Jim passed the blurred green road sign that read KETCHUM: 502 MILES. He held the ball in his hand and his fingers saw the red stitching in the dark car as the rain swallowed the road and pressed it down to the old places of the earth where nothing still roamed freely in the dark.

Ernest drank. He started drinking yesterday morning and was still drunk with yesterday's alcohol.

"Way up she rises, early in the morning," Ernest said between drinks. "Way up she rises. Way up she rises. Early in the morning."

Jim had not thought of stopping him. 'Drunk for two days,' Jim thought. 'Guess he needs it.'

Ernest shifted in his seat. "I am not outright drunk, Jim," he said.

"What would you call it?" Jim asked.

"I am writer-drunk," he said.

"I thought you only drank when you wrote," Jim said.

"Typing words has little to do with writing, Jim. You use your mind to place your pitches; a writer uses his life to move words."

“And the drink?”

“It greases the works, Yankee pitcher,” he said. “Yankee pitcher. You have made it, Jim. No more working at the lumber yard. No more pitching to a dead father in a blue tarp. It is over now. It is now right now.”

Jim’s fingers twitched at the words.

“No more early mornings all alone,” he said.

“No more,” Ernest said. He drank. “Yes, of course. I drink.” He drank. “I drink,” he repeated. He drank again. “Yes. Drink some more,” he said.

“No more waiting for the next day,” Jim said. He looked at Ernest. “Yesterday is gone,” Jim said.

“Yesterday is not something to hide behind, Jim,” he said. “Hiding and the retention of fear is not part of a man’s existence.”

“Fear has its uses. I now fear women. And I will avoid their lies.” The offering was involuntary.

Ernest drank. The bottle poured itself into him and it felt warm in his throat. “It is not fear,” he said. He drank. “No, Jim. Do not be misled. Fear is the rock a man throws at his enemy when he

knows no better weapon. It is primitive, ape-like behavior to call it fear."

"But I do fear them. Charlotte was my own ideas of beauty. She was what I imagined in a woman before I ever touched a woman."

"It is not fear," Ernest said.

"What do you call it?"

"It is the fundamental frequency of absence, a tuning of your expectations. What you call 'fear' is the absent frequency that all minds hear on their own, anticipating and filling in the void between the notes the world gives within its stuttering symphonies of experience. It gives the note at a man's birth and after the attack—that awkward initial clash of sound—the flux of the world's scale must follow even days such as these when a war between ideas presses our nation and shifts our meanings along the scale. And if a man is a man of his mind he will soon recognize the world's ancient tonal center, and while it offers many overlapping scales through its wars and its women and its illusions of greatness, a man will hear the absent frequency so often throughout his life that when he comes to his death he will say to himself, 'I heard that note coming' and the world will play its crudely obvious note in his heart as it beats its last."

Jim sat quiet. He understood why he was the audience to the artist's thoughts. Novelists, poets, lyricists—men of the world—would take life for such a theater as the one offered inside the car as the rain beat on the world. Jim took no comfort in his understanding.

“It is my mind,” Jim stated, “finishing a truncated experience. Finishing a song?”

“Not a song. A collection of notes that we must group through our recognition and dismissal of sound and meter and rhythm. Within your own thoughts of that woman you have already tempered your rotation of the loudness of your experience. This morning it shook your mind with fatal decibels. And your body resonated with your hate and betrayal. The sound moved through your arm, producing the energy of a one-hundred-five mile-per-hour pitch. You now fear your capacity for such energy, but do not resist it. All men—whether men of sport or music or words—maintain an inherent resonant frequency tuned to the inaudible ancient decibel of the world and the great men know how to summon and harness the sound and press it through the instrument of their choice.”

Jim drove. The rain fell in furious waves against the car and Jim tapped his finger on the seams of the baseball with the back beat of the rain.

“It is more than icebergs and words,” Ernest said. “I gave the reader points of familiarity. I trained my ear to listen for the common speech of everyday conversations and my eye to look at the easily observed details in a hill or a road or a group of men marching. It is in these mundane details that great writing dwells: as I created a scene or conversation that resembled actual life, the reader suspended their perception that they were reading a fictional conversation; rather, they believed they had heard the conversation earlier that afternoon at the market or in a diner. And in that moment, I achieved a gateway into their minds, because through the involuntarily registered

details of a conversation or hill or road or group of men marching, I could tap into a self-persuading pattern of anticipated completion. I could make them fill in the words I removed because they were there in the scene. I could avoid writing ‘he said’ because they were listening to the conversation from their own memory. I could dismiss the verbosity of the dogmatic Victorian standard because the mind does not need words to access memories. It needs smells and tastes and sights and sounds and I could access these senses with a terse word. And as they designed a pattern of expected completion to my plot with their set of anticipations, they afforded me the opportunity to upset their expectations. To take life when mercy was anticipated. To render life tragic in spite of apparent heroism. I knew if I was going to write well that I must align my characters and dialogue and plot with a natural syncopation of the common man before I could earn the right to upset his views of himself and his world and his faith and present a new anticipation to which he could graft himself.”

Jim pushed the car through the water, and it made sense to him. “Jesus wept,” Jim said.

Hemingway drank. He nodded his head.

“Exactly,” Ernest said. “Jesus wept. Offer a man of significance and let him act truly; it will align with another man’s expectations, and it will shock him for he has seen the quality within himself but has yet to listen to it well.”

Jim thought about baseball and the conversation he had in the phone booth yesterday. “How did writing find you? No one is born as a writer, just like no is born a ball player.”

“You are wrong. It does take a birth. Writing and baseball are the same thing, Jim. It begins as a game you play as a kid. Discovering words and testing your ability to not simply tell a story, but tell an emotion and anticipate a mother or father’s expectations and match them and exceed them. You find your love for hitting a ball with a stick, and you find you are good at it and you try to send the ball past the cars parked along the street, then past the next set of cars, and soon you don’t see the cars at all, just the far blue sky stretching to eternity, waiting for your offering. And by that offering you judge yourself and you discover your life and you think life, if it is a good life, is a metaphor for baseball and for writing. But later, once the game has you, it consumes you. I once played at it, but as I grew older, it played inside of me with my set of expectations. At first I went mad with it; drunk with my lust for going beyond myself. That first summer—a season where my results were perfected beyond my expectations—I drank late into the night and into the early morning, writing and thinking—playing in an endless field where the center field fence was far from me but I could reach beyond it if I rotated at the hip of my experiences and extended my hands to the thought before me and through the thought before me, hitting it squarely and refusing to pull it; and, when enough words had passed through my fingertip, I found myself crucified: my marrow pierced and my sinew broken; as I killed off bits of myself each night over my typewriter, I found myself reborn to the absent, resounding nothing that waited on the next empty white page at the foot of my chair. The more I opened my veins and bled my life blood out, the more the rebirth rendered my removal from the world around me, and at the same time, created a craving to look at it once again: to smell its forests and listen to its rivers and see if I had smelled and heard it well. And after I did this for several months I realized I could not continue such a pace. I started at only five hundred words a day, but they

were true. As I pressed myself, I found more true words, and the five hundred words turned into one thousand words. Then twenty five hundred. Then five thousand. Five thousand. Six thousand words a day. I finished the work in four week and it was good. But I could not write a true word for many months. And I learned the mechanism behind baseball and writing superstitions and why the great players had at least one. Why players refused to touch the chalk along the third baseline and why they would not wash their socks. Why a writer wears a certain jacket or smokes or drinks or only writes in the morning. It is an imitation of the madness of singularity that he needs but cannot sustain in the known world for any duration of time. And I learned how to live in a structured madness. How to make everything I did serve my writing: the way I spoke and the way I did not write and the way I did write. Good writing, like baseball, is found in what a man does when he is not writing just as much as it is found when he puts himself to the task."

He drank.

"I wrote because I believed there was something lurking beneath the white page that rolled through my typewriter. It was a thing I could find if I stared long enough into the empty, white, void in front of my eyes, and if I forced my hands to write one true word among a hundred words I saw it for a moment, but it was fragile creature—forcing a name upon it made it vanish into the depths of that white page and it would be many days before it would trust me enough to come to the surface. It was never a creature to hunt as a prize or to capture and encase in a box. The wild nothing that dwells under the rough white surface of the page is Ahab's whale: a beautiful power of nothingness—of absence—that drives a man's sense of himself to madness with its discourteous breaching on his known waters and its indifferent ramming against his most trusted

hulls of security and truths that offer his syncopation. And, like Ahab, I loved my white, absent-nothing, for it took me to a level of mad singularity that I could never have achieved through charts and the known world that invites interruptions with its insistence on keeping a record of past days. On the countless white pages I have filled with my words—words that have kept a record of yesterday—the white nothing still lurks, refusing a name and a place in the halls of thought. Even now it lurks on the page, and if a man finds an inclination to seek it out, he will find a degree of wisdom and madness in the inversion of roles. For so many years I believed I sought it out. I was the captain. It was eluding me. Now, I believe it marked me and sought me before the world fell from grace into the depraved rotation of hell that recycles a man's soul like so many drops of water until it concedes to the fact that nothing must come to pass before all things are made new. I was the elusive one. I ran. I hid. It plumbed my depths and cursed my name. My writing was a confession to the fact that I cannot elude the nothing lurking beneath the white page. No man can elude it. It seeks him to the ends of his dark corners and across the reaches of his ocean. Ahab never possessed the white whale—it was never a matter of Ahab's whale; it was always the White Whale's Ahab. I was the White Whale's prize. As I submitted to it and let it take me below the surface and drown my breath with its waters, I found few things in the world compared to the White Whale's molestation of my anticipations and intentions and senses. And now I am an old man who cannot float in the great damn wide realm of the White Nothing and wait for the sound of absence to fill my mind's ears and speak words locked away from me by the world. It will no longer swallow me whole and take me to fathoms within myself and spew me back out on the clean white page with true words."

He paused. He drank.

Jim pushed the car through the desperate waters. They were only ten hours away from home, but he wasn't sure Ernest was alright. Perhaps it was the long drive. Or the rain. 'Damn guy has lost it,' Jim thought. 'The man is talking about a whale raping him underwater.'

"It seeks you, Jim," Ernest said, as if he knew Jim's mind.

"You, too, are its prize. I does not sleep and it knows your name. You run from it to your own destruction." He drank. He drank with long pulls on the bottle and after he drank he sucked the surviving red wine through the moustache of his beard like a whale pulls food through its baleen.

"Its prize," he repeated. He slumped against the seat and fell away into his dreams of the lions.

Jim reached for the radio and tuned the game in. He knew it helped Ernest. The Yankees were in the sixth.

Jim watched the man who ushered in American prose sleep soundly in his seat. It did not occur to Jim to wonder what the lions and Ernest did in the dreams. Rather, his mind settled on his future. As the watercolor yellow lane markers cut beneath his car, Jim dreamed of a major league pitching career with his waking eyes. He imagined the guys sitting on the bench; Mantle and Maris; Whitey and Yogi. Saw Casey leaning against the dugout steps with his right leg as the sound of sixty thousand people filled the stadium as if it were a Steinway; each shuffle of the feet and crack of a peanut and cheer pulled on the keys of the place until the harmony of baseball was

all that a man could recognize. And it that collection of chaos, a single rhythm would rise in Jim's mind: he would see a blue tarp playing with a gentle breeze behind home plate. An expanse wider than any ocean, waiting for a pitch that could not miss. As Jim cut through the beating rain, he realized the failure of American fathers could never be placed on their shoulders. Theirs was a burden no one prepared them for; as men they were the gods of war though as fathers they were mortals stripped of their power, and the sons of all blue tarp fathers are perhaps always destined to be the kinless kings of the rain who sit on a throne of solitude in a world that renders their face into a gallery of pictures.