

# **The Common Lot: Take Off**

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*It is accepted as democratic when public offices are allocated by lot;  
and as oligarchic when they are filled by election.  
-- Aristotle {Politics. 4.1294b}*

**sortition** |sôr'ti sh ən|  
noun

the action of selecting or determining something  
by the casting or drawing of lots.

ORIGIN late 16th cent.:

from Latin

*sortitio(n-)*, from *sortire* 'divide or obtain by lot.'

Chapter One

FIRST YEAR  
January Third

Carrying the silver and ebony mace entrusted to him, the sergeant-at-arms leads the procession through the burnished oaken doors of the chamber's entrance. Through those doors flow five hundred women and men unlike any other legislature in the history of the republic. Breaking with previous sumptuary rules, the more than one hundred blue collar workers walk into the halls of Congress dressed en masse in striped coveralls and cotton blues. They had caucused earlier and decided to be who they were.

Others followed their lead. The nine food service workers parade dressed in white aprons with hair netted or under toque. A few from the intermountain region jingle and jangle spurs, chaps flapping, under wide brimmed hats. The two policemen wear their uniforms -- though under longstanding House rules without their sidearms.

The attire of the four Native Americans covers the spectrum. The wizened one has his hair in braids, dangling a feather. His vest of hand-woven wool is adorned with a breastplate of porcupine quill. At the other aboriginal extreme is a woman of sixty, her hair frosted and tied in bouffant. She wears sheeny cowgirl boots and a gaudy necklace of turquoise. Her perfume is not from juniper.

An Amishman of twenty-five, the minimum age for representation, has defied his sect -- first by registering at all and then by accepting his selection. His name is Matthias and he cites Acts 1 verse 26 as personally prophetic: " ... and the lot fell upon Matthias." He is another sartorial anomaly: black hat, black coat, black pants, black shoes. Coming

from a sub sect that allows one suspender not two, a singular black diagonal slashes across his stiff and brilliant white shirt.

Matthias is the object of particular media attention. He is quoted as saying that, besides the eponymous calling of his name, he believes the use of sortition is an affirmation of his religion. Though his own community does not agree with his decision to break their taboo against involvement in secular government, he points out that for centuries the Amish have withstood brutal attacks upon their sovereignty guided by bishops through the use of the lottery.

Matthias also reveals a reason more whimsical. He says he is following in the tradition of an Amishman who took a cruise around the world to prove to himself and to his neighbors that the world really was round. Since he is as yet unbaptized and unmarried, Matthias says that -- renegade though he is -- if he returns to his family's farm, having braved his dangerous sojourn in "the world," he will be spared the communal wrath of shunning. He could not do so otherwise, for without the harmony and support of his fellow peasantry, he could not survive among them.

Given that citizens had to choose to register for inclusion in the lottery pool and that furthermore they had to pass the civics test required of immigrants, and given the mathematical probability of a deviation of less than two and a half percent, not more than a baker's dozen of the five hundred are unrepresentative of perspectives common to groups of at least six hundred fifty thousand citizens. Besides those in dress specific to occupation or region, it is a crowd of department store corduroys, jeans, knit skirts, polyester slacks, cotton blouses and sports shirts. Feet inhabit serviceable sneakers, scuffed oxfords, day-glo pumps and a few high heeled binders. Compared to

photographs of the old Congresses, the change of appearance is startling. Gone is the uniform of the tailor suited, the overbearing, the self-made. Gone, the millionaire oligarchs. Gone, the two hundred lawyers.

Of the newly inaugurated, only 50 make more than \$83,000, the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile of wage earning. Some of those are upper middle class managers and the goal setting workaholics, men and women who might be said to be throwbacks. But even among them there is a difference from the old Congress. The glamour boys and luxury girls have disappeared. The media seekers are elsewhere. They may be hard drivers but they are not self-promoters. Emblematic of them is the statement one made to a reporter's query about their financial acumen: "It's pretty much like sortition," said the executive, "a matter of being in the right place at the right time ... for no apparent reason."

Cathy Marcek Gresham has chosen a white woolen dress for herself, lighter weight than the season. Embroidered sky blue tigers paw at each other all over her body. Cathy surveys her compatriot representatives and is thankful she need not obey dictates of fashion, station or uniform. Unlike many of the others, Cathy is not ecstatic about the prospect of years in Washington. In the decade and a half since leaving college she had been using the disposable income of her modest trust fund for domestic travel. She had seen and she had touched -- had made a point of touching, of stopping to bend down and feel the dirt with her fingers -- each of the contiguous states. Her traveling companion for most of those 'touch downs' is the aunt with whom she had lived longer than she had imagined she ever would and the aunt who is now director of her staff, Clara Voight. During the course of their travels, happenstance acquaintances would sometimes imply that domestic travel was plebian. Cathy didn't bother to respond but Clara would counter

with tales of triumph of mounted heights and gradients descended, doing so from the confinement of the wheelchair to which she had been condemned by a mishap on one of their first domestic adventures.

When the two weren't peregrinating they improved the two acre lot Clara had lived on in the pine and oak forest of north Florida. But now they have left that base for the uncertain and immobile adventure of three years in Washington. Cathy wonders if any of the other Congressional members miss their homes as much as she misses the place where she has lived the past fifteen years. Amidst the drone of voices making motions and taking measures on the floor of the new Representative House, she lapses into remembering the quarter mile walk through the forest to the mailbox, enlivened by the variegated trill of a springtime mockingbird.

Halfway down the drive she is surprised to meet the postwoman driving toward the house. The woman has a registered letter for Cathy. "I was looking for a garden catalog," Cathy says. "The black tulip is all the rage."

"I heard about that on the radio," the postwoman says. "I listen to the call-in programs, everything from gardeners to the lovelorn."

Cathy signs for the letter and returns to the bungalow. Clara has wheeled herself onto the porch despite the morning chill, greedy as usual for the mail. "Registered letter today," Cathy says.

"From our banker?"

"No. U. S. government. For me." She hands the rest of the stack to Clara and holds open the door for her aunt to wheel herself into the warm kitchen of what they like to call their commodious abode.

Sitting in the bay window, Cathy peers out at the flower garden, forlorn of anything but a clump of ragged straw flowers and brown mounds of dirt. Thanking Clara for the tea offered, she opens her letter and reads it silently while Clara tears through the rest.

Letter in hand, Cathy mulls a minute. She lays it down. Walks to water the geranium on the windowsill over the sink. A rose geranium. She is on the verge of tears.

"What was that letter about?" Clara asks.

"Clara, do you realize how attached I've become to this place?"

Clara rolls over to pick up the registered letter. After a glance she smiles.

"Congratulations! This calls for your favorite anglophilic refreshment. Tea and crumpets, in honor of your colonial royalist ancestors! I'm sure they're rolling in their graves."

Cathy spins away toward the geranium. "You're so hard."

"Oh? Have you turned sedentary, full stop?" Clara pours another cup of tea for Cathy, and puts crumpets in to toast. "Buck up, gal. Where's the old wanderlust?"

"Wah-shing-ton," Cathy drawls, affecting a deeper southern accent than she has.

"Please, dah-ling, can anything be more déclassé? Besides, Clara, you know that the Supreme Court has not yet ruled on the injunction. It is still uncertain if the implementation of sortitional selection at the federal level will be recognized."

"And you, my dear niece, know that it was the states' decision, each and every one of them, to choose their representation by lot. They've already succeeded in using sortition in municipalities and state legislatures. I can't see how the Supremes are going

to find a way to finagle out of that. And ... who, knows but that you'll meet a Representative Charming? Not that I want to lose you."

"Auntie, time is running out for me on that score. I'm not exactly a fetching beauty nor am I the compliant housewife that men still want. Furthermore, *sturm und drang* is not what I am looking for, even if you are. No matter what the Supreme Court decides, there are those other forces -- former politicians, the 'influencers' as they call them, and a whole raft of other unsavory characters -- out to scuttle the new system. I'm averse to any greater uncertainties than arise in our little quotidian life."

"Wouldn't it be just my luck," Cathy goes on, "that the letter assigns me to a full three year term. Why couldn't I have drawn a one-year term or the two-year term? Those will only be available in the first two years. After that, entry to this Citizen Legislature will stagger, annually replacing one-third of its representatives. Maybe I would be happier if they'd chosen me a little later, after it all stabilizes. There's too much scruff and duff around it now. I'll be overwhelmed."

"Flounce about and pout all you want," Clara declares. "I rather like to see your dander. But remember that when you and I registered for the allocation and passed the civics test, we were agreeing to take the chance. Pundits predicted women would not sign up in numbers proportionate to men. Our intention was to insure an accurate female demographic. Agreed, we never gave the slightest thought of being chosen -- way too much of a long shot. But now it's come and it's a duty. Not only for women in the aggregate but also for you. Stand up and be counted, Cathy. Don't be a clam."

"You are always right, aren't you, Clara? Always quick to jump, ready for every next ... big ... thing. Well, maybe I don't want to give in so easily to you this time. The letter gives us a couple months to decide. Maybe I'd rather grow those black tulips."

Chapter Two

PREVIOUS YEAR  
Early June

Clara's fat legs blimp up out before her as Cathy guides her wheelchair into the steaming waters of the heated pool. Clara laughs at the uselessness of her dangling appendages and lays back further as the water lifts the white collar of styrofoam around her neck and then the rest of her, all of her, finally buoyant and free. It is two weeks since black tulips had come between them.

Cathy returns the chair back up the ramp, then quietly submerges out of sight. She swims underwater to Clara and breaches, spouting. Clara gulps a mouthful and mimics Cathy with a small fountain skyward. "I guess", Clara mocks, "we can both be whales!"

They lollygag for the moment -- nothing to do but loosen limbs and drift and muse. Of the other couple dozen in the pool, half are taking care and half are giving it; but those definitions dissolve in the gentle waves of spastic commotions.

"We're not," Cathy says, "going to be able to do this so easily up north. We won't be able to take off at a whim. There will be schedules. Much of the time it will be cold and we'll be indoors."

"Still afraid, hey Cathy? You want to join the invisibles? Want to join those who decline the seat when it's offered?"

"Well, there are plenty of good people who do decline. You read about that doctor who decided that his patients are more important to him than a three year

interruption would allow. Is it such a great loss that he isn't going? One other doctor was chosen and he did accept. No one will miss us if we don't go."

Clara spouts again. "Sure, for some there are compelling reasons not to accept the challenge. I thought that doctor was right. And I admired that young professor whose research ... what was it about?"

"Plant pathology."

"Yes. She was possessed by her work. But, Cathy, we aren't in that position. Your wavering seems more like that of the fellow who threw it all away for his little romance. He was unemployed but not on the dole, living with his parents. His girlfriend didn't want to relocate. Poor him. He had no excuse to renege and neither do you. No offense, deary, but your volunteer job dabbling in social work is more hobby than anything. Your choice now is between national duty and private prerogative."

"Clara, I should have stuck with those millions who never registered in the first place. I only signed up because of your argument about bulking up the female demographic."

"Right," Clara grunts, "you could have joined the religious separatists. Or called yourself a philosophical anarchist. Or, most accurately, melted into the blob of the blissful apathetics. Why not claim opposition to gambling, to random selection, sortition, on humanist grounds? You, the inheritress, refusing to take anything unearned."

"Auntie, auntie," Cathy sighs, "you are so quick with your dagger of words. All right, I give up. You'd never forgive me if I didn't accept. You'd lose *your* chance! So then, tell me, what are we in for?"

"What are we in for?' That sounds ominous, like it's a prison sentence. You think we're breaking some law? Like what? Nepotism? Ha!"

"Well, now that you mention it, is it legal? Us going up there, in tandem so to speak?"

"You flabbergast me sometime. You really do. Just because we are related and live together doesn't mean we can't work together. We'll assemble a top notch staff. We can draw on expertise among our local contacts and add a few of those previous professionals who remain in D.C. We'll do it all in tandem but you're the one sitting up front. Officially I can only advise."

Cathy smiles at the thought of hierarchy between them. Funny.

"Cathy, I'll carry on with the same old bitching ... what you've come to accept and endure from me ... as I've done ever since my accident when you came to live with me. 'Onward for the cause of the feisty crips!' 'All power to the sassy spazzes!'" Clara shoots her arm up high causing her head to dip underwater. From which she emerges spluttering in laughter.

"Have you got my opening speech ready yet?" Cathy asks. "You sound like you are ready to jump to a podium yourself."

"Touché, dear niece, touché. My mind's been racing, flat out. It's a good thing you've waffled. It would be better if you keep your finger in the dike and not know what's behind my floodgates." Clara smiles a sheepish wolfish alligator smile. Then she submerges.

Chapter Three

PREVIOUS YEAR  
Mid May

Turkey looks out past hexagonal iron screens that purport to be other than bars. Alone, he lingers in an alcove of a darkened corridor, gazing through resinous smoke. Interchanging field and ground, ground and field. A useful ability, developed over time, controlling the world.

He's drifting off with the spirit of smoke, off to an old blue mountaintop. He has a lair up there, under a boulder, under the trees. Not an eyrie, no. Eyries be damned! Gauche, blatant things, eyries. Scorn upon the raptors. Turkey waddles under the leafy canopy, free. Plenty of mast for him and his harem.

He pats his back pocket, smirks. He pats his shirt pocket, sighs. Repeat. Repeat. If anyone had been looking, they would have labeled him autistic, obsessive-compulsive, ADHD, whatever. The back pocket paper is release. Only for another day or two does he remain on hold, awaiting the bureau's concluding ministrations. In his shirt pocket, over his heart, his admission ticket. To the other patients he brags, calling it entry to his very own Turkey Shoot – with himself doing the shooting. In a few months he'll be strutting up Capitol Hill.

Removing a ventilator cover from the wall, he withdraws a plastic bag, shakes out powder dry green leaves and distributes them in a neat line on thin white paper. Goops it with his tongue. One for later, in the darkness, after dinner. With ground privileges he can sneak a toke before slumber.

The dinner horn blats. Penetrates his musing. It won't be long before he expects his imaginings of a harem to become real. He tongues his fingers, dabs out his sacrament, stuffs his stash and genuflects to answer the summons of civilization's blandishments.

Beating his wings, loud and oddly squeaking, he flies through empty corridors past doors with numbers and names. He lands, carrying a tray, behind a guy with the herky jerky heeby jeebies. Warned by long experience, he backsteps a pace, making allowance for spill or collision.

"Hey, Larry," Turkey says, "seen Mrs. Hardnose today?"

Larry sniffles, shakes, has to gather himself. His malaise causes him to sob all day for the children he fathered but abused. "No," he shakes and breaks into balling.

Turkey continues pushing his tray along the aluminum trough, loading on the carbohydrates, inured to Larry's situation. It amuses him to realize how much he likes his social worker, "Mrs. Hardnose". Sure, she pastes on a mechanical grin when she has to. Her pancake make-up and the pillbox hat are pre-century. He can ignore the toilet water, is that what it is? Why *toilet*?

It's the kind of question she wouldn't mind. Like earlier in the day, their last formal interview. He does not expect to see her again except for that last fleeting moment before his triumphant walk toward the gates.

Like all the other officials he has known she has insisted upon calling him according to their records, "Melvin". With her, this too does not bother him. Unlike the authoritarian others, she was solace in the cold.

He had grown up called Turkey. His parents, especially his father, were admirers of Ben Franklin -- *Poor Richard's* admonitions his lifelong guide. Turkey's mother had had to fight to prevent her husband from naming the boy, on the birth records, "Turkey". The father, an immigrant, admired Franklin's high regard for the bird. He had an odd way of seeing the success of their connubial conjunction in mercantilist terms. He referred to their procreative lovemaking as "talking turkey".

For the first week of his life though, begrudging the compromise, he used the name. Melvin, derived from *Meleagris*, the nation's erstwhile national symbol. But the name stuck in his craw and he, and the mother too, soon reverted to bestowing their affection to the little "Turkey".

The mother resisted her husband's insistence upon "Gallo" – from the species nomen, *gallopavo* – for the boy's middle name. By pandering to her husband's amateur interest in astronomy and his hatred of organized religions, she extorted "Galileo". Thus amidst ideological struggle, Melvin Galileo Panos was born in a red brick flat deep into the south of south Saint Louis with nary an eagle in sight.

Turkey soon learned that he was not himself an admirer of Ben Franklin. All he knew of turkeys was at Thanksgiving and he wanted none of that. Furthermore all his little buddies were admirers of eagles. At school he tried to hide the name but that lasted only the week it took Wally Schmidt to figure out kindergarten. Wally lived up the block and had a roundhouse that Turkey learned to bobble away from but which, nonetheless, firmly established Turkey's subordinate position. He was an easy mark, the perfect butt, a klutz.

He adopted evasive tactics, didn't fight back. He took the jabs and the jibes. He trained as a punching bag, perfecting the blank look. But just as he was coming to appreciate the attention, his nemesis began to desert him. He had to make an effort. He learned to strike out with the bases loaded. It became second nature, a sure thing, happened all the time. He added grim touches. He would lose his hat on each pathetic swing. On strike three, his bat would fly in the direction of a triple down the third base line. It was something at least, something airborne.

The greatest danger Turkey posed was to himself. As he aged, the game became more dangerous. He had to stretch his natural discomposure. It was tough to keep the jaded amused.

Institutions came to take dim views of his antics. As a juvenile charged with breaking-and-entering, he glimpsed steel bars. Psychiatrists got hold of him a couple times. But he could play it straight and sober if necessary, even better than they. He liked to unbalance his interrogators with bits and pieces of exotic information he gleaned from books.

He was not without charm. His upside-down derring-do and his contempt for status had gained him muted admiration. At the bottom of the pecking order, Turkey had to be careful. Not to be the object of disgust. It was a fine line. He had fallen often into the muck.

On this day as on so many others, during his meeting with his social worker, he struggles to understand his feelings toward her. He can never allow for love. He angers at how she stresses that he has no record of violent behavior. Why must she refer to files rather than to his living person right here before her? He's sick of this incubator.

Maintaining her right of initiative, she ends the meeting by offering him "continued support." To his embarrassment she is available for "consultations." It is a short plane ride to Washington she assures and he can return to visit at any time. She exhorts he continue his medications.

Turkey glazes during this finale. Abandoning the details of her discourse, he delves into the creases of her forehead, divining the curious relationship that has grown below the folds between them. Ostensibly clinical. Dispassionate. He falls into her depths -- concealed unto herself -- lost, gladly lost, within her wrinkled beckoning. Nothing to do but take refuge from the cognitive, rocking in a childhood cradle of soft cries and tender lullabies.

She means what she says. Turkey knows this and forgives the language in which it is couched. At the end of her farewell, she thrusts her hand into his. One is limp, the other clammy. The handshake, perfunctory and yet electric, befuddles them both.

She wishes him luck and warns that life on the outside may be more difficult than he expects. She repeats her fears that his release is premature. As if he had never before gone from catacomb to open air. As if he had forgotten the unleashing of previous detentions. What the ascent is like, the shock. The danger of the bends.

Chapter Four

PREVIOUS YEAR  
Early September

After a summer in the protective cocoon of his parents' home in southern Illinois, Turkey awakes from a crumpled night on the train into Union Station, Washington D. C. Turkey figures he is supposed to feel something momentous. What is it? To be as free as a jaybird? Not while dragging around a suitcase of lead. He has had to maneuver it and himself through a bus, a taxi, the train and now a subway. He speaks only if spoken to. Not until he emerges from the underground, into a rotunda of automobiles, does he venture to acknowledge his return to earth.

Unlike any previous release, Turkey faces a predetermined reality. He has an objective. He pats the shirt pocket, its slip of paper.

He has not read newspapers for a while. He should learn the currents, which waves are safe, which tides strong. He has not taken his medication. He floats, a foot or so off the ground. He must think of his every move twice.

"GOOD MORNING" he says, frightening the nearest stable face.

The kiosk vendor startles. "Hey, bub."

"And How Do You Do?"

The dealer studies Turkey. Suitcase. Swarthy. Diction staccato. Probably a foreigner.

Turkey gambits, "What is your name? Sir?"

The man smiles. He enjoys serendipitous improbabilities such as this one. They spice his days. "McKnight," -- the dealer plays -- "Sir?"

"Melvin. Melvin Panos." Turkey sticks out his hand. "That's my name!"

"Yeah..." The vendor lets Turkey's hand dangle, likes to get a rise. "You want to buy a paper, bub?"

The hand stays levitated. The vendor plays for suspense, extends it by picking up a paper and waving it under Turkey's nose.

Turkey's eyes swim. He is being made fool of. But what can he do? His brain woozes. Is it because of months of medications? Or because of one day without?

"What's this?" Turkey asks, saying anything, hoping to cover his confusion. He knows it is a newspaper. That is obvious. It is what he was looking for. But these things cost money. They require transaction to acquire. He had not considered the ramifications of wasting his few pennies. He's stumbling. In the outside world they expect responses surefire. His head pendulums with the waving newspaper. He's almost hypnotized.

"What's this?" McKnight asks. "What's this?" The vendor greets Turkey's catatonic handshake. "It's a newspaper," McKnight asserts. The guy's not a foreigner. Maybe dim. Maybe hung over. "A newspaper," he repeats. "Mister ... it was ... Pan? No. Mister Panos!"

"Yeah." Ah, a glow of recognition. "Melvin Panos." Turkey relinquishes McKnight's warm palm. He withdraws coins from his pants pocket. "Here's my tribute," he says.

Thus, the first material object to pass between McKnight and the Congressman-select is a newspaper. The headline reads "Sortition Passes Last Court Test; Training

Begins.” Much later, amidst pitchers of philosophical boozing, their hindsight names that newspaper "oracular."

Turkey sticks the paper under his armpit, folded. That feels natural, the right thing, mark of a civilized gentleman. "Nothing like disinformation to keep a man disinformed," laughing at his cleverness.

"What are you talking about?"

Sure of himself now, Turkey proceeds, "And could you tell me, my good man ... " -- he feints -- "And could you tell me, kind sir ... " -- the clown's two-step -- " ... where the White House is?"

McKnight has no other customers. Never have seen this guy, never will again. Nobody else to talk to. So what if they guy is some kind of freak? It's a bit chilly but the clouds have cleared. The stage is large, actors play as best they can. Why else do I run this money-losing, irrelevant, out-of-date business? "Sure, buddy. What kind of a white house are you looking for?"

"I said *The* White House, sir."

"Oh, yeah, sure. Going to pay your respects to the President. I should have known.” A true loony. Should he alert his friend on the beat? Nah. It'd just mean another bogus terrorist report. This one is harmless. Why should the guy be exiled? "What I meant was," McKnight apologizes, "was that I live in *a* white house. That's all, Melvin."

"Melvin?" Turkey starts. "*A* white house?"

McKnight shrugs, quizzes.

"Look, what people call me is *Turk*." Turkey turns tough, needs to show talons. "Thought I'd try out that *Melvin* bit. A new image. But all you had to do was to say it once." He spits. "Nope. It won't work."

This guy wants to fight. McKnight likes to fight. "So is that *Turk* as in *Oversize Cluck*?"

"I'm a patriot!" Turkey lets feathers fly. "You know what Ben Franklin thought? *Sir*? Ben Franklin preferred turkeys to eagles" -- announcing God's Truth.

"So what's new? Everyone knows that. We're all carrion eaters, all of us. A friend likes to say 'When it comes down to it, it's all shit.' He's right. Brown, brown, everything's brown. Give it time, it turns fecal."

"Mr. McKnight, please." Turkey's sensibilities are offended. "Has a turkey ever been known to eat rotten fish?"

"Ah, young man ... What you don't know about rotten fish. Or eagles or turkeys, for that matter. The wild turkey is a trusting soul until he learns of man. Then he becomes as wily as any. And the eagle is not the only one to enjoy rotting fish. I've had the pleasure myself, Melvin ... or Turkey ... or is it *Turk*?"

McKnight lets the jumble of thoughts slow him long enough that he can revel, for a split second, at the northern lights splattered inside his skull. "Good rotten salmon heads, son ... can't beat 'em. They turn green with mold and as soft as Limburger cheese. Athabaskan women up north are proud to serve you some."

Turkey, trying to avoid vomitus, grabs one of McKnight's safer lines. "It's *Turk*. I used to be a wrestler and I wore a mustache and I was ferocious." He is, forever after, glad of this lie. "My mother is Anatolian, at least a quarter, and I have Mohammedan

bloodlines.” Turkey stands, bold and cold – scraggly black beard dangling from high and hollow cheekbones.

“We were talking about Ben Franklin, remember.” McKnight maintains relentless grip.

“Ah, yes! Yes, indeed. It was Benjamin's essay on the turkey that intrigued my father most. I heard him pop off to his friends so often I know Franklin's words verbatim: 'The bald eagle is a bird of bad moral character ... generally poor and often very lousy. The turkey is a much more respectable bird and withal a true native of America.' Good old *Mellea gallopova*. Pop stayed around long enough to use his Audubon Index. He decided: *Mel* if a boy; and *Lea* if a girl. They tried the Melvin as a compromise but more often called me their Little Turkey.”

“You're not kidding, are you?”

“Nope, but as I said, I went on to become ferocious. I tarred-and-feathered all my opponents. As I reached adolescence, they shortened it to *Turk* ... which, as I said, given my matrilineal background, was appropriate.”

“Perspicacious parents of yours, the Anatolian and the birder. They knew a ferocious Islamic wrestler -- as an infant -- when they saw one.”

Turkey nods assent. Serious, considered assent. “It was Ben Franklin. They both liked Ben Franklin.”

McKnight motions Turkey hold further digression while he turns to his two-burner hotplate and pours himself a cup of soup. This guy is all right, McKnight ponders. Quirky, strange, probably a liar. But all right. McKnight turns back again. “So you, the

patriot, have a date at *The White House*. Is that it? Have they finally proclaimed that the turkey is to depose the eagle?"

"Ah! A nice way of putting it, McKnight. Yes, I am off to depose the eagle. Or, to put it another, more legally rigorous, way ... I'm off to make a deposition. It's time I left the cloister and claimed my harem, my due."

"Is this an invitation, my young man?" McKnight probes.

"Does it matter, does it?" Turkey fingers the paper bomb in his shirt pocket. He might explode it right now, in front of this old man, the invitation to his seat in the First United States Representative House. The Citizen Legislature, already being acronymized -- the 'CL'. "May I speak straight, McKnight? Or doesn't it matter?"

"Matter, matter ... a good question. Are you to be a meatball to me, a turkey, too stupid to come in out of the rain? Is that a matter of consequence? Or are you to be a mellow Melvin fellow ... a wet dish rag wiping up the yuck-yuck of quotidian thanksgivings?"

Turkey grins at the old man's appreciations. McKnight accepts the attention and presents a gift. "If it's a matter which matters -- and a name is -- I'll call you, from among the choices you give, *Turk*."

Turk jumps from a jolt, over his heart, emitting from that little paper he has hidden there. The paper is not simply his ticket *out* ... not just an escape from flophouse floozies on the barroom's backstage of life. The paper is a ticket *in*. Turk has hit a place where he can not lie. "It isn't just diplomatic immunity you're talking about, is it, old man?"

"Of course not, son. It is before beginnings, back to the play of animals, transformed into the games of civilization. Welcome to the begin of the beginning, from an old bag of bones."

A fly lands on Turk's nose. He uses his newspaper to slap at it. His nose starts to bleed. "Ah, a little blood." Turk pulls a white handkerchief to dab at it. "Excuse me, my nose. A remnant of my wrestling days. It's a delicate nose, always a crowd pleaser. They loved to see the red stuff flow."

"No need to apologize, Turk my son. It's a fighting nation we belong to. Don't you know, don't you know." He hands Turk a paper towel from beneath the kiosk counter. "Course I don't believe your wrestling story. Not one bit. I like to lie myself. I'm a fight fan, Turk. Let's collude."

"All right, old man. I give up, you win. All I'm saying is that I aim for the White House."

"Cool down, my boy. Cool down. What round are you in? You say you're looking for a place to stay, right? I'll give you access to *a* white house. Not *The* White House but the one I live in."

Turk is shocked to realize he has become comfortable in the place he stands. He has not moved and he has reckoned some bearings. "So, you've decided I'm not a wino or a whacko."

"Well, you've got to do something with that suitcase. I've got a white house and a clean white kitchen. Two bedrooms, one bath and nobody else. For a few days I'll take a chance on helping you land."

Hours later Turk is panting like a pooped out pigeon when he knocks on McKnight's white door. "Come on in, my fine-feathered fakir. Glad you could make it. Glad."

Not having taken the opportunity to do anything but loll around his parents' house during the long slow summer, it has been a long time since Turk has walked more than a couple hundred yards and that was through bland, tiled corridors. Gathering a last gasp, he turkey trots through the door. "It was more harrowing than I remember. All the colors, the swirling people, the yawning buildings, the corridor streets."

"Turk, I told you to take the bus. It's more than half a mile from my stand."

"A half mile! Aw, that should be nothing. I used to do a half mile on all fours. I did it in caves, small spaces, to strengthen myself as a wrestler, had to. I've weakened but I ought to be able to walk."

"There always comes a time when the champeen fails. I know that well, son. Do you?"

Chest heaving, Turk flops into an overstuffed chair. "And that's when they kill the bird, hey? Royalty fails so they give thanksgiving."

"Forget it, Turk. Welcome to my bachelor's pad. I told you it was a white house. As far as I'm concerned, it's *the* white house. You think you can settle for less than classical columns?"

"Capitalized columns', don't you mean? Like at the White House. It's all laid out in *Das Kapital*. Ought to be standard reading at The Capitol."

"You did have time on your hands in the institution, didn't you, boy?"

"As Ben Franklin, poor Richard the good capitalist, said: 'I shall never ask, never refuse, nor ever resign an office.' I've been *out* but I am obliged now to accept the invitation *in*."

"In, out. Out, in. Sex talk, Turk. Where are you coming from? Where have you been?"

"Earth, McKnight. The sweet soothing mother, the dirt earth. That's where I've been."

"I should have figured as much. I've been there, too."

Turk lolls back, imagining oceans swelling. "*Sampanku*, McKnight. The whites of my eyes, beneath the iris, are showing." Turk rolls his eyes to the ceiling. For a moment an apparition appears. His social worker, Mrs. Hardnose. Safe, mechanical. But the ocean, the mama, the wave.

"It's Jerusalem, McKnight. Or Salem 1692 all over again. The White House thinks itself holy. Armageddon its purview." His words drag. "They got the missiles.. There's an old in-out." He takes two breaths. "The launch pads are white." Turk's lights go out, he begins to snore.

"Powerful demons," McKnight muses out loud. The slumped form goes on snoring. "This man is at war."

McKnight turns two steps to his kitchen. From the cupboard he removes small cans and dumps the contents into a pot. Within minutes he is sitting with the paper spread, the same paper Turk had bought from him. He reads the headlines and laughs to himself.

Turk wakes at midnight. He is alone with one dim light and a note. The note invites him to raid the refrigerator and concludes "... Make yourself at home, Honorable Mr. Congressman."

Relieved that his secret is out, he does raid the refrigerator and constructs a monument to eclectic gastronomy. Taking a moment first to pride himself upon its dimensions, he then abandons himself to his hunger.

McKnight stirs from the shadows of the bedroom. "I thought you might be a night owl. Alone all these years, I can feel in this house when the air moves."

"If air is your medium, then cosmic rays are mine. If I'm a bird, early or late, I'm a raven. Rhymes with craven."

"Tough luck then, boy, since it looks to me like you're going to have to deal with hawks." He points to the newspaper on the table.

"Figured it out, hunh? They say anything about me in there?"

McKnight lifts the paper, thumbs through to a page. "Let's see ... They were kind. The article gives some selected numbers: nine waiters, one medical doctor, four registered nurses, seven truck drivers, two lawyers and ten firefighters. They list all five hundred names. And mention, too, 'one recently released mental patient, name withheld'."

"I'm that obvious? You going to kick me out now?"

"Haven't said a thing like that. You're welcome to stay until you get situated. What I want to know is what you're going to do on the Hill? So you're out of the hoosegow -- I call all those places prisons -- and you're in through the oaken doors and into the leather upholstery. What do you have planned for yourself?"

"Haven't given it a thought." One edge of Turk's lip hints at a smile. "I'm just glad to be out."

McKnight pours himself a beer. "Turk, this is destiny. Look, you've got to jump in there, make a splash. Grab the reins of power. You ought to angle for a seat on the Rules Committee. It's a whole new ballgame and that's where the power begins. You can play Zeus, start hurling thunderbolts."

Turk shrugs.

"Who's to be your staff director, Turk? Look, I've been following the arguments about this thing. You're in over your head. No offense, but you'll need help. Just because you've had your head shrunk doesn't mean you aren't worthy of your say. But you're going to need help in how you say it. You're still confused, aren't you? You admit it. What do you expect, after being locked up all that time? But now you've got business to attend. You're going to be giving orders. You're supposed to be deciding the nation's course."

Turk continues to deconstruct his eclecticism.

"Listen, buddy, I'm your man. I'm not sure about this new set up, selecting representatives with a wheel of fortune. 'Sortition', it's called. I guess I'm for it. Funny, the way the Supreme Court finally OK'd it." Picking up the paper, he reads, "*The 5-4 decision hinged on challenges to the constitutional amendment that requires a civics test – the same that immigrants seeking citizenship must pass – in order to place one's name into the pool from which the random selections are made.* Interesting, the way that battle has progressed. I remember the first skirmish when some hotheads wanted to push through random selection without the constitutional amendment. The article mentions

that history: *The question then was about the Constitution's Article One, Section Four: 'The Times, Places and Manner of holding Elections for Senators and Representatives, shall be prescribed in each State by the Legislature thereof...' The ones who wanted to push ahead coupled the original meaning of 'election' -- from the Latin electionem, "pick out, select" -- with the longstanding right of states to choose the 'Manner' of selecting. Namely, by random selection.*" McKnight sets the paper on the table. "The over-enthusiastic -- the ones who hoped no amendment would be necessary -- withdrew when they realized a staggered three-year term was the only way the idea would be accepted. There was no way they could get around the fact that that change required the amendment."

"Yeah," Turk grins, "before I got my head way messed up, I followed all of that. They fought some of it using the Tenth Amendment, about powers reserved to the States. Municipalities and state legislatures had already begun using random selection. As you know, they use it not only for legislative offices but for smaller bodies, some advisory and some statutory. There is more decision-making by more citizens than ever. It fits Aristotle's idea that 'One factor of liberty is to govern and be governed in turn.' My state, Illinois, had fought and won the battle about using the citizenship test. I took it while I was *inside*. Had plenty to time to study up on my civics."

"I guess that blind chance can't give us any worse than the politicians did," McKnight continues. "Still, you're going to need a man of experience to deal with the sharks. I been around, let me tell you. That little newsstand is a hobby, my way to stay in touch. I spent most of my life in garages. You meet a lot of people, different types, when you take care of cars."

“Already you’ve got former Senator J. Rastus Daymond and his religious sidekick the Reverend Gutierrez employing their well-honed capacities to connive, wheedle and manipulate. Besides their willingness to confuse the public with lies and deceptions, they also control a considerable militia. You aren’t going to be playing tiddlywinks with those boys.

"I'm not saying I want to steal your show, Turk. How could I? You're the one with the ticket. You're the bossman, the one who will vote. But it looks to me that you've got nobody to protect you. Blind luck, without a seeing-eye dog, will lead you stumbling into blind alleys and worse. You're not going to find somebody as experienced and, I presume, as simpatico as I am."

Turk nods. Swallows. Nods again.

"Do you care, boy?" He opens the refrigerator's freezer and removes a pint of chocolate ice cream. "It may not matter, Turk. I'll grant you that. If you think you can make it, you can. Rush in where angels fear to tread, go ahead. May the luck of the Turks be with you! He laughs, scooping the ice cream into two dishes. "I'm not after the money, if it's your windfall you think I'm after. I like the gamble. So, Turk, open up. What do you think?"

Turk starts in on the ice cream. "So you want me to be your black body, is that it?"

"What are you talking about? Cut the riddles. What's skin color got to do with it? I don't care what kind of sun tan you have."

Turk smiles the smile of an interrogator. "Testing, McKnight. Testing. A 'black body' refers to a theoretical object which perfectly emits all the energy radiated onto it.

He flips his eyebrows, chuckling to himself for employing another of those exoticisms accrued from his former institution's library.

"I said there's no way I can run your show." McKnight talks turkey. "I like my news stand. I'd as soon stay there the rest of my days but I'm about to be jettisoned by the marketing department. They want to replace me with a vending machine and 'online'. Anyway, I'm an old man and you're a late surprise. Surprises are harder to come by these days." Finishing the ice cream he lifts the dish and slurps the melt. "You've got tough tasks ahead. I could help you. I'd be willing to take another leap. Another fracture to the old noggin wouldn't make much difference now."

"All right, McKnight. You're on. Better you than someone who might come seeking me out. If this is luck, this ticket in my pocket, then maybe you can double it. Spread it around, that's the best way. You're right, I'll need a steady hand."

Turk finishes his ice cream. McKnight picks up the dishes. Through the windows they hear rain.