the Cultural Revolution in China, many eaten in acts of cannibalism sanctioned by Chairman Mao as acceptable political action. John Steinbeck, novelist, and Tallulah Bankhead, actress, came to the end of their journeys in this world, if not yet in all others. But James Lovell, William Anders, and Frank Borman—the first men to orbit the moon—traveled 250,000 miles into space, and all returned alive. Even Barty seemed to be attentive, but Angel happily applied crayons to a coloring book and hummed softly to herself. Dr. Daines spoke with Celestina in the corridor, outside the door to 724. Some of the passing nurses were nuns in wimples and full-length habits, drifting like spirits along the hallway. Dinner was available in the lounge. Junior enjoyed a superb filet mignon with

a split of fine Cabernet Sauvignon..He decided that he must never again kill so impetuously. Never. In fact, he vowed never again to kill at all, except in self-defense. Soon he would be rich-with much to lose if he was caught. Homicide was a marvelous adventure; sadly, however, it was an entertainment that he could no longer afford..The street in front of the gallery was as flooded by a sea of fog as the alleyway at the back. The headlights of passing traffic probed the gloom like beams from deep-salvage submersibles at work on the ocean floor..More good American music. The Supremes were Negroes, sure, but Junior was not a bigot. Indeed, he had once made passionate love to a Negro girl..Maria was hand-repairing some of Joey's clothes, which Agnes had meticulously damaged earlier in the day..Vanadium sat in the chair, watching. With the perfect control of a sleight-of-hand artist, he turned a quarter end-over-end across the knuckles of his right hand, palmed it with his thumb, caused it to reappear at his little finger, and rolled it across his knuckles again, ceaselessly..Bartholomew was an uncommon name, however, and logic suggested that if the baby was now called Bartholomew, he'd been named for his adoptive dad. Therefore, a search of the listings might be fruitful..Still relishing her little pretense of rejection, Victoria did not touch the rose. "What kind of woman do you think I am?".a deeply troubled John Wayne while the delightful David Niven floated along overhead in a basket suspended from a huge, colorful hot-air balloon..The poster announced an upcoming show, titled "This Momentous Day," by the young artist calling herself Celestina White. Dates for the exhibition were Friday, January 12, through Saturday, January 27..There were effective actions and ineffective actions, socially acceptable and unacceptable behavior, wise and stupid decisions that could be made. But if you wanted to achieve maximum self-realization, you had to understand that any choice you made in life was entirely value neutral. Morality was a primitive concept, useful in earlier stages of societal evolution, perhaps, but without relevance in the modern age..Sheena Hackachak, at forty-four, was more beautiful than any current movie star. She looked twenty years younger than her true age, and she so resembled her late daughter that Junior felt a rush of erotic nostalgia at the sight of her..This back blow wasn't just sport, either, but more like Vietnam as lie sometimes told women that he remembered it. As though pitched by a grenade blast, Junior went from his feet to the floor with chin-rapping impact, teeth guillotining together so hard that he would have severed his tongue if it had been between them.

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