Bleeding Through: Text and Contexts

1. *Bleeding Through*

The original novella from the 2003 first edition

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A very old lady ambles down a hill. A neighbor tells you that she may have murdered her second husband. You search for clues on her face, but it is unlined, as if she had kept it in storage. Molly is strangely cheerful in her dotage. If an event annoys her, she mentally deletes it. She has a genius for survival, that much is certain. She has outlived at least two husbands, along with her garment business downtown; she still opens for business after sixty years. You notice Molly's beaded purse. She has stored a pearl brooch inside, and a delicate gold chain, knotted up.

'I just don't look good in jewelry,' she explains.

While she smiles in your direction, she seems to be looking away at the same time. Molly is so used to practising an absent-minded guile, her eyes operate without her, like a ceiling fan running in an empty room. If she murdered her second husband, that would have been at least twenty-five years ago, in 1961. Of course, there is also a rumor that her husband hung himself up in her attic.

A pale hum rises from the Hollywood Freeway, three blocks below, down the hill. But once the wind shifts, it seems to blow the freeway north. Its hum grows louder, as it bounces off the canyon rim near Elysian Park. Directly overhead, the sky looks surprisingly clear, but that must be an illusion. Rumor has it that there is a bubble of oxygen here, because old folks go on forever. The breeze certainly is remarkably cool, and coming from the west. Somehow, it arrives from the ocean fifteen miles away. The hill must be faintly higher than the rest of the Basin, enough for a whisper of relief.

Looking in all directions, boxing the compass, dozens of houses have been torn down. But most of this neighborhood, Angelino Heights, is surprisingly intact; surely an accident, six square blocks sealed off in a double horseshoe. Some city maps even erase some of its side streets. But most of all, Angelino Heights has evolved into a hub of misinformation. You can count on facts that start here to get lost by the third person they reach.

By that time the rumors could raise the dead. They turn very ripe, ambient, even a trifle gothic. That is, if Angelino Heights could be called gothic. It certainly has claimed to be biblical. In the Teens, someone planted carob trees, after a trip to the Holy Land – St. John's bread, like in the Bible. They leave a vinegar sweetness on the ground. And a widower named Edgar suffered through a biblical revelation while restoring his Craftsman house. It wasn't voices, but something subtler when he was working on the roof.

Edgar gradually came to believe that he was not simply sanding down the alligator, and pouring a new foundation. He was in fact rebuilding the Holy City, for something like a second Temple. One day he simply changed his name from Ed to Ezra. He started memorizing Nehemiah in the Bible, on how to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. He began to study the age of thousand-year-old redwood trees that in 1908 provided the four-by-fours for the foundation of his house. The numerology of fours is all over the Bible. He drilled a hole into the redwood, to feed electric cables; but miraculously, every bit broke. The redwood had turned to stone, like Nehemiah's walls of Jerusalem.

But Ed was definitely not consoled. The weight of being Ezra made him short of breath. He nearly slid off the roof hyperventilating. His hands swelled up with rheumatism, and he'd never been sick a day in his life. He gave bastard testimony, but no one was insulted or relieved to hear it.

Finally, Ezra settled in for the duration. He poured a new Western wall. He uncovered dead space hidden behind the kitchen, with papers left by a suspiciously unnamed group of people, mostly in very faint pencil, so no-one uninitiated could read them. Ezra also took endless coffee breaks. He found that caffeine helped his mind wander. He remembered

dancing with his wife at dancehalls near downtown. His shoulders were still graceful. She was as light as a ghost even back then.

Molly used to visit and let Ezra serve her breakfast. Then she'd fold her hands, and face him down with a glazed look for as long as twenty minutes at a time, while he quoted this and that, mostly from Nehemiah. No matter how much his mind wandered, she answered him by smiling comfortably, as if she were waiting for him to decide what suit he wanted to order. She treated Ed like a customer, and it was a comfort to him.

Of course, it is well known among biblical scholars that the memoirs of Nehemiah are extremely unreliable. There is no telling how many storytellers and epochs are buried inside it, particularly since it is in the first person, most unusual in the Bible. I pointed that out to Ed or Ezra one day, and he agreed. Then he nodded gravely, as if I had stumbled onto a very deep truth, something only descendants of Aaron should be allowed to utter.

Men of Judah, he reminded me, are beginning to marry the women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. Half their children now speak the language of Ashdod, or even of other peoples; but not of Judah. Do not give your daughters to their sons, he warned me further, like the sons of Joiada, son of Eliashib, the high priest, son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite – all driven away.

I was trying to figure out if this was some kind of covert anti-Semitism, but finally gave up. Sometimes, Ezra's eyes were so wide open, I felt I could see into the back of his head. So I asked him the question that had been gnawing at me for months now.

'You and Molly are old friends?'

'The oldest,' he said with a twinkle.

'You even knew her second husband.'

'Walt.'

'Where would he fit in the memoirs of Nehemiah, in the rebuilding of Jerusalem?'

I sensed my sarcasm. Maybe poor Ed sensed it too. I was momentarily heart-struck.

'Walt,' he said, 'was too organized for his own good. I meant to tell him that.'

'Where did Walt go?'

'Walt went the way he lived.'

'Which was?'

Omigod, I'd fallen into the trap.

'Too organized,' Ed/Ezra answered, having a laugh.

'Do you think the rumors are true?'

'About me?'

'No, that Walt disappeared in a mysterious way. There are rumors that he was perhaps murdered.'

'Or met a violent end. Probably, but he left with money for three, like the pharaohs of Egypt.'

'So he left alive, not murdered.'

'No, I couldn't say that for sure. Maybe you should ask Molly?'

'How can I do that?'

'True enough,' he agreed. 'I should have been there to console her back then. She wasn't altogether – how do you say? – she grew much prettier the older she got.'

'The last year she was around Walt, before he left with money for three, was she getting prettier?'

'That was a good period in the business for her, better than even I expected.'

So I left Ed to his regrets. The conversations with the other older folks went pretty much the same way, without the biblical qualities, much clearer, to the point, but the same way. Nevertheless, over the next eight months, I gathered what I could to assemble a story about Molly. There was definitely a story there, but what rhythm captured the best of it – that there were vast absences, and that these excited me much more than the facts themselves? There seemed no way to prove for or against the death of the dangerously organized Walt. The newspapers do not cover every corpse that shows up on the beach, or in a dump site near the train yards above downtown. And if a man simply vanished without a trace, in an organized way, there would be no newspapers there at all.

Walt probably did not have a funeral. He simply was lifted by an archangel, and taken out to sea. He left a daughter, Molly's stepdaughter, who looked gloomy and evasive every time I mentioned her father.

The stepdaughter, Nancy, was dutiful to Molly, as if she owed her a good day's work, at least until Molly turned senile. Then Nancy could attach her property. But Molly simply drifted along, pretending to forget her debtors, leaving the rent eternally low for the Mexican family downstairs. I've never seen a face so openly canny, but seemingly unaware of who was looking at her, or why.

As a result, I couldn't trust any of her stories. Not that her facts were wrong. Or that she didn't make an effort. Before each story, she would inhale deeply, to bring oxygen into her brain cells. Then she'd fog out dozens of key facts. Whenever I noticed, she would blow me off, smiling, and say, 'So I lose a few years.' Certainly, she lost the end of World War I – 1918 became 1922 instantly. Harding never died. For sixty years, she's covered up something very private about Mr. Julian, the oil swindler who bilked the city for millions in 1926; possibly his shirt size. Molly's loyalty to good customers was eternal. The Depression was 'mostly a problem of inventory.' Or: 'After Roosevelt was elected, they bombed Pearl Harbor.'

But there were seven memories in the years from 1920 to 1986 that were luminously detailed. Each was no longer than a day in length, but the day funneled into other material, eventually consumed her friends, her sister, her husbands. That night, I dreamed that I was given a mental function that could reverse the events of my life, like a switch on a toy train; or a function in a software program. I could shuffle the events simply by pulling the lever. That would fire up an engine made of flesh that gave me a small window of choice over how my so-called fate might work. In my dream, this felt like the illnesses that dogged many of the people closest to me, my anguish about failing to catch them as they were dying. In my dream, any of these events could not so much be reversed as re-edited for a different effect. The surprise events were like changes in fonts, or raw footage from a film.

The footage could be shot inside my head in high or low key, more or less contrasted. It was like deciding on your skin color. At the same time, the edited versions could feel like a pot cooking on the stove; but inside my five senses. I could make the events taste more like the dinner I had last night. Or make it blow like four AM in Los Angeles.

As I gradually felt my eyes needing to open, I turned toward my research on Molly's life, as if I could edit her sensations into a story that was symphonic in some way, or contrapuntal. I started to imagine scenes before her husband died as if from a camera, in quick time, or as photographs. I could write paragraphs about his last conversations with Molly – or someone else – but the words would have no sense of sight, as if I were moving Walt around by tapping the walls with a stick. I could gather data for Molly's story, and embed it like bots under the skin: newspaper clippings, historical photographs, and patches of interviews. Then I could assemble my assets into a vast database, for a search engine that could be selected according to the senses.

I felt a chill, as if I couldn't breathe properly. I woke up thinking my symptoms were partly about grief, as if I were watching my wife die slowly again, or was unable to comfort my family. My wife's breath had become so halted that she was preternatural. She was no longer able to eat or drink, because the cancer remained as the only part of her body that could be fed. She had ceased as an organism, and was only able to look up, and speak lovingly, but in denial, as if she were asking you to let her sculpt the last thought that she wanted to carry into oblivion.

That last thought is wafer-thin, and can be stored inside the sleeve of her small photo-album, a diary for a trip – if oblivion involves travel. Inside my head, not quite awake, I also begin editing my final thought. It too is wafer-thin, like a membrane, or a pig's ear. However, I choose my final thought badly, edit with the wrong software. My words are corrupted from third to first person, like Nehemiah's memoirs, or Molly losing a few years. In my dying breath, I was rude. Ghosts around the bed tried to be gracious, but looked at each other in a certain way.

So in my sleep I finally got a sense of how Edgar and Molly were feeling. They had to select the final thoughts that could be worn comfortably into oblivion. To get just the right angle, they tried every medium that they knew. And inside Angelino Heights, there were dozens to choose from, too many. Media extended like cilia from the body; they spread very thin, like the weather or micro-organisms, or wind patterns. They made forgetting simple, but a bit too dispersed, as simple as turning a switch or releasing a gas.

The reasons for all these force fields in Angelino Heights was obvious enough, nothing magical about that. The hill faces east toward an orbit of perhaps three square miles. Inside those three miles, under the skyline dropped by mistake into downtown ten years ago, more people have been murdered in classic Hollywood crime films than anywhere else on earth. Also inside the same three square miles, Angelino Heights faces an extreme of urban erasure. Hundreds of buildings gone: that could just as easily have been caused by carpet bombing, or a volcano erupting in the central business district.

To defend itself against the elements, Angelino Heights has turned to foster care. It takes in wounded buildings. More than a dozen have been delivered by truck from old neighborhoods undergoing wholesale bulldozing.

All these erasures leave absences. These absences, in turn, generate desire (as I'll explain later): cinematic misremembering, orphaned buildings and fake skylines – all crammed inside six streets that haven't changed physically since 1925. Together, they leave Angelino Heights mildly haunted, like a sour fragrance, or an insinuating ocean breeze from fifteen miles away. Many neighborhoods in LA are mildly haunted in this way – nothing very gothic really, except in the movies, where handheld cameras chase victims gunned down in slow-motion.

A truck pulls up suddenly in front of the house. My urban paranoia takes over. Thieves were coming to empty my place. But it was only the newspaper delivery at five AM. Then the light began to collect before dawn. I sat up, stared at the built-ins outlining the living room. In 1908, a carpenter would have been paid two dollars a day to install the woodwork. You showed him the picture in a pattern book, and he built it for you in less than a week. It was the era of pails of beer and sheet music.

But what does the standard of living before World War I mean to us today? Clearly, since the mid-Seventies we have been drifting in that dismal direction. We are leaving the century backwards, toward poverty as it was in 1908, toward a hierarchy just as ruthless. No wonder people want to live inside buildings with phantoms from that era, to help pre-

pare their final thoughts for what Molly's sister, Nettie the Communist, used to call the big sendoff.

But for me this morning, the sendoff was still how to turn Molly's act of murder into a story. If it was murder, that is, if her second husband was actually run over by a milk truck in 1961; or eviscerated in Molly's kitchen, where he wouldn't stain the good furniture. Perhaps he jumped off City Hall, featured so prominently in LA films. There were certainly no traces of him now, in 1986. Only his absence was present; or in Molly's words, the way he wore out the lining of his sports jackets. Walt apparently never quite fit into human clothing. The shoulders usually hung on him as if he were part horse; so different from Molly's first husband, smiling Jack the 'sporting man.' Jack was always tailored, no matter whom he slept with, or how much he drank.

I try to visualize Molly arriving at the Santa Fe station in Los Angeles in 1920 or 1919, after the war. Under the glare of a much fiercer desert heat than today, she stared at the dust rising subtly at the train yards on Traction. She could smell ripe oranges on the ground blocks away, in groves to the east.

Molly was twenty-two, but as uncomfortable as a teenager with her body. She tried to evaporate into the background, but always failed. Even her eyes went from hazel to green, to whatever did not match the colors around her. Her hair was thick and almost red, Russian Jewish, and knotted in a bun. She liked to take oatmeal baths, mostly to avoid seeing her scrawny hips in the bath tub. She knew that she was not chaste though, because she liked to feel herself under the covers.

She had just lost her virginity to a roofer back in Indiana, one of the few Jews her age in the small town. He was barrel-chested, rather stout, named Archie because the sound faintly resembled his Hebrew name. Archie initiated what Molly liked to call her theory on burly men. It had something to do with the way a woman's hips and a burly man's thighs met. I took this to mean that Molly did not prefer the missionary position. I tried to put the question to her. She answered, 'The Jews don't seek converts.' I took that for a guarded yes.

Archie had a kind of rented charm. He affected the style of a man of means. Molly's father hated him, called him a bunco artist. Molly told her

father to not call the kettle black. Who specialized in bunco more than her father, the burliest *gonnif* of them all? He clearly inspired her yen for well-dressed thieves. Her father used to sport a mink collar for business trips. He lost her mother's dowry in two years, presumably to buy penny stocks in Filipino oil, but the documents were lost in a flood.

Anyway, Archie nearly proposed to Molly more than once. Finally, he simply skipped town, to join the postwar building boom in Los Angeles. There, a few months later, near Brooklyn Avenue, he slipped off an Eastlake roof and into a bay-fig tree. Molly sensed an opportunity. She wired Archie, who wired back. With her book-keeping degree from business school, she took the train to Los Angeles.

At the station, Archie wobbled on his cane to greet her. His face looked a trifle puffy, like a pastry soaked in brandy. And he was much too attentive. In the distance, Molly saw a short-waisted buxom woman wearing a brocaded georgette, with glycerine ostrich feathers in her hair.

'Who's that plump lady looking us over?' she asked.

'Katy, my second cousin.'

That was her first clue. Biblically speaking, second cousins do not breed cross-eyed idiots. And Katy had the bosom and accoutrements of a newly arrived immigrant – 'a winter storehouse,' Molly would say. But Katy probably could cook for hundreds, would do anything sexually that her lord and master asked, and undoubtedly had enough room to breed like bacteria. 'She's a hunky melon,' Molly told Archie. She laughed, but he only smiled.

What was even worse, Katy began to slim down a little over the next few months. Molly took to her bed, suffered unusually depressing menstrual cycles. Indeed, Archie was more than dividing his time. What to do? 'Should I throw in a subscription to the Saturday Evening Post? Boil up a side of beef? How about an athletic competition? We each lug in ten pounds of our secret lattke recipe?' Molly tried to be lighthearted about her predicament. But she soon noticed – as her first lesson in how to treat burly men – that dapper types like Archie preferred to make their own jokes, and hated her digs. No more needles about 'lord and master over the greenhorns.' And yet, try as she did to rein herself in, Molly felt

her spleen grow larger, her acids build week by week. Stranger still, the more Archie grew distant, the more he slipped his hand down her skirts. But given the tradeoff, Molly decided, twice was enough for now. Once bitten, as the old story goes.

Meanwhile, she had settled into a rooming house near Brooklyn Avenue in Boyle Heights. She worked as a temporary bookkeeper; legend has it, according to her step-daughter, that she actually spent three weeks in the same office as Raymond Chandler, at Dabney Oil. Chandler looked very young, a little soft under the chin, and pretended that he came from England. That was all Molly remembered.

As for Brooklyn Avenue with its famous mix of Jews and Mexican, Japanese and other 'swart' young men, the *hamische* smells of herring barrels and the bins stuffed with soup greens only reminded her of Katy's cooking. She became self-conscious about the narrowness of her hips. The men leered anyway. To be practical, however, Molly started to keep an eye out on Sunday afternoons. Sure Archie was well-spoken, and had a mopey sadness that appealed to her, but he was all but spoken for. The uneducated melon had won.

Molly let herself cry for three days, even missed a day of work. Then she decided that she had to cross First Street to downtown. As she walked far beyond the river, the haze made by the heat was intense. Yet even on the asphalt streets, between the bank buildings on Spring, the topsoil from orchards would sometimes blow tiny grains of dirt into your teeth. There were stories that the hot California sun could fade the color of your eyes.

She refused to take the trolley today, wandered gloomily, sat under a date tree in the Central Park that was not much of a central park. The so-called crimson veil of the desert sunset was so soothing that she fell in love with the early evening in LA, came back four nights in a row to think. There was no point writing to her mother, who was still recovering from what the Cossacks did to her own mother fifty years ago.

Central Park, soon to be called Pershing Square, was a bughouse square with speeches by radicals of every lost cause, with tottering old men, with women's clubs whose members would gather at the benches before going to concerts at the symphony hall across the street. Molly

finessed her way into the group. The music went in one ear and out the other.

She went to a dry-goods store to get some stockings. There a flirtatious young man waved her over. His nails were magnificently trimmed and lacquered. While he said his piece about getting lost in her eyes, which were unfortunately turning that strange green again, he opened a box of European nylons. Like a button loose on his fly, he slid his fingers through the nylons, turning his wrists like a fish. As he stiffened the nylons and made gestures with them, Molly got the point. She even got faintly wet, very faintly.

This was the first sexual kindness from a stranger in weeks now, since Archie had begun to try Katy's full menu. It was then she decided to go into men's clothing. Surely that was a sensible line to get attention, and make one's way.

Then there is one of those gaps. For the duration of a month, something embarrassing brought Molly into the men's apparel business. It may have been a salesman, a reason to be hired. After all, she was on her last legs. One fact is clear: by May 1921, Molly was an expert on male etiquette, on how to make the famous first impression. She had learned the importance of wearing freshly laundered white shirt waists with simple dark suits. The smell of soap was obviously erotic to men.

But perfect diction was the most erotic of all. 'Beneath a ragged coat,' she would say, 'there may beat an honest heart.' That was one of her best opening lines. The tone was crucial. It had to be delivered naively, as if she'd just memorized it from a book. Then she usually followed with, 'A bright intellect,' – shy smile ('like yourself') – 'might even rise above the bright checked suit and yellow tie.'

'But there are better guarantees, of course. Something casual but appropriate.' Then she would 'accidentally' brush shoulders against the customer; pretend that she hadn't felt him; and reach down to gather a bolt of fabric. 'Those guarantees, as you well know,' – a shy, empathetic glance – 'give a man that … first impression.'

Then she would slowly massage the fabric from below. If the customer was still smiling like a puffed toad, she could probe further. He was halfway there. She might ask about his business, his children. Did

he really like the prevailing cut? Did he ever – now be honest – have the slightest need for a cutaway? Anyway, this wool would never do for a costume that … formal. 'I agree with you, an intelligent man does best with a simple business suit.'

In the late afternoons, she would do the books. The owner Ike – for Isaac – was fidgety about her at first. It became quite apparent to her that there were two books. The second worried Ike the most, what he called 'the excise.' Molly was instructed to jointly and severally pay his friends for excise. This excise came from overseas, but was apparently not liquor. It was service added. Ike never told her what excise looked like, whether you wore it, mounted it, swallowed it internally.

Ike would study her face when she did the books, the excise in particular. In time, almost in self-defense, she began to study his back. His eyes tended to be shrouded. He barely slept. Apparently, his wife's ghost used to visit him in the evening, and he would pretend to play a game of five hundred with her.

Excise helped relieve Ike's losses. Hundreds of his customers were invested in it, for value received. Perhaps excise was a kind of barter. She wrote, in rapid business writing: 'I hereby covenant and agree that George T. Hoar be fitted for two cutaways, and one afternoon tweed. We will also sell and convey the following from his haberdasher, an *excise* to be withdrawn from the capital sum of four hundred and eighteen dollars.'

One afternoon, while Molly was about to test out a new erotic sales pitch based on books of etiquette she had memorized earlier that week, the owner literally pulled her aside. This was at least the fourth time he had pulled her in that way. She all but felt his bull neck breathing on her, the way he did when he leaned like drapes over her shoulder to read her columns, the excise. To appease that breathing, she used to leave a few random curls unfastened toward her back. Given her limited means, just a room in Boyle Heights, there was no point taking anyone for granted. Ike (or Isaac in his loneliness) was definitely a man of experience, even if he did spend evenings at home playing cards with his dead wife.

Today, Ike asked Molly to join him on a trip, to leave the showroom, and not worry about the receipts. Time or providence would take care of

them for now. He wanted to drive her somewhere very important, west of the city, bring her one step deeper inside his business. As they left the store, she noticed in a fitting mirror that her eyes had turned that ugly green again.

Ike (more than Isaac) liked to gamble. For some strange reason, he drove Molly up North Broadway, pointed out the Italian card parlors and bookies. Then he began to confess to her, occasionally taking her hand as he worked the clutch. 'I get the point,' Molly explained. 'I learned how to drive back in Indiana.'

Then he told Molly about his swashbuckling days. Molly wondered if half of it were true: At age fifteen – that looked to be about forty years ago – Isaac as Ike was taught to gamble, and to steal fruit in Chinatown. A hasher used to sneak him to "N* Alley" ("Calle de los Negros")[1] after work. It was remnant Mexico: hardpacked earth everywhere, adobes, weary hotels. Hatchet men from the tongs looked straight out of a dime novel. He saw teenage girls sold for $ 200 and up.

Sold for what, rented for what, Molly asked? Isaac explained with euphemisms so vague, Molly could barely decipher a word. Apparently, Ike knew chink whores and Mex whores – an eager young boy. Sadly, Ike found them a vast improvement on his fiancee, a drab third cousin with Prussian Jewish manners, a pouty look of exhaustion on her face. So he angled for a way to cancel the engagement. Finally he told her that he hoped he didn't carry a disease. The girl cried to her mother, and news spread.

Young Isaac's parents felt obligated to bring him in to the rabbi for guidance. They left him alone with the holy man at the Base Hamigdash. For five minutes, Isaac was required to sit still, and watch the rabbi

1 2022: That term was used regularly in turn-of-the-century Los Angeles daily speech. It was even on various maps. It indicates a racist overlay that is crucial to understanding the history of the city, especially during that earlier period, but with deep importance later on. As a deep irony, that slim alley north of the plaza was not a black neighborhood. Most of the residents were Chinese and Mexican. In other words, Chinese and Mexicans were also freely designated in that racist "non-white" way. Moreover, the area was policed and zoned in a deliberately racist fashion.

complete a prayer. In the middle, the rabbi shared a smile with a ghost over young Isaac's shoulder. The ghost apparently was smiling back from the small orange-pebbled window. Then the rabbi began adjusting his tephillin.

Ike stared at the window, and started to get anxious. To break the ice, Ike made a crude joke about the Queen of Sheba's ass, in so many words. The rabbi stared back glumly. I have an answer to that story, he explained. The rabbi moistened his finger, then thumbed through the Talmud. Finally, he rattled something in Hebrew, but as always he never translated the same passage the same way twice:

There was a young woman of Judah, he began, breaking off to re-read the commentary on the commentary. Her hair was lustrous. Her eyes were like moonlight. But she was pale and sick with guilt. The holy teacher could sense that her body had been awakened. 'Your holiness,' she said, 'I have slept with a married man.'

His holiness, amazingly enough, had in translation exactly the same personality as the rabbi. According to the Talmud, the holy teacher waited for the girl to stop weeping. Gradually, he made her look at him and said, 'When you accidentally dip your fingers in honey, what do you do?'

Isaac was impressed: Was this an exact translation? Then, in so many words, Ike wondered out loud if rabbis ever dip the honey. The holy man laughed, but didn't say no. So the boy felt even more confused; but much better. This was, in fact, the closest Ike (or Isaac) ever came to joining any organized religion. 'I realized that it makes more sense if you're selling God than if you're buying. But in my business, you're selling to gentiles.'

Finally Ike married a Protestant girl. He decided to cut off from his family altogether, even from relatives back east. Every Friday, his mother would light the Yortzeit candles, and call his name, as if he were dead. Only right before she died did she forgive Ike, since he had become so rich and had, as Isaac, bought new windows for the synagogue. Ike used his wife's money to buy a small factory as well. At the brass-fitted showroom on Broadway, Ike sold to anyone no matter what Messiah they believed in. Criminals with good manners were fine. Whether the money

came from their shoe or the bank, be they Moluccas with tattooed necks or the King of Panama – he could fit them.

After a suit was ready, Ike always took the paying customer drinking and gambling; sometimes on Spring Street, sometimes in Ocean Park. Ike the owner saw himself as a sporting man, even though he lost the taste for it in his forties when his wife grew ill. She turned to spiritualism, and Ike turned to the burlesques on Main Street (but only to watch). However, as she weakened and started to die, Isaac suddenly learned to see through her eyes. Like that strange rabbi, he began to communicate with ghosts at the window. Then, while his wife shrank for a year in bed, Isaac let her ghosts advise him in business. Their advice was never quite right for the season, but they obviously had a good eye for the long term.

Then, after his wife died, jealous to the end that he was still alive, she sent all the other ghosts away. So Ike has grown lonelier. He no longer can speak his mind, not even (and especially not) to his son. Having lost even the taste for gambling, he can no longer relax. He wakes up at three in the morning, spends hours listening for whispers, hoping to be haunted again, and finally goes to the showroom at sunrise. In recent months, Isaac has begun to wait, almost impatiently, for something from Molly, the homely, oddly appealing, skinny Jewish girl, with the long sad face. He watches her recite from Eichler's new book of etiquette. He inhales her quietly, secretly, while she keeps his books in the late afternoon.

Isaac glances at Molly for reactions to all this. He drives her up Glendale, past Edendale. One of Sennett's revolving stages is being torn down. Ike points out that above Sennett's movie stages, the dairies and the horse ranches are disappearing. He keeps waiting for her to speak more. They drive south into the old Los Angeles oil field. Scattered flimsy wooden derricks, survivors of the hundreds there at the turn of the century, stand on the slope with dwellings encroaching upon them. The air is faintly acrid, like vinegar.

Then Ike drives toward lemon groves further west, and up the foothills through purple verbena. They head south of the walnut orchards; he points toward olive trees being tended. New gaps are opening quickly, the start of a housing boom. Construction crews, whites, Mex, Japs, Filipino, are frying in the sun. They go six long days a week, from

can't to can't, the owner says (an old plantation phrase he heard somewhere), with checks every Saturday morning. But most of all, there are miles upon miles of open fields and unpaved drainage ditches. The shiny rails of track can be almost blinding for interurban red cars. The horns of the red cars moan, while the horns of the yellow cars gong. Inside the business core, just five or six blocks running south on Broadway from First Street, trestles for streetcars crackle and shiver into the second store windows.

Suddenly, Isaac looks so worn that Molly advises him to remove his jacket. While they stop, he asks her if an older man needs a daughter, or needs a wife. Molly told him that she would take a few days to decide.

A year later, when Molly was married to his son Jack – as much married, that is, as that restless boy could be – Isaac offered advice. Jack sat back pretending to listen, the usual blank attitude, as if he were in a box at a theater.

Isaac said, 'My son has inherited his father's weaknesses, and his mother's regrets.'

Then Ike brushed against Molly, and looked hungrily at her hair. 'But I never saw a young man who understood my story about honey any better than Jack.'

Jack saw a very different city when he drove Molly around, especially after the old man died so strangely, and left those excises unexplained and entirely on Molly's shoulders to figure out. By 1924, the boom had begun to subside. But there were billboards everywhere. Men would relieve themselves under a billboard, while the wife would stand by the car and look away demurely. From Canada and Mexico, trucks came in with tarpaulins laced down tightly; inside them booze for Jack's friends who needed a handsome suit.

He agreed with Molly that he couldn't sleep comfortably in the house anymore, that they should leave Bunker Hill before the ghosts took over every window. They already were making a racket. Jack wondered if his mother was still able to stop his father from speaking to ghosts; and if a few of them might leave some business advice for the long term.

Jack was convinced that jacket lapels with silk were a good investment. Molly had a habit of putting her hand on his thigh, to check if he

was skittish or spent, he thought. There was a story he liked to tell her about a friend of his who put down two shotguns as a down payment on a house. But he rarely brought these friends over, especially after Molly moved on to Angelino Heights.

Jack clearly had his own gin-soaked theories on gracious living. He devoted thirty years to the study of his declining health, as if it were a stock exchange. He remembered seeing, as a child, his father talking to white-robed Klansmen riding horses across downtown to the auditorium on Olive to see *Birth of a Nation* in 1915.

The problem was essentially this: His father had started in a store on Main Street, a small factory. Then came the showroom on Broadway. He found a partner, with gambling connections in Chinatown (or perhaps in Little Italy on North Broadway, up above Dog Town). The partner was a leech in the end, so his father paid him off. But Jack still enjoyed spending time with the leech's family, and the leeches who were their friends. Thus, despite all the Protestant affect, his father wound up a kike; while Jack was a swank with an edge. His father was always poor; Jack was always rich. His father knew how to dry up. Jack always said the wrong thing at the right time. But it was a gruesome shock the way the old man went up in flames.

Molly was pleased to know that Gloria Swanson started in Chicago, and would marry royalty next. It was clear to her that Wallace Beery, Swanson's first husband (she was on to her third) vaguely resembled every man who sniffs up a fifteen-year-old's dress; and waits like a ghoul, even for years. She was mildly thrilled to overhear a customer saying that Gloria wore her dresses 'too thin.'

It kept Molly going just to know that Gloria Swanson had rented – and been beaten by her first husband – just down the block back. Of course, that would have been 1916 or 1918, before Molly came to Angelino Heights. Finally, in 1923, Molly actually met and passed ten words with tiny Gloria while she was visiting her old haunt.

Years later, Archie, who never quite recovered from falling off a roof – and wasn't much of a catch after all – suddenly moved near Molly. He offered himself and his miseries on the rebound. Failing that, he tried to show off a little. 'I haven't seen Gloria Swanson since she was sixteen

years old,' he said. 'She had the tiniest feet, like a little dwarf child.' Maybe so, Molly answered, but in 1924 Gloria made more money than any man in her business, on earth.

Molly's taste for movies ended when her career went sour. Molly never much cared for anything but comedies anyway. She mostly went to see the cut of the suits. But I had to interrupt her stories this one time: Did she know, I told her excitedly, that in the three square miles around where she worked and went home, more people were murdered in classic films than anywhere else on earth?

No, she hadn't the first clue, never saw anything of it. I thought I was doing something important by showing her movie stills from *Double Indemnity, DOA, Chinatown* (a murder just a block from her house, only a few years ago), *T-Men, Crimson Kimono* … The stack spilled out of my lap. I reached to scoop up the stills.

'I knew men who committed murder,' she interrupted suddenly. 'Three men to be exact. But I don't want their ghosts coming back to slug me, because I told.' Then she peered vaguely through those beer-bottle glasses. I never could tell if she was pulling my leg.

I told her how many movies were shot in Echo Park Lake, where she used to sit under those shady and ornamental trees on a Saturday. She saw quite a mix: Russian Jews, Mex, anarchists, Nazarines from the Four Square Gospel. She especially liked the Egyptian papyrus and water lilies growing in the shallows, where waterfowl – swans, ducks, coots, grebes and geese – would come for shelter at different times. But the lake is such a tiny patch, only eight acres, barely four feet deep. Lately, they dredged it, found wedding rings, china plates, bottles for anything from poison to elixirs and soft drinks. The river dribbled down Glendale originally. And the lake was simply an artificial pond, built to power a woolen mill at Sixth and Pearl (now Figueroa).

Molly knew about the woolen mill, but not the murders in the movies. She had watched the Mex take over the Lake, but they never bothered her. In 1943, she saw blood on a store window after the Zoot Suit Riots. She knew about dinges, the Watts Rebellion, and sixty years of hop, one kind of social trauma or the other. Mexicans were swart and bronze faced. During the war, blacks turned the abandoned Little

Tokyo into Bronzeville. Like everyone else, she called it Bronzeville, didn't worry much about what happened to the Japs, the Nips, the little Japanese. She was a specter with an attitude. As with most of us, her problems sealed her off from the rest.

A man two blocks away spends five years building a fall-out shelter, a Simon Rodia (Watt's Towers) in reverse; another case of someone haunted by his wife's disappearance.

A friend of Archie's gets so drunk one day that he falls into a bus and dies. His children turn into thieves. The basement is piled high with car batteries. The plumbing implodes. The electricity dangles and pops from light fixtures. Their mother finally sells the house. The children spill in all directions. But each one has the same dream: the house walks into their head, and tells them to never move back.

Archie certainly damaged Molly's theories on burly men. So, as a corrective, she took a fancy to slight men for a few years, had a yearning for an Alsatian chef who owned the big Florentine house on Douglas. She told him that with some exercise, he wouldn't look so gaunt. Then before much more could be said, the chef had a stroke; and installed an electric chair on a rail to take him to the second floor.

Worse still, a slight man at a rooming house on Boston Street in Angelino Heights kidnaped a ten-year-old girl. Then he held her for ransom, stirred headlines for a week, collected the money; but had already tortured and slaughtered her. Molly actually remembers seeing his hollow, gentle face on Carroll Avenue that very week. They were passing each other slowly, near a large bay-fig tree, below Mr. Pinney's house. An ice-cream truck was jingling behind them. Like in a romance novel their eyes met. They each said hello. She smiled, kept looking, to drop a hint, maybe lay some groundwork. He was cordial, a bit lost in his thoughts.

'When it came to romance, I never had a good sense of timing,' she said. In 1927, Jack disappeared for two days. He came back like a Viking on a death barge. He was literally too tired to make excuses. That was Jack. So Molly didn't even ask where he went, only if he planned to go back regularly. Molly slaps her forehead: 'I never had that presence of mind with men. My sister Nettie had that and more. Of course, she al-

ways chose badly.' She paused, then added, 'Walt, my second husband, always said he loved me for my sense of timing.'

She didn't say Walt my ex, or Walt who died of natural causes. Then Molly laughed loudly, almost a cackle. Walt was one of her successes. Her 'timing' with him had finally worked out. Next day, I went to a newspaper morgue, looking for articles on Walt's disappearance. Instead, I found fifty ways to kill a man between 1959 and 1961 (along with five suicides). I've scanned all the articles into a database for you: the 'sluggings,' the bodies dumped in olive groves, in the bushes, in vacant lots, hotels, railroad yards, at the Long Beach Recreational Center. The deadly argument between 'an invalid and his friend.' The 'wheelchair man' who kills his estranged wife in a duel. The police chief's son who keeps confessing that he stabbed someone. The quarrels in parking lots. The famous last words: 'Go ahead and shoot.'

The short stocky gunman with a quick temper. The chivalrous man who is shot dead while trying to stop a 'burly' robber from pistol-whipping a woman. The discarded husband who kicks down the back door of 'the house that was once his,' but is fatally shot by his successor, who says, 'If my wife wanted you, she would go back to you.' The boyfriend who shoots the husband while the wife watches. The head carried in a bag by a 'bowling bum.'

The man slain in a row over cutting his lawn. The Disneyland Hotel Scene Killing. The Wild West Bandits Slayings. The coffee-shop owner who shoots a troublemaker. The poisoned cocktail killer. The missing gun in the murder of a 'Hollywood doctor.' The man who for months makes advances toward another man's wife, only to be continually rebuffed. So he borrows a gun – for 'target practice' – from someone in the office at Columbia Records, and kills her husband. In another musical murder, a 'musician cafe owner' is shot in 'a bedroom pistol duel.' The murders blur into each other.

A man eating a hotdog is berated by a stranger, then 'mysteriously' shot. An unidentified car drives backward and forward over a husband's body. A wife tells police: 'I honestly thought there were no bullets in the gun, it fired and misfired so often.'

We are bizarrely charmed by the comedy of murder. Crime story takes us farther from the intense realities of a person's life toward a hypnogogic escape, extremely vivid but somehow medicated, easy on the nerves.

So many of these murders feature domestic partners. The story turns into a dark sexual farce about forensic detail:

- Points of entry – for the bullet, the adulterer, or the assailant;
- Time of murder – the last time, the first time, the best time, her time of the month, his bad timing;
- Vengeance – cradling his hunting rifle under her arm, she listened by the window outside their house for the grunting of her bare-assed husband;
- Amnesia – the murderer has forgotten where he was that night.

The photos that go with these clippings cut out their surroundings. Often, editors have them cropped in white before they are printed. And no matter how graphic the police photo – the bullet through the eye, the blood on the couch – it is a mode of erasure. Among police photos, I find what should be Walt's body. He lies under a blanket on a cement embankment of the LA River, just north of downtown. Four exhausted men stare in confusion. Then I discover that on the same day, the downtown editor canceled photos about racist crimes, particularly the railroading of blacks and Latinos. He went with the nameless crime instead.

I gather my research into boxes, perhaps as a back story for a screenplay. But no matter how 'realistic' I make it, the screenplay reverts into a mode of erasure, an allegory about psychotic vendettas and petty greeds – in a world where all crooks are in business, and all businessmen are crooks. I guess LA murder has a distinct fragrance. And this fragrance plays into the longstanding American distrust of urban democracy. Many Americans believe, as they did in Jefferson's day, that equality can survive only in a small town. By contrast, fascism flourishes in crowds. Murder becomes a call for order, and a symptom of alienation. Of course, I absolutely do not believe these noir fantasies. I prefer to make Walt's

murder a critique of urban capitalism; but then the crime becomes a defense of the suburbs.

And yet, these neutralizing murder stories have brought me closer to who Molly was. I now enjoy the same evacuated indifference that she does. On a buffet in her dining room, next to china cabinets imploding with depression glass, I find a photograph of her from 1959. Her face had blossomed by then. The camera almost finds planes on her face, and a bone structure. But her expression looks much the same: surprised to be there. She is walking toward the bank on Spring Street, to gather pay vouchers for her factory workers. The investment houses near the bank have hired men to polish the brass on the fire hydrants. But the postwar decay has begun to show. Molly chats with prostitutes and secretaries who literally share the same street – makes girl talk. But thinking back in 1986, she imagines that she was raising feminine consciousness all around her. These brief conversations, with her payroll sack in one hand, were the only ones she ever had with whores, and have thus been inflated in her mind's eye. 'My memory plays tricks,' she admits.

We live as tourists, but remember as if we were in the thick of things. Yet despite our mental evasions (my own in particular, after my girlfriend's boyfriend robbed me blind), we clearly belong to every square foot around us. That should be my story, not the fifty murders condensed into one screenplay, or one novel. But first, I must gather enough evidence. Probably the gathering is richer than the telling anyway.

The story would go something like this: Molly undoubtedly murdered her second husband. But she couldn't murder a soul. When she arrived in Los Angeles, soon after World War I in either 1919 or 1920, she already had something to hide, since she never contacted her family again. Coincidentally, she married into a family that ignored its relatives in much the same way. She clearly had customers who went to jail, probably committed murders, or ordered them. She also had customers whose only crime was using a stamp more than once, or never mentioning at tax time how much they made on their saving accounts.

She is protecting the ghosts that hover around her. She has lost the ability to distinguish between sunrise and sunset. Her stepdaughter

and the family of her sister Nettie all need money. The Mexicans renting from Molly treat her like the only roof over their heads. Then there is Archie, the alcoholic roofer who finally moved near her, after losing his fat Russian wife. But Archie cannot even make his way to his back door at night, and is under the care of his sister. And she is falling apart, won't be around much longer. I hear Archie sleeping in his backyard tonight. His snoring wakes up the dogs for blocks around.

Unreliable Narrators

It is time to unravel or commit literary murder. I am now convinced that Molly had Walt murdered in 1959. He hasn't been heard of or seen since. Molly, of course, never says otherwise. She likes being unreliable. Narrators don't get much more inscrutable. And her stepdaughter, Walt's own flesh and blood, is an outright liar.

Molly's motives won't help me much. Every motive imaginable has led to murder at some time. In 1959, Walt and Molly argued until the wallpaper began to peel in the kitchen. He tried to beat her, even stab her, but wasn't in shape, hadn't lifted anything more than a shoebox in twenty-five years. Also, Walt suddenly had begun to smell old, like her father. He was a huckster, a liar, a schizophrenic. He was a thief who rummaged through her savings, and planned to sell off her factory. He went with prostitutes from Fifth and Spring who told Molly he wasn't much. He was in league with the devil, with the gentiles, with the communists, with the neo-nazis, with a masonic order who saw themselves as ancient Spartans, and believed that homosexuality could save the British Empire. His sour disposition infected everyone around him like a rash. He began to collect guns, would store them like fine china in the living room. He was so schizoid that he annoyed the ghosts who visited regularly from the attic. He found out Molly's darkest secret, and threatened to expose her. Since we don't know that secret, she must have done away with him. Walt lived in a blind rage. He intentionally left his fly open at the office, to keep everyone amused. He was too frail from cancer, too kind to have to suffer.

Or simply put: Molly had had enough. She believed that what you don't know can't hurt you.

Have I hit a motive that is convincing yet? It is a daunting prospect to give up all those newspaper clippings in order to make this story legible. Perhaps I am too reliable to be a narrator. I promise to murder him off as much as the evidence will allow. I have about a thousand photographs and newspaper articles, over two hundred relevant movies on file, and over twenty interviews, along with hours of interviews with Norman Klein; and hundreds of pages of text. With all of these elegantly assembled in a DVD-ROM, I can follow Laurence Sterne's advice (1760): to make an entertainment, a tristful *paideia*, a mocking of the truth. I can draw her 'character … merely from (her) evacuations.'

So we begin by locating Molly in noir flashback. However, the grammar of noir is built around racist and sexist egoism, mostly a white male tradition: what I call 'white men caught in the wrong neighborhood.' It has been adjusted in recent decades – more female noir novelists, more black, Latino, Chinese, and Japanese noir; and noir from every sexual persuasion. But fundamentally, the point of view that gives these sinister tales their ferocity will not do here.

Molly simply was not a noir heroine. I call her Molly of no bloom, the Emma of Angelino Heights. She is a Eurydice who adjusted quite well to spending half the year in the underworld. She learned how to dress for it, found the best, cheap restaurants. She was vaguely corruptible, like most unreliable interviews I have known. Perhaps I should make her a female version of Uncle Toby (from *Tristram Shandy*, 1759, the dotty man with a hobby-horse, and a gift for forgetting most things). That is, if Toby ever hired assassins to kill his wife.

Molly is as genial as Uncle Toby, but much cannier, not a cheerful old fool blathering on about a groin injury from the 1695 Siege of Namur. Suppose Toby as Molly lived in Angelino Heights? Where do we go from there? Toby has a blackout. She wakes up with a corpse in the dining room. It sits, shoulders dangling, as if waiting for breakfast waffles. Toby has 'a killer inside her,' a touch of Jim Thompson, but too pathological for Molly.

Molly tried a therapist once, when it was the fashion. He was a customer, seemed well-read, knew his tweeds. She spent three months talking about her parents, and her legs, her pride and joy. She even discovered a well of resentments inside. And luckily, the sessions were paid off in trade. But it was clear that the therapist was deeply unhappy with his own marriage, and had never honestly wanted to go into medicine, did it to please his immigrant parents.

Finally, Molly wasn't sure who was helping whom. She felt somewhat better, but finding the right man, even pretending to find the right man, seemed like the best therapy. That was her quixotic search, a picaresque where no one was ever on the road. I imagine the devil offering her a Faustian deal, but she refuses because she thinks he's angling to get her to Palm Springs, to sell her time shares in a condominium. Molly prided herself on never carrying more than you need; except, of course, for the jewelry she kept in her beaded purse: her dowry, as you will discover later on.

I need a different model for the unreliable narrator as well as for the fragrant noir world, vital though these have been for modern literature, detective stories, cinema suspense; and for lies the State Department delivered on broadcast news during the Cold War. (This is 1986, remember. You the reader may have more grisly forms of unreliable news to deal with.)

I believe that the unreliable narrator is an absence, like a chiaroscuro. The absence is a camera, an aperture. Beyond the frame of this aperture lies something more interesting than the answer to a crime. Answers are so formal, so mechanical, like bad television murders: all the world put back in order inside twenty-two minutes.

This aperture generates desire more than action: the unspent eroticism when a stranger you can never meet accidentally looks exciting; the ache when children fail to love their parents, are politely dismissive; the anamorphic gaze, the yearning across the room that is never returned (he was looking at someone behind you instead). Absence is a lingering distress that is deeply pleasurable; and truer to the way we actually live than a corpse dropped on the lawn. It is the trace left by a crime, the erasure and forgetting of a crime.

Let's toss Walt on the tracks. We don't even care how he got there, not for the moment. It is suspense, after all. Perhaps he was dumped on a concrete river embankment, as in dozens of police photos that I have seen.

We check for clues, in all four points of the compass. Clearly, we want to know more than what happened to poor Walt (even if he got what he deserved). What possessed Molly? Or even who possesses Molly? Did her legs finally hold up after all? Did the 'good-natured horse face', as Walt liked to call her, finally learn to kick?

I prefer to set the aperture wider, around the criminal misremembering of the city of LA itself, more Balzacian, give it the sweep that monstrous crimes deserve. There are numerous characters in the background who may show up, but certainly will appear in future volumes of *The History of Forgetting*. Harry Brown is a lawyer who orders a leisure suit in 1928. But he is in a very strange line of work (as I will show later on). His files, and the worm-eaten young scholar who tends to them, present an alternative history of the city that never arrives, only leaves its traces.

For example: A man decides to quit the 500 rummy game at home along with the droll anomie of watching to see if the dog's tail will light up because the dog always sleeps too close to the fireplace. He leaves his sprawling bungalow, and the ornamental trees and the Japanese garden on nearly an acre setback, in order to get some smokes: like Jack leaving Molly for 'some air in the country, before they drop another house on it.' Three hours later, or in Jack's case two days later, the man returns. The man has a box of cigars in his jacket pocket (that is, if the cigars are indeed just a cigar). Where did he go? He looks fed. She even gave him snacks? He tries to eat dinner, but his wife can see his stomach about to burst through his suspenders.

Harry Brown knows precisely where the man went, and how much he paid, and what the snacks were. Harry and Molly like to share gossip at her showroom, especially at closing time. She knows what men wear under their suits. He knows where they take their suits to be pressed. For both Molly and Harry, it is simply a matter of business as pleasure. They keep tabs on their trade.

So one day, in the late Twenties, before everything went to hell – even before the San Francis Dam burst, driving 180 feet of water from the Grapevine all the way to Ventura by the ocean – Harry looked especially vivid. He had something he could barely keep to himself (and Harry could keep a world war and white slavery to himself).

'You're trying to say then?' Molly coaxes him on.

'That a crime is being built in Los Angeles larger than anything you read in the newspapers.' Then he went on about how much money, how many people.

What on earth could that crime have been? I suddenly wondered if I had slipped into an espionage novel? No matter how often I asked what crime, Molly didn't drop a stitch. Like all the old folks I interview, she was eternally loyal to the memory of dead friends, in this case Harry Brown. 'Go look it up,' she said.

I found circa 1928 letters in what remains of Harry Brown's files. They looked like drivel, about the All Year Round Club, a booster campaign run by the power broker of LA, publisher Harry Chandler. I noticed Harry Brown's name on the roster; and Walt as his secretary. Harry also co-signed a letter from Protestant women's groups railing against bootleggers (at least ten thousand in LA). Another letter, also with his name on the masthead, condemned the movie industry, after scandals involving actor Wallace Reid dying of a drug overdose, comedian Fatty Arbuckle's trials for rape and murder as well as, finally, the unsolved murder of Paramount director William Desmond Taylor.

The mayor's office was being pressured to tighten the screws, morally speaking. That meant, as always, more restrictions against the black community on Central Avenue, especially when by 1924 membership of the Klan reached its highest numbers ever. It also meant tightening the covenants on deeds, to make sure people did not sell to blacks, Jews, or swart types.

Five years later, after Walt was fired for some reason, Harry filed letters on an elaborate plan for a multi-ethnic LA carnival. It would pretend to support 'the amalgamation of all races.' 'Local people (of ability)' would be asked to 'give small displays, distinctive of their particular country. The Japanese, for instance, are exceptional gardeners (something along

the lines of the famous Chrysanthemum tableaux of Japan).' The movie industry would be 'asked' to set up a Parade of Nations at various studio locations with 'tableaux' (vivants, no doubt) to help sell real estate in Hollywood.

Was a grand scheme buried in all this ephemera? The police also intercepted letters, which wound up in Harry's files, from Sam Clover, editor of *The Los Angeles Evening News*. Clover lived near Molly, across from Echo Park Lake. Harry used to vilify his name. Clover ran a campaign against the corrupt water policies in LA. But his newspaper went out of business once the damning municipal light and power bonds were passed anyway.

Harry also collected notes passed between Clover and Louis Adamic, the radical social critic who began LA studies in the late Twenties. Clover knew Jake Zeitlin, the muse of the highly marginalized avant-garde in Twenties LA. Zeitlin, in turn, lived near Molly, up in Edendale, at the junction of Alessandro and Alvarado, a block north of where the Sennett studios had just shut down.

Occasionally, I found a letter that sounded more corrosive, like the following by journalist Thelma Nurnburg to her editor/publisher at *The Examiner* in 1928: 'Maybe by the time this letter reaches you, the (Saint Francis) dam business will be all dried up. They ought to settle it by blaming someone. He'll probably deny it, but it will do nicely, editorially speaking.' When this dam burst in 1928, it sent an eighty-feet-high wall of water from the high desert to the ocean thirty miles away, killing nearly four hundred people. The famous water commissioner, William Mulholland, was disgraced after that, and drove himself ('I envy the dead') to an early grave.

I try to concoct a noir murder mystery out of Harry's junk mail. My problem, however, is separating Harry – and Walt – from the movie *Chinatown*. In Robert Towne's script for *Chinatown*, water scandals from 1906 and 1928 were juggled ahistorically into a cinematic 1937. The film is a masterpiece of fiction improving on the truth. Mulwray is obviously Mulholland; the Albacore Club stands in for Chandler and his cronies, who set up water policy, as well as the All Year Club among dozens of other booster boondoggles. Then, to make matters even worse for me, another

290 murder films have been shot no more than five minutes from Molly's house. Every time I outline a treatment, the ghosts of dead screenwriters turn it into a B-movie murder from 1947.

But little by little, the vast crime that Harry Brown mentioned to Molly became very apparent. Harry did not mean a specific scandal, a specific murder, a Julian swindle, or a wall of water. He sucked in his stomach, looked at himself in the mirror. Molly shrugged, as if to say 'Call it your winter storehouse.' Harry was overwrought after an unusually long week listening to twenty versions of false information, all of it linked, but all of it hidden – what added up to a parallel universe. He was talking about the crime of vastness, of an immense pinball machine of greed and misadventure. He was overwhelmed for the moment by how much goes unnoticed that he is required to keep in his file cabinets. He had gotten a particularly sick earful that week. He needed to howl at somebody. The 'boosting of the city,' as he called it (a pun on boosterism), had 'gone epic, even by my standards.' The city had tripled its population in less than fifteen years. One out of five barrels of oil in the entire US came from the new LA fields.

'The crime, then, was this bubble by 1928,' I said to Molly.

'Have you heard the expression fish don't know they're wet?' she answered. I've decided that Walt is a drop in the bucket. The crime was the urban pathology itself, from 1920 to 1986. That would be my story, with Walt's corpse as emblematic of traces we cannot decipher. And Molly as the great sieve of forgetting, the guardian of all that we really don't want to know.

I rummaged for more documents. Molly's friend Dolores, who died eight years ago, has been seen, or at least heard, up in her attic. Apparently, the wild cockatoos up in the date trees are mimicking her sounds. Her ghost stands next to cardboard boxes filled with family photos and portraits. On the second floor, she left an archive of used clothing (1919–78). In life, Dolores used to iron each dress and blouse that she could no longer wear, then stack it face down, like one of Gogol's dead souls. By the time Dolores was sixty, the piles had gathered to the top of her closets. And she lived another eighteen years.

Dolores also packed away letters, in the buffet; along with the French cutlery left by her uncle, the skinny chef from Alsace who had a stroke in 1959 (Molly always found him young for his age). Among Dolores' photographs, I found two of Harry Brown; one in particular, of him standing in a troika with three men whom no-one can remember. They were posing at noon in front of the Eastern Columbia Building, right after it went up (1929). Harry was looking at something off camera. He seemed concerned, as if it would go away, or possibly get in the way. According to Norman Klein in *The History of Forgetting*, Harry believed that every great city has a folklore about its own demise. And in these fables, we find secrets about how it was built, or taken apart. Los Angeles was supposed to be Babylon resisted, the urban chaos stalled in its tracks, quite literally, a garden city that could forget how to age. Harry Brown was behind the scenes for much of that. For him, the entire mechanism of Los Angeles was a crime story, more the whole than any character.

As Harry always said, LA was meant to be a Protestant fantasy of the pleasure dome. He was quick to add that the moment downtown was paved in 1882, they put it under electric arc lights. I would add that in Chinatown and up the Mexican hillside at Chavez Ravine, the roads were never fully paved.

Harry had a theory about LA as Babylon on wheels, first by rail, then by freeway. Like the Spanish *ciudad lineal*, LA was 'a city (…) derived by locomotion.' As a result, neighborhoods could be buried behind this circulation – as the DVD-ROM will show. Indeed, the LA Harry Brown knew even as a boy was already a lineal city (not concentric like Paris or Vienna). It was already growing literally like a vine, from 1885 onward, along trolley lines. It merged city into farm land, with beach-town suburbs past the wilderness. That's what Harry saw as early as the 1890s, before his misadventures in the Philippines (1901).

A lineal city is designed for forgetting, Harry would add. It is not like the concentric city; it does not strangle people into submission. Instead, lineal LA dissolves them into the air. LA forgets by way of evacuation and absence. Even the myths of LA promote this sense of absence, of a city without neighborhoods, without any urban culture. It makes a perfect setting for burying bodies.

Of course, Harry was basically wrong. He spoke for the downtown elite, who had their suits cut at Molly's store. In fact, behind the trolley lines, followed by the lineal freeways (mostly after 1951), LA is very much a city of microclimates, tucked in canyons, in swamp fills, in lake basins; and in traces of farms sold off to make towns. These little townships were then clustered around nodes made by the radial system of roads. LA is nested, but not empty.

Angelino Heights is one microclimate that Molly knew brick by brick. Harry thought he knew the entire city that way. In my next book, I will take us through Harry's Los Angeles (he helped LA oil barons play poker in Veracruz during the Mexican Revolution; and helped more, they say, into the 1970s). For now, Harry is an ornament in Molly's story. He sips dishwater coffee behind her showroom. He talks about his extremely young wife, and shudders. 'All wives get younger over time,' Molly warns him.

Molly knew the immigrant microclimates best, in Echo Park, south of downtown, and east in Boyle Heights. But she serviced the Anglo upper crust. Only once did she actually try out the posh set, in the Franklin Hills, near Chandler's imaginary mansion for *The Big Sleep*, where General Sternwood talks about orchids having the 'flesh of men.' Molly got into trouble up there; and Harry helped her pay the damages. 'Afterward I learned to stay put.'

By 1925, Molly fell in love with Ocean Park, also filled with immigrants, but exotic to her. In the shadow of the thrill rides, she behaved like a dime-store Daisy Miller – the Protestant *converso* let loose. But Molly's version did not contract malaria, never paid the price for her indiscretions ('Why pay for what others get for free?' she liked to say). Molly thought the ocean front walks at Pickering and Lick piers were 'Our Italy,' a phrase she remembered from an old travel book about Southern California.

One day in 1923, she was watching a slapstick movie being shot by the beach while the Lick Pier was burning down. The wind blew funnels of smoke along the shoreline, and out toward the Palisades, luckily beyond camera range.

Zones of Death

In Chandler's *Little Sister*, a screenplay rewritten as a novel, Marlowe notices how effortlessly he becomes a celluloid copy of himself. He 'kills a cigarette,' tries to light another and inhales deeply, 'as though that scrubby little office was hilltop overlooking the bouncing ocean – all tired cliched mannerisms of my trade.' Then, in chapter eighteen, the movie mogul Ballou lectures to Marlowe on how flat and manipulative story writing can get: 'If suspense and menace didn't defeat reason, there would be very little drama.'

We sense Chandler's disgust with LA, with moviemaking, and with his body. He never fully never recovered after meeting the fierce deadline for *The Blue Dahlia*, then checking himself into the hospital. We tend to ignore what that anomie means for many crime writers. Redundancy is a plague for them (consider Doyle's struggle to escape from Holmes). So they write out the agony. Thus, the key to a well-timed murder is not the action, but the deep inhalations, the pauses, absences. The action ceases, and the story is at war with itself. The detective, as writer, is literally lost in regrets.

Molly had a gift for handling that level of regret. She treated it as lost inventory, something for a dollar sale. I profoundly admired her for that, especially when she announced, 'I never dream. And if I do, it goes where it wants, I go where I want.' Sometimes, she was almost transcendental, a Buddha controlling her stomach acids and brain waves. She would fit sliced Wonder Bread inside a wire mesh. Then she would place it on top of a gas burner, next to her percolator. Next, very slowly, she would drift toward the cupboard. While the toast burst into flames, she occasionally would throw me another clue.

She explained that Walt's mother used to play dead for him when he was a teenager. Walt would sit by her bed, in his knickers, pose nostalgically, looking like a magazine cover. Then his mother would pretend to choke, and glaze over. She was devoured by one fear above all – that she would die of a stroke like her mother, at exactly the same age her mother went. So she would rehearse, as if for *Camille.* For his part, Walt had to

practice mourning for her. But if the bell rang, she would jump out of bed, and act normal for the neighbors.

Walt's family were, in their way, overly concerned with appearances. Worse still, Walt's father never thought there was anything all that strange going on. He was too busy practising contempt for his son. His father was a martyr to business, and very practical. At their income level, there was simply no money to even think about mental illness.

'You mean Walt faked his own death?' I wondered out loud. Molly was scraping her toast. She was smiling delphically this morning, perhaps trying out a new angle for her smile, something for the customers.

'Death can seem very fake when it happens. I had quite a few customers who claimed they were experts on death. They were mostly fakes.'

'How did you know they were fakes? Not if you see violent death up close.'

Molly nodded, and smiled back. Walt, I guess, was an exception to most rules. He had seen something in the war, but came out mostly confused. In 1945, wood debris from an explosion landed on his head. He was out for ten minutes. When he awoke, he'd been captured by the Germans. After the war, on the first of each month, he received a check from the government for his wartime disability. He also had a nervous tic, every so often made a clicking sound like dentures being readjusted. And he seemed neurotically involved in gadgets, especially portable radios and electric shavers.

Molly let on that she knew something about death. At the age of eleven, she saw a little boy die after slipping off a roof. The ambulance, like a chariot, took the child to the hereafter.

Was Molly confusing this child with Archie, who also fell off a roof? Archie was still alive, drinking himself to death a few blocks away. His stories were even dicier than Molly's. He said that Walt was a disgrace to his gender, but apparently, according to Archie, had a large penis 'that looked just like him.' Not so wonderful, I guess. 'What's more, he was a little swish.' Archie – who had since gone to his middle-name Samuel, or Sammy – started to do a little jitterbug step. Sammy misses the dance halls that used to go all night long back in the Forties, during the swing

era. I try to imagine him as a soldier back from the Pacific, trying to grab ass on a crowded dance-floor.

That night, someone tried to break into my house. I had nodded off downstairs, was startled by a tapping against the mullioned window. I jumped out of my skin. The man jumped back, looked frail but big. Then, he foamed over the mullioned window; why, I couldn't imagine. Then I went into a walking coma, grabbed two very dull kitchen knives, and minutes later found myself standing on the porch screaming at him, bluffing about slicing him like a roast, waving my knives. He reacted by throwing a lug wrench at me. Time passed strangely. And that was it.

The next day, Sammy/Archie came to do me a favor. He had found Walt. For only fifty dollars, he'd take me to him. Apparently, Walt had risen from the dead, and was now living in a rooming house off Western. It smelled like cat urine, none of it in Walt's style. A few residents, with embattled faces, had seen Walt just the other day. He apparently looked more lumpen than ever, like a one-celled panda, with black eye sockets. None of the other descriptions matched. One of the old-timers added, 'You know Walt is wanted for murder.'

Speaking about myself, I've seen almost no blood firsthand since I was a child. Back in Coney Island, they would beat each other with chains and bats. I got into a few fourth-grade fights. I saw a neighbor's boy hit by a car, and knocked twenty feet. And over the years, I have watched seven people linger and die from cancer.

That makes a thin soup for writing about murder. But I know the simple tricks for evoking murder. You can learn them from Jack London stories, or the newspapers. First off, never record the sound of the death-blow – only its impact on the body. The victim's shoulders drop suddenly. Life signals indelibly float away.

In 1959, Walt's head fell back, as if he were fighting to remember, while his nerve-endings slowly shut him down. He lay in the corner, ten feet away. Every few minutes, his body shuddered involuntarily. It must have taken almost ten minutes for him to die.

What I know best is imaginary murder. In movies, they are staged in shadows no more than two blocks long. In fact, in Los Angeles, there are actual zones of death, ideal for murdering people in the movies. They

are sometimes as carefully marked as hospital parking. The most famous zone is centered in and around downtown, inside a three-mile radius – north into the rail yards, and the river embankments; and west straight into Molly's orbit.

During the noir era, 1944 to 1960, movie murders tended to cluster around the Plaza, and into Olvera Street, then down Broadway, with the ziggurat of city hall presiding somewhere in the background.

Since the Seventies, murders have been relocated a few blocks west, because gunfire looks more ironic underneath the LA skyline at night, seen best from hills in Temple-Beaudry (that were cleared of houses after 1979).

Let us say, the vaults contain one hundred thousand hours of murder filmed inside this zone of death. Its trace memories are ghosts, like Dolores, who finally agreed to stop haunting her attic. Her grand niece couldn't sleep through all the clatter upstairs at night.

But generally these movie locations look very sedate, much too everyday for crime melodramas. That is, until you add oblique camera angles, low key lighting, tracking shots and ominous music to change quiet neighborhoods into troughs of despair. But consider how little outside the frame will make the final cut. I cannot describe the pleasures of excavating what lies around the frame, around these imaginary murders – the humanity that they need to ignore. Molly walks blindly past a thousand of these movie corpses just on the way to work.

So I have made another decision about my story: The journey through the evidence is more exciting than the crime itself. We want to see everything that is erased to make the story legible. We want to visit Balzac at his desk as he gathers his research to begin a novel. Balzac worked so fast, with something like a quill, as if he were engraving the page; so fast that the top of his desk was worn away by the abrasion of his fat forearm, by the sweep as he wrote.

Preparing for a movie murder is more poignant than deciding which one percent survives into the finale. You see past the frame of the picture, get a context. You understand how the story lies. You circulate inside and outside the characters, see who they are modeled on. You find moments for the actors to build character: how people tilted their head in 1937; how

men with a big gut stood in 1944; how women positioned their hips; how people avoided each other in crowds; how crowds were different when most people were not there to shop.

You study the dentistry of city streets, dissolve the future into the past. Collective urban memory, like guilt, bleeds through, but elegantly, very tangibly. You can actually control how much paranoia, or eroticism belongs in a scene. At last, you arrive at Harry Brown's state of mind; and the reasons for Molly's gift of erasure.

You see erasure writ large. You study the results of misremembering on the zones of death and on the orbits of Molly's life; and on her sister Nettie's life; Jack's; Walt's; Dolores'. And dozens of other characters who exist a foot out of the frame. You can visit and map the unfindable. All at once, terms like witnesses after the fact, simultaneous distraction, erasure, social imaginary are solid.

And with that, Walt's murder will be simple to explain – as you will see inside the DVD-ROM. It makes the plot points legible, in order to hide vaster crimes, larger paradoxes. We sense these like a stare that is not returned, by their evacuation, by the power in their absence.

Finally, Molly loses her house, and is sent to a convalescent home. There she bloats out like a barge, with nothing to hide or remember, and no-one to care. As she dies, her cancer makes war with her body. At last, only the cancer can be fed. So the nurses decide to starve her to death, to reduce her pain. Molly achieves closure with her step-daughter. They speak quickly about what happened to Walt. 'I loved the way he cut his nails,' Molly says hoarsely. 'He dolled himself up before they took him away.' The nurses give her unlimited morphine while she can swallow a bit, then morphine only on her tongue.

But Molly lingers on. She achieves an eternal instant. People begin talking around her, assuming that she has gone into a coma. In fact, she now can only hear, and think matters over.

Jack appears, her first husband. He understands her better than he ever could in life. Jack looks a bit like Walt suddenly, as if they were genetically merged. There is kindness all around Molly.

Finally, she settles upon seven moments that gather the most moss for her. I have collected these, and structured the first tier of the DVD-

ROM around them. The second tier takes us into the context that goes with each moment, over a sixty-six-year period in Los Angeles: the characters she knew; the events and neighborhoods that might bring her story to life. Finally, the third tier winds up where I am now. The I who guides you is now, of course, myself. I inhabit 1986. You are somewhere further on.

The third tier is a meta-text (not a deconstruction). It is the structure of what cannot be found, what Molly decided to forget, what Molly never noticed, what passed before her but was lost to us. It is proof that no novel or film (documentary or fiction) can capture the fullness of how a city forgets, except by its erasures, its evacuations.

To follow a restriction absolutely is practically a modernist device like abstraction or automatism. Here, the restriction is story itself. We assume, for the sake of argument, that all novels and all films erase vital facts within cities. Then we search for the absences that stories leave out, in order to arrive at a fresh narrative: absence to generate desire.

Not that I don't love to see a suspenseful killing. But I hate watching every character's problems resolved at the same time. I hate the lengths that are needed to make all of it 'legible.' Moments like these in films often send me to the bathroom early. I flinch at cases of mistaken identity. For me they are not suspenseful, only peevish. I resent having the moral weight of the world get lifted during a car chase, even during multiple orgasms; and most of all, during a murder. The ballet of it sometimes works for me: so many pieces tossed in the air, then landing like a jigsaw puzzle. But it is a bit too precious compared to balletic anarchy.

Most of all, I enjoy characters who are still loose cannons, not a resolution in sight. Do you remember a 1933 Warner Brothers' film with James Cagney as a gangster in the chips? He dresses like a million, to the nines, but lives unchecked, still a con man. Suddenly, from out of the Great Depression, a 'forgotten man confronts him. He asks Cagney for nickel, just for a cup of coffee. Cagney smirks, digs into his pocket, and barks, "Here's a dollar. Buy yourself a poi-co-later.'"

I'm chuckling just writing this down. Those are my moments for a good murder. Power and paradox are still unresolved. The good-hearted local shit-heel still owns city hall.

That is why I cannot abandon Molly an hour from her leaving earth. Those were indeed her cherished, assigned seven moments. She delivered each one to me, sculpting with her hands as she spoke. I wrote them down, have them in the DVD-ROM. But I made up that death scene. (Even though I have seen people at the instant of their death, as many of us have. The final un-breath is godlike, sculptural.)

Molly manages to outwit her stepdaughter, and keeps her house for another three years. Then, a week after convincing the ambulance driver that he had the wrong address, she tells me finally, in precise detail, how Walt disappeared. It's not at all what I expected: Walt was much more in the hands of strangers than I had ever imagined. I can see his face, and Molly's surprise, much more clearly now. They were in the factory. The factory was her ethnographic escape: Serbs, Japanese, Mexicans, Filipinos; not as many blacks downtown back then.

In what follows, allow me to deliver these possibilities to you. I am mentally traveling through the photos and the clippings as they bleed through. I have placed over a thousand of them on the floor, like a mosaic. The journey through these could be called a picaresque, or a pilgrim's lack of progress, a bildungsroman in which no one learns enough about anything.

Most of all, it is an aporia brimming with evacuated possibility, even the details inside Molly's house. (We've photographed her interiors, taken an inventory of sixty-six years of a city in a state of forgetting.) Molly was right about Walt, by the way. He did wear clothes as if they were made for another species entirely. I'll explain as we go.

Digital Murder: The Aporia

To achieve aporia, the ancient Greeks learned how to lose track of the road itself, to be baffled, trained themselves to give the wrong answer to the wrong question. Both Plato and Socrates argued that aporia was a distinct pleasure, and a virtue. Obviously, it feels more like an eccentric pleasure, an agonism. Its surprise can blind-side you, literally drop you to your knees. It can break your faith in almost anything. Systems of apo-

ria were brought from Central Asia by the Seljuks, and then refined by the Ottomans, to brainwash boys who were selected to become Janissaries. They knew that aporia arrived in your mind from a place so unfindable that you finally give in to it. You are swept forward as if by a crowd (perhaps the reason why Adorno and Horkheimer identify aporia as the pre-Fascist impulse within the decay of the Enlightenment).

I lose my way inside the arguments that followed, for millennia after the Greeks, from hundreds of philosophers, novelists, theorists. Aporia meant paradox so extreme as to cause a physical ache. During the seventeenth century, Neoplatonists within the Jesuit order saw aporia as a simultaneous journey. You moved toward initiation, yet at the same time never actually began at all. You were inside a puzzle based on rules that seemed to change every ten minutes: furious flight, utter stillness, like a hummingbird.

Molly's effect on me is as aporetic as anyone I know, even more than my own mother, who bored me into amnesia with her stories about foreigners coming to kidnap me on the way to school.

Most of all, Molly's felt her marriages were aporia. She couldn't say if her husbands felt the same way. Jack certainly talked too much, generally about himself, and more when he drank. But Walt mostly scratched his lower stomach in a rather obvious way, to stop from saying anything in public that he might regret. As a result, Walt may have had few regrets, but he was a social disaster.

In medieval history, the greatest aporetics were able to induce forgetting at will. One group in twelfth-century Provence realized that aporia proved that God and the devil were equal partners in the universe: When you remembered, they explained, you became God, but simultaneously, for precisely that reason, you had to forget as well, because you were also Satan.

An earlier sect of Aporisiacs, as they are called, left scrolls not far from the Dead Sea Scrolls back in the first century. However, no-one to this day can make heads or tails out of them. Like Molly, these aporetics from the time of Jesus knew that once you wrecked your memory (aporisiasm), once you literally burnt away synapses (with a pointed stick, in some cases), your pituitary secreted a hormone that brought consider-

able pleasure. A Roman aporetic (circa 125 AD) compared it to having sex with yourself, while your mind was convinced that your own body was a stranger.

In storytelling, from the novel to cinema to the computer, all forms of absence and evacuation are aporia. In the history of forgetting, of the erasures within cities (especially Los Angeles), aporia enters urban sociology, along with the traces left by social imaginaries, simultaneous distraction and collective memory as a whole.

As in my quixotic interviews with Molly, the history of forgetting is a pleasure based on absence, on anti-tours, on bleedings through. I could go on: The narrative side of aporia has literally kept me up at night, awoken me at three in the morning. For example, tactical computer games like *Doom* are presumably designed to remove aporia, find closure against the anxieties when the labyrinth gets you lost. But I am convinced that these are, in fact, a labyrinth effect, the pleasures of cheating the program, the myth of absolute freedom in a cybernetic world of absolute predestination.

For computer games and other forms of digital story, in other words, aporia is essential, but we must work very hard, like modernists in 1885, to design new forms to keep the aporetic pleasures alive. And these must be a little fast and dirty, very spontaneous, like a sketchpad on DVD-ROM, in order to locate the absences for unreliable narrators, for aporia.

Consider this: the computer is fundamentally an aesthetics of assets (of database, as my friend Lev Manovich explains). Thus, if ever there were an aporetic model of story, it is the digital. However, we must never trust any use of aporia that suggests it is a problem to be solved. That is like saying that unreliable narrators are a problem, rather than the heart of the modern novel. Too often software cleans out aporia as if it were a virus. I sometimes wonder if the algorithm itself tends to make a loop out of an evacuation. Perhaps we have lost the sense of what gives story presence: Absence.

But in certain ways the computer is not appropriate for story. It cannot deliver the third act, the payoff that books can, or movies. Its attention span is different. It is long-winded and at the same time a hyperac-

tive child. With help from writer-director Norman Klein who is all over the DVD-ROM, and with the superlative leadership of the co-directors Rosemary Comella and director Andreas Kratky, I came up with a model that captures the immersive power of a Balzac novel or a stream-of-consciousness journey through a city (Musil, Joyce, Proust, even Melville – the ship as city – and Virginia Woolf).

The structure works like this:

Of course, first, I must tell you that I do not quite exist – that is, in the *a priori* sense. I am contingent, an invention of Norman Klein. He and I mostly coexist on the page, but once you close the book, not much of me will be following you into the DVD-ROM. I am the opening act, so to speak. But I have been doing my homework. I believe I have found a program that allows me to function as a ghost inside the DVD-ROM, like Dolores, who has been something of a god-send. So if while operating the DVD-ROM you sense another presence breathing down your neck, it will most likely be me.

Now for the structure:

As I mentioned earlier, there are three tiers. The first are the seven moments that Molly remembered when she almost died. You will notice a flow of photographs (a *durée*, if you will) from left to right; and a bleeding through, from back to front. Norman will persist in the corner, a few minutes of video for each moment. Then, below the photos streaming and bleeding through, a band of texts crawls with more information.

The sum of these will be a visual, interactive radio program, where you will finally get the last act in which I begin to reveal the unenviable Walt's final days. Of course, it is not me revealing it. Jack left a diary from 1959 to 1961. Molly inherited it, along with Jack's shoes and his suits.

Put it this way: the seven moments are a kind of modern novel on screen with hundreds of photos and Norman as narrator. You might say they are also a docu-fictional movie. But Jack's story is the land of noir. His orbit is closer to the noir movie structure that you know so well, and of which you will find hundreds of examples throughout the DVD-ROM.

The second tier is more like a contextualization. I like to compare it with Henry James' notion of fragrant. What sort of information would you need to know to fill in the absences left by the first tier? After all, only

seven moments in sixty-six years? Thus, in Tier 2, you will learn about other characters in Molly's story, like her sister Nettie. You will learn much more about the neighborhoods within Molly's orbit; and within Jack's orbit.

If the first tier is dominated by photographs, the second integrates a great many newspaper clippings, scanned in as they looked in the newspaper morgue. Each tier, then, comments on a specific medium that tries to make the city intelligible as it erases, collectively forgets, survives from day to day. The history of forgetting is a distraction from the basic reality of urban life in Los Angeles, its quotidian power of survival.

The third tier is the aporia of media itself. It is dominated by film and video imagery, by a vast 'ironic index' of what Molly left out, forgot, couldn't see. It samples from the back-story that gets lost when the movie or novel is made legible. Essentially, ninety percent must be erased to make sense. Tier Three (in)completes a 'making of' so vast that there is really no point in boiling it down, like a tomato sauce, into a feature-length film. All the interviews are gesture-driven, anecdotal: the kind of material novelists and screenwriters use, and actors study, in order to enter their characters.

It is an unmaking, an over-making, a bricolage, an aporia of story itself. At the same time, Tier 3 is simply another genre of story. I am quite convinced that the computer and our media economy have shifted the point when stories begin. Now, we actually enter at the moment *before* the movie is actually shot, *before* the novel is actually drafted. We sit by the side of Balzac at his writing table, as he gathers his notes and immerses himself until the novel pours out as if he were living inside five hundred bodies at once. We look at his face as he imagines its entirety. For an instant, he is all story, and all places. In the end, he will make this sensation into a legible novel.

But on the computer, we don't have to make sacrifices on behalf of the legible. We can stay in an immersive world, and play with ten variations of aporia – the aporetic in drama, documentary film, the novel. We become archaeologists of story and city simultaneously. We also run through trace memories of hundreds of murder movies shot in Molly's orbits, in Zones of Death. We become simultaneously the omniscient

narrator and the unreliable narrator, as well as urban archaeologists on evacuations in Los Angeles between 1920 and 1986.

After all, aporia is most of all the instrument of memory itself. Its pleasure is a kind of memento mori, the ache of mortality. Thus, I can call the entire project an aporia. It was conceived, designed, completed and published within nine months. It is a product of 2002, just as I am a ghost from 1986.

I hear the echo of the first moment. Sammy has failed to make it home again. He is sleeping on the lawn, in front of the house that Norman Klein used to own. My dog struggles to not launch into a howl, as Sammy goes into a snore that could awaken the ghosts.

The rooflines of Angelino Heights look a bit like Algiers. The streets could pass for the Midwest in 1925. The Hollywood Freeway roars back. I want to keep speaking to you, but my face seems to be disappearing. Wait for me.