

Houston, As It Was: An Excerpt from *Epilogue*

Chapman Caddell

A few days later it was Halloween and it was Stella who found one, not Charles: a broken, irredeemable, unliterary box in a driveway at a yard sale in the Heights. She put a hole in the bottom with a saw or some other toothed instrument and placed her head in the center of the hole, emptied of all components prohibitively heavy or electronic. She showed her costume to Charles and explained she was Sylvia Plath, whom he had avoided his entire life for fear of becoming the sort of person who admired early deaths. Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin. DB Cooper, probably. He pointed out that Plath had used an oven, not a microwave, and in any case it was anachronistic and, even if the costume were historically correct, tasteless in polite company. She responded that the evening's company was anything but polite, and this was a point he admitted he could not honestly contest. Those who saw them generally judged her costume the best of the night.

When they returned from the last of the evening's parties—he had dressed as the static cling, socks and underwear pinned all over—she followed him back to 808A, his apartment in an anonymous building in an essentially anonymous section of town. They went upstairs via the elevator, dingy and ill-conceived with cracked mirrored paneling, and entered his apartment laughing. She had thrown her arms around his neck, and her head (as she shifted her weight to her toes) set the microwave half on his shoulder. When they sat on his studio's couch, still laughing, she tried to undress and the thing became stuck, so they worked together to remove the

crown and restore her previous status as an ahistorical person—which should not suggest, not at all, that a mid-century poet in a microwave is a strictly historical person. Her unplating required poses from Charles first comic, then tragic, then finally obscene, and he began to use tools in contradiction with their designs: hammer as lever, screwdriver as holepunch, et cetera, et cetera.

— It could be my head that's the problem.

— You have a lovely head.

— All the more lovely for its problems.

And when it finally came off after enlarging the hole where once it held a plate, she slipped off her microwave and he his clothes and later they lay, very much alive, on the studio's bed by the kitchen. The windows in 808A were big like none of the other furnishings, and had blinds like old creased government maps, laid across the sky with pins and ridges on vellumish cloth that obscured all the skyline but for a crack—which exposed only the faint refracted glow of the center of the city, a trace of lonely light swept gentle across the floor. A singular bulb hung from a fixture somewhere in the middle of the room, but Stella and Charles' corner of the place remained for the most part dark, and anyway the light was flickering. Its intermittent closings adhered to the logic of easy physics poorly applied, an incandescence contingent on failures built into the wiring or a rodent, maybe, and they used it less as a source of day than as an atmospheric tool, giving the gift of the ambience... She held him close, matched concave to convex, and beheld with him the former microwave, which still lay broken on the floor by the bed. He asked her about its literary merit, whether it had any.

— It's staggeringly unpoetic.

— Is there any future for the microwave?

— Not in literature at least. Unless you're Sylvia Plath.

— Ivan called postmodernism the "poetics of the microwave." Or something similar. He'd hate to be mischaracterized.

(Ivan Fishman lived upstairs in 908A. He was very old, and on Thursdays, they played chess.)

— Something similar. The toaster oven?

— I didn't clarify.

— Ivan hasn't read a poem since the death of Itzik Feffer. He doesn't know what postmodernism is. Everything for him is *post*.

(Ivan Fishman: immigrant, post-Soviet Jew. Left Leningrad/St. Petersburg finally in 1994.)

— Shall we write the first ode to the microwave?

— Only to its victims, she said, and she told him how a childhood friend had trapped her gerbil in the microwave.

— What happened?

— We didn't speak much.

— But the gerbil?

— He spoke after about as much as before.

Charles considered all the wretched ways in which a gerbil, or really any living creature, could meet the narrowing of the light, the end of its wheel, and thought that the deaths he considered worst were much the same from species to species, including his own. The gerbil was spared, if anything, only the anticipation, the wretched ability to imagine its death, and so he imagined on the gerbil's behalf. He envisioned or almost dreamed himself in

a microwave built to contain the average human male in height—weight, disposition, whatever—and he watched himself expand, hit the glass, as he drifted to troubled sleep. He woke however many hours later, still dark but for the flickering bulb, and felt Stella’s fingers following soft along the cartilaged crest of his ear.

— We should synchronize our breathing, she said, and she closed the remaining distance between them, holding him from behind. They followed one another. He felt a furtive warmth spread discreetly from his belly, and it seemed in the mechanical rise and fall as if they shared a rhythmic secret, unspeakable. Beyond microwaves. He opened his eyes and cast them up and thought he saw, though half taken with sleep, that the cycle of the bulb had aligned with their own, a dull pulse that followed their breathing, he couldn’t be sure, but real or not, he watched the noirish cone at the center of the room disappear and reappear regardless of the night outside, lighting (off and on) the spine of *Wounded Memory* square and alone on the bedside table. The filaments themselves, dead as they were, breathed with the two in the bed as they slowly returned to sleep, and Charles asked with his last waking thought,

— Who was matching whom?