

Books by Sarah Tolmie

Poetry from McGill-Queen's University Press

Check, 2020

Art of Dying, 2018

Trio, 2015

Fiction from Tor.com,

All the Horses of Iceland, 2022

The Fourth Island, 2022

Fiction from Aqueduct Press

Disease, 2020

The Little Animals, 2019

Two Travelers, 2016

The Stone Boatmen, 2014

NoFood, 2014

Sacraments for the Unfit

Sacraments for the Unfit

by Sarah Tolmie



Aqueduct Press
PO Box 95787
Seattle, Washington 98145-2787
www.aqueductpress.com

This book is fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2023, Sarah Tolmie

All rights reserved

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022951887

ISBN: 978-1-61976-240-4

First Edition, First Printing, July 2023

Cover Illustration: Ludwig Wittgenstein's gravestone in Ascension Parish Burial Ground, Cambridge Pontificalibus CCO 1.0 license.

Back cover bouquet: Photo by Annie Spratt on Unsplash

Book and cover design by Kathryn Wilham

Printed in the USA by McNaughton & Gunn

So spoke the angel Unfit, Unfit he—
Unimportant, uninvited, unproved,
One over, extra, out of place and tune—
Said *no*. I do not see why that should be.

—from *Milton, Never*

A serious and good philosophical work could be
written consisting entirely of jokes.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

Contents

Apparatchik.....	1
The Death Shortage	7
The Forms	15
Zoom.....	21
Honey Business	27
The God That Got Away	53
The Hand of M. R. James.....	59
The Pickled Boys	91
My Grandfather and the Archive of Insanity.....	99
The Wittgenstein Finds.....	113

Apparatchik

In order for there to be an Apparatchik, there has to be an Apparat. That logically follows. But what if, in the ebb and flow of event and observation, the Apparat dissolves? And if an Apparatchik, one not much involved in event and rarely subject to observation, persists?

Such is our problem. Evading thus these great engines, the Apparatchik has been overlooked by non-existence. He—for it is always *he* on such occasions—is lucky. A being formed for logical rigor has devolved into contingency. He does not find this freedom particularly comfortable, but then, he was not designed to be particular.

Where then were you, on the day of the great flourishing? he asks the goat grazing among its fellows on the uplands. The goat does not appear to notice. It tears the grass, which makes the Apparatchik wince. He is usually on the side of grass. It has an inevitability to it. But it is important to consider everybody. The flourishing? he reminds the goat. It grazes. What to do? He has always been attached to the idea of flourishing. He likes the word. Looking at the goat, it is clearly flourishing. The goat feels no need to do anything about this. Yet the Apparatchik does. He and previous goats, back in the day, were in a different kind of relationship, one of mutual praise.

That was the thing. Praise. Praising went on. It was part of the task of being. Once upon a time, a goat, say, would feel itself part of the almighty, all-encompassing work of the

Apparat and so would acknowledge the Apparatchik, praiser and appraiser, when he happened by. All was well. But this goat, if it thinks about the question at all, must understand itself differently: perhaps as a unit of value in a commercial enterprise, the value of which is determined by the fluctuations of billions of interrelated blinks, zooming around the globe at breakneck speed. (The goat is, after all, stock.) Or perhaps as the fleshly product of encoded deoxyribonucleic acid. If it is of a contemplative turn of mind, as many goats are, it may think in terms of recombinant atoms, of elements that have been around since the beginning of the universe. The Apparatchik is happiest with this latter frame of reference, in many respects, he thinks. It figures on the scale of what he is talking about in asking about the flourishing. One's flourishing, he reasons, begins at the moment at which one's matter is organized in such a way as to become oneself, so that one can show oneself off with a flourish. One has to have something, or in other words be something, to flourish. Yes. But then, it may be that the acid business is the key from the goat's perspective: it's the DNA that distinguishes this goat, among its tribe of goats, here on this upland, and makes it into a living, eating, shitting, being that moves about—a thing alive, but distinct, say, from a partridge. Perhaps the goat does not particularly identify with minute particles of iron or water, those atoms that might be in anything. This is all part of the tribalism of sentience. It strikes the Apparatchik as a bit newfangled. It was not always so. Time was, he could have had as satisfying a conversation with the stone in this goat's hoof as he is having, or trying to have, with the goat.

The Apparatchik knows that these matters are not merely semantic, that they are, in fact, matters of deepest moment. Of

matter. Of metaphysics. They take a long time to process. It may be that the goat is still processing them. Asking anyone to consider the constitutive moment of their being, such that it becomes a distinct locus of rejoicing, is asking a lot. This goat may lie down and die, and its children and grandchildren be born before the Apparatchik gets an answer. A far-future goat will gaze out of its slotted eyes at the Apparatchik and say, yes, the flourishing, I remember it. It will then be up to the future goat and him to negotiate whether it is the goat's individual birth, the birth of the genus *Capra*, or the crashing together of diverse elements that founded the planet, constituting its resources ever after, that is remembered. Or if, indeed, it might be all of them. Some goats do analyze things thoroughly.

It is hard to say what is otiose to a goat. This is the area of the Apparatchik's worst fear. It is a fear not confined to goats, either. It applies universally. Perhaps the being of the goat is not a matter of praise or blame to the goat. Perhaps it is of no consequence. It is, and that's all there is to it. This thought makes the Apparatchik giddy, as if experiencing vertigo. A kind of sideways vertigo. It is the feeling, he concludes, that one gets if the most fundamental impetus of one's being no longer has any pathway to travel upon. It makes him, in a metaphor of which he has become very fond, short-circuit. Electricity, as a concept, is most pleasing to him; he was glad when it came about. Having always conducted a great deal of his business on that plane, or via that conduit, or as part of that energy, he felt that its formalization might render him more accessible. By that time there had been a considerable falling-away in the substance of the Apparatchik, and he was beginning to clutch at straws. Others of his kind had conducted various experiments with electricity, seeking to communicate

with certain constituencies via telegraph and electrograph and so on by influencing their signals. On the whole, these had not turned out well. Accidents had happened. Wars. He had not been surprised; to him this had appeared too much like precipitating events, which had never been part of his purview. There had been, of course, many classes of Apparatchiks, all of whom had had different tasks, many of which tasks had been invisible or inexplicable to other classes.

The goat grazes, unperturbed. There is a failure of communication. This he can bear; he has infinite time to work on his communication skills. It takes as long to learn goat as physicist, or Tigris. Another failure, though, a much more terrible one, he feels, is opening beneath his feet: the failure of that which is to be communicated. This is a titanic problem, utterly insoluble by him. It is rather too much, he thinks, listening to the metallic sound of the goat's teeth ripping the grass as if it were steel wire, that a single Apparatchik should be left confronted by it. It ought to be annihilating, yet somehow he is still here. It must be a random effect. Yet random as conceived against, or indeed as part of, what order? If he can gain some traction on this smaller question, he feels that all might yet cohere. This may be a selfish way of proceeding, having to extrapolate the world from his own being; it is not one he is used to, never having had to consider before whether he had an independent being or not. Once it was all given. No longer. Is he now stuck defending reality from the ludicrously diminished footprint of his own insubstantial feet on the grass? This is not a lot to go on. It takes hours of sustained concentration even to bend a single stem.

The goat. He is losing track of the goat. There is a goat! Rejoice! (Rejoice, goat. Please rejoice. Just this once. Goat?)

The Apparatchik runs around the goat in a frenzy, hallooing, trying to bend the grass stems.

Though he finds it an embarrassing intrusion, in poor taste, he whooshes through the goat's synapses, insisting that it shake its tail and refocus its eyes. The eyes of a goat with their slotted pupils are undoubtedly fascinating; there is such a wide angle of vision. He cannot quite see his own tail—the goat's tail. Can he? The goat cranes its neck, then begins to spin around, scattering its grazing companions. It spins the other way. Enough of that. Hmm. Dichromatic color is refreshing: the blue of a distant pond simply disappears. So many things have disappeared lately. The vision of the goat seems to capture a great truth: things are only there if one can see them. But of course, that is stupid. The pond remains. The goat sees it. It just doesn't see it as blue. Blue and green make little difference to goats. They rarely drown. It is a matter of salience. These are not thoughts that fit well in a goat.

The Apparatchik exits the goat. Pop, the pond is blue again. He has gained this much from his excursion: he has been reminded that his default sensory settings are those he shares with humans. It is possible that this is insulting. In principle, they could all be optimized. He might have a bat's sonar and the eyes of a dragonfly and a canine's sense of smell. But humans have always been the main architects and maintainers of the Apparat; they have been, and their animals. Domesticated animals understand the Apparat and live within it, or they used to. That is why he has previously had good luck with goats. They have been domesticated a very long time. Perhaps that is why today's failure is such a troubling disintegration. Wild animals, lions and cheetahs and such, sea lions, armadillos, and all, those used to fit into the Apparat antinomically: the

wild, enemy of the tame. Antinomies are blunt instruments, but they get the job done. Though it seems that they no longer do in the kingdom of animals, perhaps because the two sides can no longer be imagined as equal. Today a wild animal is nobody's enemy. They have long since lost that war. Now they are just another kind of tame: protected.

The Apparatchik wonders if he hates the goat. Its indifference is galling. He could change his color to tiger orange, making himself superbly salient to the goat, and chase it across the field, roaring: die, goat! Remember your beginning as you face your end! Rejoice! There certainly had been Apparatchiks who used this method. But it is really not his style.

No. He watches the goat, a trifle sourly. It is flourishing.

The Death Shortage

It was the middle of November of that year that we ran out of death. Everyone ran out of death, everywhere. At the time, it seemed like a miracle, though miracles were well out of style. For a time, there was euphoria. Leaders of every religion spoke out, claiming it as a triumph of their faith. Learned men stood forth everywhere and said that death had always been a metaphor, that the perfected life had always been available to all: here was the proof. Here it was. Here it was. Yes. Christians and Muslims and Jews fighting, perhaps, but no longer killing each other over matters of scripture and land. Muslims and Hindus still quite busy on that score; likewise, not dying. X and Y, X and Y, X and Y and all permutations and sub-infeudations, surviving. Everyone proved right by immortality. All causes saved. The cause of women, the cause in human history always the most clear, obviated.

In that year:

The women who (would have) died in childbirth did not die.

The women who (would have been) raped to death did not die.

The women who (would have been killed) in backstreet abortions did not die.

(Putative) female infanticides did not die.

Poor women who (would normally have) starved with their families did not die.

Poor women who (tried to) starve to save their men did not die.

Women who (would have) died in the grind, earning half on equal rights—guess what? They didn't die, either.

That's not to say they didn't suffer. I'm sure you see the problem. Still, it might be worth taking a second—no more—just to appreciate the magnitude of this change, to see it as the triumph it was. Until it wasn't. Unfortunately, it didn't take any reasoning person much more than a second to realize that it wasn't a panacea. It was a disaster.

Very soon people began to speak of it as a shortage. The death shortage. Death became, as you might imagine, the most desirable item in the world: the one that couldn't be obtained. Scientists raced to provide a cure for the disease of life. There was just too much of it; it was pathological. Endemic. There are a surprising number of situations in which persons would prefer death over life, individually; there are many more when considered from the point of view of families, caregivers, hospitals, municipalities, nations, or international health organizations. Morticians despaired but suicide was not an option for them.

The fate of Tithonus was much discussed in the media, but in the end, as a myth, it was moot. The love for all things zombie, which had used to prevail, withered away. You can't be undead if there is no such thing as death. Life, in fact, became a lot more difficult to define: this kept philosophers busy. This was just as well as there were a lot of them, starving along with everybody else. Gerontology, which had already been coming

on strong amid a wealthy and aging population, became the center of all medicine. The diseases of old age became a bottomless gold mine. Zoonosis became a hot topic. People lived in continuous fear that deathlessness might jump the species barrier—deathless animals? Deathless plants? While there were some who argued that this might be an advantage in feeding the exploding population of humans, the prevailing view was that any such creatures would just be dangerous and unkillable competition.

Celibacy became a craze. But never a universal one. People like babies, and social power is expressed by the number of one's children in many parts of the world. A lot of women, people thought, would have nothing to do without them. And nobody likes women with nothing to do, especially when you can't get rid of them. Various states tried to enforce sterilization with varying degrees of success. As it could not be made universal, it made little difference. Pro-lifers rejoiced that abortions had become impossible.

You might have thought that this great ontological reversal would lead to social reversals: revolutions, new religions, state collapse. To date, though, it has scarcely done so. Demographically, things have continued to trend as they did before: the 1% becoming ever wealthier, the 99% poorer. Within a short time it was observable, as the population grew and grew, that the 1% who commanded most of the wealth shrank noticeably: .5%, .3%, and so on. The ultra-rich spent a large portion of their wealth defending themselves from the teeming billions of the poor by ever more forceful and devious means. For them, the death shortage could be experienced as immortality, at least for a considerable time. For everybody else, it rapidly became a burden.

And how did the super-rich fund their pleasurable deathlessness, in a world in which all resources were diminishing faster than ever before? The same way the rich have always done in modernity: through investment. In addition to consolidating their hold over real commodities—fuel, agricultural land, water, industry, the funding of science, local infrastructures, and the like—they began to speculate, or to speculate anew, in death. Enormous profits had been made out of death when it had occurred; there was no reason for these to cease now that it didn't. The death market developed gradually, going through several distinct, though overlapping, phases. Almost at once companies like Thanatos and Todestrieb sprang up; these were entities that conceived of death as a service, one that would ultimately prove deliverable after a certain amount of clinical trial. Meanwhile, death service tokens (DSTs) were sold competitively. Funds so generated substantially underwrote the medico-legal advances that were necessary to sustain the growth of the death market in its second phase. Chiefly, Thanatos/Todestrieb (T/T) funding provided the earliest Obliteration studies, those that sought to define the medical and legal minima for what constituted a person under non-death conditions. As these investigations were going on, a robust secondary market in death futures arose, as DSTs began to function as tradeable commodities. Ad hoc trading itself moved the legal definitions forward: death became a fungible asset. The incommensurability lobby—those who maintained that, for example, the putative death of a fourteen-year-old girl suffering from an agonizing cancer and of a ninety-five-year-old man in late-stage dementia were qualitatively different and as such ought not to be traded at the same value—are writing embittered legal memos to this day. Qualia, as legal ar-

guments, have suffered considerable explanatory loss since the advent of deathlessness, it must be said: arguments from consciousness lose urgency when its supply is no longer limited.

The death shortage led almost immediately to a concatenation of other shortages: food, water, fuel, *lebensraum*. Labor was the one thing of which there was an infinite supply, limited only by the supply of provisions required to sustain what came to be known as Usable Life (UL). The practical minima for UL were determined by market forces to be far lower than any previous standards, however, cutting costs considerably. Obviously, a labor force that cannot die additionally reduces safety costs. The remaining problem was one of sheer numbers: the numbers of those too weak to work, in any capacity, yet unable to die. Earth was becoming, as pundits said, a Standing Room Only planet. What was required, analysts argued, was divestment: there had to be a legal way to divest such unusable persons of their assets, which they no longer had the strength to use, and additionally to remove the necessity of expending further scarce resources upon them. The solution, one greatly aided by the medico-legal groundwork laid by the T/T et al. Obliteration research, was Legal Death, the foundation for what became the Statute of New Mortmain. Thresholds for determining when an individual became legally dead had existed before, of course, but these were utterly insufficient for the present circumstances. It was necessary to be more imaginative. Finally, lawyers hit upon the legal precedent of the treatment of lepers in the High Middle Ages, the congeries of socio-legal and medical practices understood as the *Separatio Leprosorum*. When combined with the robust definitions of (mental) Competence and (physical) Coherence that had emerged from the rigorous threshold

testing sponsored by T/T and related enterprises, Legal Death became the widespread practical solution. People who could not meet the standards required for Competence—which included an annual Sentience Test (ST) based upon the original developed by Alan Turing, and its mandatory associated paperwork—and Coherence, which involved maintaining a functioning non-cancerous body mass of 37% of original or projected BMI on adjusted age tables—were declared Legally Dead (LD). The Statute of New Mortmain prohibited property-holding by the Legally Dead, and so re-distribution of their assets followed, according to the claims of legally surviving family, employers, states, and corporations. LD bodies were transported to Low Utility Areas (LUAs)—zones irradiated, polluted, prone to flooding or earthquakes, and so on, often partially remediated landfills—and placed into skeleton housing, the quality of which varied by region. Such LUAs worldwide were almost always immediately encircled by encampments of aid workers, religious and charitable organizations, protestors, and profiteers. Families of the LD were allowed to visit, and some did; more simply contributed what they wished to front-line LD aid workers, religious or secular. No organizations were permitted to retain an overnight non-LD presence in the LUAs, though they were allowed to set up infrastructure within LUA boundaries.

While we might say that the traditional economy responded decisively and robustly to the post-November situation, the sudden and shocking removal of a condition that had always previously been assumed to be utterly fixed (i.e., death), it must be admitted that it was the numerous micro-economies that sprang up in the LUA zones, or that were in various ways LD-adjacent, in which the most spectacular innovations oc-

curred. Organ harvesting operations spread quickly throughout LUAs, as did other resource extraction schemes exploiting LD bodies for animal fodder, fertilizer, and other uses. Such operations were condemned as bodysnatching by aid workers and combatted by them where possible, though embarrassing cases of collusion were occasionally discovered. Fringe science also made significant headway in LUA zones: among other cutting-edge theories originating from studies, formal and informal, in LUAs zones in Chile, Guatemala, and Brazil was that of Liminal Sentience (LS), a state of residual molecular perturbation supposedly observed in LD bodies that had been reduced to dust or expressed for water. The LS concept proved a money-spinner for the unscrupulous, who soon began to bottle and sell so-called Living Water, and to mix up a species of color-changing cement sold as bricks of Living Rock. The aid sector made millions live-streaming the degradation (or the Progressive Incoherence) of LD individuals, many of whom became celebrities as a result. The fact that LD persons were legal non-entities who could not hold bank accounts or otherwise command wealth made it easy for aid organizations to make sure that all such earnings were captured for charitable purposes, though it was observed in certain cases that high-profile LD individuals obtained various kinds of perks by informal means.

It was undoubtedly the success of the LD livestreams and the lucrative betting and meming that they generated that led to the development of the massively popular NFT market in celebrity deaths. This so-called “aspirational” market model was pioneered by DeserV2Die and immediately adopted by a variety of competing companies (DieProfile, WastR, and so on). DeserV2Die first minted an NFT for the death of a

famous and much-reviled prisoner on death row in a Florida prison; it sold for \$150,000. “It feels so great to own the death of that bastard,” said Wastrell Garnett, purchaser of the token. Within days, NFTs were being generated for the deaths of every kind of famous person: politicians, movie stars, athletes, oligarchs, lawyers, abortionists. Prices skyrocketed into the millions. ShowTheWhoreTheDoor, producing NFTs for the deaths of feminists, achieved a market capitalization of \$450 billion in less than a month. People with any kind of name recognition rushed to claim rights to their own deaths, usually by sponsoring an NFT and then purchasing it for one dollar; Bollywood stars thumbed their noses at the system by doing so for a single rupee. Lawyers began to make a lot of money in this arena. A Milwaukee housewife created an NFT for her own death and started the lasting craze for Normcore deaths. A curator at the Rijkmuseum in the Netherlands sponsored an NFT for Vermeer’s death: it raised 2 million euros at auction for the Dutch government. Immediately thereafter The National Museum of Egyptian Civilization—a civilization famed for its interest in death, as its trustees justly claimed—issued one for the death of Nefertiti. It was purchased by an anonymous buyer in Dubai for an undisclosed amount. Since then there has been fierce competition among a number of companies specializing in historical deaths, several of them offering luxe historical re-enactments in addition to the relevant NFT. Though corrections can inevitably be expected, this second-wave sector of the death market appears, at the present time, to hold limitless value.

The Forms

People who know fuck all about Plato speak of Platonic love, by which they mean love without screwing. This ain't the half of it, as Harold can tell you. Harold was born knowing the Forms. He has a feel for them, an instinct. His brain is full-up all the time, measuring all observable phenomena against them. It's a nightmare, like having perfect pitch in everything.

For one thing, the Forms were invented, or perhaps discovered, by a Greek 2400 years ago; they're very dated. Looking at most men, their dicks are too big. Everyone is too tall. Big butts, little butts, whatever the fashionable shapes are, they make no sense to Harold. When he looks at a person, he wants to see a perfect mathematical model, expressing certain harmonious ratios from part to part; this is what his eye yearns for; consequently, almost all people are grotesque. He sees them as a series of blubbery or bony excrescences, horrible knobby outlines superfluous to the Ideal, as if everyone were wearing hideous fur coats made up of extra muscle and hair and eyelash extensions. He once saw a woman who conformed to the Ideal in Sardinia. A man in Alaska. It is important to go to places where people are not too big. In each case, the relief was so great that it caused Harold to weep. For those few seconds as their images entered his visual cortex, he experienced a fleeting moment of peace, a moment in which something was as it ought to be. His brain paused in its endless series of

agonizing calculations, sizing things up, sizing things up, having them fail. It was okay.

Harold is a reluctant philosopher. He's had to look all this stuff up in order to keep himself sane. Insofar as he is sane. Most people and all doctors he has ever spoken to assume he has OCD. It's fair to say that he does; it's just that mindfulness exercises or antidepressants afford him little relief. Looking at the doctor, knowing that she is acting in good faith prescribing Prozac and yoga, his mind flails through the ancient Greek pharmacopeia seeking the Ideal remedy to balance his humors, then denying that any remedy should be necessary as an affront to the Ideal Man, then refusing to acknowledge that there can be such a thing as a female Doctor. She just falls out of the center of his vision as if his retina were detaching, gone, leaving a black hole. Her authority is not Ideal. He tries the yoga, carefully framing it in his mind as Gymnosophistry, through which Ideal Forms might be encountered. When he does not prove very good at it, his mind dismisses it as oriental trivia. The Prozac does not work at all. It involves assumptions about the complexity of the brain, when the Ideal Mind is simple.

Harold does his best lying quietly on his bed in the dark. The Forms are good for contemplation. He can think peacefully of the Good or the Beautiful, or admire the perfection of the number Six. Untroubled by unassimilable outer stimuli, he can sink into the trance of atavism that the Forms induce. A Form, after all, is a kind of memory: a memory of a time now untraceable in which people lived without flesh, perfect Forms among all Forms, self-identical, evident, effortless, in a dimensionless and transcendent space. Harold feels that this time must have been incredibly, unspeakably long ago, so un-

thinkably remote that nothing in our experience has remained the same: only this can explain the violence of the Forms, their incisive, razored clarity that simply cuts through all Being, leaving scars. The scars of the Forms: these are what Harold understands himself to be carrying, through and through, down past his bones and backwards, he assumes, into eternity.

This makes watching TV hard. Or movies. Very few of them now obey the Three Unities. Unities of Time, Place, and Action make it much easier to observe Forms. You need a still background. The world provides so few still backgrounds these days. Trying to keep the Hero in focus against the whizzing backdrops of things he sees on TV is almost impossible. What such shows do not understand, or at least do not manifest for Harold, is that the Hero, as a Form, is not really himself: he is a state of relation, a perfect and exact state of relation, between all the things in his environment, human and divine. He is for the gods the image of the human and for humans the image of the divine. His plot, perfectly free and perfectly determined, expresses the conundrum of this position, making of him a kind of living palindrome. The subtlety of this is lost in the frenetic pace of modern drama. Watching an episode of a cop show or an action movie makes him feel seasick; fragments of Forms, like stick figures missing half their limbs, rush at him endlessly at breakneck speed: incoherent bits of Justice, the Hero, the Maiden, Virtue, Hubris, the Matron, the Polis, the Nemesis, the Sage. Twenty minutes in, he feels ripped apart, as if he is undergoing *sparagmos*. So he's pretty much given up on TV.

He reads a fair amount of Plotinus. It is calming, if rather baroque. Plato, of course, he also reads, though not without a persistent low-level antagonism. Harold's suffering is, after all, Plato's fault. The question of whether he—Plato—just

made all this up, created the Forms with some psychotic mental power that has somehow lasted two millennia, or whether he stumbled upon them as pre-existent entities, in a religious trance, niggles at Harold all the time. It's not as if it matters, practically: Harold is still stuck with the Forms. But he really would like to know how far to share the blame around, if it was just one man, or one man channeling the power of some unknowable godlike beings who created the Forms or who, perhaps, are the Forms. Plus, of course, Socrates was an asshole; Plato's hero-worship of him is something Harold has never understood. Still, the dialogues and the last bit of *The Republic*, especially—the bit with the Cave—cause him less cognitive dissonance than almost anything else, and for that he is grateful.

Many video games are soothing. They are just animated math. Extremely Formal. He suspects that this is a large part of their widespread appeal. No matter how much sex is in them, they are Platonic. Everything behaves predictably, and many golden ratios are present. Palladio, he feels, would have liked them; he would have seen through the effects of their occasional and superficial Gothic to the fundamental Classicism that lies beneath. Gamers, though, and even the few game designers he has met, he does not like any better than anybody else; they are just as weird and distorted, physically and morally.

Platonic love is a topic he has long since given up discussing. It leads immediately into boring talk about sex: man to boy sex, or waffle about finding one Ideal life partner, one's Other Half. He used to explain to people who started off down the latter road about Aristophanes, and what he says in *The Symposium* about the terrible conjoined male-and-female crea-

tures, Janus-faced, fused all along the spine like Siamese twins, forced to move by cartwheeling. So that's what you're looking for, is it? A spouse that you carry forever, built into your back? Eventually he got tired of the looks on their horrified faces. No. This is not the problem with Platonic love. Once upon a time, Harold thinks, perhaps back in Plato's time, the Forms were an instrument of love: seeing a Form superimposed upon a person, seeing its outline and how it allows the person, even if partially, to conform to an Ideal, to approach to the Perfect—this was Good. A Form gathered up the details, made them cohere into an appreciable shape. Forms allowed for the possibility of Perfect Horses, Perfect Mice, Civic Virtue. They were aspirational. Perhaps. They must have been. Harold really hopes that they were. Because they certainly aren't now. Now, as he knows all too well, the Forms cause nothing but pain. They obviate love. Harold feels, desperately and inchoately, that he would love to love the world, and all the things he finds in it, but he can't. He just can't. Every object, every concept as it appears in his consciousness is wing-clipped and ruined, scored and bloodied. People and ideas are just a series of leavings, the bloated edges left after the cookie-cutter of a Form has passed through them. People complain about cookie-cutter thinking and yet domesticate it using this sugary image. A cookie cutter is a sword turned back on itself, small enough to fit into the hand. It is a terrible instrument when it is scaled up: the Ouroboros edge of Form, ever morphing, endlessly slicing through the Real.