

William the II



by Virginia Austin

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Front Cover: Billy Duffy
Back Cover: Billy Duffy

Acknowledgements

- Lyrics in Act III, *This Must Be the Place (Naïve Melody)* – Talking Heads
- Lyric also in Act III, *Don't Let Me Get Me* - Pink

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You are the bows from which your children
as living arrows are sent forth.
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite;
and He bends you with His might
that his arrows may go swift and far.
Let our bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;
For even as He loves the arrow that flies,
so He loves also the bow that is stable.

Kahlil Gibran
The Prophet





ACT I

From the east a sudden riot in the breeze rose up to swipe the hat of the man standing outside of the library. Immediately he left where he was at to chase it down to its new place of rest. But when he reached out a hand the wind whisked it away a few more feet. To the knavery he gave a tip of his head and set out again. This time he netted it with an authoritative step and returned to whence he began.

The knitted blue Salvation Army threads now back upon his head he looked down to the one treasure that he had left. And there below him the boy curved up his lips into a dimpled smile of innocence. The warmth of that made him forget the chill in the air. The warmth of that made him forget the past. The warmth brought a few lines into his mind which he spoke in measured breaths.

“The windy city, though not for the wind. Though the wind is not without a sweet or bitter voice. In summer a friend, in winter a foe, but allegiance it holds to none at all. So keep your hat tight upon your head or . . .”

William searched about his father’s eyes and awaited the next line with all the thirsted roots of youth.

“For the life of me, William, I can’t seem to put another word to this,” the father said as he slowly shook his head and stroked his sable-silvered beard.

The boy ruminated for a moment, and then offered his own thoughts. “So keep your hat tight upon your head, or to it you will

no longer be wed.”

“Son, within me a question eternal the lines of rhyme. For could any a verse be true that had to beg for words of new?”

“You didn’t like it, huh?” the boy said as he crumpled his face.

The father smiled and with a gloved hand ran it over the top of his son’s hat.

“No, it was terrific. I’m just teasing you. Listen, what do you say to us ducking in here and hiding ourselves from this unfriendly voice.”

The boy nodded and followed his father through the arched doorway of the library. They walked down the terrazzo flooring of the corridor, stopping at the Grand Lobby. William leaned over the oculus and stared down at the cosmogram on the lower level. He traced out a golden line of DuSable’s journey to the crescent words of Harold Washington’s inaugural speech. Then, he put his arms out like propeller blades and began to twirl around in the magnificence of it all. When he finally came out of the spin he wondered a question to his father.

“Dad, how come we never came here before? It’s like we’re in some great castle.”

“Did you know I used to work here?” the father said as he walked the perimeter of the question.

“Really?”

“Yes, in truth. In fact, this is where I first met your mother. She worked only a few blocks from here and would stop by every day at lunchtime. I was assigned to the Literature and Language Department on the seventh floor. She would pull a book from the stacks and sit down at a table all by herself. At ten to one, she would close the cover and head back to work. And after she left, I would take her book from the cart and place it back in the stacks.”

“What did she like to read?”

“Oh, your mother was a voracious reader.”

“What does voracious mean?” William questioned.

“It means ravenous, or greedy. Like a wolf. Yes, your mother was like a wolf when she read. Her eyes would dart from page to page as she devoured each word. And her fingers never seemed to leave the corners of those books. No sooner did she flip a new page than another was in hand. It was just an incredible sight, son. I remember at first I thought she was just sort of scanning the print because I couldn’t imagine anyone being able to read that quickly. I—”

The boy eagerly cut in over his father’s words, rushing in his own question to unfold the tale. “So, what did you say to her, huh? Huh, what did you say?”

“Well, I knew I needed a plan to win her heart. But I knew her heart was inside of those books. So, I began to read all of them myself. Not as quickly as your mother, of course. No one could read as quickly as that. Every time I finished a new story, your mother would already be three or four books ahead of me. So I decided on a Friday. This way I would have the weekend to catch her.”

“What did you read?”

“Oh, into my mind that title arrives with more haste than the day of your birth. It was *All’s Well That Ends Well*.”

“Who wrote it?”

“Ah, in that question my heart doth faint for I have been remiss in bringing the words of life’s most true musings to thine ears.”

The father paused and looked down. Gazing up, the expectant countenance of a child awaited for the answer to erase the question on his face.

“The Bard from Stratford-upon-Avon. The greatest of all those who have ever written or those who will ever attempt to write. The playwright of all ages. The author of seven score

nineteen sonnet and poem.”

The boy sighed heavily and rolled his eyes. “Dad, come on, just tell me. Who wrote it?”

“William Shakespeare, my boy. William Shakespeare.”

“We’re both Williams, aren’t we?”

“Yes, we are. And for today, your birthday, I shall call you William the II. That is, my liege, if you do not mind?”

The boy straightened his back and shoulders proud, edging a little on his toes to find more height. The father wrapped a gentle wing around his scion and guided him off to the elevators. When the doors parted, they exited at the seventh floor and found a table. And no sooner had William claimed a chair than he popped up and disappeared among the stacks. After turning around to ensure his son was out of sight, the father reached down to his sock and withdrew his wealth into his lap. He counted seven dollars, returned the money to its cotton vault, and then set his head into his hands.

Anon, the boy returned. Tilting the book on its spine, he opened it to the middle and his eyes began to flutter about the print. Still at rest, the father counted the rustling of five pages before removing his head from his hands and looking across the table. William peeked over the edge of the butterscotch cover and waited for his father to speak. But his father stared on without verse—for a moment just harvesting all the features of his wife that had grown into his son.

The structure of his boy’s face was all hers, and he was glad that the carbon of lineage had bled through on that page. The cheekbones were less masculine and not as pronounced as his. They had been smoothed out, effeminate at first look, but on second blush just simply endearing. The nose was round, not flattened to the face like his. And he had her eyes, though not in shape, but with a sparkle of curiosity and a quest for knowledge. They were wide to the world and with a depth of acceptance. A

depth he knew the world would keep trying to slowly fill with mistrust as it would incessantly and interminably promise then disappoint. Right there, at that moment of despair, he wished he could just rewrap this little boy in the package from which he came and wait until the world found a heart of change.

“Dad. Hello, dad. Are you there?” William said as he waved a hand about.

“Yes, I’m sorry. I was just drifting away. You know how I get sometimes. I see you found Mr. Shakespeare.”

“Oh, it’s wonderful. You know, it’s almost like I’m listening to you.”

“Well I do thank thee for thy compliment, William the II. But I must readily admit to the guilt of plagiarism if our words ever find confluence.”

“Huh?” the boy said as he tilted his head.

A visitor’s voice broke into their conversation and both turned to the woman as she placed a hand on the father’s shoulder.

“Excuse me, sir. I’m sorry but you’ll have to find something to read if you would like to remain here.”

After her words, the boy immediately plunged his head into the book and reemerged with a line to speak.

“How called you the man you speak of, madam?”

She removed her hand from his shoulder and looked to the boy.

“I called him, sir, I think, didn’t I?”

The boy reentered the book, taking the next line as his reply.

“He was famous, sir, in his profession.” The boy shook his head, and then retracted the line by inserting his own words. “I mean he is famous, madam, in his profession. And it is his great right to be so.”

A smile drew across her face and she glanced to the father before turning back to the boy. “I am sorry, then. For I did not

know I was in the presence of such a famous man.”

“He is excellent, indeed, madam. The king very lately spoke of him, admiringly and mourningly.” The boy paused and set the book down, asking, “What does mourningly mean?”

“Well, it means that the person is actually dead, son.”

“Oh,” the boy said in a trailing voice. “I guess mom is mourningly then.”

The woman spoke softly in an aside to the father.

“I’m really sorry, sir. I didn’t know that this was your son. It’s just that we get a lot of people in here who . . . and you know sometimes we don’t know which are . . . Well, you know.”

“It’s all right. I understand. My clothing does belie my standing in society. Actually, my son was speaking a little too modestly. It is he who is the famous one. For this is William the II,” the father said as he finished with a circling of his hand toward his son.

“William the II,” she said in greeting.

“Madam,” he replied.

“My deepest apologies. May I take leave?”

The boy glanced to his father. And with a nod the father encouraged him to another line. The boy rushed another look into his book, tracing each verse in pursuit of a proper farewell. Finally, without discovery, he waved his hand.

“Yes, yes.”

“I thank you, William the II,” she said as she bowed and took her leave.

“No, wait,” he called out. “I haven’t found anything, yet.”

“She’s gone,” the father said as he shook his head and grinned.

“Oh,” he uttered dejectedly, then fell back onto the page.

As William read on, his father read his lips. And as the boy repeated himself, the father found himself speaking along.

“Moderate lamentation is the right of the dead, excessive

grief the enemy to the living.”

Hearing the echo, William looked up.

“What does that mean?”

“He’s saying that you shouldn’t cry too much for the dead because it can kill all the happiness in your life that is still to come.” And as the words left him, he realized that he himself had shuttered an ear to the advice. The face of his wife appeared briefly and when it dissolved he nodded to the book. “If you look a little farther down, I think there are a few more verses that are just as valuable.”

William scrolled a finger down the page and his father recited them aloud.

“Be thou blessed, William, and succeed thy father in manners as in shape! Thy blood and virtue contend for empire in thee, and thy goodness share with thy birthright! Love all, trust a few, do wrong to none; be able for thine enemy rather in power than use, and keep thy friend under thy own life’s key. Be checked for silence, but never taxed for speech. I can’t remember it all but I think it went something like that.”

“It went exactly like that, dad,” William said with a face illumined in adoration. However, he soon dimmed as these words also eluded him.

“What’s wrong?” his father questioned as he immediately took witness to the candle flicker in his son’s face.

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“That’s okay,” the father replied as he scooted his chair out and stood. “Why don’t you think about it for a few minutes while I go to the restroom.”

“All right,” the boy answered, placing his eyes back upon the lines and his mind back in thought.

“William,” he said, trying to regain the attention of his son. “William.”

“It is William the II, father.”

“Art thou ascending the throne before thy time?”

“Just for today, dad. Could I be king for just today? It is my birthday. Just for today, huh? Then you can go back to being king, okay?”

The father exhaled heavily to suppress the tears that had begun to well up in his eyes. He looked down for a moment and suddenly found himself unclothed and unarmed before this emperor—stripped of the fantasy he had created for himself and his son. A fantasy that was quickly evaporating into the reality that he was not at all providing for his now eleven-year-old boy. They still lived in a car. It was a ‘92 rusted out Buick station wagon that he could still remember buying an hour before he came to pick up his wife for their first date. A ‘92 Buick purchased with part of the money that was handed back to him after he had handed over his rare vintage Martin Handcraft Committee trumpet—befittingly though he remembered thinking, as Miles Davis was exactly nine years at rest on that very day. A ‘92 Buick he used one year later to carry his newborn home from the hospital and then used to drive back out to the cemetery to place flowers on the mother’s fresh grave.

And the boy, the boy who had kept his threadbare life together with threads of joy, hadn’t been in school for the last three months. Pulled out once again as the rent was four months past due, his last job nineteen weeks lost and the apartment locks changed for what seemed like the hundredth time. But he quickly cast the thoughts aside and somewhere somehow found the strength to put back on his apocryphal smile whose ruse was only being sustained by this beautiful boy. Reaching out, he placed a hand on the child’s and squeezed tight.

“Yes, for today and ever after. You will be the new king.”

He looked over his son and in him saw the wisdom that arrives in the so very few long before their body is ready to fulfill their greatness.

“Good,” the boy replied.

“Okay. Well, I still have to find that restroom. Now, don’t move from this floor. It’s a big library and I wouldn’t want to lose you in it. All right?”

The father made his exit and took the elevator to the third floor. Inside the bathroom he found himself alone before the mirror and peered into the reflection. It returned with a man much older than his forty-four years. It returned with a man in a coat of another and yet of another. He turned his hands so that his palms were facing him. And although the lines seemed longer and the troughs cut deeper than he last remembered, it was the grime of the streets smeared across the skin that was more unsettling. Reaching a hurried hand over to the towel dispenser, he rent two sheets, turned on the faucet and began to scour the filth into the sink. Just as he finished, a man walked in and tossed a reproachful glance before moving on to the urinal.

“When did they start doing this?”

The father looked around and soon realized that he was the one to whom the address was being made.

“Doing what?” the father inquired.

“This, you know. Having people handing out towels,” the man said as he threw a quick look over his shoulder.

“Oh, I’m not . . . ,” the father began, and then cut himself in mid-sentence as he looked over to the two paper towels near the edge of the basin. But instead of picking them up to dry his hands he decided instead to offer them up with humility and subservience.

“You know, nothing against you guy,” the man said as he zipped up his pants and walked over to the sink. “I mean I don’t mind this at Grace or Alinea. In fact, I kinda expect it. But at the library. Don’t you think that’s going just a little too far?”

In a mirror’s view, the father watched as the man snaked his hands over each other under the running stream. He then

answered the question with only the lone thought of his son.

“Just trying to earn a little extra money on the side, sir.”

“Oh, yeah,” the man replied, shutting off the faucet and taking a look at his reflection.

“Yes, sir,” the father answered.

“Did ya perhaps ever think of more gainful employment?”

“Are you looking for a hand?”

“Uh, no. I don’t think you’d be qualified.”

“Why? What do you do?” the father asked.

“I work over at the Board.”

“You got a nice little seat over there?”

“It’s a figurative term, guy. But yeah, I actually do have my own.”

“Then what you doing over here?”

The man in the suit swiped the paper towels from the father’s hand and replied, “I’m just checking on my assets, guy. Got a little thing going on here, if you know what I mean.”

“Ah, you mean you got yourself a woman here, huh?”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I mean.”

“She uh . . . ,” the father began as he stroked his beard, “she work here?”

“Nope, just comes to read. Followed her in two weeks ago at lunchtime and been dropping by to see her ever since.”

“Is it serious?”

“She’s a secretary, old man. I ain’t looking to marry her. Just looking for a little fun.”

The man took out his wallet and began to thumb through the hundred dollar bills.

“Sorry, nothing here for you today.”

“That’s okay. I don’t need anything from you anyway.”

“Is that so, huh? Have you even looked in that mirror over there? You barely look alive. I give you another month before they find your body in the gutter with a bottle of cheap wine

frozen to your lips. They're going to strap that tag on your toe, mark it John Doe, bury you in a box and that will be the last this world ever hears of you. It's all about Darwin, man. Survival of the fittest. The stronger of the species lives on. And I would have to believe that for your roots it's getting close to the end of the line. You just think about that tonight when you rest your head down on that concrete pillow of yours. Okay? Just give it a good thought. Because I know I will when I'm sitting back in my three-million-dollar home in Inverness toasting to your misfortune with a glass of Cristal in my hand. You have a good day now and enjoy the heat while it lasts because this little hotel of yours closes at nine."

The crumpled paper towels left the man's hand where they were soon to strike William's father in the shoulder before falling to his feet. He turned to the mirror after the man had left. Though this time the reflection wasn't his. It was his son who now appeared in apparition. He lurched forward and heaved the contents of the shelter's morning breakfast into the sink. After wiping his face, he turned to the entrance as a security guard appeared.

"I'm sorry. But when you're finished in here you're going to have to go. We just got a complaint of panhandling."

"No, I didn't ask that guy for anything. He—"

"You gotta go, man."

"My son is here," the father remonstrated.

"Yeah, right. Just hurry it up. I'll be right outside."

"I'm serious. Just check. I left him on the seventh floor. His name is William."

"I ain't falling for that. Come on, just be cool about it and leave peacefully. All right?"

"Then just have him paged or something. I am not leaving here without him."

"Don't make me call the police, guy. Come on, just take off."

“Call whomever you think you have to call because I came in here with my son and I am leaving in that same manner.”

“You’re leaving when I say you’re leaving. So hurry it up. You got two minutes.”

The guard departed after his peremptory statement. William’s father walked into a stall and slammed his fist against the tile. When he reemerged, he found his son standing by the door, book pressed to his chest.

“I thought I told you to wait for me upstairs!” the father uncharacteristically shouted.

“I had to go, too,” the boy sheepishly replied.

Walking over to his son he buried him there within his coat and held him as if tomorrow would never come.

“I’m sorry, William. I didn’t mean to yell at you.”

“Anything wrong, dad?” William asked as he pulled back and looked up.

“No, I’m fine. Why don’t you just go and we’ll leave.”

“We just got here, though.”

“I know. But there’s somewhere special I want to take you for your birthday.”

“Really?” the boy said as his eyes lit up.

“Yes.”

William made a straight line for the urinal then just as quickly returned to his father.

“Could you hold this?”

The father took the book. And as his son turned away again, he looked at the cover, flipped through a few pages and then tucked it under his coat. At the sink, William ran the water and found his father in the mirror.

“I think I know what they mean.”

“What?” his father asked.

“The words in the play. I think I know what they mean,” William beamed as he dried his hands and faced his father.

“Well, go on.”

William rolled his eyes up to his mind and began to read from the slate that he had written upon.

“May I be as good as my father and grow up to be like him because then I will be just as great. I should be good to myself, and just as nice to everyone else. However, I should only trust a few. I should never hurt anyone, but I should be able to defend myself when it is necessary. I should keep my friends near to my heart. And I . . .”

“Be checked for silence,” his father prompted him.

“Oh yeah, and I should listen more than I should speak.”

His father nodded his approval.

“Then I got all of them right?”

“You will make a great king,” his father replied, but then just as quickly corrected himself. “You are a great king.”

William bowed with humbled thanks. Walking out, his father put an arm around his son’s shoulder and threw the security guard a look that kept him silent.



He opened the door to the Jaguar XJ and set his Forzieri briefcase on the passenger’s seat before sitting down in the soft grain leather. After a check of his hair in the rearview mirror he unwound his Burberry cashmere sweater from his neck and fit tight his recently mink-oiled driving gloves. The rumble of the ‘L’ train caught his attention and with a child’s wonder he watched as the saffron sparks spit out from the rails like a meteor shower.

Suddenly, jets of water began to fan out across the windshield. On the glass he pounded a few times but the man from the streets seemed unmoved and was now wiping down the spray with a cloth rag no cleaner than his hand. The driver eased

down the window just enough for his voice to travel out.

“What in God’s name are you doing? Get the hell away from this car, will ya!”

Ignoring the rebuke, the man stretched his body over the hood to start on the other side.

Teethed clenched, he glanced at the glove compartment and thought about it once. But as the car started to rock, he thought about it again. Nine-millimeter now in his coat pocket he stepped out and indignantly slammed the door.

“Hey, I’m telling you. Get the hell off. You’re denting it. Jesus Christ, you have any idea what this car costs.”

The man slid off and spoke.

“How about a little change for the work?”

The driver shoved him aside and walked a few more steps before running a hand into the valley of the indentation.

“Son of a . . . You did dent it. And I just bought this thing.”

“That was already there. Come on, guy. A little change and I’ll be on my way.”

The driver did a quick assessment of the area. Those souls near were not near enough. The windshield washer he then rushed and pushed him up against the side of the car.

“You want some change, huh?” Reaching a hand into his coat pocket, he pulled out his gun, shoved it through the opening of the man’s coat and pressed it into his abdomen. “How about instead I just empty this thing into your body and end your miserable life.”

The wiper fell from his hand and he looked down—staring at the weapon that now connected them like a steel umbilical cord.

“Oh, it’s real all right,” the driver replied with a new sense of empowerment. “In fact, just bought it.”

The windshield washer swallowed down a breath and did his own check of the streets.

“Unless you’re feeling like superman, I wouldn’t even

venture a thought in that direction. I've just about had enough with you people today."

"What do you want?"

"Whatever you got in your pockets?"

"Lint, that's what I got," he replied, turning them inside out.

"Take off your coat then."

"Come on, man. It's cold out."

"It'll get colder if I shoot. Now take it off."

The windshield washer left his coat on but slowly reached up to remove his hat.

"Here, thirteen lousy bucks. My life savings. Enjoy. Won't even pay for one of your salads I'm guessing."

"You're right, it wouldn't. And now I want you to put those dollars into my wallet. My guess it's the first time in your life you've ever made a deposit. And do it slow. I'd like you to see how that feels."

"I hope you're proud of yourself, guy. And I'm telling ya again, I didn't put that dent there."



Outside, the father and son opened their eyes defensively to the brilliance of the sun. But the light was only a ruse from the heavens as the temperature had fallen by midday and a new chill was whistling in the air. He ushered his son to the library's rusticated granite wall and knelt to one knee. There, he fastened the top button of the boy's jacket and rearranged his scarf to lock out the wind.

"William."

"Yes, dad?" the boy answered as he wiggled about, trying to lengthen his arms so that they could once again appear.

"We have held this court outside of its walls for a time that I find to be much too long. We need to find a plot of land for our

kingdom and get you back in school.”

“I did not think kings went to school.”

“Ah, but they do. And it is there that they learn of the world that they are soon enough to inherit,” the father said as he arose.

“I don’t care where we live, dad. Our kingdom is wherever we are, isn’t it?”

“Your speech belies your age, my young king.”

William lowered his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” the father asked as he took notice of his son’s sudden change in countenance.

“I don’t want to be king anymore. Because then it would mean that you would have to be dead, wouldn’t it?”

“Not at all true, my son. For I could pass the crown before my last breath had made its final exit.”

“Dad,” William said.

“Yes?”

“Would I have to get married?”

“Would thou not want a queen at the court?”

The boy shook his head as fast as he could and the father smiled. After refitting his son’s hat, William’s father led them west on Congress Parkway, turning north to bring them alee of the wind. At Van Buren he brought them to a stop.

“Where we going?” the boy asked, following his father’s eyes and searching in the same directions.

“For the moment, I’m not quite sure. But I do know where we are going later.”

“Later?”

“I did say I was taking you somewhere special, didn’t I?”

“Yes,” William answered.

“Don’t you want to know where?”

The boy nodded his head and bit his bottom lip in wait for the revelation.

“Well, I am going to take you . . .” The father paused for a

moment to lengthen the surprise. “Did you want to get something to eat?”

“Dad, come on, tell me,” William said as he puffed out the anticipation and rested back on one foot.

“All right. Close your eyes and hold out your hand.”

William shuttered his eyes so tight that the new frame of black before him was awash in threads of white. He then held out both hands thinking that perhaps what his father had for him wouldn't fit on only one. From an inside pocket his father took out the tickets and set them across the boy's awaiting palms. In the touch, William's lids drew open and he scanned about the print, reciting each word he read.

“Chicago Shakespeare Theater on Navy Pier. The Tempest.”

When he came to the bottom and saw the price his excitement dropped off from a roller coaster's height to the end of the ride and the tickets he handed back.

“What's wrong?” his father asked.

“We can't afford these, dad.”

“They're already paid for, son.”

“Can't you get the money back? I don't need anything for my birthday. Just being with you is good enough,” William said.

His arms he wrapped around this little present from heaven's heart and allowed himself a few tears while the boy was pressed like a leaf between the pages of a book. After a moment had passed he dried his eyes on the sleeve of his coat. And there now with sight unburdened from remorse and regret he took view of both quarrel and gun. To himself he spoke, but with words that sailed beyond his own mind. “These dried lamps, these windows of the soul what before me lies. What world are we to inherit where rich men are thieves of beggars on the streets?”

“What did you say, dad?” William asked as he fell back from the embrace.

“Listen, William. I want you to stay here while I have a word

with those two men over there. Okay, don't move an inch from this spot. Promise me."

"Yes, dad. But what's wrong?" William asked, his body now feeling the cold as instinct ripped open a primal hole into the warmth of his body so he could sense the imminent danger in the tone of his father's voice.

"Nothing. Nothing is wrong. I just need to talk to them."

The boy turned, then asked, "Do you know them?"

"I know one of them," he said with certainty as the habiliments of the villain were unmistakable. "I met him back in the library and I wanted to ask him a question."

"Why can't I go with?" the boy inquired.

"Just because," the father replied, squeezing his son's shoulders before dropping his hands into his coat pockets and crossing the street.

William's father flipped the collar of his jacket up and kept his face down as he approached. His gait was neither hurried nor delayed. In the short walk he thought all that would be necessary would be to appear on the stage. The gun would be withdrawn in reason and then all three each to their own way.

The 'L' train made another pass, grinding the rails again and shaking the tracks. Riding its back the wind came next and swept the debris underneath from east to west. William's father finally made his entrance and stopped before the two men in pretext of tying his shoe. Immediately, the driver's head slewed to the new arrival and the windshield washer took the opportunity to move from harm's way by taking a swipe at the gun.

The retort only momentarily turned the heads of the passersby. But it was the collapse of William's father and the fleeing steps of the windshield washer on the concrete that stopped them to gape. Like iron filaments to the magnetic attraction of death, they began to gather around the body.

William raced across the street and knelt beside his father.

From the impact on the cement the blood was beginning to pool from underneath his head. But the visible trauma belied the hole that had been bored into his heart. The king turned to face the one whose tears were now falling upon him. Lips parted he tried to speak to this prince. However, the red rush of life flowing up along the channel of his throat suppressed any last lines. William placed a hand to his father's mouth. When breath no longer chilled his skin, he spread his thin frame over his father's body like a burial shroud meant for a shorter man.

After a few minutes William slowly withdrew and sat collapsed atop his folded legs. With a mortician's sense and a mourner's fatuousness he pulled the knitted hat of his father back over the ears so that it was no longer askew. The errant shoelace on the right foot he tied back to a perfect bow. The wrinkles of the coat he smoothed out with a long gentle stroke. And it was near the upper part of his father's body that he came upon the treasure buried beneath. He hurried to unzip the jacket and there found the same book from the library that only moments before they had just read. It drew a smile across his face and he turned to share the find with those who had gathered. However, they stared on silent and solemn—mouths slightly open in astonishment and thoughts thanking their gods that today it wasn't them.

At the sound of sirens the one who had pulled the trigger slowly backed out of the crowd and then surreptitiously slid into the Jaguar to make his escape. The windshield washer was already blocks away though in his head the sound of the gun was still ringing an echo of disbelief. William took his father's hand into both of his and squeezed one final time. But the warmth there that he had always found was in fast retreat. His body shivered in a current of cold and he let it fall back to the ground. And as death unfurled the fingers, he picked up the book and a wallet that lay nearby.



In the sodium burn of the city streetlights he stepped out from the shelter of a Starbucks onto a stage that had already been played. The indigent had made their exit when the money makers had made theirs, returning to the shelters or the viaducts that canopied their cardboard homes less the durable goods. The urban professionals had returned to their nested lofts to find a few hours of rest before heading back to the candlelit clubs to drink in anonymity to their wonderful lives. And the older money had made its escape via the highways back to the safety and serenity of the suburbs.

Already bled of all his tears William sat on the steps of the Art Institute. A slight pang of hunger made its way through a crack in his despair and in his coat pocket he searched for the emergency candy bar. A crush of recycled napkins from atop a shelter's folding table he pulled out first. Next he unearthed a plastic figurine from a boxed meal that to him rated five stars. And then to his surprise he raised up an object that he couldn't remember ever placing there. His father's spare set of car keys were hooked on to it like seaweed and he quickly untangled them.

The hide of the wallet was so new that the scent of leather twitched his nose. He opened it to a driver's license that on it had a face faintly familiar but not quite known. After pulling out the credit cards and placing them back he separated the billfold for a look inside. The crisp notes were as thin as razor blades. The odd dollars though tacked on the end were as wrinkled and dull as those taken from his father's hand. He counted the money by a hundred seven times and then by one a total of thirteen. When finished he put the wallet in his pocket and the cash into his sock.

A knowledge of the streets was imperative. That his father

had taught him ever since they began to call the city their home. “Think of it as if you have a house larger than anyone you know. Every block is your own room. But unlike a house, these rooms are numbered.” It was a refrain his father kept repeating for the first few months of their homelessness. Since the city of Chicago was laid out on a grid, one fortunate result of the Great Fire, it was easy to remember if one could understand the numbering. So, in the first few months, his father had him memorizing the streets and their numeric designations in all directions. And although recitation became immediately apparent as his métier, it was life that still proved to be the greatest teacher of all when they took a job delivering newspapers for the Sun-Times and the Tribune.

His father was impressed at the way his son could absorb information and then spit it back out with uncanny accuracy. However, he still made William write down the address of the car every time they had to move. And that was quite frequent in Chicago. Snow routes, meters and tow truck drivers on the take could easily foreclose on one’s home quite quickly. So William was required to pen the street and the number on a sheet of paper and tuck it in a place that he believed to be secure. William chose his hat. He may have had different ones but one always remained on his head. For the summer, it was either the White Sox or the Cubs. In winter, the choice was obvious, the Bears.

And as William stood up, he finally understood why his father had made him write it down. Although in part it was in case of injury, it was also because confusion has a tendency to hide from recall what the mind takes for granted when it is not preoccupied with survival. And there, staring west across Michigan Avenue, William’s mind had lost the number and street of his home amidst all the desperation of the day. He removed his hat and the piece of paper floated to the ground. When he picked it up he read that where they were now living was on 14th and

Indiana.

As William headed south, the city began lowering itself to a more manageable height. The steel and glass were now ignominiously replaced by conscious architectural neglect. The streets were deserted; the opportunists of capitalism and the consumers of its promise were still waiting for the pariahs to migrate off to a safer distance. He took sight of the car a full block before coming upon it. When he neared, he could see that the windows were still dusted in a light snow that had fallen from the night before. It was a covering that he and his father both welcomed as it curtained a view inside to those walking by.

He opened the passenger's side door and slid into his familiar seat. To him, time had seemed to pass without relevance to the face that it circumambulated. He was guessing ten o'clock. However, the analog hands on the alarm clock that his dad had placed on the dashboard were guessing that it was nearer to eleven. He reached around to the backseat and returned with a pile of wool blankets. Then, using the book as a pillow, he lay himself across the seat and let his tears bring him to sleep.

In the dream he awoke as a child on the eve of five. Nestled under the covers in his racecar bed he was bathed in the moon's stolen light. He sat up and glanced about. Above him birthday banners and multi-colored balloons crisscrossed the room. On a wall the painted planets encircled a bright orange sun. From the ceiling fan, the glow-in-the-dark stars cast a faint lime green across this twelve-by-nine universe. The floor was a launch pad of rocket ships and plastic spacecraft, the toy box a holding pen for aliens and one lone astronaut left to defend. To his right the oak dresser was stacked with presents that he would soon unwrap once the night returned to its place of rest. Atop one of the nightstands stood a framed picture of his father at center court of an IHSA championship game, his arm around his best friend Benji, number twenty-five from Simeon High.

Suddenly he felt something heavy in his lap. And so the photo album he took into his hands and began to turn each page from the past. Year by year his father and mother grew up before his eyes. She a double Dutch queen he a fireman for Halloween. Her with a ponytail and books stacked to her chin. Him at a chess competition with a black king in one hand and a first-place ribbon in the other. She as valedictorian speaking to her class. He as another but at a school with different colors. And even though they had not met he knew that they were a perfect match. Hurriedly he began to flip through the second part of their lives to find a frame in which they finally appeared together. And when it came he had his first taste of fate and inevitability.

They stood holding hands at the Shedd Aquarium. They sat side by side in a picture booth with no room between. They rested in a park with a pitcher of lemonade and chocolate ice cream cake. She had her head on his shoulder and he had hold of their skates after a long night at the outdoor rink. They had an altar of flowers and pink bridesmaids. They had a white dress and a black tuxedo kiss. They had another just feet from their “Just Married” car. He had her gently at the waist she had an ear to his heart for their first wedding steps.

And then, on the last leaf one picture remained of them in a honeymoon embrace. As he stared hard at this final entry, he saw the colors of the image begin to blur and blossom like that of a Monet. When their faces became indistinguishable he sadly closed the cover. But to his surprise he now found his mother standing at his side. His hands reached back to grip tight the back wheels of his bed. And even though he was quite afraid, he was more afraid to awake and find her not there. So he swallowed down all of his fear and scooted over so she could sit near. With the magic wand in her hand she tapped the air and now in his lap a storybook. The cover she turned and up popped a castle with words on top. And even though he could read he waited for her to

speak just so he could hear her voice. But when he closed his eyes to accept her first word he found himself waiting in vain as she had disappeared.

Opening his eyes again he discovered his father now sitting where his mother had been. With a snap of his fingers the man he most adored produced a butterscotch birthday cake and set it on the bed. And then with a nod of his head he encouraged his son to a wish. He puffed up his little chest and blew out five flames. He couldn't have been happier he couldn't have asked for a better gift. His father then threw his arms around his little boy and said that he loved him more than the sun, the planets and the stars. But when he pulled back to answer just the same he found that his father had too vanished into this unsparing firmament.

William sat up quickly. His clothes were now pinned to his body by the perspiration that had bled through from the dream. His head was in a spin and he found himself hyperventilating. When he finally calmed, he rushed to wipe away the tears and then rushed a hand into the glove compartment. After fumbling through all the other accoutrements of survival, he took hold of a flashlight pen. He set the book into his lap and began to read the words that now no one else could.

Near the battlements of the castle Francisco welcomed Bernardo to his watch, and soon Marcellus and Horatio stepped onto the platform and greeted all. The ghost came and then the prince came and William shivered before all left for the second act. And he could not help but hear the voice of his mother and father reading along. And when it came to an end, he imagined himself the last victim and lay himself down again.
