

The jelly guts quivered and pulsed, and before I could get out of this mess of a conversation I'd created with the artist, I had to get out of this mess of perception the artist had created for me. I reached for the jelly donut, to turn its unlucky side away from me, and met with the artist's wind-chapped hand, which, it seemed, floated down from nowhere to snatch the pastry the very moment my own had touched its plate. He leaned back again, holding the breakfast treat beside his face, so as not to obstruct the angered twinkle in his eyes.

My slip of the tongue and the pumping donut innards were making me sweat. "Have you ever noticed," I said, attempting a diversion, "the peculiar shades of powdered sugar?"

Theodore glanced at the donut, its speckled scalp, and then, as if recognizing a trap, returned his eyes to mine and began to speak in a very stolid, matter-of-fact tone.

"You know I wrote something years ago," our plaintiff confessed. "When I was in my early twenties. An essay of sorts. It was a joke. I was making fun of two old friends. I even named it after them. An effortless pun. A vicious thing, really. It was an assignment in college. We were supposed to write a manifesto, outline our theory of art, whatever that could have been. Anyway, everybody wrote about how their art defined their distaste for structures of power. Angry adolescent stuff, mostly. Conservative parents, narrow-minded teachers, fascist policemen: these all became straight lines, geometric shapes molesting what always ended up being a self-portrait of the would-be artist. My two friends had been

especially obsessed with this kind of art, and their work had always seemed infantile, solipsistic, monochrome, and banal to me. So I used the assignment to get back at them for whatever it was they had done to offend me. Blah blah blah. The teacher loved it; she even made me read it in front of the class. A silly thing. I regret its creation—and would despise its existence if I knew it had survived the years. But of course, as you might know, my parents misplaced it along with everything else when they moved. If I ever find it, I will destroy it. If anyone else finds it, I can only hope that *he* will do the same.”

Theodore looked again at the donut and then brushed some of the sugar off its dusted cap. Of course he would destroy it, I thought, relieved and enthralled by the idea that I owned the autograph manuscript. The Manifesto proved that Theodore’s crime, this primary color soon to assault our small city, this oozing jell soon to suffocate us all, was premeditated, its creation meticulously planned throughout the years. Theodore’s story about the two old friends, his claim that the thing had been an assignment was clever, yes, but undeniably fictitious. His not so subtle request that I destroy *The Rexworth Manifesto* fell on deaf ears. If what I had seen the night before was not a hallucination, a bad dream; if what the artist had told me was true, then the Manifesto would end up being the last original Jonson I owned, not to mention an invaluable tool for blackmail, should it come to such blows. *Everything makes sense*, I thought, this time to myself.

Theodore appeared ready to pick up where I had left off, on the subject of powdered sugar, but then hunger, or anger, or the two instincts meshed into one, seized the moment, and he bit into the sloppy treat, his tiny venturesome eyes squinting, and once again a blob of that parasite invention, now fixed forever on this thing called jelly, flew from the injection chute and fell in the artist's lap. I must have shrieked, for the artist relaxed his animal visage and, with the mauled pastry poised below his chin, smiled, then proceeded to shove the tainted vessel into his filthy mouth. I thought I would vomit and almost did when a coagulated stream of that infected confection dribbled out of the jelled anus and down the front of the artist's wool sweater, settling into the crease above his gut.

"Control yourself!" I commanded. "You're getting it everywhere!"

"Oh shit," he growled. "These things are so messy." He picked up a napkin and began to wipe himself. "Did I get any on you?" he asked.

"No," I said, but he threw the soiled rag at me and apologized anyway. It landed in front of my chest, next to my styrofoam cup of coffee. Instinctively I flicked the violent gesture on the floor and began to count to ten.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"What would you call that?" I asked, pointing to the last bite of donut and dribble of guts now sitting on the table between us like a recently peeled scab.

“What?” he said, playing innocent. “The jelly? I don’t know. Jelly, right? I think its strawberry, or grape, or maybe both. Actually, I doubt its either one. Raspberry? Or just a bit of corn syrup and food coloring. You don’t know what you’re eating these days.”

“Indeed,” I said, thinking myself thinking again. “But I mean the color. What would you call that color?”

“Well, it’s red, of course,” said the painter incredulously, as if everyone knew and would agree with such a snide response.

“You call it red?”

“Okay. Well, there,” he pointed to the smear on the newspaper page, “it looks crimson, and there,” he pointed to the napkin on the floor, “it looks magenta, and there,” he pointed to the pastry gash, “it looks scarlet, almost maroon, and here,” he stood up and pointed to the stain on the front of his khakis, “it looks vermeil.” He sat back down, looked me in the eyes, and made a sympathetic gesture with his eyebrows. “Red. Right?”

“But *red* is already taken,” I reminded him. “You can’t use *red*. You should really come up with something a little more original, don’t you think?”

His brow remained furrowed when he asked, as if it were relevant, “How’s that bump on your head?”