FICTION

TO THE MEASURES FALL

BY RICHARD POWERS

First read-through: you are biking through the Cotswolds when you come across the thing. Spring of '63. Twenty-one years old, in your junior year abroad at the University of York, after a spring term green with Chaucer, Milton, Byron, and Swinburne. (Remember Swinburne?) Year One of a life newly devoted to words. Your recent change, of course, has crushed your father. He long hoped that you would follow through on that Kennedy-inspired dream of community service. You, who might have become a first-rate social worker. You, who might have done good things for the species, or at least for the old neighborhood. But life will be books for you, from here on. Nothing has ever felt more preordained.

Term's out, and it's time to see every square mile of this island. Bicycle clips, a Blue Guide, a transistor radio, and skin-hugging rain. Villages slip past on valley roads as twisty as the clauses in Henry James. The book turns up in a junk shop in an old Saxon market town whose name you will remember as almost certainly having an "m" in it. Among the rusted baby buggies and ancient radios you find old cooking magazines, books on fly-tying and photography, late-fifties spy novels with cardboard covers worn as soft as felt.

The thing pops out at you: "To the Measures Fall," by someone named Elton Wentworth. There's nothing else like it in the shop. It's a fat tome with rough-cut pages in a deluxe, tooled binding. The dust jacket has disappeared, but the front matter suggests that you know all about Mr. Wentworth already. Born in 1888, the author of twelve previous books and the winner of awards too numerous to mention.

The first line reads, "A freak snow hit late that year, two weeks after the sand martins returned to the gravel pits near the South Downs." The next few paragraphs sketch out a hard-pressed town, Wotton-on-Wold, much like the one you are in, with the "m" in it. On page 3, the author reveals the date: 1913. On the last page, a village search party finds the body of a young amputee captain who served at the Somme lying at the bottom of said gravel pits. Only seven years have passed, but the lilting opening cadences have darkened into fragments from another world.

SUA GÖTZ

The book seems to be a sweeping portrait of rural England before and after the First World War. You check the title page: copyright 1948. Aside from two bold exclamation points at the end of Chapter 1, the pages are unblemished, perhaps unread.

Pencilled into the upper right hand of the inside front is a price: 10/6 d. Exorbitant. You draw seven pounds a week for student expenses. A three-course Chinese dinner on Station Road costs four shillings, and lunch in the canteen is half that. A 12-inch LP runs only a pound, and even a two-minute call to the States is cheaper than Mr. Wentworth's book. Half a guinea for a used novel you've never heard of? Robbery. But something about that opening is too strange for you to resist. Besides, you've just devoted your life to literature. You graze the start of Chapter 2, in which Trevor, a spindly farmer's son with Addison's disease, baffles his parents by insisting on going to university. You need to know how this beginning can reach so macabre an end.

The shop's owner is a beaked old man with a gray hairline like a cowl slipping off his head. It's humiliating to bargain with him, but you're desperate.

How much do you offer the junk-store owner for his used book?

You are, by the way, female. Lots of folks think you shouldn't be out biking alone, even in the Cotswolds. See pages 214 to 223 of Mr. Wentworth's epic.

How much would you have offered for the book had you been male?

You buy the book, lug it around on the rest of the bike tour, drag it back up north with you, but somehow fail to read it. When summer ends, and with it your English idyll, you're shocked to discover how many essential novels you've bought and haven't got around to reading.

Now the problem is packing them all into a suitcase that is lighter than forty-four pounds. You could mail them to the States, but they'd cost more to ship than you spent to buy them. You resort to the time-honored system of three piles:

1. Keep for all time.
2. Suspend in Purgatory.
3. Cast forever into the outer darkness.

By the evening before the homeward flight, "To the Measures Fall" is stuck stubbornly in Purgatory, along with Wheelock's "What Is Poetry?," James Purdy's "Malcolm," "The Bull from the Sea," by Mary Renault, John Braine's best-seller "Life at the Top," and Updike's "The Centaur," which has got mixed reviews. "Life at the Top" might be tricky to get hold of in the States. Who knows how long Updike will be read? "Malcolm," on the other hand, is already on every undergraduate syllabus in the country. Renault, guilty pleasure, is the one you'd really love to have in your carry-on. The further adventures of Theseus and Hippolyta, with sun-drenched temples, earthquakes, and human-god miscegenation: how better to fill eight hours of captive reading? But your bag will hold only four more volumes.

Choose which two books get dumped forever.

Wentworth makes the cut, if only as a souvenir of that magical cycling tour. Weirdly, browsing through the bookshop in the Oceanic Terminal at Heathrow, you notice a reprint of one of his earlier novels, about coal miners in Wales. It's a Penguin, with that orange spine that's synonymous with great books. There's a jacket blurb from Winston Churchill calling Wentworth "This island's Balzac . . . our much revered, much imitated national asset," and another from Dame Edith Sitwell, D.B.E., calling him "England's most distinguished living author of the novel of community."

"National asset" makes Wentworth sound like a hulking stone country house given away by pauperized aristocrats for tax deductions. And "most distinguished" feels a bit dated, against a backdrop of Mods, Rockers, the Angry Young Men, and "Beyond the Fringe."

Still, two immortal literary lions have praised this man to the skies. What an incredible deal, getting that first edition for eight shillings. Clearly, the balding junk-shop owner didn't know what he was selling. Far out over the Atlantic, as you approach Greenland, a twinge of conscience hits you. What good is all

the cultivation in the world if you use it to cheat ignorant people?

How much *should* you have paid the shopkeeper? Exceed his proposed price, if necessary.

Back in the States, you look up Elton Wentworth. He isn't England's most distinguished living anything. He died right around the time that you realized you'd sooner sell cigarettes from a shoulder tray than go into social work. In addition to sheep in the Cotswolds and coal in Wales, he did Lincolnshire fishermen and three generations of Brummie factory workers. He wasn't England's Balzac; he was the James Michener of the Midlands.

You read the first hundred pages of "To the Measures Fall," hacking your way through thickets of dialect. The prose can be brutally beautiful. But the semester starts, you fall in love, get deflowered, watch Kennedy die and the Beatles invade, get high to listen to Coltrane, and discover Heller, Ellison, Ferlinghetti, and Bellow—writing that flows across the page in huge bright swaths that you didn't know English could permit. So the First World War was a bad scene. Aren't we over that yet? And what was Wentworth doing, bringing out a book wrapped in Edwardian nostalgia three years after Dachau?

You graduate in the spring and pack up your worldly possessions again, just as the U.S.S. Maddox fires on three patrol boats in the Gulf of Tonkin, letting Johnson widen a war in a country that, until recently, was as fictional to you as Wentworth's South Downs.

Does the book go to Goodwill, the Salvation Army, or the twenty-five-cent pile at your graduation lawn sale?

You survive two years of graduate classes, the General Comprehensive Test (flubbing the question on Tobias Smollett), marriage to a Faulkner guy, and a gruelling four-hundred-book Special Field Exam on "The Electra Complex in Postwar American Prose," a subject that you begin to hate long before your committee can lob the first question. All the while, there's Biafra, Black Power, the levitation of the Pentagon, My Lai, back-to-back assassinations, the siege of Chicago, street warfare, and city centers burning in an annual summer ritual. Drugs are everywhere, making people see God or murder their families. Books go surreal, psychedelic, and sometimes you wonder whether they're causing the mayhem or just profiting from it.

The dissertation—your baggy monster—becomes a four-year excuse to read everything except those writers you threaten to write about. On a hot June Thursday, early in the new decade, right around the time when five men break into the D.N.C. headquarters in D.C., you find yourself patrolling your own shelves, like a hopeful bidder at an estate sale. It's a shock to come across that deluxe binding, which you distinctly remember throwing out a long time ago. The Cotswolds: cruel joke. Elgarian Imperial residue.

You take it down and browse. You stop to fix dinner for your husband, who, an invalid of high modernism, cannot fix it for himself. But you're back at Wentworth until 4 A.M., when you end up at the bottom of the South Downs gravel pit, 1920, your throat feeling as if you'd been taking swabs at it with a pipe cleaner. You don't know what hurts more: the swirling moral turbulence of the book or the belated discovery that everything you thought about it was wrong. You missed it all: register, mood, irony, ambiguity, subtleties of characterization, narrative arc, even basic plot points. You can't read. It's like finding out, at thirty, that you're adopted.

You're not yet sure that it's great literature. But the thing took you underwater and held you there for the better part of thirteen hours and, two days later, you're still winded. Its single, history-slapped village is a whole world, whose heft and weight and strange sinuous tangle of syntax stands for nothing but itself. Its portraits—particularly that of Sarah, the mother of doomed Captain Trevor and the furtive wife of idealism-scarred Francis Beck—seem so clearly ripped from microscopic observation that it's cheating to call them fiction. This story is not your life. It's not your time or place. It's just a scrap of torn diary floating up from a scorched past. What does the thing want from you?

Give the book a final grade:
Fail
Low Pass
Pass
Pass with Honors
Highest Distinction

You make your husband read it. You do the Lysistrata thing until he does. This is a mistake, as he reads it way too fast. "Very well done," he reports, wanting his sugar cube. "Skillful. First-rate social realism. Why haven't more people written about this guy?"

It isn't skillful. It isn't social realism. You read it again, taking a week this time. Now the book gets more troubling. More weirdly allegorical. You can't put your finger on what bothers you. Something to do with hoping against your better judgment. You lie awake on a hot August night wondering how a thing might be good and real and true for a while, then made irrelevant, or worse, by later events.

You've got very close with your thesis adviser. In fact, if you remember right, you're sleeping with him. The two of you are in an actual bed somewhere, in the dark, a luxury you can no longer imagine how you managed. Maybe it's an OPEC, oil-crisis thing: turn off the lights when not in use. The two of you are playing that old favorite: which classic would you never dare admit to anyone but your lover in the dark that you haven't read? You offer "Silas Lapham" and he ups the ante to "Billy Budd" and you try to trump with "The Sound and the Fury," which he blows out of the water with "Huck Finn." You ask him if he's ever read any Wentworth. He just snickers, thinking it another game.

You obsess about the thing. You read all the criticism. Most of it damns itself with due diligence: "Trevor Beck and Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development"; "Wool, Surplus Value, and Class Unrest in Wentworth's Wotton-on-Wold." No article has an insight strong enough to explain why you should be reading it, rather than the book again.

You learn all kinds of things about Elton Wentworth, some of which you wish you hadn't. Blacklisted for pacifist activity under the Defence of the Realm Act. Went to Russia between the wars and came back extolling the enlightened social state. Right up until Munich, a

prominent appeaser. But come September, 1939, he turned British superpatriot and personal propagandizer for Churchill, which helps explain the latter's jacket blurb. After the war, he fought decolonization tooth and nail, in a series of interviews with dozens of natives on three continents who all declared the British Empire the best thing ever to happen to its colonial subjects. At the age of eighty-one, he was jailed for three months for participating in violent demonstrations against nuclear weapons.

In short, the author of that autonomous, ungrudging, unjudging book with no villains and fewer heroes, in which every moral position is plausible but flawed, was himself a hopeless, card-carrying, repeat-offending true believer.

Grade Elton Wentworth's public performance. Separate marks for form, style, and intent.

In one of the Wentworth biographies, you come across a photograph of a note to Wentworth from Sir Winston himself. The letter's signature vaguely resembles the inked scrawl that you've never paid attention to, on the inside front cover of your copy, underneath the pencilled price that now fills you with shame. The signature in the reproduced note reads "Winnie." The drooping, obscured squiggle in your copy looks more like "Hump-hump Clunluch."

You are insane, of course. Hallucinating from over-research. There is no way on any likely earth that a book belonging to one of the century's most famous personages could end up in a junk shop in the Cotswolds. Winston Churchill, Nobel Laureate in Literature, wasn't about to write his name in his bloody books. *If found, please return to House of Commons, London.*

You try to erase the pencilled price, for a better look. But you succeed only in smearing the signature. You look up every occurrence of Churchill's signature on record in the university's library. There is a similarity. The book gives you nothing else to go on, except the two bold exclamation points at the end of the first chapter. The one on the right seems distinctly Churchillian.

You'd take the book to an appraiser, but you get paranoid. This is exactly the kind of scenario in which the naïve get bilked. On your next trip to the city, you show it to an antiquarian whom you've bought from many times. He listens to your theory with a tight, embarrassed smile. He says that even if you did get the signature certified—which could cost considerable blood, toil, tears, and sweat—the simple signature, without any further marginalia, might not greatly increase the book's value. Given the dicey nature of the scribble, you may not want to pay for appraisal. But he's willing to give you fifty dollars for the copy, for a good customer. Fifty bucks could buy two years of used novels.

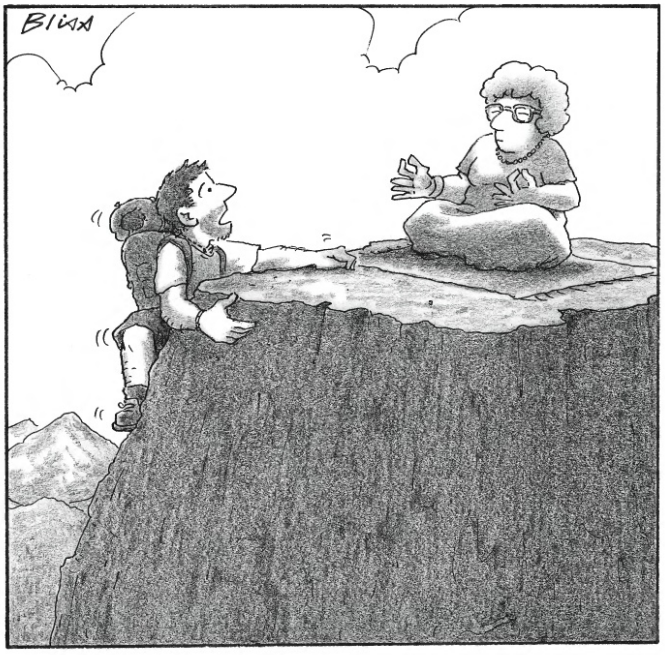
Deal or no deal?

You keep the copy, for reasons that reason doesn't understand. But two and a half months later you wipe out on literature altogether. You're out of time in the graduate program, and still no diss. Your husband says no kids until you finish, but you can't finish. The thesis isn't even embarrassing. Psychoanalytic readings reek of . . . six years ago, and this new post-structural stuff gives you hives.

You crash and burn. The house goes to pot. You glue yourself to the Watergate hearings for weeks. The whole mad circus is like a Dickens serial saga. You talk to the screen, cheering and hissing. You even develop a little thing for Sam Ervin.

You get a job adjuncting at a nearby college, intros and surveys. But drumming up enthusiasm for Wharton and Cather is murder. These days, it's all Pynchon and Barthelme, Coover and Gaddis and Gass. The canon goes up in smoke. You realize, belatedly, that you're a co-opted, false-consciousness servant of Empire, a kapo of privileged heteronormative white paternalism, but it's too late to retool. Around the Fall of Saigon—plagued by those films of people on the Embassy rooftop clutching the runners of escaping helicopters—you bail out into law school. It's the only practical choice. And doesn't law, at bottom, involve the same act of eternal verbal negotiation as reading?

The marriage breaks up under the pressure of 1L. Your only recreational reading for the next two years is the *Congressional Record*. You get a good job, with a decent boutique firm, specializing in intellectual property. None of your dozens of bright, well-read colleagues



"Mom?"

have ever heard of Wotton-on-Wold.

You marry again, this time for real, to a big police-procedural fan in corporate litigation. At the last possible moment, you have kids. Three of them: one reader and two watchers, who get their ABCs from purple and green televised puppets. Nothing will ever light up the cortex faster than cathode rays. Yet, with your reader daughter, the whole awful, gut-wrenching seduction happens all over again. Urban ducklings, Wild Things, Purple Crayons—it doesn't matter. Your daughter, glazed-eyed and body-snatched, chants "Read, Mommy, read," like she's off in Neverland already, even before the first verb. And you, fallen Wendy, eviscerated by the eternal recurrence of it all, hear Peter snarl at you for growing guilty and big and old, while something inside you cries, "Woman, woman, let go of me."

A few years pass, and still your daughter is reading furiously. You'll lose her eventually, to the rising flood of film: the swelling archive of video that offers whole new republics of visual democracy. Who knows how long the page will hold her attention? Do you rush her into the good stuff while you can? Maybe, if you time things right, the whole crumbling Edwardian stage set of Wotton-on-Wold will strike her as some kind of hyper-Narnia.

When should you push Wentworth on Jane?

1. Never too early.
2. Never too late.
3. Never gonna happen.

Your children become the heroes of their own plots, timeworn narratives in unrecognizable new bindings. The eighties pass while your energies are spent elsewhere—on building up the college-tuition war chests, on making partner, on helping companies copyright common English words. You still read for pleasure: all kinds of things. The hunger remains, but, as with sex, the costumes must grow ever more elaborate to produce the same transport. You're caught somewhere between reading for recognition and reading for estrangement.

Mostly what you read are reviews. Too few hours left to do more than scan the books that you know you'd love. At least you can read what the gatekeepers say about this fall's lineup. And, often, imagining a book from its synopsis beats what you do manage to slog through.

The reviews accumulate faster than you can flip through them. What you really need is a thumbnail summary of the thumbnail summaries. A year or so after Grenada or Iran-Contra or some such thing, while blasting through last year's stack of unread literary weeklies prior to pitching them, you come across the fact that "To the Measures Fall," long out of print, is being reissued in an annotated Essential Library edition—part of a general renaissance of Wentworth, who, the review laments, has been in a twenty-year decline. The reviewer calls "Measures" the "once celebrated, now forgotten British 'Magic Mountain.'" He claims that Wentworth's wartime Midlands still have as much to reveal as any of the marginalized regions of the earth. Can that possibly include Lesotho, Lebanon, the Punjab?

The retrospective appreciation feels like one of those lifetime-achievement awards that you get for having the courtesy to stay dead. The new cover for the Essential Library edition is dazzling; it makes Wentworth look like the next Alice Walker. You're not sure what constitutes a decent interval between "much revered national asset" and "unfairly undervalued." For the reviewer, the revival proves the one universal truth about literary merit: quality will surface, in the run of time. The trick is to stop time at just the right moment.

Who is Elton Wentworth, exactly? Choose one.

1. The currently most unjustly underrated author of his generation.

2. The formerly most justly overrated author of his generation.

3. The soon-to-be least unjustly rerated author of his generation.

New annotated editions flood the market. Does your boat go up? You break down and pay an appraiser ten times what you would have, ten years ago, to look at your copy. Churchill's marked-up volume, it turns out, went for eight hundred pounds at Sotheby's, just as the new Wentworth renaissance hit. Your copy belonged to a Cotswold sheep farmer named H. H. Cleanleach. The appraiser offers you ten bucks off his fee.

The boys in Information Processing install a terminal in your office that fulfills your old dream: rapid access to abstracts of all the articles that you can no longer find time to read. In between researching briefs, you follow the boomlet in Wentworth studies. The reader-response people take him up, then those who study reputational revision. There's a minor heyday in swarming any author still in the state of pre-post-exhaustion, just before the idea of single-author studies gives out.

A modernist at New Mexico State proves that "To the Measures Fall" was really written around 1928, suppressed by Wentworth for two decades, then published, despite his objections, in a form he didn't want. A Barnard associate prof proves that half the novel was the work of Wentworth's longtime mistress. A graduate student at Indiana proves that the book is riddled with historical error. Scholars of all ranks show how Wentworth was the product of a thousand horrific cultural blindnesses and Eurocentric brutalities.

Write a brief letter to no one, about what you once thought the book might mean.

The Berlin Wall falls, and the Evil Empire falls with it. The Cold War ends, and for a moment history does, too. You stop reading anything that is more than two months old.

You don't exactly remember the nineties. The Gulf, of course. Something about Somalia and Sarajevo. Smoke everywhere. Lots of colored ribbons tied around America's trees. The firm keeps dangling the promise of senior partnership, but it never quite happens.

The 1993 feature film adaptation of "To the Measures Fall" stars Daniel Day-Lewis and Emma Thompson. There's an extended hallucinatory sequence depicting the suicidal "slow walk" at the Somme (filmed in Scotland), graphically matched to a torrid sex scene on the heath outside Wotton-

on-Wold (filmed in a Hollywood sound studio). A tie-in paperback edition appears, with a glossy movie-still cover featuring the gorgeous leads.

Rate the film:

1. Worth the price of a movie ticket.

2. Worth videotaping, when it comes on TV.

3. Worth denouncing at a dinner party.

4. Worth a class-action suit by readers everywhere.

On your fifty-fifth birthday—the age at which the terminally ill Sarah Beck must identify her son's body at the foot of the South Downs gravel pit—you join a book group. The kids are grown, the career's on autopilot, the husband is off playing paintball, and it's time to read again. Books are back, in more flavors than ever. Cool books, slick books, innovative remixes, massive doorstops, funny jeux d'esprit, weepy Uighur bildungsromans, caustic family sagas from Kazakhstan. Books in every market niche and biome: avant-après-post-retro. Back, too, is the long-dead art of communal reading. O.K.: maybe a few of your book-group members are in it for the finger food. But you'd forgotten what a pleasure it is to discuss out loud—aimless talk about love and lust, responsibility, hope, and pain. Together, over two years, you read the major national selections. Your fellow-members bring their old secret freight out of deep storage. You take nine months to work up to your request. You're unsure of your friends. Unsure of your ability to reread. Unsure of just what's in that treacherous book these days.

You read it slowly this time, a chapter a night, over the course of weeks. This time through, the book is no more than a grand, futile gesture of *nevertheless* in the face of human frailty: Francis Beck's refusal to believe that his wife is ill—a feckless cowardice that turns, by insistence, almost heroic; Alice Wright's paralyzing premonition, which she can't act upon without destroying the man who would destroy her; Trevor's premeditated signal to Alice, ready to launch itself from beyond the grave.

Two club members report flinging the book across the room in a rage. Another demands her three days back. Accusations multiply: it's mawkish, it's cerebral, it's meandering, it's manipulative, it's cold and cunning and misanthropic, it's wrecked by redemption. *How are we supposed to care about these characters? I just wanted them all to get a life.*

But a few people in the group don't know what hit them. One friend hated the first fifty pages but wanted fifty more after the end. The quietest man in the group comes back from Wotton-on-Wold wrapped in brittle bewilderment at his own existence.

It's a custom of the group—introduced by the male minority—to assign every book a letter grade. Yours gets a C+.

What percentage of your pleasure has gone out of the book forever? Fractions permitted.

Overnight, the World Wide Web weaves tightly around you. A novelty at first, then invaluable, then life support, then heroin. It's a chance to recapture everything you've ever lost: college friends, out-of-print rarities, quotations that had vanished forever. Your online hours must come from somewhere, and it isn't from your TV viewing. You lose whole days on the roller coaster of real-time eBay auctions. Volumes of Wentworth go off at every price, from triple digits down to a buck ninety-nine. You rescue a few, to give to friends, someday, or whenever.

It thrills you to discover a site where all the shameless, recidivist Wentworth readers in the world gather to post their guilty pleasures. You subscribe to a feed. Six months later, the community spirals into civil war as a thread between sock puppets and anonymous avatars goes up in flames.

You watch the Amazon ratings for "To the Measures Fall" drop steadily, from a high of four and a half stars to a low somewhat below that of a defective woodchipper. The wisdom of crowds means to send Wentworth into a third and final eclipse. You consider logging in at Comfort Suites across the country, creating all kinds of personae to rescue the book for another generation of Wentworth readers, whenever they dare to come out of hiding.

How many aliases do you create to rate the book?

1. Just enough to boost the book back to its rightful rating.

2. Sarah Beck would never create an alias.

Then the new century. Terror and sci-fi become life's dominant genres.

War turns perpetual.

The last print newspapers head toward extinction.

More words get posted in five years than were published in all previous history.

Global warming threatens to flood coasts inhabited by half a billion people.

Most of the planet suffers from drought or tainted water.

Name the book that best captures life as now lived.

Two months before you plan to retire, you learn that you have a massive hilar tumor, nestled up in the stem of your lungs, where nothing can reach it. It's right where Sarah Beck's is, if you're imagining correctly.

Your daughter the reader brings you the book, to keep you company in a state-of-the-art cancer center, in your bed next to a window that looks out onto a brick wall ten feet across a cement courtyard. You read it again. Not the whole book, of course—you couldn't possibly read a whole anything. But you manage a few pages, searching for a creature that recedes in front of your gaze.

This time, the book is about the shifting delusion of shared need, our imprisonment in a medium as traceless as air. It's about a girl who knew nothing at all, taking a bike ride through the Cotswolds one ridiculous spring, mistaking books for life and those rolling hills of metaphor for truth. It's about a little flash, glimpsed for half a paragraph at the bottom of a left-hand page, that fills you with something almost like knowing.

A freak snow hits late that year. You lie in bed, an hour from your next morphine dose, your swollen index finger marking a secret place in the spine-cracked volume, the passage that predicted your life. For a moment you are lucid, and equal to any story.

Score the world on a scale from one to ten. Say what you'd like to see happen, in the sequel. ♦