I see him, accosted in his very habitat
by exclamations of the mores,
by the shapes and tones of the times,
by conjugations out of his undermind.

I will watch.
I might recognize him some afternoon on the square.

Memory is an organ, it says.
Nothing, it says, which means everything,
is the cause of history.

How the present vanishes, it says.
Whatever, it says, this is the world.

Letters from a Midwestern Superhero

Dear Victim #17,

Allow me to introduce myself. I am the superhero who nearly saved you that night from being dropkicked off the Hot-107 radio tower where you fell and broke your pelvis. You may have heard me shout, "Oh, no!" as your body plummeted to the parking lot. While my condolences cannot assuage the loss of your spleen and other non-essential internal organs left there on the gravel, let me tell you that your attacker, this villainous Jeff, will be stopped and would have been stopped if my grappling equipment from Hoo Rahn, the SWAT team mail-order catalogue, had not been backordered.

You see, there is no real superhero school or guidebook. And, well, to be perfectly frank, I find myself a bit overwhelmed with the role I intend to perform as all-powerful defender of Columbus. Unlike most other superheroes, my parents were not extravagantly wealthy nor were they taken from me by the grim hand of death at an early age resulting in some special superheroic neuroses in my psyche—no. Though my brother and I failed to meet their lofty standards, rest assured, Mom and Dad are both doing fine. Another, crueler disadvantage to this vocation comes from my mother's side of the family who all tend to be a bit hairy and slightly heavy in the thighs. I cannot say I dodged that genome, and long periods of exertion in the industry-standard Lyra suit can create painful chafing. Plus it was sleeting that night, and, well, wetness just accelerates the chafing, resulting in what I like to call "sunset thighs," after the fiery red color of the raw skin.

My greatest strength thus far is thriftiness. By restricting my diet to a box of cornstarch a day, I have almost saved enough money to buy the full armor-plated SWAT suit, which would have been strong enough to deflect the hematoma you received on your kidney courtesy of Jeff. That seemed painful. I ask that you give me time. Soon Jeff will know my wrath or, at the least, know me.

Best wishes,
Thad Gelding, a.k.a. The Arm and Hammer
Dear Victim #29,

I saw Jeff the other night. He stood outside the block of government-owned homes in The Bottoms, right behind Cooper Stadium, staring at the cemetery between the edge of the projects and the back of the outfield wall. Somewhere in those rows of tombs was the secret entrance to the warren of tunnels that run under the stadium where Jeff plans his deeds. (Despite many hours scouring those graves, I have yet to find it.) On this cold spring night, he was smoking cigars with what I would assume to be a henchman. Most of his henchmen work as groundskeepers at the stadium and have an affinity for the bunker-like homes that hug the banks of the Scioto River. You see, some men favor the mountains, and others the sea, but Jeff's henchmen are river-folk. He calls them all his "brahs."

There was a preseason game against Toledo the night of my surveillance. It was cold, and a fog laced through the rows of tombs below me, but the full moon and my seat high atop the right field wall provided the perfect vantage to read Jeff's lips. After Jeff and his henchmen plotted their malfeasance for the evening, Jeff spoke about his sleep apnea. The doctor thought if Jeff wore a respirator mask he'd feel more fully rested and be less sour in the morning.

"Sure, brah," Jeff said, "no woman will have me with that bulky mask, but a good night's sleep is worth sacrifices."

"Some women go for the fighter pilot look," the henchman offered.

They laughed for a while over the image of Jeff making love to a woman wearing his respirator mask, when a home-run ball shot out of the park and bounced in front of them.

"One of our guys hit that, brah?" Jeff asked.

"Nope," the henchman said. "That's a two-run shot for the Mud Hens."

In an instant, Jeff snatched his firearm and fired at the ball four times, reducing it to a sloppy mess of yarn. One bullet ricocheted off a tomb and killed a pigeon roosting in a tree a few yards from where they stood. The henchman cried out. Jeff shrugged and ate a hot dog. This is who we are dealing with.

Now what does this have to do with Jeff eating the eggs of the condor living high atop the James A. Rhodes State Office Tower? The best lip readers, I am told, can discern on a clear day thirty to forty percent of a conversation. I seemed to have overestimated my abilities on this foggy night. While I should have lip-read Jeff's plan to kill and dine on our fair city's lone endangered inhabitant, I mistakenly inferred through context that Jeff was simply going to tie glass jars of hydrochloric acid to helium balloons, launch them over the downtown area, and then eat hot dogs as the city burned.

What I do know is that you watched out for those almost-birds like a brother, and I feel a kinship toward you and all the other park rangers, as our avocations are stitched with the same needle. Please know that I, as a fellow defender of the helpless, apologize and mourn over those avian bones with you.

You might also like to know that I devised a way to leave certain clues at the crime scene to alert the police to my presence and forthcoming assistance in capturing Jeff. It was the box of baking soda that you might have seen on the ledge. While this may not be as good as actually participating in the apprehension of a criminal, I am getting some name recognition, which is a huge aide to morale (mine, not yours).

Yours in Stalwart Mourning,

Thad Gelding, a.k.a. The Arm and Hammer

* * *

Dear Victim #33,

You may have remembered the night of the 27th as a snowy one. The Columbus Dispatch reported it wasn't as bad in the downtown area, but in Delaware County where I live, the sheriff's office declared a level three winter weather emergency, largely due to the drifting snow. This edict meant no vehicles were permitted on the roadways except emergency personnel. I now know I do not own a superheroic vehicle that can readily be identified by law enforcement officers, since as I was driving out of the cul-de-sac in my Le Sabre, consumed with the threats Jeff made earlier in the afternoon on television (city zoo, release of tigers), a Delaware County Sheriff's Department cruiser signaled for me to pull over. The officer was a young man with a burr of blonde hair that glistened in the lowering snowfall.

"What in sweet baby Jesus's name are you doing on the road, son?" he asked.

I tried to explain my alter-identity, pointing to the new logo—an arm holding a hammer—on the door of my car. He was unmoved.

"So which are you, the arm or the hammer?" he asked.

"Both symbols are housed in a single entity," I explained. "Thusly, I am both the Arm and the Hammer, and, therefore, the subsequent arch nemesis of Jeff."

He grinned in a fit of misunderstanding, something I find all too typical in today's peace officer, but he must have seen the determination in my eyes, so he asked me to step out of the car and then placed me in his custody.

My time in the solitude of county prison was much needed. The camaraderie was scarce, but I spent my days conditioning my body, especially
my abs, which one felon harshly described as “dumpy.” (It seems, while improving my financial status, the all-cornstarch diet has come at a significant price in regards to my physique). And though the charge against me was listed as Communism (a gross misinterpretation of my new logo), I can assure you my only crime was attempting to thwart the evil of Jeff.

Has the onslaught of negative criticism affected me? No, gentle victim, it has not. These are the same pooh-poobs who have afflicted the psyche of countless other superheroes, spewing the same message of incredulity in the face of overwhelming competence. I will prevail, and soon we will recuperate together: my wounds of the fleeting psychological sort and yours of the permanent physical variety.

I understand you will not be able to go to the winter coliseum now since your lung is unable to re-inflate on its own, and for this I am deeply saddened. The paper described you as fulsomely beautiful and a leading contender for several local pageants, and I am sure you would have won if it weren’t for Jeff’s pusillanimous deed, and the tiger biting you so very hard. You will be heartened to know that since my release I have placed donation jars at several gas stations in my neighborhood in the hopes of your recovery. They say a balm made of mulberry tree sap is the best remedy for claw marks, and I will do my best to procure some and send it your way.

Yours in recuperation,
Thad Gelding, a.k.a. The Arm and Hammer

To Be Read to the Families of Victims #258–309,

I believe it was the Friday before Jeff exploded the dam on the Hoover Reservoir and flooded the Scioto River and all of downtown and drowned most of your loved ones. The Clippers were at home that night, playing a doubleheader against Pawtrout. More importantly, it was the first Monday of the month and a new moon, which means it was “Dime-a-Dog Night.” While ten cents is a ridiculous price for a hot dog, in my investigations I learned this promotion is nothing more than a simple fundraiser for Jeff to grease the gears of the sophisticated crime syndicate engine that he drives (it’s a Le Sabre). Naturally, I was forced to act.

I had gathered from previous surveillances that in order to infiltrate Jeff’s cadre of henchmen, I would simply have to arrive at the stadium dressed in neon hand-me-downs, sit near the first base dugout, and jump down on the field during the third inning when they tended the infield grass. After a quick raking of the dirt, I would follow them into the series of tunnels underneath Cooper Stadium, allowing them to lead me directly to Jeff’s secret lair, one hundred feet below the pitcher’s mound of Columbus’s hometown heroes.

It was a perfect plan until the rains storm began during the second inning. There is no real inconspicuous way to jump onto a baseball field when carrying a rake, especially in the rain. Furthermore, the training regimen of rolling out the tarp during rain delays at Cooper Stadium while singing the Clippers’ theme song has made all of Jeff’s henchmen very strong. Like the Japanese samurai warriors of ancient times, they have learned to turn the most innocuous farming implements into tools of sometimes-lethal pain. I do believe now if I had actually landed correctly on the field, I could have avoided getting steamrollered by the tarp and pinned to the bitter mud so quickly and saved all of your loved ones, but alas this causal train was derailed, and I was again imprisoned.

There are signs posted all around Cooper Stadium listing the fines for streaking or running on the field ($300 and up to one month in jail), but what a windfall it was to discover that there is an actual courthouse and tiny incarceration unit right underneath the stadium where they kept me for several days of observation. Each day I pretended to be sedated as the henchmen came and went, when in truth I was silently observing their every move. At night, I kept an ear to the wall where I could discern their movements and, most importantly, listen to Jeff’s inner workings. Here are my findings:

1. Most days, after sprinting drills with the rain tarp in the underground exercise lair, the henchmen alternate sets of jumping jacks with push-ups and sit-ups, and at the apex of each jack, each man exclaims one letter of Jeff’s name. When the name is spelled fully, the men lunge toward the heavens and rotate, this time exalting his full name three times: JEFF! JEFF! JEFF! No man shows any sign of weariness during this or any task they attempt, be it somersaulting forward on the concrete or firing assault rifles in the range or manning the soft serve yogurt concession stands at Cooper Stadium.

2. There was a substantial amount of water running through the pipes just outside of my cell, and from this I deduced that Jeff and his henchman partake each night in an elaborate group-shaving ritual designed to foster unity. Jeff, being a hirsute man, seems to require shaving twice-a-day like some Mediterraneans, though Jeff’s nasal twang undoubtedly places his origins in the Ohio Valley area.

As Jeff shaved the stubble clean from face after face, he gave talks to his men. Some nights his words were brief and mysterious:

“Some days, brah, you wake up with a raging hard-on and want to knock something down with it.”

Other nights, he would launch into wrathful tirades:

“There I was last night, standing by the Scioto River, wishing it were easier to pee with an erection so I didn’t have to bend over like a fricking monk, when it came to me. Why not blow up the Hoover Reservoir dam if the city doesn’t give me $100,000,000? Easy-peasy. I’m going to blow
a big goddamned hole in it and then I'm going to stick my dick inside it if they don't pony up the cash."

Still other nights, he showed his compassionate side:

"Bras, this mission too dangerous, and I couldn't risk losing any of you. You'll all sleep on the top deck of the stadium, cheer for the Clippers, and wait for the water to fill the city."

...

The day before the dam explosion, the whole stadium was quiet. I had been sleeping on a cot with my arms tucked in my thighs and my back to the bars when I awoke to his hand on my shoulder. I turned to face him. He wore the uniform of an umpire: the gray pants, the black sports coat, the barred mask. He even had an old, black, foam-core ball stopper strapped to his arm like a shield. In the darkness, I could see the embroidered letters I-L on the front of his black beanie cap. In a panic I read them aloud.

"Ill?" I said.

"International League," he said. "Don't get up. I'm ump-ing the doubleheader against Richmond today before I blow up that dam, but it's pouring outside. I'm thinking of calling it."

"The explosion?" I asked.

"No, the game."

He never left that crouched position, never once took that black shield away from his body. "Listen, I know who you are," he continued. "And I'm not going to kill you."

I could smell the claying smell of aftershave on his blue skin.

"But this hero business needs to stop. I have no beef with you."

"It's my duty to stop you from blowing up that dam," I told him.

"That dam is old. A good rainstorm would topple it eventually. I'm just helping it along. It's nature's way."

"I must stop you," I said. "I am a hero for this town. I am the Arm and Hammer."

Jeff put his hand over my mouth and told me to listen. In the distance I could hear the tinny rendition of the Clippers' theme song playing. Jeff sang the words softly to me. "It's the Clippers," he sang. "The Columbus Clippers! The Clippers are the hometown heroes. Whoever they're playing had better watch out. But home Columbus, we're the best without a doubt."

He picked up the box of baking soda I kept under my bed and then spit in his hand. He shook out the white powder into his wet palm and mixed it with his finger until it was pasty. His razor gleamed silver and green as he pulled it from his pocket. The paste was warm against my cheek. He held my shoulder down. I could not move. He scraped the blade down quickly on my face and opened a hot slit under my eye that leaked blood into my ear.

"Look at you bleeding like the rest of us," he said. "And you call yourself super."

The shouts of ballplayers and the hollow claps of clowns echoed in the cinder block hallway. Fat chords of rain bounced off the aluminum stands. It sounded like distant applause.

"The Clippers are the only men I know with super powers," Jeff said, wiping the blood from my face. "They're special men. They can hit ninety-mile-an-hour fastballs. They can dive head first into the bases without breaking their necks. When they get really good, they fly off to New York, leap tall buildings, and live in even taller ones. They'll wear pinstripes for the rest of their lives. They don't bleed or break. You and I can only watch them play. But you don't need any super powers to be a villain, Thad. You don't need any pinstripes on your pants either. You just need to accept that you're a bad person. If you can just see that one time, nothing else will matter. Why spend your life trying to leap a tall building when it's so much easier to knock one down?"

...

I don't know when he left me. Perhaps I slept for a while afterward. When I awoke, the blood had dried on my cheek and the cell door was open. My face was gritty with baking soda. I ran through the tunnels until I came to a room with roots growing from the ceiling. Through a small hole in the wall, I saw Jeff alone, loading crates of baking soda into a yellow moving truck. The rain had stopped, but the sky looked pulpy, as if a wet newspaper had been stretched across the sky.

"Jeff?" I cried. "What are you doing with that baking soda?"

"I'm blowing a hole so big in that dam, a duck'd shit his feathers if he saw it."

"With a baking soda bomb?"

"What the hell is a baking soda bomb? I'm packing it with C4 plastique explosives. The baking soda is so they know it was you that did it. You're a bad man, Thad Gelding. I'm just helping you realize it."

He pulled the gate on the truck shut and latched it tight before the rain started again. "You'll never make it to higher ground before the flood comes," he said. "You'll be safe in the stadium with my bras. Help them pull the tarp over the field, and no harm will come to you."

"I'd rather drown than give in to a villain like you," I said.

"No you wouldn't," he said. "Besides, brah, in Columbus the only real villain is the weather."

I don't know if it was the lack of sunlight or my steady diet of cornstarch or the huge wave of water that flooded the city that night, but those words made me reassess my whole purpose. While it may seem like I failed you all, gentle victims, I can see now I was never able to save you in the first place. For what is a man but just another box of absorbent powders that
Lake Effect

I don't understand why he calls it a houseboat. It doesn't look like a house, and it doesn't look like a boat. What it looks like is a white box with windows cut out of the sides, railings clamped all around, and deck chairs tossed on the roof. The whole thing bobs in the lake, tethered to a dock post by a soggy green rope. Inside, everything is brown. The walls are covered in plastic panels printed with a wood-grain design, as if to remind us that wood floats and it's perfectly reasonable that we're loaded on this box for the next six days, instead of at home in an actual house. He, my Dad, is one of three Dads for whom this trip is now an annual thing, the third summer in a row that these college friends have brought along their elder sons for a week of fishing on a giant lake—this year, in Minnesota.

The kitchen in the houseboat is brown tile instead of brown carpet. I'm eleven years old and standing in front of the sink, washing every dish from the cupboards. The Dads and the other Sons are sitting on the slick white top of the boat, a deck on the roof above me. The sunset is beautiful, they keep telling me, but I keep doing the dishes, which is taking a lot longer than anyone would have guessed. We've already unpacked, already uncoiled the rope linking us to shore, already buzzed out across the water, turned off the engine, and started our slow drift around the lake in whatever direction the waves and wind push us.

Even though I've endured two previous trips, something about this houseboat idea unsettled me as soon as I heard about it. Maybe the intimacy of all of us aboard a small vessel, three Dads and three Sons in too close quarters? When my Dad announced our plan, I tried suggesting how disastrous my habit of sleepwalking might be on a houseboat, the way I could silently slip into the dark water before anyone noticed I wasn't tucked inside my sleeping bag anymore. This was unconvincing because, to his knowledge, I'd only sleepwalked once—when I was five and stood in the hallway snoring and peering in a corner before shuffling back to bed—and because it hadn't happened since then, he wasn't worried.

I also hate fishing, but that's never worked, so I didn't bother bringing it up. I've always hated fishing because it's boring. For that first trip, I was simply excited by the fact that I was going somewhere on my own with Dad—no little brother or Mom. And I was so intrigued by the special pants required for trout fishing that I forgot about the fishing part. The