

S I G

N A T

U R E

R A M

I C K

My scrawl, my blood oath and honor,
the rendering of identity, scratch and
loop, figure and refine, a southpaw's
bane—what's my contract with this
earth, what are my defineable traits,
what's my claim of responsibility. One's
never owned a comprehensive sense of
self. One's never been convicted of fraud.
We're twice undone when we think we're
only half what they suspect we are. You
signed your death warrant when you
agreed to be born, as did I, as did one, as
did she and he and they and all of those
others, as did everyone—we can't wriggle
out from under our destinies (slippery
or swarthy or wiry beasts that they be).
Time doesn't disappear the ink or the
surface as much as it disappears the vital
context, what makes the promises count,
what gives our words their meaning—if
our words have meaning, if there's a
larger or universal context beyond our
local contexts, if promises are ever made

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for any time but now. Soon I'll have
cursived my last claim. Soon I'll have
etched my last sternum, my last cliff, my
last cave. What we hold, we've always
held. Prick the palm, shake the friend. I
stand before you as an ordinary man (of
course, I don't actually stand anywhere,
since I'm already gone), committed to
language, or at least one language, the
language of my father, the language of
my mother, the language of my sister,
the language of my brother, unless we
have access to another language, the one
no one speaks, or at least not fluently, a
language uninfluenced (unthreatened) by
all other languages, but my commitment
to my language doesn't do me any good
now. Close the book, mute the dream. A
mark unmade by neglect, or a mark too
shallow to last. One should've chiseled
one's abstractions into a diamond ring.
The dinosaur knows nothing of the robot
and the clouds move as if they're unaware

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of my boredom. Soon I'll have swept my last sky. Soon I'll have ushered my last extinction. What we love, we'll always love. Slip me something at once joyous and fatal. You stabbed me with life. One curlicues one's latest failure, an apoplexy of try—the naked self in a thundering crash—and they don't forgive someone who won't accept consensus. Pride is a thicket; humility, a bog. Or maybe it's the other way around. One doesn't script one's own flaws, or one could be the very author of one's tragedies. The viral context wasn't what you wanted from time—what you wanted was respect upon which to sleep. What we want is acknowledgment of our right to fail in spectacular fashion, even if we're simply not (spectacular or in fashion), even if failure's as overrated as success, even if one's happy to sign off on the next, on what's determined to happen despite one's overdeveloped sense of caution,

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caution that can look like common sense, that can resemble cowardice. We don't know how to prepare for personal catastrophe. We can't foresee what's not foreseeable. Look at one feeling sorry for oneself—one has nothing for which to feel sorry for oneself except for one's inclination to feel sorry for oneself. This is life's trundle bed, one's crib, your bed of nails, their cradle, her murphy bed, his sarcophagus, life's lower bunk. This is the way out—one trying to hide in plain sight. The negatives know bravado. I've whittled the handcuffs, I've wickered the throne. Maybe one should sign off on one's life in semen, underlined in blood. Or maybe one should sign off in blackest bile, outlined in tears. We're contracted—most of us—to survive, to stick around till some bitter end, to stay busy and make things happen and do our best, to be clever and compassionate and dutiful, to see life through with basic

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decency and gratitude and panache. I'm as dubious of my equilibrium as I am of roil, and I'm as weary of my churn as I am of stasis. Here's my detritus swept into a corner, what's left of a life fought, a life pampered by peripheral intellect, a life strung overtight by obsessive flex. We don't desire a world of sanitized corners or a world of soiled sinks. Death rides the showhorse, not the workhorse. Out of the constant earth come periodic cicadas and jerusalem crickets, bacteria and our drinking water, parasites and greenery, raptured concepts and thicker concerns, perennial ideas of blossom loss, what's been long obfuscated but soon becomes too transparent. If one were edged toward any tone of brilliant (noticably beyond pedestrian), wouldn't someone attuned and aware of it be telling others of it, telling them there's something well worth attending to over there, telling them with confidence and

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purpose, with a resounding and tireless anthem-call, a solarium's brightness of bell-hound and cone-trust, of tonic-verve and ascension—thus there must not be some rare sound of value in that space. I would climb the ladder to the greater attic if I had the lung-reach—instead I'll restack last fall's maple cubes. One structures one's pastimes around the pleasures of the oblique. One puts one's stamp on her hip. Threnodies in one's daydreams, dirges in one's praise. What's over there stays over there and what's in here curls up at night. I don't at all mind eradicating sculpture from our quad or furniture from our sleeping quarters. I don't care at all about entertainment on the head of a pin or on the face of the moon or on any hand-held tell-it-like-it-is-or-ain't window-upon-this-world. Loneliness arrives hand-in-hand with standards. Standards, one admits, can be too stringent, too democratic, too private,

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too commercial, too inherited, too zen, too unilateral, too sticky. They're very unadorable and seldom beloved. My ego has led me away from healthier egos and I'm content killing time on the back stoop of this long-condemned house of words that wants little or nothing to do with me. Here abides a man who will be forgotten, as one must be forgotten, as you'll be forgotten, as will he, and she, and they, and all of those, all of this forgetting in memory of Clive Wearing, all of this memory in acknowledgment of Merlin (and of those like Merlin, and of those like Clive Wearing), a gift to be forgotten while one's still unforgettable, unforgettable by someone or other, until they're also gone and forgotten or have passed by at night going the opposite way (or along their perpendicular paths), or they were invented for the sake of comparison—one and one's one lovingly concocted for the cheap thrills of contrast.

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I stood in front of the old mirror in new
candlelight vulnerable to your scrutiny,
to the vagaries of your discernment, to
be dismissed or dismantled, to be loved
and someday lamented, my frame no
excuse for my core, my core no cauldron
of shame—one's caldera no vestige of
force, her image uncooperative, his mood
unkempt, their visages as vacant as lots.
We've been to the fortune fair and won
things. When did I up and misplace my
bethlehem conscience? What does it
mean to turn the other cheek when one's
only enemy is one's self? Arousal of the
heart, arousal of the mind—what are
these without the scintillated shell?
Mortal life with unlimited imagination:
take a bad situation and make it worse.
Write my sins on my skin and then flay
me alive—I'll put no blame on you; no
stain will settle upon your mythological
bones. We can fail one another since we
must unavoidably fail one another, since

failure's necessary for free will, as we've known since our very first spark in the very first cavern, if not sometime long before. Capture the look, cue the pale fizz. If one were to bleed out in some ignoble fashion—having done something stupid or been one of that day's victims of chance—one may want to confess a noble bronze moment or two across one's silver-soul life, one's golden silence too private to post and one's honorable mentions too public for reprise. In that field of endeavor, heroes aren't allowed to die twice, but the rest of us can each die thousands of little deaths. We die but one true death, obviously—I'll die but one true death, you'll die but one true death, she'll die but one true death, he'll die but one true death—I died but one death. Script, whether continuous or hampered by voids, whether scratched or etched or spat, whether contrived or dutifully received, whether dictated or

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conscripted, will always stir the nethers, will forever reek of alchemy, till Death parts the sunny waters, till Love storms the empty castle, till one (any one of us) disappears. I've carved meat and petals into my slate. Though this might be one's sleepless day, one could drift into snowy waves, into cannon surprise, into one's defiant reveries. You might come along, or you might know someone who might, or you might know someone who might know someone who might, coming along being a natural human trait, one shared by joiners and recalcitrants alike. Or one could feral one's solitude. Looks as if we scrubbed our pitch dark. Here's heaven's craw and here's that tightening wheel. Looks as if we chapped our quarry. What I want is beyond your giving—way past chasms bridged, far askance of seasonal weight—something like the lost breaths after radical dreaming, after poor ideas gone scrounging, after the incandescent

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touch of perfect distance. One's heart was always in the only place one's heart could be, right or bad, selfish or aimless. We withstood—at the deliverance of an amaranthine dusk—God's felon wind, and time flowed above, as here we wait. Too many good words get in the way of Life. Dwindle your days as you see fit, observing others live their lives, through windows or on screens or in city streets, we watch, we loiter, we pass by, we linger, we get glimpses into houses at twilight, we sit in total darkness and peer into apartments across the street, we gaze at others in hotel lobbies, at airports, in markets, when we feel confident we're going unnoticed, occasionally locking eyes with another overconfident gazer, we glance, we stare, we peer, we ogle, we imagine depth of thought and breadth of experience, we tinker with temptation while we broadcast nonchalance, our old quest for a meadow through tunnels of

trees, for a reciprocating first star at night,
our desires normally unmet, one's kettle
water with unrequited steam, light upon
surfaces that won't shine, her purity upon
his purity, my squint into the ocean's sun,
we pour our looks over crushed ice, we
stir our spirits with plastic swords, we
sunbathe in intellectual cyclones, all to
expend and extend excess time, time not
needed for anything else, adjusted to
scale, wasted as attitude, wordy angst as
embarrassing as ribbed puns, days given
over to scamps. You lust for a long coda,
one that would allow as much reflection
as sorrow, as much validation as claunch,
one for posterity and one for laughs,
stretched by willpower and as good as
the risen gods, your grip on the shifter at
lift off, your eyes on the world builder,
what looks like victory but is really just
passage, movement toward rest, a good
life with a dignified death better than a
superior life with a horrific death, or a

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supreme moment of transcendence worth more than a thousand seasons of effortful competence, his hand on her thigh, her eyes on his road, my mind in the mire, your heart in the lurch, one's curse in the margins, their studs in their stories, our babes in our tears, we've struggled through tangles of care and we're stuck in our thoughts as if they make a snare, my inscription as a flowering vine along the hedge's gleam, a shy copse or a grove more enticing than a wilderness. Quiet are the domestic gaps—spaces without attention—honey-lens and pulse-smelt, what we know still as consensual, what we feel is real. I'm around the corner ahead of us and it looks like around the corner behind us—the leaves rustle, the ground shakes, the eaves rust, the species soldiers onward toward its doom—we've found our virilent peace in momentary distractions, the many ways we can fool ourselves, the many ways we can zone

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into pleasure within the violence of our artistic industries. In these last millennia, I give my word that I won't tarry, that I won't flinch, that I'll forgive everyone of everything, I swear, I'll tend to the task at hand (or tasks, if there be more than one—there are so often more than one), I'll do whatever I must for the poor of spirit and the disenfranchised, for the beleaguered and harassed, for those of sloppy send-offs and those of slipknot precision, for craftsman and diva, for the oversensitive and the underwhelmed, or I'll laze in the warmth of a universal star as history closes its curtains and turns out the lights, it's perpetually my birthday, it's amusement fathoms deep, you'll be me and I'll be you or it won't work, what promises to never need promises, what's bedswat pure, what's overclothes sturdy, what made us search for shadows in the diminishing sunslant, what brought odd closure at the intense edge of evening.