The New Suffolk Hymnbook

a novel by Ben Williams (WLLBEN003)

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This work has not been previously submitted, in whole or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work.

Signed

Signed by candidate

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7 September 2000

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Jonah

Sing, cries Jonah, softly, under his breath, as if the word were his last. To sing would be to release the sum of his afflictions to the sky. His interior self heaves like a shipful of men, rowing for the beach in sight, but thwarted, ever thwarted, by the mighty tempest in the sea. The ship, he feels, his mind, may crack. What then? Would he sink down the fathoms, rest among the broken coral and lost pearls of his sanity?—Dream of mermaids' solace, and barely hearken, when the hour arrived, the watery tolling of his death? Would he take relief? The storm inside bulges, overstuffed. It cannot but break into the world, wheeze through cracks into his lungs, which spasm as if to expel sand or sea-spray. He coughs several times. He wishes Dear God again for some outlet, some soothing poem to chant, or a song of ancient, charming powers to sing. Sing, he groans, like a mourner who has lost his faith.

He has spoken aloud. He sees this when the students at desks in front of him shift and turn their heads. They have heard the word quite clearly. They greet it not, as one might expect of students, with confused silence. Rather, a mischievous opening of the air, which hints at an infant ambition, proceeds from the halos of their polished hair. They are prepared, Jonah sees, with butterfly nets to swoop on any words that might flutter from his mouth.

He says to them with some spite—This is my final lecture at the university. Let them prize that. It is what he had intended to say, not this sing foolishness, this sing betrayal. He takes some comfort from the image of a crestfallen room.

But to the students the announcement only confirms that they have had good luck today. For it is obvious that this class, this first—and last—Shakespeare's Tragedies lecture of the year, is to be the scene of a Literary Moment. They bend their heads fiercely to the

paper, hardly believing their fortune. They poise their pens like weapons, ready to strike upon the slightest further movement from the podium. Not a sentence shall be lost, they resolve. And years from now, they will show their notes, which record the spangled utterances the master is about to speak, with happy condescension to Those Who had not Been There. For surely—their hopes spur their expectations—this moment of all will be pointed to as the moment when—well, that's the question. When the author of *A Suffolk Hymnbook*, after long brooding years and a particularly pregnant summer, ascends to another level, more transcendent, more luminous, of poetic greatness? Or when Jonah Behr, Poet of the Nation, first publicly romps through the meadows of the mad?

His dishevelled state would lend itself to either apotheosis. His clothes are not ironed. His shirt is mis-buttoned. He appears not to have shaved for at least two days. And then there is the gossip, gaining momentum, of the new book. An early manuscript has purportedly been seen. A new if predictable title has been whispered. Suppose the master has indeed passed a threshold—into triumphant greatness? or scandalous ruin? It could be either. It doesn't matter. The students will have Been There.

They pay due attention to the milieu. They gather the sun slanting through the dusty windows into the margins of their notes. They surreptitiously check their watches to be sure of the time and date. They glance around for equal surety of faces—so no outsider will be able to claim to have Been There. And when Jonah speaks again, with rather a lot of vehemence, and says that he wants to spend the hour proving that Shakespeare has no business here, is not significant to Suffolk, the district, the hills, the entire country, they think to themselves, This is going to be good, and write with fury to copy every word.

In their zeal, however, the students are careless. They take the lecture, its dips and pauses and wild words, for truth. They are wrong. It is rote. For Jonah has that gift, common to many in his profession, of speaking something and thinking something else. He

has come to the classroom for reasons he does not fully understand. Why even deliver a final lecture? It is true that he is stubborn. And dogged by a need for closure born of a volatile childhood. Too, there's the bitterness and ill will toward his department, an undeniable wish to inflict damage. To hang goitrous around the university's neck. He cannot look upon these reasons, however, as a boy judges the throwing of a rock, with calculation and spirit. He does not know what he is going to do. The lecture is something to do. It has form, yes, and voice, and is familiar. And Jonah has mused about its content for some time. But, really, the lecture is empty, it does not whistle or creak or remember, as Jonah is doing, as the students do not see. They record his words, what amounts to the hooting of an owl, his looks, what amounts to the inscrutability of a vagabond. They do not write about Jonah conjuring false remedies for a certain inscaped storm, nor do they record for posterity his fervent wish that clouds inside would clear, and that the moon would rise and inspire a song to soothe matters which have nothing in common, so Jonah believes, with what he is talking about.

I curse you, the students scratch into their notebooks, for this is how he begins. He means these words very much. He directs them at the department now. At Peter who, ironically, sparked the genesis of his lecture. It was two years ago. During a staff meeting. Peter droning on—as always—about reforming the curriculum. Jonah, to pass the time, inventing words with Peter's name. Petercilious. Peter Cuttingedge. For Malcolm's amusement later that evening over pints of beer. Malcolm himself wise during Peter's speech, as befits the Head of Department, nodding and frowning, but with the slightest wrinkle of a wink for Jonah, at odd moments, to acknowledge conspiracy. Peteridiot.

Then, as will happen to poets, as happens to Jonah at least, an event. A vision. Shakespeare appearing, huddled, right there on the coffee table. His clothes shivered to ribbons, his pointy beard full of snot, and mournful like an abused but gentle dog in the eyes. Peter flogging away with New Theory. The amused thought comes—Lucky for Shakespeare

he was not a traveller. He would not have survived abroad. Too many savages and Peters about. An inward chuckle. But the thought not scuttling away, as expected. Rather rustling, secretly, like a pupa, while thousands of tiny complexities work themselves out, and then delivering itself in a suddenly more consequential form. Shakespeare does not belong in Suffolk. A short bark of illumination in the middle of the staff meeting. Malcolm's friendly inquiring eyebrows. Peterwilderment. Then Shakespeare and notion rolled away in an oak barrel, to be stored, and tasted from time to time, by that unpredictable vintner, Jonah's muse.

It was all supposed to have aged into a poem. But now it spills, brown vinegar, out of his sick mouth, no good, like the other poems that he so recently, last night in fact, delivered, a messy stack of a decade's work, into the peeping bird-chick maw of his fireplace. What, he asks himself again, am I going to do, and words continue to drop out of thin air on to the student's notebook pages.

They are writing about that wretch Caliban. But no. To proceed, declare their pens, we need a definition. For convenience we will reduce the world to two types. The black and the white. This is not fair but it is useful. It avoids certain delicacies. Now how often has poor Caliban been nominated the symbol of the black man? The students make swift and neat marks. *The Tempest*, Act I. From which the master quotes, from memory, a not unexpected ability. You taught me language, Jonah says and they write. Now I can curse. The red plague rid you for learning me language! Thus Caliban to Prospero and Mirabella. Cal, write the students, and Prosp, and Mira.

And on the argument runs. Cal is the black man. Prosp and Mira are the white pilgrims. They usurp Cal's domain, make him their servant, banish his god, force on him English. He strikes back. The slave's only weapon. Impudence. Using the language that oppresses to curse. Cal, the modern black man. So the argument runs. But here the master becomes canny, or this is what the students think, and allows silence to follow his next

phrase, which is a question. So tell me how many Cals do you know, personally, here in Suffolk, down here in these hills? They write the question and still their pens.

But Jonah is not silent for their benefit. The break is not so they can ponder whether indeed they know any Cals. It is because the floods inside him have vomited up for contemplation the face of the gardener, who is a member of the set of Caliban-not-Calibans. The gardener's face is like the Mona Lisa's, or like the moon's, pleasant without commitment. Jonah has become well-acquainted with this face. How many times over the last sixteen years has he walked to work and not seen it? The face is a note in the memory-song which the walk has grooved into Jonah's mind. The song begins, like a music box, at any single note—such as at the gardener's face—and faithfully proceeds to the entire tune, which starts with strains of anticipation, the walk to the university is not a long one, fifteen minutes on a strong day. Jonah lives in a small house two doors down from the corner of Honey and Wormwood Streets. Relatively neglected streets for a relatively small town. Honey intersects three blocks up with Church and up that street lies the town proper. Six blocks of low shops with windows that somehow seem always foreshortened in the walker's perspective. At the head of it all, of course, stopping Church Street like a cork, the Cathedral, the town's glory, the town's shame, a block of spires that fell, it seems, from an 17th-century Middle European sky, and now rides the pastel hills of Suffolk County like a castle upon the ocean. It is difficult to go past it without chuckling, as at a fat man who wears nothing on a beach. But you must go past to get to work, contrive a means to outflank the Cathedral, and reaching the other side you enter the garden, compact and serene, a relief like oxygen after exhaust, and in the garden is the gardener's face. It is there wherever you look, like a sunspot on the retina. Never anywhere else. It is the same face for sixteen years, getting older with your own, weathering the caprices of facial hair with your own, bearing with good cheer new furrows around the eyes and mouth with your own. It rises in the

morning among the Carnations and Roses and picks its way to the copse of Bamboo where, upturned, it receives its daily dose of shaken-off dew. It worships at the Indian Rubber Tree, obeisant like the creeping snail's-foot roots. It lunches in the grove of Gums, by the brook, among the confetti leaves and paper bark. Its sovereign is the First Tree Planted, a hoary Elm, at the heart of the garden, from which silent instructions emanate, dictating the gardener's afternoon, a revolving affair of trowel and clippers until, at last, the Great Elm is reached, and the day's acts of government are acknowledged with a sober survey of the situation. Attention is turned to the ruler itself. A Great Elm leaf, perhaps, is clipped, which may show sickness (the news of blights growing ever more insistent). The gnarls and whorls of trunk and limb are carefully inspected (the tree is old—it must not die). And then the gardener's face is turned away, which is like the shutting of the door of some spacious town hall, and the day is done, the night creeps up, the gardener wanders to the Camphor Lane, where aroma hangs like bats, and at the end of the passage the Banyan waits, entrance to Hades, raining its poles of rain. Once the pyrrhic evening's spent, the weary gardener creeps back to the flowers to make his bed. His face closes up like a black red rose, waiting for the dawn.

Or so Jonah has imagined, as poets will do, taking ecstasy in the familiar. The gardener features in *A Suffolk Hymnbook*, Hymns 7 and 24. That was years ago and Jonah is sure the gardener is still ignorant of his fame. They have never spoken. Jonah doubts, however, that he could count the number of times that they have exchanged a friendly wave.

Beyond the garden the university begins. Blocks of buildings like grazing cattle on wide, neat lawns. The walk to his office involves an upslope, so Jonah is breathing pleasantly hard when he arrives. His office. Where now a dull alien computer—he shuns technology with all his soul—put in during the summer, broods in a corner. He hasn't turned it on.

And beyond his office (which has the view)—the hills of Suffolk. Suffolk's thousand hills in the tourist literature. The hills appear at first to be the bottoms of mountains, but no, where you would expect a mountain there are only more hills, heaped upon one another, until, at a certain altitude, they flatten to a plateau . You cannot see mountains from Suffolk, on the clearest day. You can arrive at a certain notion of the plateau, once you come to understand the logic of the hills, which recede in blues and purples at sunset and feature more prominently than the gardener in *A Suffolk Hymnbook.* But the great mountains are far away, appearing freakishly, as on Mars. They hurt altogether different air, and feature in a single, non-committal *Hymnbook* poem.

Beyond the mountains? The North. Slaughterhouses. Smokestacks. Coal and Gold. The North—where Jonah might flee? As soon as he has finished this lecture?

Not all the pens of his students have been idle during this pause, but with furtive, bird-like motions have written telegraphs to the future. Is he mad? His eyes—not wild. Now they take up once again in unison. They underline the question posed before, because Jonah repeats it, How many Cals do you know?

Two reasons why you know none. First, the people of our land supposed to resemble Cal do not curse. On the bus, leaving town for the day, perhaps. When they are by themselves. In public they are more sophisticated. They do not spit about red plagues. They understand history. They point out contradictions. They list grievances. They talk of cruelty and demonstrate that it is something which tends to worsen. They explain how superiority suffers from itself. Or they are wholly mute. Mute as dogs. Bending their heads attending to their brooms. Saving the cursing for the bus. It is either one or the other. Dumb—or declaiming in voices as well-equipped as ours.

Second, Cals entail Prosps and Miras. But how many Prosps and Miras do you know? Think yourself one? Do you command the spirit Ariel? That noise, that sound, that

sweet air who knows all of Cal's life apart? Knows what Cal eats and where he sleeps and what he dreams and that he weeps to dream again? (Act III) Knows what Cal conspires and with whom? What's more (Act V) Ariel charms, controls and renders Cal as comedy. And sings everything to Prosp. Prosp knows all Cal is and does. But what white knows all of black? Who has such command? Who keeps the magic books and staff of Prosp at home? None. Cal's not a black. He is a character in a play. Words. Barely more than a dream (Act IV).

That is the lecture distilled, at least, put into notation. The students have given up trying for every word. Because Jonah is thinking rapidly all the while, too rapidly for smooth speech free from stutters and skips and repetition. So the students strive for gist. The master does not pause. He has moved on, to *King John*, to Constance. Their pens race.

Constance is his wife, of course. Is his ex-wife. In the storm of his mind she heaves, rolls, the ship's figurehead. Constant Con he sometimes called her. Con-Con. The beating weather refines her features. What is not important bleaches away. What is permanent shows up as such. Upon meeting her for the first time he daydreamed for hours. Upon learning her name—the second or third rendezvous of chance (yes, rendezvous, and yes, chance, for Fate had involved Herself!)—he went straight home to *King John*. There was a memory from college of a certain name. Yes. Constance. He read the play again. Found that it was not true, this time, of Constance. She was no shrew, no infuriation on the page. His Constance was sweet, unprovoking, thoughtful. She lived without queenly ambition. She smiled at small things. She wore a wicker hat with a wreath of plastic flowers that made her look as pretty as a figure in Rodin. He wrote a poem—The Liar Bard. It required nearly three weeks of his attention, and caused his face, upon completion of certain stanzas, to blush as he surveyed what he had done—uprooted the weeds which Shakespeare had planted in ten-syllable furrows and sown words of his own, woody iambic vines that grew thick and

neat and bore fruit. He admitted to himself that it was a very good poem. He gave it to her, boldly. Later she said it was this boldness that attracted her to him, not really the poem. They married. Happiness. For three years.

Then she leaves. One night she says she that after careful thought she finds she is going crazy. At the height of his influence and form. *A Suffolk Hymnbook*, his second book of poems, his second, in its nineteenth—nineteenth—printing in a year! Laurels upon laurels, most especially the sudden title of Poet of the Nation. International remark, even a few invitations for posts. He didn't take them. Thought himself content. And he was. And he has been. But O. He should have followed the trail his slim volume blazed! He should have split from Suffolk, returned every few years to acclaim and adornment. All would be different. Constance might still have left—surely she would still have left—but all would be different. There would be no cause for storm.

She leaves him in character. Sweetly, understanding, enragingly firm. She packs through the night and then her presence in the house is gone, except that hat that first attracted him so. For a moment he gives in to the paranoia bred of anger and change and feels that she left it behind on purpose. In the kitchen! hanging lopsided on the fridge! the symbol of the woman! to torment him! For he does expect to be tormented. Lawyers perform a divorce. He will be tormented. She moves away to board for a while with an aunt and sends legal documents by courier. He still expects to be tormented. He knows he will be miserable. In fact he is not. Without a wife to thwart them, certain tendencies that marked his life in Suffolk become habits. Such as—A Pint With Malcolm, an institution, where their friendship fastens, and their private system of communication, at first unconscious, grows over the years into a closeness and an ability to anticipate that Jonah has never before experienced with a man. Certainly not with his father, who said stupid war things like Straight as a rifle, that Old Tom! Jonah gets the odd letter from Constance, which he only

skims. They always end she hopes he is Taking Care and that he will Stay Well and once there was a P.S. I read the short stories and think they're better than the poems. Nobody else notices that particular book. He sends very short replies to her. But what a smile on Malcolm's face has come to mean to him!

Uneasiness which has somewhere attended this recollection thunderclaps, and Jonah suddenly remembers that he and the gardener have in fact spoken, in fact two days ago. Two days ago, the traditional staff meeting of the Saturday before New Term. Malcolm started this tradition before Jonah's arrival at the university. It is like a court, he tells Jonah that first year, in the classic sense of the word. Everyone gathers and we try to set a mood for the rest of the year. Often it works. Bring wine. Jonah brings wine, nice wine, and the gathering meets expectations. The first year is warm intensity and friendliness. And through all the fifteen later years the meeting more often than not acts as a useful almanac for things to come, if one is canny, if one values trends more than exact predictions. Such is Jonah's disposition, of course. So when Peter arrives, from a more fashionable university, and begins, on that very Saturday, at that first assembling of the department, to preach Transfiguration. As Jonah likes to call it, uniting his distaste for religion and Peter. To pooh-pooh old, staid, readings and to advocate what he vaguely describes as Theory, as An approach involving Theory. Jonah feels no alarm whatsoever that the established order might be disrupted. He reads the year's almanac very carefully. The trends are obvious. The faces are bemused, nowhere near conversion. The most important face, the head of department's, which by now can be called venerable, shows delight at this young blood, but delight of a certain kind. The kind that implies supreme confidence, the delight a father shows toward his bungling child, which begins How wonderful! and ends But wonderfully wrong! There will be no Transfiguration. The almanac says to plant around the Peterweeds.

And of course there is none. Peter wails on, Malcolm maintains, and winks from time

to time at his good friend the poet. The poet who speaks voluminously as he watches the gardener's face rise again instead of the moon, a placid face, like that of a child who watches an ant, like a god's who looks from on high to see if men will drown. The poet who, as the students arrayed in front of him scratch Act III into their notebooks and the words When law can do no right let it be lawful that law bar no wrong, which is what Con shouts at the men in power (King J, King P, Arch, Pan, Bastard), remembers exactly what the gardener said two days ago, in fact watches as the gardener's petal mouth unfolds and releases the clean-smelling words again, in better English than expected.

Excuse me, sir, are you well?

Jonah almost mouths the words himself and they are almost recorded as part of Constance's speech in fourteen student notebooks. Instead he speaks in his mind to a face which has approached too close to his own.

Yes I'm fine.

The gardener hesitates, aware that he has intruded. But he is brave. His eyebrows deepen.

It's only that, he hesitates, you never sit, he gestures at the park bench. Jonah has rested there for some minutes now.

The rage which mounts might not be measurable. It has been waiting for an excuse, preferably one involving innocence, to cause Jonah to do terrible things. He feels that he will uproot this familiar contemptuous gardener and break him in half. Can it be that he is shaking? O—the meeting.

Can it be that he is shaking? No. But the students, squinting, approach truth for the first time, and begin to consult their mental thesauruses for a reason they can't quite fathom, but before they can write old man or frail or most subtly diminished the master speaks again and they are forced to write instead that Con is as good a model for our black man as any

Cal.

Nay, better than Caliban. For does not Constance tell what we've been hearing all along? If the law does no right then let it stop no wrong. This is what they say. This better stands for their sophistication. These are our words used against us. Not I curse and red plague. And through the whole of the play Con supports her own cause. She will hear no other party's voice if it dissents from hers. The mark of true opposition. Not the spittle of a curse. She knows the power is with the kings. So she uses words to shame. Not curse. And in our eyes and Shakespeare's too she's a shrew. In Con then the black man. Words spoken truly and ignored.

He would curse the gardener, rave at him in fury, were only his thoughts clear on the matter. But since the afternoon, the traditional Saturday gathering, they've been overtaken, boarded, scuttled. Now it's as if he's captaining a dinghy deep in swirling clouds, on high seas, and has no time to dread those other ships on the water, which may present themselves at any moment, like looming faces mere feet away, to splinter his own craft. There's only time to cut the sails free, hear them flap and shriek away, to chop down the mast, pitch it overboard, to call for oars, to bid the anger to bellow your voice as you roar for whatever human strength is left to row, row for where you reckon is safe land.

And dismiss the gardener with a weak Yes, well, today is different.

The gardener removes, with a gesture of apology. Jonah continues to stare at the trees. Today is different. O How today is different.

Malcolm is dead.

So why did we who decide about these things decide on Cal the wretch instead of Con the shrew?

Or so Peter says on Saturday when Jonah arrives at the department tea room. Jonah is refreshed—the walk as usual. He feels for no reason great sanguinity about the acclaim his

new poetry will receive. He thinks with joy It has been a long time! He carries a bottle of very fine wine that befits his status. He repels, with humility, thoughts of himself through others' eyes, words like dapper and sagacious. He opens the tea room door. He is momentarily taken aback by the viciousness of his reaction to seeing Peter in Malcolm's chair. Peter rises. The others in the room betray alarm, or guilt. Someone seems about to speak. But Peter moves forward.

Jonah you'd better sit down, Peter says. He gestures to Jonah's chair, at Malcolm's right.

Jonah stands and the students write. Why was Con not chosen over Cal? The answer's simple. Cal's a creature. Not a man. Act I. Scene 2. A freckled whelp. Not of human shape. Earth. Tortoise. Devil-born. And Cal justifies these base and damning names. He would rape Mira and people all the isle with Cals. He's adjudged a monster precisely because—he IS one. (Act II) He IS in fact of the devil. He IS in fact born a slave. These are not unhappy chances. They are his role. It could not be any other way. After all his mother was a witch. Now we must be honest. Do not old books that fetch great prices see the world in terms of Prosps and Cals? The missionary texts? The early town gazettes? The decorated colonel's memoirs? Cal's a black because he fits the shape our thoughts. Not because of what he says. Cal because he confirms our fears. Mutiny and rape. Not because of weak red plagues. Cal here in Suffolk because he's brave to curse? Cal the dispossessed? Only because we look at blacks and see not man but Cal. The model is as flawed as Hamlet. To whom we turn. To show the falsity of Shakespeare in Suffolk. To show the easiness of models.

Jonah does not sit and he senses vaguely that in not sitting he has created a standoff, two men facing each other with implacable intent until it is seen who is the quicker. In this case it is Peter, who employs a strategy beyond Jonah's understanding, who proceeds by

behaving as if Jonah had in fact obeyed the order to sit. Jonah fails to defend against the intimate, crafted barb Peter looses when he says—

Jonah, I'm so sorry, Malcolm's dead.

Their echo strikes him, but the words themselves remain near Peter, swelling until they've gained mass enough to rumble forward and release a deluge, pummel him for forty days, forty nights. Jonah reaches out. Perhaps his colleagues see an attempt to push Peter back? But in fact the gesture mirrors Jonah's mind, weakly fortifying against the sudden catastrophe. Panic, indigestible, hardens in his stomach. As if something has now been asked of him which is beyond his powers. His hand affords no resistance to words building charge, producing heat.

Like Hamlet's Denmark our land is one of poisons and ghosts. The lore of pilgrim days supplies a lode of omens, armies and confrontation with false gods. Ancestor worship still competes with our cathedrals. Albeit in guerrilla war. And gremlins on the plains are reported in the papers as in the early Mail-and-Adverts of centuries ago. Last but never least we all know the beetle crouching under its special bush. Crush its grubs. Mix them up. Dip your weapons in. And you can kill a man with one sharp poke. Who knows what happens if you pour the grub-glue down his ear? Hamlet does. Hamlet could have lived here.

Jonah's hand floats to his brow. It is cool and damp, qualities he would expect from a foreign object. His mother, perhaps, in childhood—a towel during a fever. There's nothing to do. The many sitting faces follow him.

Hamlet is the black man, not Cal or Con. His inability to act, paralysis, fatal flaw, proceeds from strife between the old and new. Tradition, old tradition, is his father. The sledded poleaxe is a stabbing spear. Father-ancestor haunts and urges action. Against what? Against the new. Against Claudius. Claudius the white man. Who got his power by devious means. Who refuses to follow the code which Hamlet lives by. Who strikes the blow to old

tradition.

Call Gertrude old Claud's wife several things. Business. The Church. Suitable whores. Most subtle of all call Gertrude a converted black. Powerful but weak. A queen but not respected. She has tossed the old ways. She, an elder, has sniffed the wind and cozened the new order. And now turned commands her own to misery. Places herself not knowing on a heightened plane of defeat.

Jonah gives in and sits. The others pity him but are nervous. Nervous because Peter is in control.

We were speaking of the future of the department, Peter says. The more fundamental concerns will of course be settled after the funeral.

Peter means of course Head of Department.

He continues to speak. The day-to-day matters however require immediate attention. We have agreed that classes should proceed as usual. Malcolm wasn't teaching this semester so this won't be a problem. We have agreed Malcolm would have wanted it this way.

This from a man who had known Malcolm two years. The others, Jonah sees, are fawning dullards. But where is Jonah's own voice now? How has this happened? The only word that he can say tastes like cold meat on his tongue.

When.

Early this morning. He ate a bad piece of fish. I was with him. I took him to the hospital. Nothing could be done.

The others murmur sympathy for Peter's trouble but a mad scene springs to Jonah's mind. It is a pantomime where all the actors are mute. The restaurant. A particular type of fish, Malcolm's beloved delicacy, found only in Japan's close waters, notorious for causing illness if improperly prepared. Malcolm in a fit. Peter watching coolly. Malcolm needing a doctor. Peter taking him for a walk instead. Malcolm on his knees outside and

finally in Peter's car, but Peter triumphant, driving slowly, taking the long route. Malcolm powerless, choking, foaming. Peter turning left instead of right. Malcolm wild with death and understanding. The hospital, too late.

Ophelia Polonius and Laertes are the peasants of the land. Wise and good they were when Old Hamlet had control. In Claudius's rule their bearings go. Old Pol prattles like a parrot. His noble ancient wisdom comes unsinewed. To thine own self be true? But what is self but long tradition, memory and custom wed, now buried together in Old Hamlet's grave? Hamlet kills him instead of Claud, then doesn't mourn. His own confused mistake. How often with our blacks do we hear the young have felled the old? Because they see their Pols as broken men. As chatterboxes. And so they harm their own. Ophelia the peasant girl cannot bear this strife. It was once so calm when Old Tradition reigned! She drowns herself. Her fertility drains like topsoil. All promise of renewal dies. Hamlet and Laertes, turned foes, each seek the other's death. Laertes is a pawn. He upholds the outer order not his own. His end by his hand sown. Thus Pol and all his family massacred. The way of sharecroppers and shack-dwelling men throughout this age. The way of shantytowns in hundreds of hills.

Malcolm had no family so the faculty will arrange his funeral.
Jonah might pay more attention to the vague points of law that march and turn, guarding distant gates, at the back of his mind, but the foreground is impossible rearing black cumulonimbi and their dazzling jolts of light. A non-familial funeral. Then who is caretaking poor Malcolm's estate? He might have guessed the things to come right away. As it is he sits dumb like a shipwrecked soul far out at sea.

We have all agreed, Jonah, that you should deliver Malcolm's eulogy. Peter speaks. Jonah joins the rest who listen. Peter has the power of a juggernaut. This is clear now. It is likely that he will become Head of Department. What will you do? You will fight. You will oppose, as Malcolm would want. True you are not young and in touch with current thought.

But you have friends among these academics. And Malcolm would no doubt have passed the torch of leadership to you. There is much leverage to be had in that. But Malcolm is dead, and it feels as if Jonah's arsenal of confidences and signals has been retired or buried. Peter's surprise is like a bullet wound. It is a modern surprise. Gloom continues to gather. Jonah finds that he stays still, like an antelope on its side, breathing quietly through shattered lungs. He dimly follows those of Peter's words meant for him. The funeral will likely be on Sunday. Will he read the announcement Peter will write. Will he inform Malcolm's closest students, as of course not everyone can attend the funeral, there will have to be a separate university memorial service. Finally, will he speak to Peter after the meeting.

It is after the meeting and he and Peter are alone.

Hamlet is alone, you see. No one to pilot him between Claud's coral and Ger's rocks. He cannot help but ponder suicide. To be or not to be? He knows that old days are irrevocably old. He knows that defiance leads to death. He knows he has some loyalty among the crowds if he can but show them how to act. So how to act?

There's something I need to tell you says Peter. Something Malcolm wanted to say but never could. This will not improve our relationship but I must respect what I know were Malcolm's wishes.

Jonah sees, suddenly, that Peter is wondering whether what's to come will make Jonah tower in a fury or keep him seated still and docile.

Of course I expect you to receive this information in the same spirit of confidence with which I offer it.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are baubles proffered by the white man who thinks that ploy still works. Hamlet thwarts them with ease. Show to all that it is good to spurn such trinkets. That is simple. But the main thing? To triumph over whites keep their modern ways appease the old ancestors? Loyalty to progress and to anthropology? When right is

given by ghosts and politics?

For the last year and a half, says Peter. Malcolm and I. Peter's words continue but Jonah cannot hear them. His ears ring as though a bolt has smote him. The gesture is enormous, the tactic one of genius. Jonah now holds Peter in his hands. He can rush to the just-dispersed faculty and roar shame down their throats, triumphant in indignation, and ruin Peter forever. They will believe him. He will ride to the department's head on a wave of outrage. That is if he trusts the truth of this confession. If he trusts this Peter. If the images which now parade in Jonah's mind are acceptable to him. If there was indeed a pale flabby Malcolm who demonstrated seamanship with the ropes of Peter's muscles. A Malcolm who knew the sail-smile of young good white teeth. Who saw the skies in certain eyes and an anchor down below to weigh when choppy passion threatened force of breaking strain. Of course Jonah cannot find this in the inventory of his beliefs. It is a trap. Peter's waiting to deny, to denounce old Jonah as a crazy greedy man. He and Malcolm, he will say with disbelief? Ridiculous. Are those the lengths to which that old poet will go?

But on the other hand. There's nothing like craftiness in Peter's expression. He speaks solemnly. He looks, even, as if he might have had some grief of late. Could it be true? Is it possible that all—everything, O everything—has been taken from Jonah this morning? Only Peter knows. Peter, who has now prevented Jonah fond memories of the wrinkles of Malcolm's eyes, the barest nuances in Malcolm's lips, which once, he thought, composed a semaphore that only he could read. Is this possible? Or is it lies? What are you going to do? Is Malcolm true?

Fortinbras is Shakespeare's mark of history. Everything repeats. Poor Hamlet cannot withstand the burden. He's killed, by what you cannot say. By his own hand, to die with Ger? By Claud's sword, to die for his cause? Martyr and hero and self-pitying man—all three? True Claud dies too. But is replaced by the model of things we know so well. The

revolutionary Fortinbras. Hamlet's dying choice. He always is. He'll rule through black Norse troops till history replaces him too.

Peter leaves the room. Now it's just Jonah and Malcolm, the Malcolm who may or may not be. What will Jonah do? It might all have been in his mind. Or Malcolm was false with him the whole time. The pretty poet, desirable, an amusement, because naive. Jonah cannot stay abreast of his thoughts. He fears he may sink into a feeling he can't define, generated by the globe of shaken waters in his mind, by the close heat of brooding clouds.

I Jonah Behr am good Horatio. I complete the paradigm by telling it to you. A model's not a model till it's shared. But see, see how very wrong all this has been.

How he wishes he could expel it all! How he has strained the last two days! But there's nothing that can soothe the mind. No catharsis. Not even a song. Until now music, always, best brought him quiet. Notes and words. But no Homer, no Housman, no Beethoven, no Bach, none of his own humble songs. He must simply try to stay afloat until the wheel of the world revolves the storm away. But then? And until then? What will he do? O Malcolm—were you true?

He tries his best. His students write for their posterity. No one knows if he will be seen again. Now he thinks—O hell!—probably. Because isn't that defeat? To hang head and do what's said? Or go to the horrid cities, teach night school, lead a private bachelor life, trust nobody. At any rate he speaks his last words very loud. To shout the lecture that has solved nothing into air. Some students note he has gone sing-song. Who can know the pain of Hamlet?

Is that sweat on his brow? He's passed the forty-five minute mark. He looks very tired, maybe even sick. I boldly predict that he will become a recluse like the Catcher in the Rye fellow.

Who dares to put a system on a poem? It is so easy, can't you see, to have a model.

Cal, Con, Ham. You can do it to any of the plays. Try *Richard II*. Or *The Shrew*. Or any of the tragedies. You'll think of something but your thoughts will be quite hollow. Because Shakespeare does not belong in Suffolk. He belongs in Elizabethan England. Read him there. With your minds there. Not here. Not elsewhere.

Jonah is finished with words and hardly notices the students filing out with brave and happy looks. He leans against the podium. He casts about again for something to distract himself. Lights on, begins, abandons a poem. Then it strikes him that he can indeed describe the trauma that whips the tempest in his mind. Insight's unhorsing lance. Catharsis is the wrong cure utterly to yearn for. Indeed a song is worthless. For what's the good of singing when you've been swallowed whole?

Secondo

Arpeggio, Jo-Ann says. *You are awake all right you are afraid to face* Jo-Ann chews the word out of her mouth, arpeggio, and it seems to take some of her teeth with it, when she smiles *this boy has no idea what I'm talking about* big and wide black gaps. She says it's the two notes of a chord. She blasts on her harmonica, cupped in her hands *hope this doesn't scare him they are sometimes afraid* and leans out of the shadow of the trailer door. The harmonica flashes between her fingers. The sound is like the expression on her face *I was searching for the right approach, coincidence is remarkable, provides a path, no such thing as coincidence of course* her brow knit in blowing fury, her eyes squeezed tight at the ground, the sun shining on her hair the brown of horse. She says but played one at a time. The harmonica thrashes in her mouth *love this*. She leans back into the shadow, her elbows sawing back and forth, her body tilting back the chair, head shaking and shuddering, leaning back and drawing breath, looking up as if Hallelujah! Praise Glory be to God! except there is no God per se Jo-Ann says, the harmonica modulating, counting a sound and then uncounting, one two one two one two one. She stops. She smiles kindly, without opening her mouth, crinkling her eyes. She is expecting some *thing* to follow *but that boy just stands there cold or furious I can't tell which my I wonder if you can see him when* and says but that's about the only Italian *you are up you know you're up so you'd better open your eyes and see what you've done.*

He does not want to wake. Memory easier when it's dreamed, according to Mama Kosi. Memory is a bad counting of things, she says, better to count it when you're asleep. Jo-Ann says *this life and others patterned together* as ideas kickstart an awakening and release is had at last. But Mama Kosi's *wrong* and though he is not awake *you are awake* he knows how this bad counting will go, that he will think of things like the icy grass and then will begin to hear the insects around him, and the birds, more distant, communing among themselves in the bushes. Then the memory that he has shivered all night, that still he

shivers and shivers. Then pain *pain teaches you need a lesson* and all its consequences for his memory, the strict ways that will order, all at once, like a poke in the ribs, the design and execution of the day before today. He doubts whether *you are awake though* he can count further than that. Jo-Ann says pain is avoidable through concentration.

A very dark faintly reddish soil lies fallow behind his eyelids, an uncountable number of black grains in a luminous red land, out of which coalesces *pain* Jo-Ann and her instrument *teaches* if you heed Jo-Ann's advice and concentrate and *if you will* but *let it* end.

Mama Kosi says eh that was a bad fire yesterday. The package lies between them on the table. She has opened it and spilled its contents on the table, creating a miniature landscape. Here is the smokestack city *he is ignoring me on purpose* the erupted, opened package. The tissue papers make pink and blue crumpled hills and here is *Suffolk* a slim white envelope *brat* further away in the farm country *proving you are awake, like a child you're employing the tried-and-true method of deceiving yourself* closest to Mama Kosi the low-lying box of chocolates *see if he gets any of these chocolates.*

I said that was a bad fire yesterday did you hear me.

Yes. *O how old women need comfort. More promises broken than kept.*

You are lucky it missed *slowly, slowly, he remembers the last time, he's very quick this one.*

Yes.

But we have lived here a long time some of us I have lost my *dearest* out back three times. Not ever this home God bless us though.

Yes *yes.*

Your name Secondo is why you are here. Gordon came with this package yesterday and *I promised to tell him the story it burdens a bit perhaps I will tell him some of my burden.* I have waited until now to open it because it comes from the place where your name comes from and it is important that you know about your name it's how you can know about yourself *an untruth* so that when you grow up *speaking without thinking.*

Can I have a chocolate.

O! You be patient now.

Can I have water.

Can I abide this I made a promise though.

Can I—.

My husband is dead you know that no need to go into it *surfacing.*

He *surfacing.*

Fought *surfacing.*

Before you were born but not so long ago to me *surfacing.*

Your mother puffing blowing hot the poor one on the floor *than any dreamt Mama Kosi tale, grinding down the road.*

The truck, a truck that once carried soldiers, grinds down the road below where Secondo lies. It's six a.m. The six a.m. truck. It might be eight a.m., the eight a.m., truck but it's not light enough. He watches *awake* on his side, the six a.m. truck does not stand out much from the light road or the dark hills. It is a heavy truck, not too fast, it moves like a bark-black insect creeping along bark. The road turns away from Secondo, leaves the contour of the hill and follows a straight line away from the hill toward the top of another hill. The truck is like a story, it has almost reached the turning point, it turns *the truck is no story*. The space under the canopy of the truck *you know* is darker than any other point in the landscape and Secondo *must simply be brought to an understanding of the* examines the possibilities for a story here. The truck has toiled halfway up the hill. All objects are potential beginnings of distraction, Jo-Ann says *you are* is an old truck, full of *must drive this truck slowly now back axle's set to go plenty trouble if I spill these darkies all over the damn road.*

Truck's moving slow.

Yes.

Sun'll be up when we stop.

It's getting on fall.

How many days you reckon.

Seventeen, eighteen outside.

Yes.

We'll get that kid.

Let him be.

I'm going to fist and knife and asshole pieces of tin roof boards and kick despite that woman she's through with him anyway.

The truck has toiled halfway up the *sources of distraction in the hands of the weak* is halfway up that hill *but when it goes over the hill* and Mama Kosi *then* like a rubber band pulled too taught by the truck *isn't it better to start now.*

Your mother puffing blowing hot the poor one on the floor. Now I had a husband but he died bless him you know that no need to go into *I promised but I'd be happier.* And not so long ago but before you were born a great war the greatest war of all yes he fought for us and lived but he almost *once is enough really this useless boy.*

Mama.

My son how was work today.

Fine, only a long trip back the car had trouble.

Again.

Yes. And oh is that the package.

Yes. And tomorrow?

Yes I must go back in.

A Saturday again.

I know Mama.

We should celebrate tonight.

Mm. I'll get some things. Hello *creeping, half-domesticated, finding your way in this world.*

Hello.

Enjoying the story.

Yes.

Good. See you later.

So my husband was almost *the snow has fallen for days now. Each falling bit carves the air like a rose petal, drops cold and settles like sand settling upon sand, suddenly*

indivisible. Ice is frozen water, snow weightless falling ice, the snowpetals ache in your hands when you ball them to throw at the playful Italians. The Italians aren't so bad. They curse under their breath, but show them your gun and they will humbly beg permission to shovel the snow out of your way as you walk to the bar. There you can drink with them.

I was not walking to the bar. I was walking to the guard house. It was my shift to watch the guns we'd taken from the Italians. I was considering my plans after returning home. Perhaps I'd start North and work down, I was thinking, a family definitely and also a bit about this vision I couldn't shake, a farm somewhere in the hills. An idea I have, I was thinking about it.

All things whisper when snow is falling. My boots did not thump, but whispered, and the only other sound was my breath which stopped in the air and was blanketed to the ground by the snow. Good God how it grows. That is why I had my little shovel, dig the snow this way and that, maintain the paths that spider around the town, the barracks, the guard house. The other thing I was carrying was my gun of course. I do not fear the Italians. They are an easy people. They might curse or show their fists, but usually to other Italians. I'm something of a spectacle of course so they're OK with me. I was taking a path that only we soldiers used, running from town to the guard house. Most of the men used a different path but I liked this one, deserted and silent, roundabout. The Italians were forbidden from all paths to the guardhouse. I liked to stroll through town before duty. Gave me something to think about watching the snow pour down for the next several hours. The Italians shrugged their shoulders or greeted you and some would even sing a song.

I saw it coming before it happened, had my eye on it for some reason, knew all along that the instant my heel hits there the snow which covers the ice clears away like smoke, the ice flashing sky blue, my arms flying out like a startled bird's wings, the shovel and gun pulling me down. I saw it all. Oddly enough I thought right away that I'd name my son a good strong name, what a strange thought, my head cracked right where my heel slipped, it sounded like a bell, my shovel and gun splashed soundlessly into the snow.

Someone came along while I was out. I could see the footprints. They followed mine first, then they tramped around, then someone dug up the shovel and gun and left. I didn't

want them to hurry back, either. You can't be sure what an Italian will do with a shovel or a gun, and something was wrong with my legs. The snow came down like rain. I was wet and cold. I got depressed just like that. The things I would have done, I thought. Travel, work my way South, take stock of the situation, a family, and then this idea I have Secondo which is why I know the name of the restaurant in town. The Star of Italy. Now he has a family of his own, look at that picture on the TV. Sends us a package every year or so the memory of my husband on that mountain strong they never met a black man before. That Secondo who saved him was a gift-child from God, my husband always reckoned it should mean gift not what it means *look at him look at those chocolates but* only an angel could have found him there and then the whole family taking such an interest. So when your mother puffing blowing hot the poor one on the floor I couldn't believe *you* no complications at all I shouted. Your mother was going to have a son still *a son I am still going to have a son.* I did. I shouted. Came to my mind just like that. Secondo! Your mother said it was the last thing she heard and when she came to it was best suited for the child *is my son I can think of no other name not the same at all as* I couldn't believe *I can't believe how* so there you are. A gift an unexpected gift after the poor one he's buried out there *so beautiful* you're the *Secondo* you want a chocolate bless that poor one ashes to ashes dust to dust Secondo *it's better to be awake.*

The icy grass droops, touches Secondo's face, his body nested in drooping, brushing, wet leaves of ice. It is morning, past six, the Earth has travelled some way out of slate. An ant pauses on a stalk of grass, a drop of water disappears. The ant marches down the stalk. They are perhaps crawling over his body as well, searching for dew beaded on his arms and legs. Birds, somewhere near, bathe in the grass. *Now* he is shivering, someone would be able to hear his teeth *now* his body aches it's hard to say where *now* he stirs, shifts his legs to sit up, to take automatic note of where he fell asleep, to take in the greening of the land. But he rolls instead back into the grass and his voice wakens. The grass buzzes, dew showers down. The sky gains in blue. His foot. It is not him, it is a dark wet rodent, caught by the leg *that will burst* scrabbling in terror for the bush *in the bush lick like a cool stream shade of leaves passing by* his throat thirsts.

He stops groaning. His foot is poisoned meat. It has given him fever. The blood has brimmed out of his foot during the night and soaked his brow. And later when the sun bakes and steams the *no because the future's never let out except on a leash memory holds tight. It used to be only instinct there in the garden, this is good and this is bad. A lot of good but then O WHAT ARE YOU DOING. O the garden is no more for you. Leaving the garden looking around then it fails, it works no longer, isn't that true. This good and that is bad. Now it's I'll give you this and you give that to me and soon hundreds of men and women all of them in two-by-twos on a great ship the waters rise the ship heaves and in forty days Land! Land! The ship is anchored, they swim to land and dry off. Their shadows fall tall among incomprehensible things that buzz small back and forth around them like messengers. It's a new world. All the delightful useful things. It didn't use to be like that. Memory now is a policeman who keeps the order, and the future is his watchdog. You hear his steady breathing throughout the day. That is your memory when you're awake, the steady breath of a man who is satisfied with the world. And the future's held tight until everything's remembered.*

Everyone stands in the front yard, everyone who's around that is. Two men, Zee and his brother, who missed the truck, they must still be drunk. They look around fiercely from under their eyebrows swaying at the hips. Secondo would move the Earth to knock one of them down *why for what purpose* yes certainly, a quick dash right past Zee's legs. But the women might try to block him, and the children would chase after. Practically a dozen women, who knows how many of their children. So many staying home today. And the two white men standing up there talking they don't look happy, that might have something to do with it. Secondo walks toward the porch.

Good morning Auntie. Good morning Auntie. Hello Zee *uglyface* hello sis ready for school *this one oh now, what will he do.*

He stands below the white men. The one man is saying she's got illegal commerce out here, she's got unzoned and unfit buildings of every kind including domiciles. There's no water. No electricity. No proper sanitation. She has violated every single code ever written, she's got God knows how many children out here without mothers and fathers, God

knows how many criminals, excuse me for saying so, and the bottom line is I am serving this notice.

You don't understand. First of all, it's not her doing, these people have chosen this place, but even that's not important as far as the court is concerned. She has obtained reprieve from all action pertaining to her property until the court makes its own assessment, you can't serve this notice.

The same goddamn court issued this piece of paper and I'm not leaving until she takes it off my hands.

Well then there's been a mix-up that's all I can tell you our reprieve does not simply expire.

There's no schooling there's no waste removal, he stops talking and looks down. He sees *Jesus Christ I can't believe what's going on out here. Wonder what that kid would think if I pushed fancy lawyer son of a bitch off this porch. Look at him. Hello? Hello? But can you expect anything else from a fucking* OK. I'm going, he folds the paper, to leave this notice here, he pushes it into the lawyer's breast pocket, and go back to the court, ask the judge what the hell. If he gives me another green light—.

But he does not complete his thought for the door opens and *Good morning* steps out still in her bathrobe her face covered with white paste. Everyone in the front yard murmurs *Good morning*.

What is this.

It seems the court granted a warrant to the city but there's probably a mistake.

May I see it.

I wouldn't advise that because if you take it he can say you accepted the notice and then come back with the officer.

Oh. Do I need to do anything.

No it's OK I'll see the judge today.

Mm. She looks into the front yard and grunts. Good morning. They all say good morning again as she closes the door.

One day soon Pete says.

Yes yes the lawyer says.

The man walks to his car, a green sedan. The front yard stirs *no he can't just come here what am I going to do the laundry with today I must find David we're out of bread hey do you think we could get that one now.* The lawyer stays on the porch, knocks at the door. *Standing behind the door the whole time who knows why she came* lets him in. Secondo waits until Zee has made it a good way out of the yard *it's probably time for* and up the driveway *school* before he sprints toward them ten times as fast as the fastest plane the furnaces in his legs hot as he charges between them and keeps on like the moon charging around the Earth. Zee's brother stays on his feet but Zee goes down they are shouting *little I will murder him set him on fire* but he has already reached the horizon, he has disappeared like a speck *why did you for what purpose* he jogs to the dirt field. Jo-Ann is there already.

She has parked her trailer as usual at the edge of the grassless plot. Most of the children have arrived, the dust has not yet settled around them sitting in the folding chairs, it billows around their legs, it tumbles weakly toward Secondo, who is walking against the brush of a breeze which smells of rain. It will rain later, hard, the dust resembling boiling water. *Shame* later the children will want to play football here *a pity* as usual. He approaches slowly. Jo-Ann has seen him, she stands in front of the trailer door, she eyes him while she speaks.

She says today is big brother big sister day so please big brothers and sisters find your partners and while everyone jumbles together like dice rolling in a cup *like children* he slouches to the back of the *classroom I insist that we call it a classroom for that is where we learn.* Jo-Ann eyes him she can *decided to sulk today pretend he's somehow hurt* she says OK OK everyone quiet down sit sit SIT you can go home if you don't want to listen. Now. ABCs today, big brothers and sisters come and get a piece of paper. They dash for the paper, pencils, *like children* at a snivelling outcast dog, Jo-Ann says Secondo let me get them started.

Big brothers and big sisters do we know our ABCs.

YE-ES

OK I want you to write A and when you're done I want you to show your little

brothers and sisters how to write A. Give them the pencil when you're done and let them write A. Do you understand?

YE-ES

And then B and then C and D and E all the way to Z. Do you understand?

YE-ES

Okay. Secondo.

They have noticed him before of *that one*. They giggle and croon and ah he skirts them toward Jo-Ann she says SHH. I'll be back in five minutes when I'm back I want to see two alphabets on every page. They go inside the trailer, she leaves the door open.

Have a seat. They sit on either side of the tiny table in the shallow room, one window opposite the door casting half a square of light on the brown shag carpet. He can see out the door, the students are not working they are squinting into the doorway. He kicks a piece of clutter, an empty box, away from his foot. It stops against the opposite wall, settles on the brown shag carpet.

I was afraid you weren't coming *but he's going to play intransigent except I'm in no mood for it OK*. Did you do your homework.

Secondo has an idea, he turns his head toward the students glances *coyly* sideways toward her and says *the Alphabet*.

She's still. Her breath comes out long like a deflating *like someone vexed with you for good reason is there any way you can call that the advancement of anything much less*.

She says Secondo. Secondo I try hard I'm not even sure if it's right to privilege you, give your abilities their due. As far as conscience goes and community, and I know you understand me, they're a better object of my time than you when you're like this. Now did you do your homework or do you have any questions for me.

I did my homework *what is fairness is it giving equal time to all or is it distributing things to those best able to make use of them*.

Let me see it.

He takes a wad of paper from his pocket, pulls it straight, gives it to Jo-Ann *I've acted rightly so far* she reads junta, noun, the military officers who rule a country after a

coup very good you did them all *but what about this* do you remember what a coup is.

Secondo says koo, noun, a take-over of government by a group of persons with he fidgets with his hands military authority.

Very good. Very good *he needs a home.* Thank you. And now for your reward as promised. She bustles in the clutter on her side of the brown shag carpet, produces a box, unfolds it, places it on the table. She consults a piece of paper inside the box. They place the pieces together as they were last time.

Now. Your move *I saved that pawn with my rook last time.* But no, Jo-Ann has overlooked *a salient point.* Knight to a4, *a salient point.* She has overlooked jump knight over pawn to a4. He has waited for this, in the dark the board glows in front of him. The figures glide past, through one another, there's a luminescent pawn, there's the queen, there's a rook, oh there's the queen again, she moves around in a jostling crowd, offended but gracious, bumps elbows, another pawn, the king, a knight, the queen again, a secretive bishop feigning illness, one cloaked step back into obscurity, could even be called a misstep even, for it invites a haven for the queen, an opulent room you've saved a pawn go ahead your majesty such a comfortable you can have tea the sounds of horses, shouts, a faint smell of mown grass, c5. And Jo-Ann, queen to c5. She has overlooked *a salient point.* The knight. Up it will go, down it will come, its four hooves a single thunderclap, A4! The knight since distant d2 a galloping furnace, coal-red nostrils, a flesh-eating horse, the pillaring dust, it charges it will gnash into the queen, flip-thrash she's razored in two he picks up the knight and moves it.

Jo-Ann *blinks.* Oh that's more consequential now that I see it than I first, she meditates. He looks out the door, the students are mostly working now, their heads bent, their pencils walking on stilts across the sheets of paper. Jo-Ann says yes Secondo I can see that and she places her forefinger on her king's crown *proud cranium dented football now slumping in the throne no sensation in my hands who are all those people watching me* and topples the piece. I'm back in three days, that's Monday, we'll start another game. I won't keep you now unless you have any questions.

Uh-uh.

Very well, here are your words for Monday *should I give my wink*. He crumples the paper into his pocket. He stands in the door and mutters.

What?

He glances at the chessboard.

She *no one in the world but us knows what it's like* searching for the right thing to say to hopelessness. Yes, she says.

A coup, Secondo says, then he is off *what it's like it's like this*. He walks quickly past the children in the classroom *a brutal use of definition* the children watch, their heads turning slowly. One yahs quietly one hisses *it's like this*. Looking back he points straight at the one who yahs then turns and tramps on. He does not lower his finger. A stirring among the children *pointing at you, trouble, what will happen to you tonight* he does not look back but throws back his finger, it emanates a wall that delimits where the children may walk, extends across the dirt, pushes up against the chest of the one who yahs and freezes him forever *an act of fear*. The children can see where he's going. He reaches the foot of the hill still pointing, his finger takes them all in now. They can see where he's going *mention it aloud* they ride the blunt rim of his finger until he disappears like a speck over the hill *is what it's like*.

He rests on the other side of the hill. *Down there* he sits among the worn-out weeds, then lies back. He keeps his thoughts shallow in the air above the valley between *down there* this hill and the next. His head rests on a patch of clay between weeds that sprout like trees above him into the blue day *it's like this* he tries to keep his thoughts bobbing above the *down there*. Mama Kosi says it is respectful and our tradition and further more it is also our duty *down there*. It will bring us good luck. His thoughts dropped. He raises them. Secondo lives just over the next *let devils live where they may with* the other shacks all leaning like weeds. And in between. Jo-Ann says yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death so the Christians say and they're not far off either. That is death exactly, a shadow, unreal, the least of our worries. What they get wrong is when *we come back*. You understand that, you see death's the smallest of problems. Then you're on your way. Mama Kosi says it's tradition respectful our duty luck. *O Jesus how we miss you bless us*. That was

a drop, Secondo's thoughts dropping like a neglectful hummingbird he catches himself, they hover higher. He lies on the hill *what it's like it's like the blank TV late at night, your thoughts soar in static blue*. The weeds blow like trees in the periphery. Death is a valley of death. There's duty, there's luck. His *luck is only for the luckless* just over the next hill, in between the valley hidden from Mama Kosi's front door. From *mean to tell me there's a what out here Christ unsanitary decomposing* Secondo's thoughts drop like a yolk from its shell and spread over the hot valley, hissing and crackling.

He could skirt the graveyard *you may not skirt the graveyard* Mama Kosi says it is in your character to experience passage through the graveyard, heh. He. A shadow, Jo-Ann says. But that one particular *it is in your future*. Our duty says Mama Kosi *you will never* yes he walks down the hill in big jolting steps, aware that he has never not taken this route. Jo-Ann says human weakness is not an untruth and is generally quite easily seen. He will saunter among the shadows the crosses cast, the plush thick green grass crosshatching under his feet. The brownness of the hill ends just outside of the *B VAN DYK*, the grass curves elliptical around the valley, a cat's-eye shape of grass laid concave in the valley, crosses sprouting from it, their shadows like toy swords lying fallen on the grass. *JUSTICE FELLOWS* then *TYE* just *TYE* perhaps a dog then *WIFE* no dates. He ignores the others passing right and left until he reaches the cement block *PHILIP ABRAHAMS—1927-1981—RIP BELOVED—HUSBAND—VETERAN—FOUNDER that's all I need for this personal version of a renaissance, you see it will support a community of one-hundred adults if they do it right, the children can inherit and acquire additional property. But the one house here the other nearby a well or two if there's no stream, crop rotation to keep one-fourth about one-fourth fallow all the time with about two dozen farmers a couple of carpenters, a midwife, my wife, goat, milking cattle and the rest working out in Suffolk I tell you a man can show the world a thing or two, yes, I've been out in it* taps the concrete with his foot it's smooth and clean. Because Mama Kosi, twice a month, everyone rooting out weeds straightening crosses singing trimming the grass. But further, pay your respects boy as often as you might they're good people made it possible and who knows but they aren't just watching over the hill appreciate your consideration send some luck your way. The concrete

flashes in the sun at a certain angle but the words do not slide off it into the shadow, the creeping quadrangular edge.

Secondo squints at the concrete *individuality is what destroys people* Jo-Ann says, our souls for instance feel it pulling them toward annihilation they want to do good you see. So the Earth I guess a kind of goodness. Secondo feels bright and hot, his face like the flashing polished concrete, but wet too. That *other* he hasn't reached yet, over there at the start of the other hill. He looks back at the hill he has just walked down. Mama Kosi says you must respect your ancestors they've made this place and truth be told your own blood is in the earth here. Tend to that *I wonder why he's so curious about* over there, that one, shadow, dense and dark, thick as blood in earth over there mixing up with the grass. The soul desires to do good. Mama Kosi says out of love and respect for those who've gone before. The souls. That *other* over there its shadow swording into it as noon approaches. He supposes *I will not contradict you* explains itself in the way he rotates away from *PHILIP ABRAHAMS*, it flashes full of sun, and takes steps away in a line as straight as possible. If he were to ride in a boat over these hills along this line the next wave would roll him to his *will not*. But goodness is in the way, he stops at goodness. Mama Kosi says *I will not contradict you*.

It is made of two tree branches, not slats of wood, and two nails. It pokes straight and stout out of the grass. *A straight, stout body was my destiny. Beams for thighs, to hunch up against the sky, sturdy as a horse, propping up the sky on my shoulders. And yes, if I was to be a shade more athletic than my peers, in the gym of thought I was to make them appear hobbled, without motion even. But nothing surpasses this—the sweetness of my soul infecting the very features of my face, my look, my glance beginning the goodness of old times. Peace. In my curving lips future girls bending to fetch water from brimming wells. In my straight and fine nose a new city plan of tidy streets. In my deep clear eyes the sweet pure air through which men and women walk with catlike ease and clarity. But I was dreaming, finding my way out of mother guided by a woven dream, my eyes were closed, as if kissed.*

Secondo rides at the bottom of a wave of hills. He pulls from the ground the tendrils

of a weed, discards them. He has done his duty. He looks up at the crosses, a small army in the cat's-eye valley of green. He turns, walks slowly, against gravity, up the hill. The coolness of shade this time of day.

Jimi says, from the other side of the hill, you are my girlfriend. The scene begins in his mind before, on the instant, he crouches and edges to the hilltop, his head he imagines rising over the hill, a dark moon. There is Jimi, with Girly, the dust disputing around their feet.

You are my girlfriend, Jimi says again. Tall handsome Jimi, lurking on the fringes of the schooyard always, girls watch the ground when he is near. But *he has spoken* not within the course of things to see them turn away from him after such a statement, the words so confidently delivered. All girls like Jimi of course. Girly particularly pretty particularly *a locked place, no exit* fetching in her blouse and skirt.

Serious Jimi come now you know it's true the point urged with a suggestive touch. Girly gapes ugh and flings his arm away she has always been a strong girl there is that to consider.

But Jimi is more handsome than ever and twists Girly's arm behind her back. Now the tall command of Jimi the man-boy *sixteen and so strong* he twists her arm and says again with such brilliant confidence you are my *what is a girlfriend, is it separable, if so girl yes Girly is a girl but is Jimi acting the way one would expect a person to act toward his* but what has Girly done but run the heel of her shiny dusty black shoe down Jimi's shin *she is not his* Jimi yelps. Not so handsome now, he grits his teeth in anger and also is not quite as tall as he once was, stooping over Girly grinding her arm until she also cries in pain.

There is no one else about *no, there is.*

Is she struggling with him, no she has been mastered. They both breathe hard. He bends so low over her that they are both almost kneeling. He has her arm. He warns that she better say yes. She shakes her head, eyes closed and tearful. Such *courage compared to* Jimi who is handsome and strong will see the issue through. They are indeed kneeling now, panting, she falls forward, supporting herself with her free arm. The other he keeps twisting, his tone gentler than before almost whispering to her that she can say yes anytime she wants.

But she has bitten her lip against saying *suppose this will happen* bleeding. Now he has fallen on his free arm as well, his lips are close behind her ear, he speaks only one word. And with every whispered rocking yes *suppose this happens the web of your forbearance will chill to brittleness and crack a freezing twisting groan rise from your belly to your mouth.*

Secondo steps up, he stands, he imagines a hulking earth spirit rising from the hilltop. Jimi abandons, leaps away from Girly, fumbling. Girly crouches still, the dust settles around her balled body. Jimi mutters to her staring up at Secondo *devil, devil up there on the hill should I beat this devil out* but smirks and places his arms akimbo *waiting*. Secondo *cannot help what you know*. Jimi barks in disbelief. For a moment it seems *march this shit somewhere do something* but it seems he thinks of something else for he merely points at Secondo then trots off with easy shoulders in the direction of the house.

Secondo is unprepared for Girly's scream. Adrenaline washes his body, he starts and stares down. She is staring up. For a moment their faces are the same, bulging, struggling for expression. He knows for certain about the scream, she rose there from the shameful dust to *that little demon his face that demon* it is intolerable, in the wild torpor of her breath and body, then she runs off too.

Secondo walks down *have you never been helpless the boys teasing you with their hands a single shout would scatter them but your mouth is* to his *blest and cursed by cowardice* he leans two planks against the doorway. Two thin triangles of sun cut into the shack's dark. A golden taut string separates the planks. But he can see nothing else, except, looking away from the door, green residue of light, and the busy patterns of his eyes.

Girly there is nothing to eat *hardly an excuse*. He will hunt for scraps at dinnertime. His shack, made mostly of wood, is cool.

Love, says Jo-Ann, though I feel it differently than most people say they feel it *acting like hawk they think but really just pigeons* is a mystery in the world's old sense, a revelation, an aroma for the spirit to inhale, complete intoxication. And of course *but perhaps I perhaps he is a bit young* there's erotic *I have always admired Jimi's body he has walked by me before when I was standing with Shirley he walked by the way a man who has had a woman*

walks so purposeful he passed us looking straight ahead. Shirley and I looked at each other Oh! what a man fortunately I feel them both towards someone in town or perhaps I should say the feelings are allowed, freed when I am with my love for the soul tends to goodness it's just culture gets in the way. It took me long enough to peel the layers down I'm forty-two *really why am I saying this what does he* my spirit's not nearly that old perhaps love reduces what is most important about you to its most *and while he was doing it to me I tried to pretend that I was back in the* mother's love *before I even went to Jo-Ann's school I remember the shadow of no the light of the sun from one window would creep down the wall and across the floor getting thinner I never saw the part where it was too thin to see while he was doing it to me I pretended I was facing that wall watching the sun slide down it and bend on to the floor but it took so long it took hours and hours.*

Can you imagine hours and hours.

The crack between the planks in his doorway has gone dark. He uncurls from his half-mattress and smells the air. Smoke. Dinnertime. He doubts *everyone* will have something for him, he goes there too often. But perhaps *if he comes tonight again I need to give him something* may even have meat tonight. Auntie Sisi often has meat.

He stretches his arms, lets them drop in his lap, resumes his hunched form. He stares at the dark crack in his doorway. Meat would be good tonight. Meat is a man's meal, Mama Kosi says, quoting her husband. Bone for the dog, meat for the man *Jimi like I was a dog a DOG I watched the* man's meat. It seems like forever since he's eaten meat. He can feel emptiness in his stomach.

Do not leave he hears noise incongruent with the night. Murmuring. But no one comes here at *back end who want's to live in that beyond the* it might be Zee, a party, yes. He listens. No music. Just people out there talking, several *do not go out.* As he leans to look through the crack Jimi's voice knocks against the planks of his doorway like stones, you better come out you black devil. The murmuring rises, falls. Secondo sees arms and legs, crossing like tree branches *like the limbs of about a dozen silhouettes in front of the dark blue sky* in a night breeze *don't go out there* heads like *black heads* dark bobbing balls.

Can you hear me devil you better come out.

Jimi strikes a match and lights a branch he is carrying. Girly's face flares. No, it is Girly's older sister, a pretty *nice breasts but too churchy* near Jimi, friends of hers and his friends standing with them *to see what will happen now* shuffling and murmuring.

Girly's sister says you devil we know who you are *in league with Satan you have caused the children to sin.*

Jimi says you come out or we will burn you out. He holds up a torch. A concentration of light like a diffused dimple on one shiny cheek. It is obvious that *if I can put on a good enough show I'll cure my troubles tonight.*

Jimi shouts again *death is nothing a valley a shadow a pasture a process stay* how long have you been *where you are* tall handsome Jimi no one ever doubts. Girly's sister is thinking only about her sister what did Jimi tell her. What did Girly *death is inevitable. You must welcome the inevitable.*

Come out and answer to us.

They all watch the shack. It throws back no shadow in the torchlight. No sound no movement Secondo is still and quiet as a hunted creature.

Jimi *get the bastard out he has led the children astray corrupted them soiled them* Jimi says one last chance come out *go out and live with lies to what they will force you to do.*

Secondo *it is in giving in to them that you will compromise yourself* returns to his mattress, lies on his side. He closes his eyes *death is the most childlike and innocent of events*. The others gather around the shack he hears their scuffling.

Jimi says you asked for this *be damned.*

Secondo *muse upon death for a lifetime it is walking deeper into still waters it is finding no joy in a woman it is singing and you are redeemed from fear* curls tight on his mattress.

The scuffling feet retreat as the shack starts to crackle the small flames climb ladders of wood, smoke hangs in the air above Secondo's head.

He *how can you betray yourself outside betray your* clenches his teeth, his fists. He is as still as *a man convinced* ice, the coming heat will keep him fixed *a stone.*

The shack begins its oration. Loud and round, the fire *take my time, come to find you.*

The walls will collapse, but not before the roof falls and presses him into the baking earth *cross blood dirt duty reverence empty things death is positivity in nothingness stay right where you* Secondo *the story of the man who feared death sought an antidote succeeded suddenly discovers that immortality is a wound oh how he wishes he would die of his wound,* breathing in hot smoke. He hears faint exclamations outside. The shack thunders *as I walk through the valley of the shadow* he wonders if *but they want you to* might open his eyes. He imagines that they see a bright square of whiteness from which a short dark figure should presently burst *don't move* curled like a sculpture of *they will* his mother panting birthing *ice* the poor one *death is preferable to* Mama Kosi reaching in both hands his mother screams pulls pushes out a heavy wet she cannot believe what she has been through Mama Kosi cradling it looking *oh dear should I show it now* gift gift Secondo his mother looks *Secondo* kicks out her feet like darting fish *no* the floor as wet and slippery as ice she wakes numb and shivering he is there still and fine as a carving in ice *you mustn't you mustn't* while in her arms what has Mama Kosi put in her arms O what.

But they are unprepared for the speed at which the figure bursts from the shack. He is almost immediately a dark shape blending into darkness. It is true Jimi touches him for a moment, his arm in reflex catching Secondo's lips and teeth but Jimi loses his balance and falls and the figure is too fast for the rest. Secondo runs and leaps until he trips, his hands shudder into earth, and an the awareness that the pain in his ankle might be too much for him *for the traffic between the stuffs of life, between cars apples and outrage. Memory you believe you remember. The apple lifted and eaten clinks in memory like coins, two men travel to different places in the same land, smokestacks belch, workers harvest, the polluted clouds blaze peach at sunset. A man sips chastely from his cup of tea, explanation, he knows is a graceless thing. Why bother with when their memories are made as easily as money and your own memory will find for you all you need to know.*

Secondo is shivering in the open grass. He has nowhere to go. There is just the road, a silver strip in the mint hills. He can stand, he thinks. He can stagger, perhaps, as well. His body has always been tough. He stands, he staggers. He spends the morning staggering down the long hill, pausing when the fever peaks and rings loudly in his ears. The sun infests

his brain, the ground sways and swelters. When he reaches the road, which shimmers in the growing heat, he sits. He does not know what will happen next. He has trouble believing that what he sees on the other side of the road is the end of the world, but there it is, a brown curtain, multifaceted as the eye of a fly, sweeping toward him. He guesses that it heralds fevered unconsciousness. Perhaps, then, it will be the end of the world. He experiences a troubling diffusion of mind, increasingly pleasant.

A truck approaches. It is a truck like the others on the road this morning, one that used to carry soldiers. He casts his arm into the air. The truck brakes, it stops down the road. He stands again. The next few moments are *life, yet your life is worthless now*. The truck will not haul *oh damn what've I brought into town now*. Stomach juices cut into the back of his throat as he walks, upright and in a straight line, to the truck. He lifts himself under the canopy, where perhaps ten men sit. They stare *could be good or bad* solemnly, without malevolence. They don't know him, or they don't immediately *will we have to accommodate now* him, it is dark under the canopy, or *we are men after all* care. The truck jolts forward.

It is very loud, but everyone speaks, shouts. He barely keeps conscious, finds himself almost dreaming about men in the back of a truck. When it finally stops they pile over him. He lies down. He cannot say whether the blackness in front of his eyes is sleep or simply the roof of the canopy.

The truck is taken for refuelling. He smells the fumes and sits up, scraping a bit. The driver hears him. He walks around, peers into the darkness and sees the shape of a young man.

Hey what are you *who are you* shouts the driver. Who are you. Other questions follow but he is trying to keep up with the first two. The answer to them is long, and he is greatly muddled. He formulates a few sentences, but they stop at the root of his tongue. Secondo, he manages at last. But it is an unusual name. The driver might not *what did he say* or worse he might think that Secondo has *what did that little shit say to me*. It can sound like a curse, pronounced in a certain way. The man might *going to sort this thing out right now*. Secondo struggles to think of how to explain. But the man disappears. Secondo lies down again. The truck moves. Minutes later it stops again, and two men's voices he's in

bad shape drunk let's have a look.

Secondo is lifted out of the truck *ugh* and is laid on a concrete bench somewhere inside. The bench is clammy. The voices say thanks a lot for this go back and tell them OK shit thanks. He is given a blanket and water. It is what he has wanted, it is *no escape where do you think you have escaped to.*

Miss V

Ants in the sun, is what Miss V clucks to herself when she steps out of the school for a better look at the children. They are just like ants, running about. There *is* order to it, she supposes, this daily chaos during the lunch hour. Just as there is, supposedly, in a thronging ant hill. But not from her vantage.

A fight has developed in the corner of the yard—this is what has brought her from the shade of the doorway. Two red ants—well, not red, really, but flushed red from all their bawling—have risen up on their hind legs and are about to lock horns, pincers, antennae, and bruise each other's cheeks. As she crosses the yard, she amends her thoughts to *we*. We are all just like ants, running about. Here comes the guardian ant, the drone—she was not, thank heavens, the queen—to put the grubs in order, to exercise her power as a bigger ant, to preserve the peace of the colony.

She takes one boy by his shirt, sends him inside. The other she admonishes. This is not fighting time, she says. This is playing time. So behave nicely. Then she lets him go. He runs off toward the playset. Her reprimand would seem inadequate to the other teachers, but she, the novice, knows what they, the veterans, seem to have failed to learn, that the boy would forget a lecture—she might have knelt in the yard and, eye-to-eye, in earnest tones, spent the rest of the hour explaining why discord, strife and war are bad—as quickly as he will forget her brief chiding. Why waste energy on a boy disposed to fight? Who will always be a boy disposed to fight. A girl, now, she might impress, but then a girl does not have this desire to—immediately—climb to the top of the playset and howl. No. They would never impress a lesson of calm and goodwill on a cantankerous boy. Better simply to relate the facts. This is playing time. Much further down the line, the boy, having put his counting and spelling to good use in the world—for these are things that *can* be taught—might look back upon his desperate life, ruined family, and hear the echo of a teacher's reprimand. But he won't pay attention now, certainly.

For war *is* bad, Miss V thinks as she crosses back to the school. The heat of the sun has already drawn moisture from her skin. She hopes, at least, that she's too young to perspire from anything else. No life-changes yet—it's still too early, if you please. Then, regaining the shade, she thinks again, war *is* bad. Her eyes sweep the playground. She cannot help it—she, a teacher, a *progressive* teacher in a *progressive* school, with *progressive* ways of teaching—*not* spelling, *not* counting, but *thinking*, supposedly, *nurturing*, she, above all, a woman bounding with a new life, cheerful, kindly-disposed to children, sees only preparation for war. Conspiracies, spies, parleys, allegiances, kings, knaves, princesses. Ants, the lot. She mystifies herself sometimes.

Her misgivings are related to her new vision of the world, she supposes. A shocking vision, all-encompassing, exceedingly vivid. Provoked, no doubt, by the reports of war on every continent. The front pages, the incessant, dreadful international news hours. Or worse, the local bulletins. Names, cities, atrocities, population movements, all in that blindness to self fault which is journalism's universal accent. She can't be bothered by it.

But of course she *is*, it has had a cumulative effect on her, building up in her unconscious until, in a moment of passivity, during a vacant tea for instance, or after reading poetry, she suddenly sees it all—thus. How to put it? The swarming world? Ugh. Red as a blood orange, with great, dark, thriving masses of people on its surface, encountering other masses, penetrating, dispersing, all without a single face. Or all with the same face. Heads bobbing along in waves, with no intelligence but that of the herd, which wants only to trample, press forward, angle and deflect this way and that, fill, empty, above all *cover*. And this, she thinks to herself, watching the unbidden spectacle, her vision, this is history. It's not something that can be written about. One has to *see* it, from above.

A stray cloud puts the children in shadow for a moment, as though some huge figure has stepped between the sun and the school and is contemplating scattering the colony with a stick.

A quarter-hour remains of lunch. Time enough for tea, she imagines, to cure her of this foolishness.

*

But she is actually quite pleased to host these visions. To look up and have it all sort of unexpectedly before you. Called forth by she does not know what. Life. She explains them to few people—in the last two years, only to J, who is rather impressed with them. I can't *believe* you weren't born here, J often says to V. Because your sense of this country is so profound! It is a mad place. Not all *bad*, but completely mad. And before J, no one for a long time—not her husband, not her family, only a childhood friend now and then. But then, in childhood they came like ribbons of dye, and in her articulation she often could only say, for instance, the birds, and so blue, so so blue, which usually caused confusion.

She told her father once. His response was the same as when he found she had spent the evening standing outside the orchestra hall, catching at the lifting strains inside. Namely, something like, worthless fantasies, rubbish. Won't have it in my house. Won't have you doing that. Don't tell me, I know where that comes from. High-falutin' bunk. Then he'd fetch his cigarettes, or go to the pub, to console himself for having a blooming aristocrat for a daughter.

So to live in that dungeon, in those Middle Ages, without learning or culture, barely even literacy, with these supreme visions! Cooking, cleaning, being lectured on the struggle of the workers, failing the Eleven Plus, ruining her life. Until now—beautiful Suffolk, divorce, this new life. And the exhilarating freedom of the visions, which are straight out of the hills. Of this J is sure, J being the type never to have visions, but having that other thing, so precious, that ability to parse, read, assess. I *know* French, J says, but *you* can pronounce it. That sums it up for V.

J wonders why it took V so long to admit to herself that she is intelligent after all. It must have been V's father. Typical working-class obsession with itself, says J. No admittance of anything different—life must be the Family, the Pub, the Forty Hour Week and May Day Off, the Drop your Aitch or Rot in 'Ell or Buckingham Palace, the Be Satisfied With Yer Bread. Boorish, says J. Bearish. Typical.

But now, in Suffolk, V thinks as she sips her tea, such space. No crowding tenements—the *grandeur* of her visions (thus J) spreading out over boundless tracts, pleasant secrets that make for quiet content, allow her to smile a bit to herself, for instance when someone has been rude, and think—Ah, but I have seen your head bobbing along with all the others. You too will pitch over the cliffs, and completely unawares.

She takes a last sip. The bell rings. Lunch is over, time for Maths. Miss V walks to her classroom with a particular phrase of J's ringing in her head.

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Their barbaric customs are their own disaster. This is what J says, what Miss V recalls as she walks to the classroom, of her father, of the British, of all the inhabitants of that depressing island. Miss V enters the classroom and finds the vision has passed. The children are there, fidgeting, children again. They quiet down a bit when they see her. She surveys them briefly and with a mischievous smile says Maths—Outdoors.

The children screech with delight, for it is one of Miss V's famous Outdoor Expeditions, which she is liable to spring on them at any moment and which, when they are inside the school, is the object of their most fervent passions and desires. To go outside again—just after lunch, so soon after lunch, once more than the rest of the school, to be *outside* again! They line up at the door, little well-dressed sparks, eager to pop back into the sunshine. An Outdoor Expedition—this time for arithmetic! Absolutely unheard of. Outdoor Expeditions are only for Natural Science, for twigs and leaves and drops of water to view under a microscope, or sometimes for Drama. But today addition and subtraction and multiplication—in the sun! This is nice, oh, very nice. Almost unbelievable—but there's Miss V, at the head of the line, leading them to the glorious outdoors, to a corner of the yard where the last blades of grass have been ground to dirt by their merciless energetic legs.

But look! Miss V takes from her pocket a tinfoil-wrapped chocolate, which can only mean one thing, and that's a Story Problem today. They are always so very difficult, sometimes impossible, though the stories are nice. Miss V, when she looks them up, though

she never lets on, usually has as much trouble with them as the children do. She always has the answer to the problem firmly pickled in her noggin by class time. Every few weeks, unpredictably, she walks into Maths class and says, now children put on your thinking caps, and produces the chocolates, which go to the winner, the person who solves the problem, which comes from Whittingham's Mathematical Puzzles and Brain Teasers for All Ages.

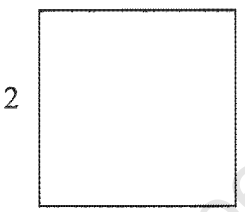
When the other teachers heard of her practice of putting the problems to the children, there were the usual fits of protest. But *must* you segregate them by sex, they asked, for on alternate weeks the problem was for the girls. She would reply with all the tenets of the new school—progressiveness, equality, *thinking*—and mixed in with all that, her own opinion, but disguised—besides, didn't we see the other month that study which showed that girls—she paused for emphasis—don't get to contribute as much?

Today it is the boys' turn. An unruly bunch. Now boys, she says, put on your thinking caps, and she arranges the class in a circle around the dirt and dust. She has been saving this problem for some time. It is rated Level Three, the highest level in the book. Adults only, one would have thought. But when she first saw it it tugged her memory for days until it came to her. It was a question from the Eleven Plus. It made her shudder to think of. The Eleven Plus. All that was wrong with the world. That horrible day, staring at this particular problem. It was raining, nothing unusual, but she had lost her slicker. Her father wouldn't buy her a new one until next winter, out of principle. You don't go around losing what I've damn well worked hard enough for. She arrived sodden, took a seat, dripped all over the desk, sneezed. The teacher—Mrs. Atkins, she still remembers the name—handed her the test with disapproval, but did not suggest she wipe the desk dry or offer to help. Miss V had to use her sleeve, which only spread the water around. Then—the test. Two horrible sections. Explain, Solve, Perform, Do, leaping out at her, the damp pages confused with diagrams and small writing. She didn't even complete one page. Time was up. She gave her test back to Mrs. Atkins, who received it with the same disapproval, downstaring with doom over her glasses. Two weeks later, you have failed the test, you can't go to public school, you can't go to Varsity. The perverse satisfaction of her father. Just as he predicted. Sewing and cleaning, he said. And so it was—after the last dank years

of school. Sewing and cleaning with her mother. Later working at the pub, taking beer to fat greasy men. Any spare time spent wandering the streets for a nice bench with a good view of a beautiful building, or perhaps, rarely, standing outside orchestra hall.

*

Miss V takes measurements, then draws a square in the dirt with a pointed stick and marks the drawing as Whittingham has marked it—



Then she says, now boys, and the class quiets down, for they enjoy her stories, if not her problems. Put on your thinking caps very tightly, because today a man is in very grave danger and only you can save him.

He lives alone on an island, far, far away, this poor shipwrecked man, where he has suffered, because the island is full of lions and bears and horrible wild dogs which are always chasing him to eat him up. (Here she makes as if to tickle one of the boys, and they all giggle with delight.)

But it is worse than that, for his clothing is beginning to fall apart and he has no ability to make fire. And winter is coming to this island, a very cold winter with nasty rains and sometimes even snow. It is like living in the icebox, and soon he will have no clothes and will have to run barefoot away from the lions and bears and climb cold, icy trees to escape from the wild dogs. And in winter his only food will run out, which is turnips, because turnips stop growing when it is cold, and you can't dig in the ground for them

anyway because it's frozen, hard as stone. He'll have to eat old dried-up turnips which he's saved.

So this man will be in a very sad state soon, shivering all the time and always hungry, and—who knows but that a lion might be hiding behind that next tree, for lions get hungry in winter too, and are especially fierce when they're hungry. Or what if over that next hill there is a pack of wild dogs? Trotting along until they scent him and look up and see him peeking over the hill and then rush at him, barking with their great fangs, and he has to run and sit with his bare bottom on a tree branch, which is cold as milk, until they go away.

But it's worse than *that*. Because a tribe of cannibals sails to the island each week. Each week they throw a dreadful party and eat their awful, horrible lunch. And they have seen his footprints! They know he's there and they want to eat him up. This is terrible! But it gets even *worse* because they don't want to eat him in the normal way which cannibals eat people, but in a much more wicked way, which will cause him all sorts of trouble.

And here she looks at the children and finds that they are all looking at her—well, not all of them, some boys at the back are not paying attention, but *they* don't ever pay attention, so she judges she has most of them imagining now, and imagining is the next step to thinking, so she begins again, very carefully, and says in a low voice, normal cannibals just put you in a pot and boil you up until you're done. But these cannibals are very, very clever. They know the part of your brain which, if you didn't have it, you'd be a cannibal too.

*

They don't eat you up, says Miss V, they make you one of them, and pretty soon after that you have to eat someone else's brains too. But they like to play with their victims before they eat their brains, and so they have left behind a note which has this problem written on it, and the message that if he can solve they won't eat him, in fact they'll take him wherever in the world he wishes to go. So here's the question. Play close attention because you could save the poor man from a horrible fate, and help him get home. Look at the square. It is *four*

square units in area. Can you make a square *double* in size to the square in the dirt, that is, a square *eight* square units in area?

She watches the children carefully. Do any of these well-fed little bodies have that something which she lacked? So many years ago this very maths problem, she was positive, had caused her eyes to smart and tear and her mind to retreat in shock and misery. She had turned the page, searching for *any* question which was even vaguely familiar, only to find she had reached the end of the test, and that she had written doubtful results for less than a quarter of the ridiculous questions, which mocked her, cavilling from the page with the smug of certainty of an adult. There *is* an answer, it's rather obvious, can't this girl find it? She thinks of those who had marked the test. It was cold that day, raining. Her hands shook. Her penmanship looped and scrawled into disaster. They would have dismissed her test halfway through marking it. Three boxes on the marker's desk. Achievement, Pass, Fail. Hers in the last box. No public school for this girl, not even college-level aptitude shown. Forget Varsity. Put her in the last box. In the last box are the things of her future life. A few more years of school, waitressing, a two-roomed flat with crumbling steps and three cackling flat mates, rain-soaked nights outside the orchestra hall, drink from the pub in her churning stomach, until quite by accident someone invites her into the hall, a magnanimous man from the Abroad who's sorry, but it's the second time he's seen her leaning against the concrete of the dirty building, staring at the hearth-glow of the chandeliers inside, a man whom she marries, a man who takes her Away, a foolish man, foolish owner of a tobacco plantation, really a polluted scrap of land near a drab city where the crops grow stunted and the workers show no enthusiasm and the debts run higher, until the man becomes like the workers, given to drink, and turns into a man whom even she, failer of the Eleven Plus, can divorce, a man of whom she has seen nothing since she moved even farther away, and found her home in these hills.

The boys move in closer, circling the square in the dust, asking one another a few tentative questions. Of the boys she thinks two might be capable of solving the problem. If it was the girls's turn she would say, perhaps, three. The girls are quite bright this year, unusually quick. Already the hierarchy has developed. One of the two boys has taken

control. The others seem to approve of what he's saying and cluster about him, behind him, as if to appreciate his view. What he says makes sense they say. The leader grows in confidence. A few hesitate—the square the leader has proposed might be too large. Indeed, some seem to agree with him, but yet some imagine the square he has proposed is too large. Miss V's other boy prodigy is in the group of doubters. It is, she sees with no great surprise, a group comprised mostly of that type of—well, the darker type—which she has not yet become comfortable with. Or comfortable is not the word. It is more like satisfied. Yes, she is not yet satisfied with these people, with her ability to be sociable with them. They seem secretive. Their smile seems not so much happy as sly, and perhaps stems from their astonishing facility with language, which they braid and pull into new meanings when they talk among themselves, and which threatens Miss V with utter incomprehensibility, with a feeling of helplessness, or blindness, or of being surrounded. She can never tell what to expect from them until she hears them speak. In the moments before nuances of tone become apparent she experiences doubt about whether she will shortly encounter empathy or self-confident aloofness. The latter is the only feeling in the whole of Suffolk which leaves her uneasy.

It appears that the children have reached consensus. Try the would-be leader's idea. Test it. But yet Miss V senses hesitation, concern. The square might be too large.

J, whose gift is predicting the conduct of people in small towns, would have foreseen this. Groups have their own rhythms down here, she told V once. It usually runs—a surprising predicament, a confident proposal, expectations of assent, arguments and cautions, grave misunderstandings, looks of worry, shrugging consent. To which Miss V replied—you mean, sort of, how do you do? will you come sit by me? where is your family? what do you do? are you married? And J says that's brilliant V! Poetry!

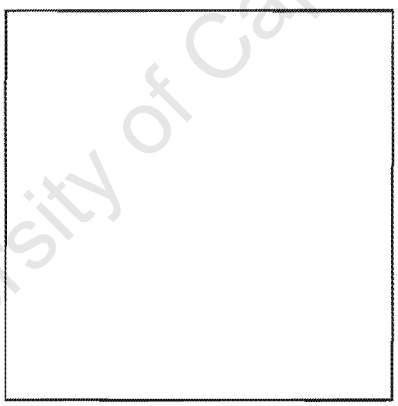
And so it goes. Now the leader of the doubters has shrugged, smiled his opaque, glittering smile so curious among his kind, spoken rapidly in ungraspable slang and then, laughing, given his consent.

The other boy, victorious, asks Miss V for her stick. Such confidence! Could he really have solved the problem? The insecurity of her school days creeps back and she

thinks—what if, after all, she *was* substandard? What if the Eleven Plus—Oh! that test!—had justly separated her from the smarter ones? If this boy can solve the problem, then he deserves to be one of the future's custodians. He is bright, it is true, brighter than she had been. And so what business has she of teaching him? What if one of the other teachers discovered her secret—saw through her act? She would not go back to England. This she was resolved. But they could force her back. They could put her back into that box for failures. They would see it only as just. Someone has to serve beer to the working men. They would send her back, thinking it only natural, suited to the limits of her nature, those dank, gloomy streets, the stinking air.

No. There was J. J would not let it happen.

She looks at what the boy has drawn.



4

A square four units on a side! Miss V flushes, triumphant. He'd got it wrong, thank goodness—terrible thing to say, but he'd got it wrong. What an absurd task to ask of a child. Teach us rather how to count and spell!

She speaks kindly, well, that's very close, but who can tell me what four times four is?

The forest of hands erects itself. She calls on a girl.

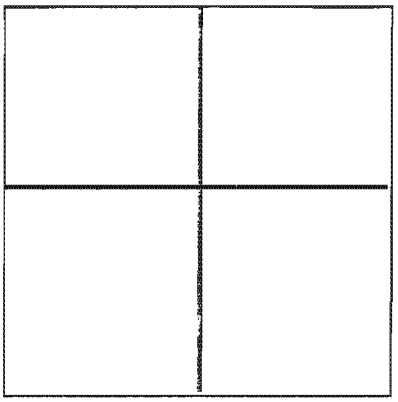
Sixteen.

Very good. Then, turning to the leader of the boys, can you see now that you have drawn a square that is actually four times as large as the one we want?

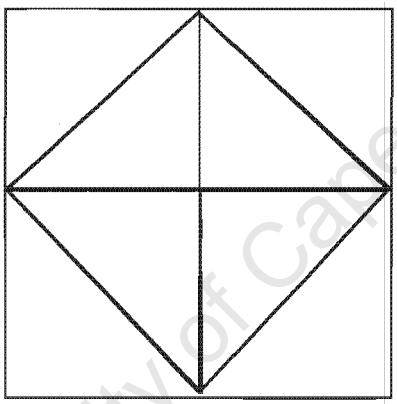
The boy, staring not so much at his square as at his feet, mutters. Yes.

So, says Miss V, what are we going to do? You see how clever these cannibals are. They gave the poor shipwrecked man a *very* tricky problem here, because they *very* much want to eat his brains up. So now who, boys, can make me a square twice as big as the first one?

A horrible, improbable thing follows. The boys hold further conference. Miss V surreptitiously watches the *other* boy, who she thinks just might get it, but *fervently* hopes not. The mutterings are of the stymied, confounded sort, with important-sounding superfluous questions which are put down immediately with scorn, as, what about three? No, no that would make nine. Oh. Are you sure? What's three times three? Oh. And she is just about to make a helpful suggestion, which Whittingham also makes in his book, that is—if we can't think of one twice as large as the first square, what if we make one half as large as the second square?—which just might take one of the two clever boys to the answer, when out of absolutely nowhere (later she thinks he must have come from the back of the crowd of children, had been there all the time—she simply hadn't noticed him, being preoccupied with the success or failure of the other boy—for how else could he have known the problem's terms, much less the situation in the first place?) the darkest, ugliest child she has ever laid eyes on (she tells J that his *face*—it was like a bud, so dense, everything falling in on itself, and the poor boy was blacker than anything she had ever seen, he was positively *blue*) appears at her side with a stick (at first she thought he was going to strike her, or one of the children) and walks with concentration like a thundercloud on his face to the larger square, where to everyone's astonishment he draws, first, two intersecting lines—



And then, with the same sharp strokes of absolute *certainty*, of knowing nothing else in the world but this, he draws four more lines—



Which is of course the answer to the problem. The diamond, a square, is eight square units in area.

Miss V advances on the child, perhaps too eagerly, perhaps with the shock showing too evidently on her face, or perhaps it's outrage at this overthrowing which the child has performed, outrage which her face expresses, for the child starts, stares wildly at her and runs off, but not before she identifies it by the smell it exudes, which is the reek of the street, and by the clothes it wears, stained rags, nor before she sees the grime on its cheeks and the bits of paper in its tangled hair.

She calls out, and even gives chase for a few steps, but stops, conscious of her audience, which is as confused as she is, and probably more outraged, though they don't understand what the boy has done. Besides, never has a child run so fast. She would not

catch him—nor would any of the boys in her class, though they are undoubtedly better fed and rested.

But she must know. *How?* She can't help herself. Turbulent thoughts distress her. Was it a plan? Had this child been following her? Been in her house, rifled through her desk, seen the Whittingham book? Was he sent by someone? An enemy, unknown? Briefly, treacherously, she thinks of J. How could the boy have known?

So without shame she runs after him again. The children, she is sure, are aghast. They will tell their mothers. She rounds the corner of the school—the boy is at the far end of the yard. How could he know? She shouts at him. His figure is obscured by the playset. But she hears something, a response, something which makes her shudder, she can't say why to think of, something which she isn't sure she even heard correctly, or at all, for it is almost more absurd than the child itself, but nonetheless the high-pitched voice floats in her memory with resounding clarity, it visits her dreams, like a wandering ghost, with the boy's gruesome face, it comes to her suddenly in the middle of the day, unbidden. Behind it lies a vast, tumultuous, rollicking meaning, she is positive—something on the order of the ocean, or of the spinning globe—something which may yet one day visit her as a vision, but for now remains trapped, caged inside the tremulous, shaking voice of that little boy who, she could swear, answered her question as he disappeared (when her sight line is restored the boy is gone—there is just the yard and the fence enclosing it, nothing more), shouting unfathomably, preposterously as he melted into the air—I remembered it!

*

The day is ruined. She wanders back to the children, some of whom are crying at the shock, and herds them into the schoolhouse. There are two more classes left. Reading and Crafts. She copes, dividing herself into two people, one who can teach Reading, one who can, sheltered from the elements of the school, explore the dizzying consequences of the afternoon, tentatively establish the degree of damage to her psychic foundations, clear her thoughts of the bracken of false logic, such as, if the mothers hear of my chasing after street

children then they will find out the truth about J, or if the child remembered—*remembered*—the answer, then cities will continue to be erected, populations displaced, women raped, children starved.

She is much more calm at the end of the schoolday. The rain that threatened earlier begins to fall half an hour into the final class, and this keeps the children quiet after school, huddled supervised in the hallway as if in some queue, waiting for their parents, who come earlier than usual on rainy days.

She sits at her desk and thinks. Perhaps J will come. She needs J now more than ever. J often comes on rainy days. J will help her find reasons for the child, will take her into town for a milkshake, will see she has been upset, will do something about it.

But even now she knows that she mustn't be too shocked. For since she set foot in this country—no. Since she moved away from that wretched tobacco farm, she has experienced, well, things she could never have imagined. Things sort of everywhere down South, if you looked for them, if you knew what to look for. Things her father never heard of, probably. And this boy, maybe, is one of these things. And maybe she will see more of it now, as she has with other things, and maybe will be less perplexed down the years. But still she needs J, who has always lived here, to help her thresh it out. And now she hears loud steps in the hall, trod in a certain way, and she smiles and thinks I'm going to be all right, for she's certain that it's J, and she fingers her gold chain, bought just last week, one of the less expensive chains, to be sure, but invaluable, because it is a symbol, because J wears one as well, because they pooled their money and bought two chains at a discount, exactly the same, and just as she fingers hers, the sounds in the hall come to a halt, and she senses something, perhaps warm, perhaps secret, perhaps loving, and perhaps all the uncertainties are dispelled now. She turns around—and there is J, with the kindest of faces, standing in the doorway, a *vision*, a perfect *vision*.

Secondo

Music music music for the next not ten not twenty but yes THIRTY minutes un-un-un-interrupted says the radio. And it all begins with this little jig from the fab four going all the way back to sixty-nine.

Frik says the radio plays shit these days *lift your gaze and thrust it out into the middle of the morning street, clean sunshine pooling into shoes, filtering through skirts, pants, shirts, hats, the people inside them only half-real at this hour, half-transparent, unheavy, their clothes on a line walking about on the sidewalks, crossing the wide street, straight, purposeful half-people, they'll soon disappear into the bank into the P.O. into Decorum, the copy place, all along the street they'll be pushing into the walls, melding with the brick, and when noon comes around they'll come out solid, real people, heavy, fleshy people, women's lunchtime calves never do look as good as in the fresh morning. Coming over here for lunch, see what have I got today? I got sandwiches with roast beef, all kinds of sandwiches, howcome they don't come for breakfast if they like it for lunch. All the trends, they told me. Quick money. Quick easy packaged breakfast foods. Damn I knew I should never have given that kid food.*

Yup says Bobby. They've lost *today it will be talk about the radio.*

I mean this morning last year we'd get news, and then talk. It's what people want in the mornings, to hear the mayor taking calls.

Too local Frik.

Well you know what I think the tourists can do.

They've got the money.

We've got a notion that they like *this is how it's going to be, neverending, shameful* at eight a.m. Tell me what tourist is over there drinking coffee in Decorum for the music right now. Which one.

They've lost touch for sure.

Friendly radio my ass. Music is the same as my beer, I only start it after work.

Good one, Frik.

The *will rest for a moment* now two men stare into the street. Frik leans on his elbows, which *weary of this life, I am cornered, a* counter over which he serves his food. Bobby *take no satisfaction from* the sidewalk on a stool that Frik produces for him each morning. Near Bobby a sandwich board reads NEW—BREAKFAST BITES—BEFORE WORK. Bobby and the sandwich board obstruct the steady foot traffic, which diverts in a curve to the edge of the sidewalk, then diffuses. No one steps up to Frik's counter.

What am I going to do about this now says Frik.

Bobby doesn't reply *you want to know what you do you just go on ignoring him like this, don't look at him don't talk to him, he's a burden to you, I say, you can't deal with every single other person's trouble in the world, not until you sell more breakfast bites at least, haw.*

This is the third morning in a row says Frik to Secondo who *when I tell my husband what I saw today oh my look at that did you ever* to the side of Frik's counter in the wake of the pedestrians.

Please says Secondo. Then *most days I'm reliable* I'm hungry.

Frik resumes gazing with Bobby into the *place where he comes from coughed him up, indigestible I reckon like one of Frik's breakfast bites, haw, oh no, he's not going anywhere, only thing to do is wear him down say no don't say when business picks up no, no, just no don't let him in not even a toe in the doorway, because you know the saying about the*

morning street. A man and a woman are standing directly across, on the opposite sidewalk. Bobby and Frik study *what's this now.* The man and woman kiss lightly *like china dolls before work but at lunchtime standing at my counter on two sticks of dead meat in pointy shoes* walk off in opposite directions. Frik and Bobby stare at the wall which the couple has unscrolled, the pearly granite of the P.O.

Bobby draws *my turn to* look kid he says why don't you just go on. You're not getting *if this bastard what's the word toward me I'm liable to do* anything today ok. Frik here's not a national governmental whatsit he's trying to run a business *an ideal like an ideal human being or vice versa. You must be sound, things must be sound, free from disturbance the officer was right about that, and society will emulate* Frik muses wistfully over the street. Secondo stays put. Bobby stares did you hear what I said go on. Secondo *my place is the place where Bobby gets his morning stool, an inexplicable attraction to this stool the axis apparently of Bobby's morning, don't have to worry only when Bobby stands up do you have to worry which he is slow to do and meanwhile I have regularly proven myself with either a shrug or a sigh, so playing the odds* GO ON he says much louder.

Bobby appeals to Frik with a look of *I'll tell you what to do, force my hand, steady pressure, nothing else important now no thinking what next don't betray yourself the bookshop not Decorum not the museum not that lady getting out of her car though she does look promising just look away now in the peripheral, just stare at the tree and remember the last thing you want in this world is food, just sit there* Frik sighs *success* and leans farther out. He *no I'll hold out, expand the possibilities here, amuse myself* Secondo. Why can't you find a job. Do you know what it means to have a job. It means you buy food from me *as the number of possibilities grows you need to start inquiring of your resolve* buy. Buy. Buy. Buy. You give me money I give you food. You're healthy why don't you go work on a farm and then come back and I'll give you food *abandoning it because the grand potential is*

never exhausted, and if you keep standing there my options are the radio *to squat in corners and to gibber, to eat the air as rust an apple* a new song *a steady uncorrupted sequence of clear tones.* Secondo *count to ten, boy, in scenarios of brinkmanship* his eyes *look at the concrete remember the last thing you want* find the spot between the sandwich board and Bobby's feet. Frik sights *success* mutters what the hell. He disappears from his window-counter.

Jesus says Bobby.

Frik reappears with two breakfast bites in a paper packet. Grease has already stained the packet from within.

Here *I've got twenty more I'm going to throw away anyway but if you pick up anything today it all says the same. Convenience convenience convenience. Sure. Dick Doolittle drives profits twenty percent with instant whatever, for years now, and when I get into it, a slump, thump, Breakfast Bites down the drain. Sure, before work, that's it, the profits the crowds the snack angle too. Sell three of the damn things a day and I can hardly give the rest away to charity cases. I've been Jewd or Hindood take your pick. So go ahead eat it all up I've certainly had my fill. Convenience will suit you just fine. Only* only if you come back tomorrow, four days in a row I can't be expected to do, I'll pretend you weren't even born. He reaches down with the packet. Secondo steps forward *like a rabbit* reaches up *born perfect coming out of mother immutable, flowering out of all the fluid already a flower, ready for tasks, for the task of being perfect to mother, infecting her with perfection, she infecting the* thank you.

It's all right but remember about tomorrow. Don't push me *on the other hand what the hell to do about tomorrow's twenty-five breakfast bites perhaps I am cut out for charity and nuns and social workers probably don't lie as much as businessmen.*

Bobby sits in silence on the stool, his face *contempt, contempt is the word the little*

shit is treating me with, contempt.

Secondo smiles at the *free now till noon.*

Thanks, eh?

Frik snorts.

Secondo saunters past *justified because the pecking order must* Bobby, crinkling the packet *what do they say on tv they say he's giving it how to me* Bobby shifts *and the stool is to Bobby as the axis to the Earth* Frik it's your show I guess.

It's not like I open early for any of these people says Frik with a wide gesture.

Secondo walks *either I must let go of her hand or we both must jump into the street better to be seen pulling her than pushing I guess perhaps she'll like me more for it a show of need of togetherness*

the bank opens in five oh what next in our town really

oh shame

the psalms only, yes, yes, put a sort of social twist on the words, obligations, as wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way, that'll do, because how can, for instance, without our help, perhaps, though I should first consult

I must speak to that man it only encourages

give her a look wait for her eyes she'll have to look up soon

mm mm mm nice ass keep walking that's it, whoops, Jesus

papa captain please don't covet after my humble items, no leave that alone now, that's my piece thankyou, papa captain I says, I says I see you my friends. I says no it's all knowhatImean, we're just tryin' to make a livin' knowhatImean, no that's also mine, don't covet, my humble wares, they said that's a fine hat we all laughed

what are you doing

I've never seen

lift her arm up no pull her close move her closer to the wall

where do

now my stove's coal-burning, I've got a trough full of shiny black coal out there in the backyard and I tell you that coal is kitchen clean compared

He saunters up Church Street, away from the cathedral, which if he looked back would lean greedily over the town, like a bully all wound up inside, its clockface fat and jowlish, a smirking *red* moon, the steeple blazing with the early sun *the grass in the park is dry by now, we'll expect him there but don't forget first the corner of Church and Snowden, that white wall, waiting to see if anyone can be conned, nab him there* cautiously turns the corner into Snowden, sits against the wall and looks into his packet *the sun tolerable-pleasant an hour after sunrise* food, greasy and warm, chews loudly and the sound mixes with the morning sounds *are closer to the truth, what can be said about the noises of footsteps, engines, breezes, newspapers, except that they are the noises of footsteps, engines, breezes, newspapers, while on the other hand* he finishes, closes his eyes, rests his forehead on his knees which *under many circumstances it is good to appear small.* Last night he did not sleep *dirt is best, stays warm long, not as hard as pavement, cardboard on dirt, where the wind doesn't blow, where you can shelter your face, else nightmares. Lie down in your place, your knees touch your chest, on warmer nights straight legs are ok. Then pretend nothing. Sleep needs your good word, eyes closed, not squeezed. An image is acceptable, but do not tell yourself that it is sleep, that it must be sleep. Sleep during the day is foolish* hears Jackie's voice inside the building *on the other hand the human voice is the finest tool of prevarication* coming out through the window above his head.

Mornings mornings mornings.

Howayou.

Oh breathing in breathing out.

Well you're doing at least as well as the other half.

Listen, the reason I'm late, I was at the mechanic's after breakfast, I've been there two hours, can you imagine.

How awful.

Yes. So—.

It's fine, I understand one hundred percent.

So what needs to—.

Oh, there, at the door for you *malingerer.*

Jackie moves through the shop to the door, says hello there, have you come to wash my car for me.

Yes.

Good good, Deb I'll be back.

No, no, take your time.

She leads the way to her car. Now I've just had it at the mechanic's so please be careful. Here is a bucket, here is a bottle of water, here is soap, here is a rag and a towel? Ok, stand outside like before when you're done ok? See you soon.

Jackie that's wonderful.

Well my car does need it and you can tell he's well sort of.

Touched.

Yes. Or no. I think he just needs a home.

Jackie this sounds terrible but did you park.

Yes, yes over on High Street.

Thanks. Mornings mornings how can I help.

Can I have a look around.

Yes you do what you like.

Secondo *Jackie, you're a dependable person but it is important to remember that you are not a mother after all. You act like one, and after a while you will snap. He is lucky, one golden loving moment from you a week. Imagine now Jackie if you had to plan three, four times a week. It will last about so long and then where will he* washes *it's true, is only expressed in public. You can't be an individual by yourself. The basis of individuality is difference from others. Take two women, each has a husband. One of the women desperately wants to leave her husband and her son. The other wants nothing more than a happy family. If in other respects the women are identical, and the one with the evil desires conceals them perfectly from others, so that no one suspects, and never acts on her desires, tell me how these two separate women are to be judged. Only when a person's deeds* Jackie's car *true individuality said to be at work.*

He places the rags and soap in the bucket and walks back to Pack 'n Send. He stands in the doorway. The shop is busy.

Two five nine nine I thought it was seven hundred.

You buy cash then it's that price, with the contract it's seven hundred.

Nice air con.

You think so come back at noon it's terrible.

Western Union don't charge anything to receive money all the charges are prepaid.

How much how much.

The rate is six nine two seven five eight six.

Jonathan handed the query form into the Post Office, to the postmaster, but he then needs to pass it on to central mail, Perry it could take up to six months, yes it's unfair and I agree with you but yes his name's—yes. Yes. Yes.

Ok hang on look in the book when in doubt the book tells all.

Just further up the road past the cafe they'll cash that.

Ok. Ok. Yes. Have a good day *furious you can see it in his eyes hear it in his voice and then I walk out the door and what do I see? I am insulted twice, by bigotry first and the living example of* can you believe that, asking for the exchange rate. Ridiculous.

Guess what Perry's doing this afternoon. He's going to visit the postman.

Jackie. At the door. Ha-lo. Nathan found his marbles yet.

It's a drama, a real drama.

Hello there, have you finished?

Yes.

Good. I'll take those. Now let me get you a paperclip. Jackie the DOOR.

But Jackie walks back to the far counter, where two women attend to two men. Through the open door *just watch, nothing serious, what's over there to take anyway, just cards, the welcome mat but why on Earth would he want that, the impact on business is, oh, who knows, who can know what people think, just watch* enters a back room, reappears quickly with something in her hand. She murmurs to the two women behind the counter, starts for the door, but suddenly halts as if *useless useless I know it is but even if it is nothing at least it's something, it means to him that I am trying, I have compassion, a token of compassion, it could be a toy, but it might send a message apart from what it actually is, to show I know he needs, that I'm here* and dips her fingers into a basket on the counter. Then she walks to the door.

Here you go. She places a bill into Secondo's hands. And this. She hands him a small plastic object. YOUR OWN MAGNETIC BOOKMARK.

Jackie leans close. Secondo closes his eyes and draws air through his nose. I've got to go now or those women will start to mutter. I'm sure my car is very clean. Thanks, eh? Ok, take care, I'll have another job for you next week, come and see me then, ok? By-ee *my heart, is it better off or worse.*

Secondo pockets the money. The park *the only good gift is a whore's gift, my giving has no place, whore whore, oh I feel dirty* to the enfolding warmth of the grass. He lies on his back. His knees, propped up, loll and splay. He could almost fall asleep, a warm mid-morning nap after food and work, but the officer after all forbade him to *always move about, vigilance against not always moving about, until sundown, and, listen, walk with purpose boy, you are going over there to do that one specific thing, nothing on your mind but that one particular* the officer said, and handed him a bottle of aspirin *ten to one against anyone caring*. A nasty knock on your ankle. Then he said wait over there at that bus stop. After work they'll pick you up *but listen I must never pick you up again*. Hey, he said, hey. Do you *hurt more than I thought or just* between waiting and loitering. Waiting is sitting on that bench over there until they pick you up. Loitering's making trouble, don't let me catch you. Take two of these every *two things which I am sure of aspirin never killed anybody and this boy is not going home to* and wait on that bench. *It is so easy to make the jump. He will heed his instincts, they will give him plenty of help at first. And number one on the list of things he will learn is who is his enemy. Not just me. A person like him. Stay away from such a person. There is the matter of his soul. Regarding the people in his position in society have you ever come across a healthy soul His newfound situation will damage it extensively. His own sudden kind is what will get him in the end. Not me. His only hope to avoid destruction* will stay here for some minutes more however. The park is empty except for one other, a small white-haired lady sitting on a far bench. She is upside-down, a white blotch sticking to a vast green ceiling of turf. The turf, the wide circle of trees, the entire park, take their cue from the beneficent sunshine and encourage lassitude. The woman may be thinking the same thing as the *it is also good to acknowledge that motivation is directly proportional to distance, and therefore to* the moment *if you can make it seem so*. He cannot tell where she is looking, but perhaps it is not at *I must admit I can't be more pleased than*

with that line of trees, each one reminds me of a painting, each leaf a bright green painted leaf or *come here my little one come here don't be* she may even be preparing *the flock will soon assemble, my own noble parliament and oh! how grave shall our decision-making be, and my! how we shall test today our character—whether the strong shall be allowed to dominate the weak, indeed a momentous day is at* but *to give someone an excuse is to put yourself at their mercy so* he rolls over and rises *horrors! a slouching rough something encroaching upon our peace. He will tear us apart, scatter us to the four winds, we must be brave* and thinks of the school *another space to occupy should always be* should be recess at the school and perhaps the teacher will lead out her class again. He walks across *thither direct your steps, O beast, O son of Cain, or was it Cain, what was that riddle about Jews not being able to abide* and hopes that the schoolyard *is the one thing you can know, only before that one judge, your own all-knowing self* will be full.

It is full, he can hear as he approaches. The school is around the corner and up the block but the voices of the children *if birds nest in the rafters from them will drop lice. Not uninteresting creatures but they are best kept away from, in fact why allow even the possibility, yet you open your stable doors wide and seek birds out, beckon them over, provide nesting hay and* he stops at the tree *they charged up out of the surf on their horses! Then they returned for round after round and dragged the half-drowned to shore. Full ninety seven people survived and several boxes came in on their own undamaged. In one of these a cache of acorns. The acorns travelled with them, as sacred as memories of home. To commemorate, they planted, but what they could have hoped for only fearfully, aside from slender saplings, was the second growth, all around this tree these historic buildings, the makings of a town, a church, the school over there, the government houses. The descendants of the navigators steered and tacked in these streets this tree their stars these buildings their* climbs the tree, coming to rest upon two close, thick branches, where he can cross his legs

and lean back against the trunk. He can see most of the schoolyard from here, though some areas are framed out of his vision by foliage. The school itself hides a back lot, from which children regularly appear, running at full speed. The main schoolyard is clamorous. Children circulate from swings and the jungle gym and the sand box to peripheral games, jump rope, wrestling, tag, and back to the hubs again without apparent design. Boys, in a group, hurl themselves against the mesh fence that surrounds the school, testing its resilience. There are numerous fights and persecutions. A girl demonstrates how shrilly she can scream to other, admiring girls. Secondo sits in the tree among the reddening leaves *we cry for our father and mother, we imagine that we are running to them, bumping strange things in the dark, which will turn out in later years to be lamps and ottomans and chairs, or we dream we have stumbled on the stairs, or are powerless on tiles, until at last they come to the crib. Then we are lifted above all danger and carried close by father or mother until at last we are safe beneath the thick blankets, between warm father and mother. We don't remember the horror of the crib, because it no longer exists. Nor do father and mother. Simple safety alone is real, the only true happiness, the reason that we curve our beautiful lips into a smile, the awesome fulfillment of safety. It is the next day that we are taken to see the kittens. Their plaintive speech calls to us. Father holds us high above, then lowers us until our face brushes a kitten's tail. We are weightless. We seem to float in tiny cries and the softest substance we have ever touched, as if we were suspended in a breeze. We know very little of the world. But the ganglions inside us, thickening, register wonder, and it is accompanied by father's laugh. Not much later, when a good pile of the objects that swirl around our parents have snagged in our own minds, and we have tried our hand at commanding them around ourselves, then we are told of the angels for the first time. This new knowledge troubles us very much. For our senses grow more acquisitive by the day. And each new acquaintance carves a runnel of delight in our memory. There we have taken hold of our father's hat.*

Smooth and thick, it betokens his wide hands, and we clench it tight, awash with happiness that it has met our expectations. Here we know that it is suppertime, for the same familiar smell manifests in our noses. The sound of cars, swift, rushing, has become a sound of life. Wherever we gaze a new sight trailblazes in our mind and keeps us wide-eyed. On the television screen, for instance, we take in the most transfixing images. Is it possible to forget that flickering screen? No. It compels us so. We revolve in the flat plane of our yard, find a coin in grass, crouch drooling gobs of spit on ants, sit on our bed and gaze at all our room's possessions, and every moment our imagination closes in, as if upon a window, on things that we know like we know ourselves. But no window opens on to angels. They are from Heaven. We cannot see them. Yet they are the reassurance we are offered at night. The angels will protect us from the evils of the dark, we are told. We fret. Invisible, soundless, intangible things are not real. But how can something that brought us into the world, we are asked, allow us to come to harm? Angels brought us here? We remain doubtful. Close your eyes, we're told. We see our father and mother. You'll know they're there, we're told, you see them in your imagination, you'll be with them in your dreams. They love you. They let you know this when they speak, but they speak with other voices, you must listen carefully. And our minds cast tentatively about. We sleep and hope.

The outside world becomes continuous with the world at home. But we act differently out of doors. It is as if a small voice directs us, tells us instantly whether we are right or wrong. It might emanate from our parents, generated perhaps by their sudden orientations. But, sometimes, a shopkeeper will bend over us and pat us on the head and give us a sweet and then we think we hear something too. Or, sometimes, playing in the yard, people pass by, and we hear steady discrimination, yes, yes, no, yes, no no not ever. On Sundays there is church. The voices hush. We are taken to a room apart. Each week we must learn a sentence from the Sermon. It becomes our code, our conspiracy, and we whisper it rapidly to

one another, when the adult's out of the room, everyone pray until I get back, and we giggle what shall we eat what shall we eat what shall we eat. An afternoon not long after this we are out in the yard to say goodbye, and mother hoists us up as the car pulls out. We watch with little interest. But mother begins to bounce us up and down, and turns us toward father's face in the receding window. Bye-bye, mother says softly. Bye-bye. She sounds like a baby. How like the ensuing seizure is to shitting and pissing! Something in us breaks and we are flooded as our mother holds us. We understand, in that spasm, two things. Happiness is the same as relief, and the voices we've been hearing, that tell us how to behave, are the voices of the angels. Now we understand.

Life, apparently, is a plan. We get to know it better and better. During the day we learn and play, and our angels gossip as we talk of sexual parts, the new toys we have acquired. A whole symphony of angels thrills us, and we crow and crow. The angels emanate from all quarters. Often when we are alone they sound just one note at a time, and we are coming alive to the great spectrum of subtlety in the tones. We observe people shuffling down our street, or beyond the fence at school. We dream of demons in the trees. The angels soothe us. These things don't really form any part of the plan until the bell rings and recess is over. The students line up along the wall of the school, then file inside. The schoolyard seems almost frozen in its new stillness. Secondo waits for more stately events to proceed. Perhaps the woman will lead her class outside again. They will gather around where she stops. A disquisition will follow. He has dreamt that someday he will have the courage to abandon the tree, creep to a bush which grows on either side of the schoolyard fence, and listen with better *we hardly hear a word he says*. She will challenge the students with a problem that requires *but it is in our best interests to play dumb* until the next bell. Secondo has noticed a breach, perhaps made by a dog, in the earth under the fence at a far corner of the schoolyard. He dreams of crawling through this breach and into the atmosphere

of the woman's academy. He has dreamt that she would allow him to join. It would not be long before *this boy has done this boy wrong I must take him at once to see* her voice soft and equitable. He has caught her looking off from the children from time to time, as if observing something out of everyone else's sight. She is privy to *glimpses of truth than most.* But the academy does not manifest today. Secondo descends from the tree. With the second school bell, the bell of the distant church also *my unwounded hands, my beatific countenance* eleven o'clock. An hour before noon. But *reiterate, you can manufacture luck. Only push* Secondo walks off without haste

what are you doing in here hey Hey I said this house must be clean everyday I walk in the front door what do I see socks fucking toys c'mere c'mere Come Here

are there damp unclean corners, stagnant wells of pain in which to pitch a child

The scientist, as Secondo suspected, has come out for the day. He crouches on all fours in his yard, bending close to the dirt and watching the activity there with great interest. Secondo stops on the walk that leads to the house. The scientist scuttles to the far end of the yard, his nose close to the dirt, squints for a moment, and hurries back to his original position. Secondo cannot hear what he is muttering *resembles nothing less.* The scientist is observing *miraculous* ants. The dilapidated house and worn yard have become their home. Thick arteries of ants pulse over the floors, the walls. Their small outposts dot the straggly grass. The scientist holds very still. He throws a sudden look at his watch, then resumes his breathless attitude. Secondo *a man's giving is his most capricious, most unfathomable, O you must* waits. Presently the scientist yelps with satisfaction and stands *wonderfully* and sees Secondo.

Hello, how'you?

What do you want.

The cardinal rule is never to ask Secondo down.

No, no says the scientist, striding down a plank of wood in his yard, this time I truly want to understand what is it exactly that you *again and again my belief is confirmed that there is no life so pure as an ant's. They have undone me. I would give much to strengthen this analogy with a few hours of simple research, but I know, I know I would be further undone. That does not mean I cannot plan, indulge myself with fantasy, even develop tools for testing. Yes, it would be the same as with my ants* oh you thought maybe I could give you some lunch did *the less experience the* he looks down upon Secondo, red in the face *in theory, yes, but firstly not ever would I myself, you see, the object of the experiment is to pin down the true source and status of the twitch and as far as controls are concerned* your position is very simple. You want food. Having procured it from me on more than one occasion you've discovered, or you think you've discovered, a dependable source, a source with high probability of success, I know how it works. But my position is rather more *and also as someone who will always talk and talking leaves open the possibility for* just stop what I'm doing these observations require timing, precision, volume. I'm trying to explain my point of view so you know why I can't have you coming *yes they have undone me, ants. Stimulus, response, or lack of response, that's all, a binary string, one stimulus produces a zero one a one, no variation and each individual the same exact rigid being. And yet it lives! It thrives! The temperature of the hive is one degree higher than that of humans. So which is more mysterious* so I can't help you, no.

But—.

Don't try me now I am ready to *strict control of all variables but one. Each limb, then, fixed immobile, and of course there must not be any possibility that the subject might influence conditions with speech. No the subject must just accept what is to happen and in the end the subject's own enlightenment will be its own* anger. Do you understand? Anger!

Please.

This conversation is finished I'm sorry *I'll say, yes, quiet and still, and this is where heart rate and blood pressure might be monitored for interest's sake while I delicately, oh so delicately, until the subject cannot withhold and then—one. Only a single difference will produce—zero. And then where's the psychic difference, at bottom, from* good day. Good day.

The scientist shuffles back to the house and when he opens the door Secondo sees briefly the dim, cloth-covered clutter, and an acrid smell is carried to his nose. He wonders *am not healthy, am a wretch, this fever must pass, it all regularly cycles* Secondo leaves the yard and continues along the wide street. There is no, *or nearly so, so you can afford patience*. He passes under the red and yellow canopy of the trees until he is near the middle of town again, the scientist's house out of *passions are always more dependable in, say, flowers and trees than in man* when the church bells *experience it in another dimension, every strand of it is tied to me, vibrating when I pluck* noon. Jo-Ann says she can't abide a person who can't abide people so *the most valuable advice, a single basis with which your interests* for lunch.

Secondo has much time yet. He will *preparing for the reception tonight? Yes. Well I've never done one before. It's easy to go to one, but to actually have to. Some nice white wine and some lovely hors d'oeuvres, I've already eaten a few, salmon mousse. And of course my regular cake and coffee and tea and things, you don't think it will clash do you, no, yes exactly in case people want a little something more, you see. All paid for by the publisher. No I haven't but it's a beautiful cover and he's quite well-known of course. Yes that's what I'm hoping. The publisher said about a hundred. Can you imagine in my little shop. I've had to move things around. My desk will be his for the night, for signing. No. Well, he's been in, of course, and I know who he is, but to actually engage the man in intelligent conversation. Yes yes several books, let me see, one on oriental mythology, a*

detective novel I was quite surprised, and some other odd things. Oh could you, say a half hour before? That would be wonderful. Of course you will. Just hold a moment. Yes it is, exactly, how did you guess. A terrible nuisance. Let me throw him something and call you back ok

or he will *love the lunch hour so much I actually want to cover the tables upstairs. In they come up they go, afternoon sir afternoon ma'am afternoon. I steam up the stairs. There's little space. I move like a dancer and I can see that everyone appreciates it and you know I'm going to feel the difference in my pocket at the end of the rush. Down I dash and pour the coffee. Janice is doing ok on her side but soon the place'll be full, up and down, and she'll need help. Up I steam. Coffee, coffee, hot milk. Have you decided? I hurry down, slide the orders to Cook there's a couple waiting. Hello would you like a seat by the window yes go ahead Janice will be with you soon. I wink at Janice. A few men from the bank have beat me upstairs. Up I steam. They're watching. Menus menus. I make sure to smile. They love it but they're in a hurry. It's twelve steps back down step step step step—step step step step—step step step step—I give Cook six orders. He's miraculous, says the first one'll be ready by the time I'm back from starting that table in Janice's section, who've already seated themselves. Janice is busy in a corner and she's already stressed. I glide over. Hello, coffee? In twenty seconds they all four of them have coffee. Janice will be your waitress. Cook is ringing the bell. I scoop up the platter. Up I steam. All the tables are full now and they know I'm doing my best. I spin with my counter-weight the platter. Everyone watches. One of them says thank you very much you're doing well and I feel so happy I could hop into his lap. It's crazy I know*

or he will *liberation! Liberation until two and then Paige can bitch all she likes there's only three hours left. I do wish she'd tell me what she is taking I'd love to share some of it. Rome was not built in a day much less an—Entire—New—Display. Involving two*

floors. And twenty half-wits. And then comes Paige. You can hear her a mile away. Like a slow machine gun. No that's unfair. It's true though. Clack. Clack. Clack. Clack. You understand of course, dears, that Abraham Meltzer will be standing right here tomorrow afternoon reading his keynote address. You understand of course, Paige, that we have ten-thousand bits of sparkle to glue to insects' wings with tweezers. She asks too much, she doesn't understand where she is. Suffolk, babe, Suffolk. No decrees in Suffolk. I can't wait to see her on her hands and

or he will

Piety

Gayle hums, as usual, after he has switched off the light and they are about to sleep. She turns away from him to dampen the noise, but it ceased to bother him months ago. Hum hum hum. Her slight shoulders, which he might brush with his lips to pacify, shake and convulse. Hum hum ha. The fit will subside soon, and she will sleep. He should be well on his way, too. The noise has acquired a certain power over him. It suggests a mood, like the musky imprint she leaves on the sheets and his clothes. Things are good. Things are actually very good. At a certain point, impossible to locate, his state of happiness becomes inarticulate, deep rest.

Tonight, though, he stares up at the darkened ceiling. Hum hum hum. He does not comprehend how the quick, musical breath induces her own rest. Abnormally fast breathing lowers the level of carbon-dioxide in your bloodstream, your blood pressure dips, and you black out. But it's not that. She insists that she never falls unconscious. She's aware of what she's doing. It simply takes her to a place. She sleeps. It is better, he supposes, than cursing yourself to sleep. As curse she will, uninhibitedly, in other situations. In traffic jams she glares about with unabashed hostility and declares, her voice rising until he winces, I wish I could show these bastards I would show THESE BASTARDS WHAT TO DO. At the gym, riding stationary bikes, he has overheard her muttering, in gritty concentration—Cunts to the left of me, cunts to the right of me, cunts-they're-all-a-round. During her fits he makes for her an empty excuse, empty because the words slip too easily, too precisely, into place. They fail to grant her her wholeness. But he cannot think of another way to put it. It's out of her control, she cannot help it. It's not her fault. Just weather the burst.

He should have weathered a veritable thunderstorm this evening, but that's exactly the problem, it never developed. In the dusky half-light of the bedroom he's still expecting the flashes and peals. He came home from work. She was already home, sitting on the couch with the mail. He opened his without much attention, watching the news instead, a slot on Islamic call-to-prayer, until she said—What's that. Sliding out of an envelope, a headshot of a smiling young boy and a brief note.

Dear Piety,

Jeanne asked me to write for her. This is your son Samuel. He is fourteen years old. Please come see him and accept your responsibility. We are always home.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Philip Williams

A telephone number followed, and an address with instructions and a handwritten map. Two questions occurred to him simultaneously, and he felt helpless and weak, as if he had been mugged. How did these people find me, and what will Gayle do.

The first question was not as damning as it would have sounded, spoken aloud. Piety was genuinely unaware, until now, of Samuel's existence. But he found it disturbing that his early life should have so effortlessly fastened to him again. You leave your home for fourteen years. You receive two degrees, you fly off for an international stint. And now, though you've returned to the general vicinity—in national terms—of your childhood, you are utterly removed from that life. Yet here were Jeanne and this Mrs. Williams and Samuel,

appearing like phantoms. Bafflement would have constituted his chief response, but the second question hung over him like a sword, and he held his breath. He and Gayle had crossed more than one divide. In his thoughts she had acquired the immediacy of, say, the current season. He had been leaning toward certain plans, toward a certain future. But what would Gayle do now? His look must have been nauseating, half an imploring for forgiveness, half a fearful expectation of judgement. She returned it gravely, for once completely calm, then stood and walked to the kitchen. Noises, smells ensued. He tried to finish his mail, tried to watch television. But he was sick with misgiving. He dithered on the couch, then in the bedroom, changing his clothes. At dinner she asked about his day. He replied tentatively, wondering if she was erecting a barrier of denial. She would not meet his gaze, but demurred to the plate, with sadness or incipient hysteria he could not tell. No storm, no accusations, no demands. They watched the first half of the late movie, him rather jumpily, then she suggested bed.

Her humming stops. He sighs. She is asleep. He will visit Jeanne, of course. See the child. Question Mrs. Williams thoroughly, and Jeanne gently. Then accept responsibility, in all likelihood, for the child's education, which is probably what they want. But Gayle. Suddenly she rolls over, embraces him with her leg. Twitching, she squeezes him with her whole body. He's a handsome young man, she says. She places her head in the cradle of his arm, then turns back with a jerk. Presently, the humming begins again. Hum hum hum. It's easy to sleep after that.

The next morning Gayle makes coffee, toast, and scrambled eggs with bits of onion and tomato embedded in them like jewels. They eat quietly. It is not a brooding quiet, Piety is glad to perceive, but the kind which might succumb to mirth, prodded with a bit of footsie or a pulled face. According to his limited experience, lovers share a secret which can't be spoken but which is fully apprehensible. Late one night, early in their relationship, he and

Gayle were kissing on the couch, he was cautiously undressing her, and the television showed two stars slowly spinning into one. That's us, he whispered, ludicrously romantic, and she giggled. In the next scenario on the screen—Piety and Gayle, nearly naked, had begun to fondle each other—a third star pulled the first two apart, having made a trifle of their mutual attraction. Finally—they had made glorious love, they held each other in silence—the gravity dissipated mysteriously into space, leaving the two much-reduced stars quite aimless. Piety's secret with Gayle—generated, perhaps, in that night—has not lost any of its pull, he's glad to perceive. He feels joyous. He and Gayle mug at each other over their plates. She is especially adept at mimicking his face. He tells himself to enjoy the moment. Later, perhaps in five minutes, he will have to answer questions.

Something in the eggs reminds him of something else. What's the spice, he asks. Nutmeg, she replies. Nutmeg. The taste is less familiar than the smell, which is forever trapped in the curling steam of a cup of eggnog at Christmastime. It's been years since he's tasted eggnog. We don't drink it down here, people tell him with a jocular laugh, or have you forgot. That's for fancy out-of-towners. It was a fancy drink, indeed, ladled out of crystal bowls by pretty, soft-voiced women. The circumstances summoned the essence of ivory—the woman's elegant, gleaming arm, the silver swan's-neck ladle that she held, the egg-brown drink, spiced and brandied and molten, that she poured without losing a drop. He would never stay to chat, but would hurry to some unoccupied spot of floor and gulp the elixir down. Then a lonely turn around the ballroom—Christmas trees with white lights and red bulbs, wreaths pinned to gilded walls, a fulminating chandelier, merry talk, introductions, deferential smiles, older men and younger women. He never failed to secure an invitation to an important Christmas Eve party. Most years he could choose between two or three. Always he would find himself back at the punch table. The prototype woman, serving graciously. Patent leather shoes, velvet dress, red, red lipstick, a cataract of wealthy hair.

Some of that liquid ivory, if you please, he would say in his most charming voice, the accent exaggerated to sound roguish. She always yielded to its effect. With pleasure, she would say, and she dip the ladle and pour with the stylish competence seen in a curtsey. If she had any expectations, however—he was positive she never did—they went unfulfilled. He retreated to a corner where he percolated himself with the drink, snuffling as he swallowed. Despite the brandy, the caramel tang, the frothy egg-white texture, nutmeg's smell more than anything else presided over his relationship with eggnog.

Gayle asks, Is it okay?

Yes, he says, it's good. Nutmeg is what you sprinkle on eggnog.

Oh.

No, no, I like the taste. It's very subtle. It's the smell that would probably do me in.

She smiles. It was an afterthought. I just skipped over to the spice rack and one, two, three shakes of the nutmeg.

He can imagine it well.

Myself, I like it, she says. She grins at him. I like it, she says again.

They resume breakfast. He contemplates the day's plan, how to work in the call to Jeanne and Mrs. Williams. Eleven o'clock, he decides, will be the best time. Eleven o'clock is neither eager nor unconcerned. He will conduct a brief conversation. I received your letter, I would like to meet with Jeanne and Samuel, will tomorrow afternoon be a good time? Piety never speaks at length on the phone. The phone is used to arrange face-to-face encounters, where you may coax, or bristle, or preen with far greater effect than when isolated in your office, gazing blankly out the window. Part of Piety's acumen for his profession—not essential, but not unimportant—is his disarming coolness, or, as it is called for, his disarming warmth. A threat laagered in aggressive knees and chest. A friendly pose, sitting back, mild voice, eliciting suggestions. Concern in your hands to make the other

person want to please you. Piety has few friends, but his rapport with the people he meets, with the people at work, is excellent.

Mrs. Williams will screen him before he will be allowed to speak meaningfully to Jeanne or Samuel. People never change, they never apprehend the degree of reconciliation you must achieve with yourself for true change, and Jeanne, Piety remembers, was a maddeningly reticent girl, with hardly a spark of volition. Mrs. Williams, who wrote for her, will surely also speak for her. Her letter, though terse, animates her. He calls her to the breakfast table to account for herself. This number rings a phone in your home, does it not, Mrs. Williams? You are—or were—a housewife. Too old to be Jeanne's friend, probably. Aunt, or older cousin, or employer?—or merely a guardian-friend, if not legally then out of concern for Jeanne and Samuel's welfare? That you are a truculent old harridan is beyond doubt. Your address, Suffolk, out in the country—and the instructions entail a good bit of driving, but if you reach the actual town you've gone too far. So you live on a farm, or what passes for one, and Jeanne and Samuel are staying with you, working for you. He grimaces. He knows what to expect. The rural poor. A musty brick-and-plank house, dilapidated stables, an emaciated horse that has clipped the grass down to the dust. Mrs. Williams, would you be grateful if I looked after the education of the child? Perhaps you, yourself, could use some assistance? He must be careful. She will have worked out arguments, requests, in advance, and attached expectations to them. Samuel may indeed be his—the photo doesn't imply otherwise—so he will make concessions, but only a few. At the interview's end, Mrs. Williams must concede that she also sees his point of view. You do understand why I can only do so much?

Gayle chooses their kiss goodbye to extract from him what they have come to call, in banter, a coupon. With the extraordinary calm that has marked her morning—no doors slammed, no singing or shouting, no cursing—she says, Can we talk tonight. He detects

merriment and sobriety at once in her eyes. Of course, he says. Coupon clipped, commitment made. She'll redeem it this evening. They kiss again. Their mutual secret, he feels, is like an inflorescence at this moment, growing up between them on a slender stem, understood because seen, felt, smelled and touched by them both.

He drives to work. She takes the bus. He would drop her, but they work on opposite sides of the city, and she likes the bus. Miss the bus and I miss my people, she says. Her unforced conviction in that phrase, my people, bemuses him, for he has never felt obliged to use it. He has no people, has no need for a people. The notion, a people, functions like the notion, a heavenly Father. Gayle is his people. His mother was his people. If he ever has a son or daughter, they will become his people. As for the rest, if you answer to the following description, black, intelligent, successful, alcoholic, you are justified if you take a jaundiced approach to the world—and all its peoples. Piety has been an alcoholic for the last ten years. He has not had a drink in three. His habit of detachment from his fellow men formed much earlier than his addiction, which, however, deepened his leeriness of fraternity. As an undergraduate he studied psychology, misled by an intellectual ideal which, achieved, would have brought him little satisfaction. Independence, he discovered after four years of privation and toil, was his sole aspiration. There is no smooth-running prosperity in psychology. He switched fields for the next piece of parchment. But his inclination to shy from bonds of fellowship was bolstered by his new acquaintance with the mind's peculiarities, and he remains a clinician at heart, a man observing the monkey who is man. It did not fall his lot to make, as Gayle calls it without a trace of irony, the connection. He marvels at her endowment of faith. For if he has suffered, she has suffered thrice. Imagine the apes which confound her, leaping and swinging from the corners of the hours, gossipy, chattering, suspicious, hostile. Gayle breeds a thousand stories a day, a thousand guess-what-I-saw-this-afternoons, which ripple through homes at dusk, propelling dinner

conversation, backyard talk, phone topics. But Gayle works through the very same day, makes allowances for her syndrome, explains it to those who will listen, names it, manages it, as she says, and after that same day she has generated a few stories of her own, usually by means of eight charmed people who have arrived at her agency for help, been assigned to her, and left with the most efficacious of counselling's strategies, an example. An hour with Gayle and you learn that you can take control. It's as if she's undergone an elemental cycle of pain, pushed the hurt of the past from her core, and has succeeded in embodying, like a tiny percentage of the rudiments of Earth, lovely life. She radiates morale. She responds to the call of brotherhood, sisterhood, with unconstrained zeal, a call which rings either dead or duplicitous in her lover's ears. That is partly why she loves him, he knows. Like a Christian, she hopes to reform him with her love.

As soon as they met, Piety went to his garage, got his hands around one of the thick, musty textbooks, and read the section on Gayle's syndrome, its biology, the tentative and not wholly successful treatments. He seemed to know even then that he would not let Gayle go—and he felt wryly curious about his suddenly fixed fate. This conviction, that he and Gayle were meant for each other, has since been borne out by his response to her paroxysmal temperament. To be sure, the syndrome surprises him—of late new, massive body tics which give her great pleasure. Like an orgasm down to my fingertips, she says with glee. And recently he discovered her tapping the stove, the burner turned to High. Her finger pounced, jerked back, hovered over the red-hot plate, pounced again. She would not stop, she said, until it felt perfect. Rather than driving him to exasperation, the fits reassure Piety of her fundamental strength and lovingness. Their sum effect is soothing—they remind him that she is here, in his house, part of his life. He is prone to the inner feast of anger, and finds himself spontaneously entered by his lover, just as, he imagines, she suddenly becomes the mannequin of some mad puppeteer. Her goodness suffuses him. She ghosts away with his

toxic frustration and malice. There are moments when he can hardly hold euphoria at bay, for all his good fortune at having found her.

He parks and walks briskly from his bay, which bears his name in yellow paint, to the building's tinted-glass revolving doors. He can make out a shape leaning against the receptionist's counter. He pushes through the revolving door to find Lester's grinning face. He should have identified the meaty shoulders. Lester is one of the corporation's lifers. They all present the same appearance—a slightly stooped body of mid-life, married proportions, a broad, blue, buttondown shirt, ample khaki pants, pair of year-old loafers. A whorl at the top of a head of thinning hair. A face kneaded by the fingers of children into kindliness, concern, and, there's no doubting it, contentment. The lifers know and are fond of their place, for it yields, wondrously, dependably, the stuff of their hearts's desire, the minor miracles of running taps, hot food, admittance to father and son chess competitions, university for the precocious teenager, free dental care. Piety is confident that he has judged the facade discerningly, allowing for one or two private family horrors.

Good morning Pete, says Lester, straightening.

Good morning Lester. Morning Reynelda.

Good morning, says Reynelda brightly, who would probably like to trade places with Gayle.

And the trials of Trust School—? Piety raises an eyebrow at Lester.

Excruciating. Are you ready for this? I'm dealing with housing now. Yes. They want to replace electrical cord right in the middle of week two. They've had it scheduled for a year, can't possibly do it some other time, their chief, van Rooyen the Nazi, takes orders from no one, and so on. Can you imagine it, no lights, no hot water, three days before the test.

Piety chuckles. If it turns into an emergency, call me.

You'll take it Up-upstairs? Lester and Piety, when they worked together, called the Board of Directors Up-upstairs. Actually, I wanted to talk to you about something else, a few questions on the test.

That's fine. Call me around three. I'll tell Vicky to expect it.

You're the boss, says Lester, smiling. Piety, the black man with the business law degree, didn't use to be the boss, a fact that marks him like a red letter stitched to his lapel. They take leave of Reynelda and walk together to the elevators. Piety's imagination indulges him with a dramatic account of the next few moments, each action blown up on a screen, inflated with significance. Your hand slides to your pocket, extracts your wallet. You and Lester each produce a card, but while Lester's remains dull lead, yours has transformed—by an alchemy that you have got right without a complete understanding of the ingredients, your quick mind, some good luck, the degrees you've acquired, and, of course, the beady-eyed affirmative action marsupial—into flashing gold, which brachiates you from Lester to a separate turnstile, glides through the cardreader with the elegant click of a gold cufflink, and ushers you to a carpeted vestibule where, while Lester hauls himself down busy cavernous arteries, you may repose in a gilded chair, straighten your tie above poppies in the great, stinkwood-framed mirror, or peruse the morning newspaper, placed on a three-legged corner table, until the elevator arrives. It is on the twenty-seventh floor. It won't be long.

The elevator Piety steps into is panelled with polished wood. Its carpeting absorbs the heels of his shoes like wet sand. The numbers, there are only seven, are touched rather than pushed, and flick alight to acknowledge command. Overhead, a globe shines softly in a colonial-style plate glass lamp. Piety's future, monitored from this elevator, develops into a string of similar enclosures, automobiles, boardrooms, penthouses, each a spellbound womb of rich red luxury, where the amniotic talk of power rustles over wood and leather, soothing. He's going up. He's rising. He will not always ride these specific heights, though. No—at

some point, he will transfer to a city of greater breadth and depth. He once stood on the top floor of the highest building in the world. It was night. The huge square windows gave out on what seemed the endless winking plains of a kind of heaven. He fancied himself, queerly, a young hero of antiquity, jerked by a jealous goddess into the 20th century where, all the old gods being dead, he was stranded outside of Fate, left to meddle with the souls of another time, another race. He pored greedily over the million diamonds below, feeling that if he pounced he would possess. The view was tremendously satisfying. Whereas when he reaches the twenty-fifth floor of his current building, discourses with his secretary, takes his plush seat and gazes out the window at what is admittedly a pleasant panorama, he sees—a city shoaled in a bowl, over the lip of which spills a succession of drab green elevations cut by two major roads which drive, in one eclipsed distance, to the hills, and in the other to the sea. The building rises twenty-nine floors. It is one of five tall buildings downtown. The people in it cater, for the most part, to the legal needs of the people in the other four, the people of two banks, an oil multinational, and an insurance conglomerate. Medium and small fry, of course, cluster around the towers of coral—there are several good ten and twenty-story buildings in the vicinity. But the city fails to achieve any measure of majesty. When the sun settles and the streetlamps flicker alight, the five buildings stand like forlorn stumps in a luminescent undergrowth. A future Piety will sniff at thirty stories, gazing from his I-beam eyrie.

The elevator smoothes and halts. The doors part. He walks to his secretary's office, where the door is ajar, and puts his head in.

Good morning, Vicky.

Good morning, sir, she replies. Vicky has never yet addressed Piety with the prefix Mr. He is not sure how to take this. He does not rule out the possibility that she simply cannot bring herself to do it, but it is more likely that she has reserved the concession for a

special day. When Vicky, who wears her brown hair down, dresses in a red wool jacket and skirt, and what Piety presumes are Italian heels, eventually becomes the guardian of a thoroughbred name—a name on a nine-carat plate, fastened ostentatiously to the door of the boardroom—then she will esteem it with Mr. Good morning, Mr. X. But not with these junior execs, who turn over once a year and get sir. To Lester she would probably just say Hi. He remembers Lester. Lester Ellman from UT will phone around three, just so you know.

Yes, sir. I've put Mr. Sinclaire's morning memo on your desk. I think he wants to speak with you right away.

Thanks. He continues down the passage to the private door of his office. Of course she would use Mr. with Sinclaire, who sits on the BOD. He is to Sinclaire what she is to him, therefore Mr. Sinclaire. He is nervous that the time will come when he will wince every time she knights him with her sir. Should he mention it? Why don't you call me Piety? Excuse me, sir? A sure path to sidelong office smirking. But if it were to become a problem, to inhibit him with irritation, a showdown would precipitate, and he would accuse her of nosewrinkling at his skin, and she would tell him what she really thinks of him. Remorse, grief, tears and reconciliation. Then ironic jokes and feigned deep friendship, until he's promoted or poached and each can, at last, relax again in their own offices. Ugh. As he seats himself he senses Gayle suddenly nearby, massaging him gently at the shoulders, calming him. Abashment twitches at the corners of his mouth. Of course Vicky won't be a problem. How could she be? He knows absolutely nothing about her, except that she's a good secretary.

The phone rings. Pete, it's Phil. Naturally, Vicky would buzz Philip Sinclaire, Mr., to inform him of the sir's arrival. Gayle tells him to hush. Sinclaire is talking. The repercussions we looked for begin today, he says, referring to the national budget in which

investment taxes, despite much lobbying, were increased. A little late but as bad as we thought. Did you see the memo? Forget it, I need you on Mickleson. Phoned me at breakfast this morning. He's talking about a seventy eighty ninety percent withdrawal, wanted to give me fair warning, he's thinking about land. We obviously don't want to lose seventy eighty ninety percent of Mickleson. I need two things by three. A review of his holdings and how spreading them around or consolidating them will get by those taxes. B, if he doesn't buy it, how we can do his land trusts, property trusts, and I want a spreadsheet of those taxes, okay? Walk it up when you're ready.

Sinclaire hangs up and Vicky buzzes and he knows what she's going to say before she says it, she has fetched Mr. Mickleson's files, sir, shall she bring them in. She chugs through like a train, drops the files, swings round on her rails, and chugs out. Piety wonders if she and Sinclaire are privy to a secret about him—the doctor has contacted them, informed them of a test result, he will go painlessly but soon, might as well let him lead a normal life but don't get too attached. Gayle would disapprove of his cynicism. In truth, he should be flattered by their lack of personal interest, which entails an impersonal faith in him. He buzzes Vicky. Hold all my calls please. He doesn't add—Even those from misters. It's 9:09. These people, Vicky, Sinclaire, are efficient at least, something for him to measure up to. He unstraps his watch and places it in a desk drawer, which he always does to clear his mind at work. Time is now like a bar of gold, which he must beat and tinker into two reports. He bends to the files. His office shrinks. First to go is the view, the windows and the world outside obliterated by his neglect, replaced with void. The walls buckle and disappear, the fringe of the floor is eaten to his desk and chair. Nullity's final triumph is stayed, at last, by a few thick files, a yellow legal pad, a disembodied computer screen, and two brown hands, encuffed in white, which scribble and type for an undefined period that ends abruptly when Piety stretches and stifles a groan. Reality snaps back to its accustomed

grid. Clouds are building in the distance, perhaps it will rain. Piety jerks his desk drawer open. It's 11:09. The first report, mostly common sense, is finished, on the legal pad at any rate. The other execs will be congregating for a mid-morning break. He supposes he can sneak a cup of tea.

Gayle quickly became aware, when she moved in, of his weariless palate for tea. After several days, she wondered aloud whether Piety had used the drink to rehabilitate himself, as a substitute addiction. Forty tea bags in one week! But no, he has always drunk terrific amounts of tea. His mother, when she considered his body big enough, plied him with it, dipping the same ration of tea leaves into hot water four or five times a day, supervising as he sipped it. It kept him alert for school, she told him, avoiding the subject of their pantry, which was comparable to the pantries in the fairy tales. During his childhood poverty was taken for granted—not matched, in his mind, with destitution—and tea remains a comfort, a memory of his mother's love, rather than a gall to remind him of the nights he went hungry. He never broke with the tradition of light steeping. A business professor advised him once to switch to coffee. Drinking coffee is like having a good stroll down a fairway, the professor said. It is conducive to the climate of friendship that precipitates good business. A polished phrase. Piety does not golf either.

Among the junior execs of the 25th floor, only Piety and Dave, an innocuous man who also reports to Sinclaire, drink tea. They raise eyebrows at each other when Piety enters the lounge. Dave ambles over, styrofoam cup in hand, as Piety plops a tea bag into his hot water.

So how's Mickleson, says Dave, dangling a hook.

Piety bites. Mickleson, he says, is a rich SOB and I'm his what's his name, the father of Tiny Tim in that story. He removes his tea bag, drops it sodden into the bin.

They talk about the rich SOBs of the world, attracting a small crowd of the other

execs, who like to roll wealthy names in their mouths like restaurant mints. At 11:30 they reach an agreement to disagree about Asia's tycoons of industry, and disperse back to their offices. Piety stops at Vicky's first.

Did anyone call?

Only a Mrs. Williams, who was not very clear, but she left this number. Vicky peels off a note.

Piety paves his secretary with his eyes, strangling inchoate panic. He sees with relief that she has not, contrary to his fears, adopted a pose of prim disapproval. Nor does he detect triumphant irony trembling at her mouth, or mischief confecting in her brow. She holds the note expectantly. He takes it. Thank you, he says, and retreats to the hall. Has Mrs. Williams hired a private detective, is that the source of her information? Or is someone following him—her brother, her son? It cannot be Jeanne herself. She was not an energetic girl, would balk at planning a surveillance, at conceiving the idea much less minding it through. And if she had been watching him, surely he would have registered her presence, if not consciously then his unconscious would have lifted her face from the flash of a windowpane, and a nebulous unease would have visited him, not a speck of which he felt. His thoughts entertain rapid possibilities. With his address Mrs. Williams and her charge could pepper him with letters, or, after accumulating resources and nerve, visit him. With his number at work they have the power to incubate a scandal, disgrace him. They might bumble upon Sinclaire, who would come down, suggest a period of leave, tell him to sort things out. In their artless persistence they would deploy the legion stereotypes baying for a chance to administer the *coup de grace*. The promiscuous black man. The irresponsible black man. The stony-hearted black man. The dark wave Mrs. Williams and Jeanne might swell with just a few words! Washing him from his office, whelming him to previous depths.

He surveys the wasteland of his desk. He was to have called them at eleven o'clock.

How, or why, did he forget? A case of denial. Or, worse, he allowed his work to dally with his detachment, the part of him that he discerns as the true Piety, who takes merely pragmatic interest in material gain. His greatest folly would be to covet as a businessman, only as a businessman. The precedents are numerous. The topic agitates him and Gayle almost daily. They toss accusations rapid-fire in the car, across the dinner table. She blames Them, Their damned outlook, Their miserable blindness. He concedes that her position holds the upper hand but muses about Us, Our susceptibility, Our repression, Our greed. She dribbles and spits that the word sinister under-represents the force that motivates certain whites in this world, malevolence is more like it, she said. He wonders to himself—From 9:09 to 11:09 this morning was an infant malevolence creeping about in his heart, restringing it for dissonance with other responsibilities? The writing on his legal pad, unbroken, goes six or seven pages deep. If this crisis widens beyond his control, he will know whom to fault.

It is almost twelve. He will call Mrs. Williams, try to ascertain how canny she is and how lucky, and assure her of his intention to visit. He will have to sacrifice lunch to finish the reports. Vicky will tell Sinclaire about the skipped lunch. Concern will purse Sinclaire's face—he doesn't want a junior exec who needs extra time to be competent. But when Piety appears in his office door, confident, voluble, extending the reports like a handshake, Sinclaire will note that the newest protégé can handle, as was wagered, several portfolios at once, and take reassurance. Piety can accommodate ambition and conscience. He must, he tells himself fiercely.

He lifts the receiver, punches Mrs. Williams' number. Several exchanges click in his ear, then a phone starts ringing. He lets it ring for a full minute, as the gold second hand of his watch sweeps its fine circle. She may be out on an errand. She may be hanging clothes to dry. Or if in fact she lives on a farm she may be in the fields, the stables. He places his watch in the drawer and begins to type his 9:09-11:09 notes.

After he judges a half hour has passed he lifts the receiver and presses redial. He takes out his watch and holds it in his hand, stopwatch fashion, for exactly a minute, from 12:21 to 12:22, then replaces the receiver. Now she is raking leaves with Jeanne and Samuel. Vicky buzzes. She's going to take a 12:30 lunch sir if it's all right. It is all right. He replaces the watch, works for what he thinks is half an hour, then holds the receiver to his ear while the second hand describes minutely the difference between 1:01 and 1:02.

When Vicky returns he knows it's 1:30 but can't imagine what Mrs. Williams might be doing unless she's gone to the town, Suffolk, for needful things. He replaces the receiver in disgust. He waits for what he thinks is an hour, during which he finishes the first report and begins the second. It's 2:14. He remembers in sudden panic that he didn't tell Vicky to let calls from Mrs. Williams through, and what if. But Vicky says that she's taken only a few internal queries. It is a quiet day. He does not write notes for the second report, but types it directly out. Fortunately he created a tax spreadsheet for land two months ago, just after the national budget, on a hunch. After about half an hour he tries Mrs. Williams again. While the phone rings it comes to him that if she were to answer he would not have time to talk to her. It's 2:41. He puts the watch away, finishes the second report, activates the spreadsheet software and enters the data. Halfway through he takes out his watch, sees that he has four minutes to finish, allowing ten for printing and the trip to Sinclaire's, and vies in a short race.

At 2:55 with two folders under his arm he tells Vicky that he's going up to Sinclaire and walks to the elevator. Hannah, private secretary of twelve years and undoubtedly Vicky's object of envy, sits conspicuously behind a broad polished desk. Mr. Sinclaire is taking a call but should be finished soon. She gestures to two dark leather chairs in the corner of the room, behind which towers a wall of gilded law books. It is an impressive outer office. A newspaper rack hangs two daily broadsheets and the day's Financial Times. The table between the chairs is an *objet d'art*, a lead-and-glass mosaic of triangles supported by

four slim pewter legs. If he was a visitor he'd be offered a drink—coffee or tea in the outer office, scotch inside with Sinclair. The point of these offices is not to display wealth—any visitor who sits in Piety's chair will be acquainted with wealth—but to prove taste. A man who works in a splendidly appointed environment will be trusted to arrange words around money. Taste is pedigree—pedigree is line, line is history, history is stability, stability is growth. Piety sits back. Taste speaks to his ambitions. He discreetly observes the outer office.

Hannah says, Mr. Sinclaire's ready, go on in. She opens the double doors for him. He strides through, holding out the files like a handshake. Sinclaire, who has come around his desk, meets him and takes the files and places a hand on his shoulder.

Good, good, says Sinclaire, thanks Hannah. The doors click closed. They sit in the two low-backed green leather chairs in front of Sinclaire's desk.

Well, are we going to keep Mickleson?

I think so. Even if he withdraws from investments, it makes administrative sense to give us his next portfolio and we're better with trust definitions in general as he knows.

That's what I'm going to tell him when we have dinner tonight. It's possible he only wants to keep us on our toes. There's a spreadsheet in here?

Yes.

Good. Do you have time for a minute?

Of course.

Good. Tell me about yourself Pete. How are you these days.

Well, sir—.

Phil Phil c'mon now I insist.

I'm doing well, thanks, Phil.

No reason to complain right. How's your girl.

Also quite well, thank you. Working every day.

Any plans for the long weekend?

No, we'll stay at home and putter around.

Save the trip for a real vacation.

Exactly.

But Piety refuses to recount the rest of the conversation to himself as he descends from floor 30 to 25. He is fuming. After several harrowing moments during which he was certain that Mrs. Williams somehow got through to Sinclaire and wreaked destruction upon his career, Piety's dread switched to anger, and he only just restrained himself from snapping at Sinclaire. He stamps his foot in the elevator. It was Sinclaire who interviewed him for junior executivehood, Sinclaire who was appointed by the BOD to select the next protégé, and it now remains Sincliare's brief to acquaint the Circle of Kings upstairs with the progress in his career and life. He can imagine the scene, the men ringed around the great table as if they were playing cards, growling about politicians, chewing over the merits of tailors, when the Chairman asks Sinclaire a question which produces a jolly pause, So Phil how's the new boy doing. Eyebrows and chuckles. Sinclaire leans back, exhales. He did good work for me on Mickleson last week. Nods of approval. And he looks well, seems to be enjoying the life. Confident, maybe a bit too confident. Doesn't talk much about himself but he's been with one girl for quite a while now, so. Nods of knowing, nods like winks. No resolutions passed, just an update, a report that will contribute to the next ring of girth in their tree of knowledge about Piety, counsel taken in by every one of them, by their oleaginous corporate earflesh, stored chemically, like ingested steak and cheese. On the one hand Piety does good work. On the other he's a bit secretive. On the one hand, a brutish meaty hand, he's black. On the other, fine and gloved, he's black. The stories about Piety will accumulate in organic particles over the years until at last the Chairman moves to adopt policy on the matter, and

Piety will be promoted again or he will have to find work elsewhere. Because of prying Sinclaire's Quarterly Reports. How dare Sinclaire ask about Gayle! What if Piety had asked, impetuously, How's Mrs. Sinclaire? He slams his office door, sits heavily, glares at the city bowl. He buzzes Vicky. Any calls. Just the one from Lester Ellman you were expecting, sir. Of course, thanks. What a wonderful day, he says to the ceiling. It has indeed been an unaccountably wonderful day. Made a slave of by work. Menaced by Mrs. Williams, then blocked, bottled and stymied by her implacable country phone. No lunch. Chatted up by Sinclaire. How much do you want to bet that Lester won't be around now too? But Lester's voice chirps on the line after only one ring and Piety feels satisfaction all out of proportion to this bit of luck.

Hiya, Lester says.

Sorry I missed you earlier.

No problem, it's in my contract to stay loyal.

This is what Piety misses about working downstairs. Among the lifers irony still has its health. Upstairs the sly chauvinism is strangled into sycophancy, each remark more an admittance that you would side, in a crisis, with the tycoons of industry. Going higher, Up-upstairs, irony is only a brute code of reinforcement. And right to the top? Piety wonders if there is a place for irony in the conversations of the world's richest men. Lester is concerned with the wording of a couple of the Trust School exam questions. When this year's crop of MBAs and Biz-Law kids finishes the three-week school, sponsored by Piety's firm, and comes to the exam, will the questions have enough jazz to stump the greenhorns for a little while? He and Lester sort it out, suspending their disbelief that two people of different ironical castes can work productively together. Then Lester says, Thanks Pete, take care, and hangs up, leaving Piety with a dull telegraphic buzz that intrudes upon the silence like a fly, and, when he himself hangs up, with just the silence. It's 3:45, an hour and a quarter before

he can drive away from a miserable business day. He leaves his watch on and spends the time writing suggestions on his legal pad for a revised equity-to-land policy and collecting unanswered rings from Mrs. Williams's line.

At 4:55 Vicky wishes him a good weekend, sir, through the buzzer. He tidies his desk, retrieves his jacket, resists like a moody gambler the urge to press redial one last time, and departs. There are three rosy-faced men from 27th, Offshore, in the elevator, talking about sport. Piety does not join them, affecting self-absorption. The inscrutable-if-not-morose-black man. The elevator's speed is a true wonder. Up or down, it never fails to cull a meniscus of pressure from his stomach. 25 to G in something like fourteen seconds. So you don't have to endure the company of other junior execs for long.

On the lip of his dashboard, hanging over and partially obscuring the dials, Piety taped some time ago a lime-green note with a thick, black question mark drawn on it. He's been in the habit for years, replacing the note from time to time. It used to be yellow, always yellow, but he grew complacent toward yellow and the note's powers faded. Now he keeps a rainbow of notepads at home, pink, yellow, white, orange, some ruled, some oddly-shaped, some fringed, from which he chooses at random the next note for his question mark. It has become tradition among some of his acquaintances—Lester, notably, and a few of Gayle's girlfriends—to surprise him with a novel notepad. The latest gift looked like a condom wrapper and bore a condom-maker's brand name. The question mark signifies condoms, in fact, to Piety, among other items, as in—Do you need them? Do you need milk? Juice, bread, butter, hot sauce? Fruit? Tomatoes? Chicken? The object of the device is to get him to THINK before he makes the irrevocable freeway commitment towards home. Does he have an after-work meeting? Does Gayle want anything from town? Gayle—any important dates coming up? If Piety arrives home without thinking through his needs, he'll be too lazy to shop at the suburban markets, and will order a pizza, call with apologies, greet Gayle like a

guilty dog, etc. So he sits in the car before starting off and reels in breakfast's commentary and observation. It appears to be a rare day—he can go straight home. He double-checks his memory for commonplace omissions. Fruit, yes. Tea, yes. Gayle—no, nothing.

He starts the car. Lester's tiny figure works across his rearview mirror in a far parking lot. He watches him climb into his car. For a moment the lifer sits and stares, as Piety has done. Then the car backs out, swings to, and rolls for the exit. Lester heads for home. Heads for—. For children and books and pets. A computer game. For—the thought slips in unreasonably but then again does not seem incongruent—silk underwear, rouge and lipstick, a blonde wig, pink pumps. I've pegged you now, old man, Piety says aloud. It is a joke. He laughs and fires his engine.

Rush hour fails to aggravate him. He listens to low music on the radio, allows his eyes to slacken, his thoughts to wander like a bee in a flower bush. The traffic drones around him. Images open and widen and fade, ripples on water. Piety's the only person he knows who enjoys this part of the day. So long as there are no outright cessations of progress—the car may be inching along and he's fine. He leaves an elastic berth in front of him so that other drivers may cut him off, because they will anyway, and he can be caught, in the particularly slow snarls, resting his head back, eyes closed or glassily fixed on the stretched white vinyl of the car's ceiling, which periodically shifts into a vast snowy plain. Today, however, at the mouth of the second slowdown, a car which has merged five or six cars ahead begins to play loud music. The driver passed up Piety's berth and gunned to the end of the lane, forcing his way in. A small blue job with the word CABRIOLET painted, in italics, on the side. As soon as he was in the driver tweaked his volume knob. The music crows and beats out his triumph and Piety winces like a person listening to an alarm, fearing he must begin a wakeful nightmare of endurance. The needle diddles between 10 and 0. The snarl usually crawls for ten minutes and the music pours green and gold out of the car's windows

like perverted and threatening Chinese dragons. It towers and swoops and flashes insolently at the other motorists. Piety checks their faces. They, too, are frowning—their anger, too, rockets towards exasperation. He promulgates, psychically, a plan to marshal the car on to the shoulder just long enough for the driver to apprehend the spite that he has roused, then to sideswipe him down into the wide grassy ditch that separates the two directions of traffic, where he will tumble and overturn and with luck ignite. Piety can imagine exactly this man's empty life up to now, the moment that he is embracing the sentiment of his bucking stereo. He's white and he's feeling good about himself. He's just performed various dilettante life-improving acts in the city and now he's slotted perfectly into traffic with a malicious kite of a smile flying on his white face, occasion for that white ceremony of victory, emotional synthesis with high and flat yearning white music. When he splashed out of his mother and was carried through the sterile halls to the nursery his fate was foreordained. He lay there, a dollop of white among forty other dollops and awaited the hand of Destiny, which anointed him with his jackpot future, lenient television upbringing in a backyard white suburb, low-slung roomy prep schools, an exorbitantly-priced university, a succession of simpering assless white vaginas flexing throatily, piping their oily siren songs to stimulate a frenzy of white fucking. After that consultant work. Spacious one-bedroom flat near the chic coffee shops. A white girl walks into his life. Need it be added—white wedding? Now he's rushing home to her, six cars ahead, feeling good about himself, chorusing with a song. He is exhilarated, for the moist secret moment when he convinces his wife to assume new responsibilities with him is nigh, and the white cloning will begin all over again.

Gayle strokes his head from the back seat, crooning to herself, looking out the side window at the regular, steady suburbs. Piety's body relaxes. His face youthens, the muscles of his stomach and the small of his back relax, allowing him to recline in the seat. His shoulders sink like poles in mud. There, there. The music is something you must accept.

Besides, traffic is livening up. Piety's needle hikes uphill. As soon as he reaches the speed limit he watches the Cabriolet drift, cut loose from his anger, for the next exit, its floating gnashing menagerie in tow. Piety's own exit comes up soon after. There is a pleasure like rest after exercise in downshifting for the off-ramp, which coasts him to a stop sign, a series of arcs through the wide humped streets that the car practically knows itself, and finally the slow drive-chain keen up the inclined driveway. The lights are on. Gayle is home.

The sun, sinking, displaces evening, which pools and rises like placid dark water, submerging Piety and Gayle's block. Streetlights pop on and hiss like divers' flares. Disembodied window panes float, unsocial glowing monsters of the deep. Inside the house Piety and Gayle drift around each other like affectionate ghosts long-drowned in the same shipwreck. They perform familiar beloved routines in silence, imprint the air with faint aquatic ripples, arrest each other with the secret, shy, longing gestures of their eyes. Gayle makes chicken and Spanish rice. They cling together in marine suspension above the diningroom table and take in the spectacle of the food's disappearance. Then they find themselves sitting in different places in the living room pretending to read but really concentrating on the great eye that hangs in the window, a charcoal disk hooped in thick silver, sole representative of the fascinated inky whale resting on the silt floor outside. Finally, Gayle says—Tell me about Jeanne.

Piety sighs long and blustery, then pauses, not to collect his thoughts but to squeeze out reserve and sponge up frankness, the things Gayle hates and loves most in him, respectively.

Jeanne, he says. I don't even recall her full name. Jeanne was—.

Gayle mutters an insult. It is her version of body language, made vocal instead of visual.

Jeanne was my first love, emotionally and in the physical sense, he says.

Jeanne was your first fuck, she responds offhandedly.

He makes the decision then to get it over in a single impervious paragraph. His story will sail over her interjections, balanced, untroubled, exactly what it appears to be. He returns to the dockside town of his childhood. Jeanne was his first and only summer fling. He was eighteen, being interviewed for the Mecklenburg, the first summer without real work. They met on the beach. That was where they always met. She had things to do during the day, he doesn't remember what, work at a textile mill perhaps. He was educated, she was not, or so it seemed because she hardly talked. He would walk, she would follow. She was so quiet he didn't know what to do, so he kissed her, a big step for him. A pattern quickly developed. He would suggest, verbally or otherwise, and she would acquiesce. He grew close to her because her silence seemed to indicate a need for his manhood, as if being with him pushed back a different, bad world. One day he brought a blanket and they went to the bushes behind the dunes. They made love—he made love to her—often after that. Then he won the Mecklenburg. It would be insulting to explain why he had to accept the Mecklenburg, which drew up like a syringe a hectic series of destinations and experiences and plunged them into his veins, the maelstrom of new life. He hasn't seen her since, hasn't recollected her in years.

His manner, as he talks, mirrors his feelings of self-pity and exculpation. He was eighteen, he was smart but poor, she was dull but poor, this kind of liaison is not uncommon among the poor. Among those who live in an outskirt city settlement where families appear and plunge away like leaves in the streams after rain. Where strangers are as common as shared space, whether it be in beds or rooms or streets or on beaches. He and Jeanne were never alone on the beach, there were always dozens of other boys and girls, men and women. And yet he remembers faintly, more feeling than image, that being with someone who wouldn't add her chatter to the great cacophony was like being in a deserted landscape. She

severed his continuity with the other beachgoers. When he was with her, sand and air and water formed a jurisdiction from which everyone else was barred, the games and calls and splashing a static residue, a stain of activity quite remote from him and Jeanne. But that time and that place, that shirtless pre-Mecklenburg boy on that damp and dirty stretch of beach, exist in altered dimensions which resist deep probing. He cannot even dredge up his first encounter with Jeanne. This compared to the first time he saw Gayle. The Syndromer's Ball at the Holiday Inn. Piety on clean-up duty to garner a few AA credits. He arrived at the ballroom at 11:45, fifteen minutes before the music stopped, and immediately cursed the cynicism that had headlocked him on the sofa in front of the TV all night. For crossing the floor to greet him was an elegant unmercenary long-sought beauty, soft cotton black dress on bold brown skin, hair sculpted in a shell shape, winking black shoes, eyes wide and merry, a smile that could have polished a diamond cradling a wide, honest nose. He had thought he would have spent the ball guessing syndromes, another alcoholic here, COAA over there, a bevy of neurasthenics on Prozac huddling in the corner, him snickering like a malicious bell hop, but now he was prepared to make a deal with the Devil. For this woman, whatever you want.

Gayle sits low on the sofa as if exhausted. She asks, Do you suppose every Mecklenburg boy leaves behind a little bundle? Piety understands that she is speaking on behalf of all women.

I don't know, he says.

It wouldn't surprise me.

No.

What are you going to do about yours?

Piety can map the question's rivers and tributaries. The social worker's pragmatism, the feminist's righteousness, the lover's uncertainty, ramified into her blood and flesh, drawn

like thread through her tightly-bound shawl of nerves. This is his moment. How do you prove yourself to someone you love? For women, through spontaneity, for men, through consistency—the advice of lifestyle magazines. No. You knelt once in obeisance to a need that approximated a martyr's fervid passion, you know the truth about proving yourself. You endured your ten-thousand stupefying trials, found the noose ceremoniously lifted from around your neck. You know, with certainty—there is a self, indeed, to be proven, a tender central emotion as easily damaged as brain-matter. Your hand does not convey, while you gape in wild stricken horror, another amber bottle to your lips—this is proof. The law is simple, but eludes most. You prove yourself by flexing and releasing muscles, in motion and in stillness. She is asking you—What are you going to do? She has proved herself with the question. She is not going to leave you. The gesture seems fragile but it is as bold as scratching a line in the sand, and you are required to acknowledge her unveiling of her pride and vulnerability with an act that is its due. Piety hears himself say that he is going to visit them tomorrow, Jeanne and Samuel and Mrs. Williams, whom he couldn't reach on the phone today. It is enough. She nods gravely. She says, again, wistfully—He is a handsome boy.

I will pay for his education, if it isn't too late. If it is, I'll get him apprenticed, maybe start a trust fund.

That is good, she says, and seems to want to say something more. He watches her nose and lips leap from side to side like a tethered dog. But the twitching ceases. He had hoped she might mention that he can't be sure—that the uncertainty can't be banished—whether Jeanne's child is truly his. It would be nice to acknowledge that tempering if inconsequential doubt. If he challenged Jeanne in court, Piety might win. And lose Gayle. She would never lend herself, even by her presence in his house, to something that amounted to corporate prosecution. The prospect of a country drive tomorrow actually pleases him.

The lateral, meditative landscape that rolls out yellow and green and blue. The element of surprise, never a disadvantage. Tea in Mrs. Williams's cramped front room, his presence enormous and imposing, he directing the talk. The talk. A little talk, nothing more, an agreement to talk again. And an appraisal of his son. Height, build, mental quickness, none of which are apparent in the headshot Mrs. Williams sent. The speech—slow and drawn or rapid and alert? Or just mute, a son in the presence of his unfamiliar father? Gayle is no flatterer. Samuel is handsome. But what things weigh against the boy, aside from circumstances, that might shape his fate more into a likeness of his mother's than his fathers?

Gayle starts to her feet and makes stormy headway toward the kitchen, a halting shuffle, a kind of dance which deposits her at the kettle. The complicated—to other's eyes torturous—configuration of her body through space restores her, venting emotion, leaving her with a task of automatic familiarity. Piety likens her to a fountain pen, and the air a three-dimensional letter in which she writes her secret grievances. The letter is sealed away forever from his jealous eyes. He watches her half-step into the kitchen, hears her fiddle with water and kettle and china, and wonders whether, because of his failings, it's possible that, when the time comes, she will descend to his mean, material level for a single breath and refuse him. Gayle will you marry me. Will she list away from him as she has just done, inscribing regret, drawing with her body a hex that imprisons him in his world while she leaves it behind? He stares through the glass top of the coffee table, brooding on Gayle and Jeanne, Mrs. Williams and Samuel.

Would *monsieur* care for tea? she shouts from the kitchen. It is as if a child has tickled him. His face jumps into a smile and he laughs. He bounds into the kitchen where she stands pouring and creeps up on her like a panther. But something goes wrong. She must have been waiting for his yes or no, unheedful of his presence behind her, because when he places both hands on her hips and growls she makes a quick sharp sob and falls back

against him. Her arms seize. The water from the kettle splashes on the skin between her blouse and pants and brims around her waist before it soaks into the fabric. She does not scream, but taking a breath bucks him off. With a nurse's calm she places the kettle back on the counter. Then the fit commences. She stands bowlegged, her face contorted and reddening, her fists about to clap to her ears and her torso thrashing as if she was being shaken. She does not draw breath, but glowers murderously at the floor, her cheeks and brow a wakened hive. Piety reaches for her. She blocks his arm and lopes for the bathroom, slamming and locking the door.

He glances around the uncommunicating kitchen. The refrigerator's white is the same white as the counter's and the wall's and ceiling's. The cupboards, all firmly closed, wear the same uniform, brown with white trim. The stove squats, a black enigma. The polished sink gleams like a metal-white empty pool. The floor tiles cover in beige and brown an area that extends just beyond the room and causes mild disorientation. The kettle on the counter sweats in a shallow pool, two baby-blue cups nearby, one of them steaming. A thin crooked line of water dribbles down a cupboard door, and there are splotches trailing out of the kitchen where Gayle stepped. It comes to him that he should make it seem that he is very far away from her at this moment. He opens a drawer, carefully stepping around the wet spots, takes out a clean green-striped washrag, and sops up the water on the counter. He wrings the rag into the sink. He crouches, rubbing the cupboard door. He is attentive, finding the water on the door's top edge and around the doorknob. He wrings out the rag. He goes about on hands and knees and dries the floor. He empties the one teacup, washes it, and puts the other away. He stands in his glaring clean kitchen and his mind pages without order through a catalogue of ideas for one that will inspire him to alter the space—so that Gayle will come upon a testimony of remorse that will dispel her reproachful air, which is blowing on him like hot wind from the direction of the bathroom. But all he can think of is a

single flower, a rose, in a vase, on the spot where the kettle stood, and that's no good. He retreats to the living room, turns on the television, cancels its sound, and watches the unconnected images of the news. Eastern-European landscapes slide over the screen. A fast-blooming thought, like a flower on a cactus, reminds him that burn victims go into shock. People in shock should be lain down and covered with a blanket. Their feet should rest higher than their heart. Piety doesn't believe he's ever been told anything about shock first-aid. Perhaps his mind is transcending itself, like muscles which outperform the laws of physics during emergencies. Gayle should drink sugar water or barring that orange juice. Brief water burns cause pain but not deep damage. Steam would have been worse. Gayle's burn should be iced. In the kitchen he finds orange juice, sugar and ice. He pours a glass of water and mixes two tablespoons of sugar in it and pours a glass of orange juice. He wraps a trayful of ice in a clean, dry dishtowel. He walks meekly to the bathroom door. He taps. Gayle, are you all right. He says it like a boy who has accidentally crushed his sister's hand underfoot. Gayle's breath shudders. Yes, she says. Her voice sounds as if played on a faulty tape. Gayle you should ice it, he says. I've got some ice. There is a pause. Then the doorknob clicks and a hand reaches out. He gives her the ice. He catches a glimpse. She's sitting on the toilet with her pants down. A wet face cloth hangs over the side of the bathtub. And you should drink this. He thrusts through the sugar water. She takes it without touching him. The door is closed. He wanders back to the television with the orange juice and sits. The juice eventually goes warm in his hands.

Images of wheat plains alternate with farmers' ruddy faces. A tractor unlike any Piety has seen marauds in fescue. He thinks—Gayle won't want to sleep with me tonight. If he was burnt he would want a spacious, cool, empty bed in which to convalesce. Shock victims often sleep deeply once they feel safe. But he does not move from his chair. He can smell the dark orange juice. The farmers have flicked away, replaced by a woman skating

low over a track of ice, far ahead of a pack. Then a triumphant medal ceremony, where an unfamiliar flag is hoisted. Dislocated commercials follow, then a vampish woman talking about Hollywood. Gayle has not emerged. He's losing time. At last he places the orange juice on the coffee table. He plods to the bedroom where he gathers blankets and a pillow. He arranges these on the sofa. It's nearly eleven. He decides to sleep.

She creeps from the bathroom as stealthily as a thief, not sparing a moment for her syndrome's eccentricity, but he hears her. He waits. A light clicks. Bedclothes rustle. The sound of weight heaved on a mattress. Another click. He says to the blackness, Goodnight. He guesses that ten minutes pass before Gayle replies, Goodnight. He drifts off wondering how often he is destined to receive the blessing of her mercy.

He is the type who resists sleep outside of normal circumstances. He wakes before dawn without much fatigue, sits and stares at the dim carpet for a moment. This morning he will not act as if he inhabits the house. He will take care of necessaries, bathroom, tea, breakfast, on the road. He stirs, folds his sheets and places them with his pillow in a neat square on the couch cushion, pulls on yesterday's clothing, praises himself for leaving his suit jacket on the back of a diningroom chair, and proceeds, a silhouette accreting substance, to the garage. Gayle surely hears the electric yawn of the garage door—he can imagine her half-sitting up to listen, can imagine her half-covered breasts—but she will know what's happening and feel rudely uncaring and return to sleep disappointed with men. By the time the garage door shuts he's a block away, past recall. Given three and a half hours up and back he should return for dinner, with apologies and chagrin, which he hopes will be met with rational acceptance.

The All Nite One Stop waits for dawn like a placid ruminant. Fill it up? asks the attendant. That's right, says Piety. He uses the clammy men's room. He drops coins into the automatic coffee and tea machine and buys a day-old banana muffin. Then he's in the

deep back-supporting seat of his car for good, chewing and cruising one-handed down a black ribbon as quiet and private as a hotel room. The freeway carves a wide yaw past the city and its outskirts. The roadlights end like palings on a quay, delivering him to a black sea that rolls, swells and dips, his car suddenly a yacht doggedly tracing the oil slick left by a companion ship. With dawn, however, the hills, pale as water, are shown to be motionless. The car caroms between them. Two years ago Piety did something for the very first time, he went camping. Not true camping, not in a tent. He rented a camper and drove to a national park with a great jangling of impulse-bought gear. He stayed three nights, leaving the meshed awning of the vehicle open as he slept. The birds saw to it that he woke at four o'clock—in three nights not more than twelve hours of sleep. But he never rested better. The air seemed to unfold in his body until he was a forest in miniature, breathing as a forest breathes, the manifold trunks and branches dressed in cool atmosphere. Piety cracks a window. Today's dawn proposes a lavish toast to that feeling. The smell is the same.

Mrs. Williams' letter and directions lie open on the passenger seat. No one is travelling his way. A few cars pass in the opposite direction, however. He remembers that he knows nothing about his car, and what if it should break down. But it won't. A year-old company car, a company policy of regular service to hedge even minimal decrepitude, a tank that will travel with him almost a quarter of the nation's girth, and if there's an accident, a seatbelt, an airbag, and a company towing policy. A faultless car, impervious to contingency, like a bullet. It will seem to Mrs. Williams and Jeanne what it would have seemed to his mother. The car of a man of consequence, a man to be reckoned with. Despite the circumstances, he would have liked his mother to know Samuel. Samuel would have pleased her greatly. There remains so much he wants to do for his mother, even now. But as she said often enough, if you want to hear God laughing tell him your plans.

He drives silently, at an even speed. Barbed-wire fences speed along with him. Their

jerky motion reminds him somewhat of Gayle and he imagines a raised belt of shiny red around her waist, where the water scalded. Several aloe plants grow in his front yard. He should have left a leaf or two on the dining-room table. Aloe is very good for skin burns. He's sure Gayle knows this too. She's probably nursing herself in the kitchen right now—in the spotless kitchen—with tea and open glistening rinds of aloe, cursing without discrimination. Cows stand as if in postholes in wet yellow and green fields, watching him go by. He crests a high hill and registers an imprint of the land—green, blue and yellow hills lofted like a lumpy quilt to the horizon, the freeway a black zipper seaming the two sides together. He should call Gayle at the next stop. She'll call him a fool and this will fill him with reassurance.

But at eight o'clock, when a 24-hour Supaline heaves into view, Piety's first concern is the accuracy of Mrs. Williams's instructions. He should be near her place by now. He stops. The tank has been reduced by an eighth. He tells the attendant to fill it. Inside the shop the pasty-skinned teenager behind the counter says, No, the map's right. The first turnoff is about five minutes from here.

Which way, Piety asks, to be sure.

The kid gives him a look. That way. He jerks his thumb in the direction Piety's been travelling.

Perhaps ten minutes later a faded signboard points to Suffolk without giving the distance. He exits the freeway for a two-lane county road that has not received attention in a long while. At the edges tufts of grass grow through the tar. He thumps over welts and potholes and passes a sign bearing the shape of a sheep. A black sheep, he thinks. He slows considerably, but it's just as well—he must make two more turnoffs before he reaches the road that passes Mrs. Williams's home, and he doesn't want to miss them. He should have known—naturally rural people don't live on land with good access to anything but a road

that leads to a network of other rural roads.

His own road does its best among the hills, fighting inclines and declines, privileging the common and level contour, and he isn't allowed another all-encompassing view. His mother died of typhoid fever. One day after a torts lecture he reached home just as the phone stopped ringing, which induced a vague premonition. After his first drink he called his mother. He was away from school for a week. She survived only a day after his arrival and the bulk of his time he spent with hospital and crematorium administrators, a burial society, auctioneers, and in awkward, panicky safari for booze. His mother's death delivered an ultimatum to his childhood. Never more call for this young man, he won't heed. But the past, it seems, merely crochets patiently in its corner like an unconcerned spider, confident that the place it has picked will yield up a soft wriggling body at some point. Piety adjusts his mirror. A small truck closes in, then passes. The two white men in the truck study him nonchalantly. The truck speeds up the road.

For no reason, Piety says—Shit, like a man who has been duped.

Up ahead, the shoulder widens and aprons into a turnoff. Piety checks his map. This could be it. He thinks of the tourist maps hanging folded above the teenager at the Supaline. Shit, he says again, and takes the turn. The new road is gravel and not wide enough for two cars. It winds for fifteen minutes, at which point a low, whitewashed house with triangular gables appears, a silo like a gigantic barrel lowering behind it. He has been driving down a driveway. When he reaches the main road again it's 10am.

Around noon, Gayle is eating lunch with no pants or panties on, reading in the all-purpose cookbook about salves and poultices and wondering if he's fool enough to stay away for the whole day without calling. Piety's cellphone has long lost contact with any transmitters. He is sweating and praying that this road, at last, will be the right road for the second turn, because unlike the half-dozen driveways he's explored, some with great

thoroughness, this one is paved. Should this be the correct road the next turnoff he must take is to the left. He squints and wonders where he's travelling. North? South? East? West? Toward or away from the long-gone city? A sign swings by, the first he's seen in hours, announcing a guest house in several languages. He nearly brakes—he nearly tracks this gravel road to the house, nearly alights from his car with relief to the surprised European faces, nearly asks of them, first, is that the right road, and second, may I use your phone, I'll pay of course. But his volition has been stolen, he feels stunned and recalcitrant and his foot does not lift from the accelerator. He trundles grimly down the road, the pasturage rising and plunging with such regularity that he might feel seasick. A road appears on his left, but he doesn't even slow, contemptuous by now of dirt paths that pretend to be anything but driveways.

He does something rare. He turns the radio on loudly, to manger his thoughts someplace other than the monotonous terrain. Static crashes like mad timpani in the car. His hand gropes for the volume, then turns carefully through the FM frequencies. Nothing. He has already given up when down in the dregs of the dial a notch of music parts the static. He fine-tunes, then grimaces. The radio offers a tough choice—silence or the 'Sixties, cattle grazing on gentle slopes beyond his windows or *I Want to be Your Man*. It is not that he dislikes music. He loves it, the right kind, the kind so rarely played for the listening public. The kind of music—and even from the tinge of recall Piety's cardiograph registers with more urgency—that you want to press like a red-hot brand against your chest, the kind that smokes and sustains you like a gritty vision through a manhood ritual, that you find in the blood behind your eyes making love. The kind—it has happened before—that pushes you into the realm of a woman, one who has sprayed perfume behind her knees, which are going weak as a pair of hands travel down her thrilling backflesh. Piety wouldn't say such music takes him to a place, as Gayle, of her syndrome. He would use, if pressed, a less-compelling demurral,

just—It gets to me. What can I say, it gets to me. The music which is currently playing is practically sacrilegious. He doesn't have the energy to fumble through his CDs. He turns the radio off.

Some sheep have found their way through holes in the fences. They graze by the roadside, satisfied with their proof that the grass is truly greener. He must drive even more slowly. The driveways have ceased entirely to mushroom off the shoulder, and he anticipates the moment when all signs of the modern world will falter, the fences will end, the road will taper to two brown ruts tunnelling through the grass, and he will nose his car toward the place the settlers call a frontier but for which the natives already have a proper name.

At 2:00 he reaches the fork in the road. He first sees a car like a toy in the distance. Behind it a monstrous tree, horribly felled. Piety drives up, squinting. The tree is actually broken—one side of its lower trunk, thick as a shack, having ruptured into a splintery gash—and its huge torso balances precariously over the left fork of the road on a hammered and jarred telephone pole. A short road peels off to the right, accessing a dusty, empty parking lot. The three men, white, have parked their vehicle, unwisely Piety judges, near the tree's base in the elbow of the fork. It's as if the roadmakers couldn't cope when they arrived at the tree, defeated even as they considered it, gave up and decided to split the road in two. Piety stops well out of crashing distance. The men are gingerly walking around the tree and telephone pole, looking up. A fork in the goddamned road. He snatches Mrs. William's map. Three right angles, from the freeway to the first road, the first one to the one he's on right now, and this one to the one he's looking for. Not a trace of anything resembling a fork. Three right angles. It is possible that the third represents the left fork up ahead, the one with the behemoth tree lording over it, thick branches poling down like prison bars. Behind the tree—probably the true reason for the road's forking—an improbable sharp upslope of yellow grass. To the left of the road, a farmer's fence. He cannot navigate around the tree,

cannot take the left fork. In Piety's suddenly kirilian mood disbelief at the litany of his frustrations cohabits with thickening rage, based in powerlessness. He climbs from his car and stalks toward the tree. One of the men is walking amiably toward him. He waits. The man greets him as he places a triangular hazard marker between them.

Terrible shame about the tree isn't it?

It wouldn't do to explode at the roadside in this small glazed plate of field and three white men and a wrecked tree. He speaks with as little bitterness and nausea as possible.

What happened.

Well, last night's storm. Dry lightning. Storm passed by, didn't break, but there was plenty of charge in the air. They got the rain down that way. He points across the fields. There isn't much for lightning to hit but that tree. It's lucky to have lasted this long. We'll cut it down, he adds with a sigh. He is doing his best to conceal his curiosity toward the discrete elements of Piety's existence, the German car, black skin and entitled pose producing a sum as unequal to the known surrounding farmland as a ghost ship. Which way were you headed? he asks.

Near Suffolk, says Piety. To get to Suffolk you take which fork?

The right one goes right through Suffolk. The left one will take you to a road that will take you there. The man pauses, then with some courage asks—Were you staying at the treehouse? It sounds as if he is testing a hypothesis about the vocabulary of strangers. No, says Piety, unfazed. How far up the left fork until the road to Suffolk?

About forty-five minutes. It's easy to find. It's the second road. You turn right.

How far until the first road?

Well, a half-hour. It connects some way down with Suffolk South Road.

Can you turn left on to this first road?

An apology seems to flutter about the man's face, as if he has fathomed Piety's errand

and feels sorry for his inconvenience. Sure, he says.

Thank you, says Piety. Good luck with the tree.

I'm afraid we'll have to cut those lines.

Piety plods back to his car. Mrs. Williams, Jeanne and Samuel—inaccessible. He wouldn't reach them before nightfall, assuming he could find them after taking the right fork. Gayle—. Gayle transmits as weakly as a star. He's tired, resigned. The men are moving their vehicle out of range of the tree. It was a truly great tree, a pine of some sort with branches wide as an elm's. It must have stood taller than the hill behind it and bristled to both edges of the fork. A tree to command pilgrimage—rejecting nature's justice in proportion, girding itself in its inheritance of sole domain over the fields's nitrogenous underworld and the full attention of the sun. The telephone pole should not have stood up to the crash, even if the branches took some of the impact. How did the news of the calamity spread? Last night's lightning. A morning milk truck makes a detour. Someone calls the mayor of Suffolk away from breakfast. He tracks down his deputies. These three men, the undertakers, arrive late afternoon. They'll get nothing done today, except lowering the tree completely to the ground. The deadline they're working against, however, is Tuesday morning, when work traffic, not motorists enjoying the long weekend, requires urgent use of the left fork. Urgent—as in a couple of delivery trucks hauling timber and Coca-Cola every few hours. The tree is moved like a stage prop behind a hill in his mirror as Piety drives back the way he came.

At 4:00 he passes another sign for the guesthouse. Tree Haus Cottages Next Left Welcome Welkommen Bienvenue. He understands in retrospect the man's question, which becomes, in his state of weariness, a suggestion. He won't reach home before midnight at the earliest. He detests night driving. It would be better to call, explain, and name a more acceptable time for his reunion with Gayle, noon tomorrow. He will ask her how she is

feeling, regale her with the trip's exasperations, and comment on Mrs. Williams and other chimeras. He will leave without breakfast tomorrow morning to arrive in time to take her to lunch. What can Gayle be doing right now? Lying in a lukewarm bath, a red snake coiled around her waist.

The driveway is shallow compared to the others he's charted. It bends around a hill and collects in a cul-de-sac at the foot of a long, low, dining-hall shaped house with a thatched roof. To the right, behind the house, several cottages, also thatched, cluster on either side of a man-made stream which trickles under a footbridge and disappears into pasturage. The front door of the house bears brass lettering—the establishment's name above three small stars. Below the stars, also in brass, the cookie-cutter shape of the grand tree, represented in unbroken twentieth-century glory. He presses the doorbell. After a moment the door's upper half parts with its lower. A small, fat-faced black woman regards him with mute alarm.

Yes? she says.

Hello. I would like a room for the night if you have a vacancy.

Excuse me, she says, and shuts the door. He hears her call out. Minutes later, the upper half of the door opens again. A heavy-boned white woman with a tight mouth says, in an accent he can't place—Yes. How may I help you.

I would like to rent a room for the evening. Do you have space?

We have twenty rooms, she recites. Five inside and fifteen in the cottages. None of them are occupied. We had a group cancel yesterday. But we keep half the deposit so we're not unhappy. It's like a vacation.

Piety is not sure whether this means no. So—may I have a room?

Yes, yes of course! One is not a problem so much. It is very expensive, she adds.

That's fine.

Well. Come in. She unlatches the lower half of the door. The maid, who was partaking of the spectacle behind her employer, scuttles around a corner. The woman says—My name is Mrs. Tienappel, gesturing to a brass nameplate above the registration table. Please sign the book. Piety writes his name and address. Well, she says. You don't need a cottage for just one night. He feels obliged to chuckle. No. We will give you the Black Forest room. Then she names an outlandish sum, for dinner, bed, and breakfast, and does not refrain from licking her lips as she watches to see whether he will pass this test. His hand once again produces his wallet and thumbs forward a card, gold, like the other. Well, she says. She takes his card and makes an imprint. We charge it at the end of your stay, she explains. He follows her to his room.

It, too, bears its name in brass. BLACK FOREST. The room is not furnished, as he expects, in dark tones, upholstered like a smoking den. A large window, pink curtains drawn back, brightens the interior unflatteringly. Two twin beds, as puffed as loaves of white bread and covered with pink and white floral duvets, are separated by a table crowded with two lamps, a kettle, and a basket of teabags. The air smells as if the kettle has been humidifying it. Mrs. Tienappel conducts a brief tour. Shower, she points. Tea and biscuits, she points. Phone, she points, to a table under the window. Dinner at seven. Do you have any special requirements? No? Good, come and go as you please, we will see you at seven. The sole item incongruous with the room's motif remains unexplained—a framed map like a square of damp on the wall, depicting unrelieved forest which is inhabited by names with thick black capitals and carpet-knife serifs. In the fuming pink stuffiness the map is like a portal to a second world, a cool realm of tree shade and boars and mushrooms, Piety's side there represented by a storybook candy window. It is only in the shower—he puts that selfishness ahead of phoning Gayle—that Piety understands. The map—the Black Forest—the Tienappels—Tree Haus—Germany. After driving showers are like a massage, emotional

and rejuvenating. You give way to the loosening of your tension. The day's troubles melt.

For no reason at all, as he turns to the showerhead and allows the warm water to patter his eyelids, his cheeks, his mouth, he remembers an evening when he and Gayle sat watching a show which featured survivors of torture. He wipes his eyes and stares down at his feet, big brown feet planted near the drain. The water steams into his scalp. The man who impressed Piety the most told the journalist that during his torture, when his fingers were broken and his testicles were shocked, when he was suspended by his wrists for hours, he told himself that this was not the worst, that the worst was coming, still coming. His strategy worked—for each successive ordeal he tricked his body into believing that the state of torture was *status quo*. He was not broken. He is now a relatively important politician. The water dribbles down the tile in beads. Piety contemplates the man's quietly aggrieved face for several minutes without thinking another thought. Then with a jolt he perceives that he is on the verge of sleep. He turns off the tap. It is time to call Gayle. He towels himself, leaves his clothes aside for dinner, and tramps wet-footed to the phone. The shower has further thickened the air. The window, steaming at the edges, shows deepening dusk. He dials, listens, and remembers what the workman at the tree said. We'll have to cut those wires. The phone is dead.

He lounges on the left bed with the Reader's Digest edition of *The Magic Mountain* and *Death in Venice* bound in one volume, telling himself, only half-jokingly, that he did not drive by accident into a different universe when he left the city, until it's dinnertime. Mr. Tienappel, thick and rosy in tweed, literally buttonholes him into a study before he reaches the diningroom, and comes right out with it. It is not often that we have a black staying with us, he says. Would you like a Schiedamer—an *apéritif*? Piety declines. Mr. Tienappel shrugs. Ja, blacks, whites, to me the same. He has owned this farm for seventeen years. He came here first as a tourist. But when he saw how many others were coming as tourists, he

knew hew was in business. Have you seen the tree? You have no German? Ah. There is a word for that tree in German, it does not translate into English.

And what are you going to do now, asks Piety mildly.

Do you hear that? The dinner bell. Follow me.

The ornate, mirror-polished diningroom table is set for three but heaped with food for a half-dozen. Roast, ham, turkey, potatoes, cooked carrots and beans, a salad as bushy as a floral arrangement, three types of bread, covered gravyboats and butterdishes, beetroot slices, mashed pumpkin and—soup first, declares Mrs. Tienappel. The maid ladles cold potato soup into his soup plate.

You understand that we have skipped a bit of ceremony for only one guest, says Mrs. Tienappel.

Of course.

Mr. Tienappel asks him what he would like to drink. Just water. She and her husband exchange glances.

I was talking of our tree, says Mr. Tienappel.

Oh yes. Do you know the history of the tree?

Wait. Our guest was commenting. Please continue. They look inquiringly over their spoons.

I was asking what you are going to do now.

Ah, yes. Well. Why do you ask?

Piety says, The tree—. And stops, sick with epiphany.

Yes?

Don't you know why the phone lines are down?

No, Mr. Tienappel smiles. The phone lines are down?

Why did Eunice not tell us, says Mrs. Tienappel, looking sharply for the maid.

You have arrived, a sooty suitcaseless devil, to consummate all the hausfrau's expectations of calamity, to stoke Herr Tienappel to immolation, and to reap among the souls of this place.

What is the matter with the tree, Mr. Tienappel demands with sudden alarm.

Last night it was struck by lightning. It has—it fell, on a telephone pole.

They sit upright and mute in their chairs as if bound and gagged by a burglar. Then Mr. Tienappel jumps up. He is not much taller, standing. What? He shouts. His eyes grope at his wife. Then—I'm going! He shouts, and crashes out of the room. She remains bolt. Her mouth begins to work. She mutters, first under her breath, then aloud—Wait, then she shrieks it—Wait! and leaps and runs out the opposite door. Moments after, she is flying back through the dining room, shrieking in German now and laden with camera equipment. A motor roars. Wheels tear at gravel. The sound quickly diminishes to a drone and fades.

The feast in front of Piety assumes the rankness of carrion. He has not eaten lunch, or even a real breakfast. Like a marathon runner's, however, his body seems shored against exhaustion, paying hunger no heed. He has indeed been running a marathon, measured out by a ponderous celestial bureaucrat. All your life, he tells himself. Marathoners run marathons inside marathons. Today has been a hill, a steep climb that will slope downward only when you get back home tomorrow. But even after that you will continue to run and run. One day your night-black figure will ink across the finishline, your shoulders hiked to your neck, your elbows pinned behind your back, your lips alive with a demon's smile. You will shut the cheering crowd out from the saga of your polychrome exertion. The satisfaction of stopping will be indescribable. He returns to his room without sampling from the table, lies on his bed and tries to rest.

But now, unlike in the shower, his body keeps vigil against rest as well as hunger. After night's total enclosure of the Tienappel farm, he is to be found still staring at the bright

ceiling, watching his thoughts like flotsam in a stream. The curtains remain open. Chill presses in from the window. He decides he wouldn't mind watching television, that it wouldn't be an acknowledgement to Tree Haus of any receipt of hospitality to watch TV. He wanders down the abandoned hall, pausing as he reaches the diningroom from which master and mistress have fled. The maid is sitting where he sat, a plate of food under busy attack by her knife and fork. She looks up, her cheeks like the mumps, and winks violently.

He finds the television and the news, watches in the dark. The window behind the television seems a stained glass pane of dark purple. He remembers last night, the mindless comfort of a soundless TV, and presses MUTE on the remote control. The byline reads, Cusco, Peru. Five white students sit around an Indian whose crumpled hat obscures his face. Then—Ollantaytanbo, and a panned shot of an archaeological dig. Prague. A verdigris dome. Politicians standing and shouting. The lower half of the purple window flashes. Piety squints. London. A billboard announcing Anthony Slate in *Milton's Isle*. A scene from the play. The window flashes again—another night lightning storm moving in, like the one that felled the tree. Arles, France. A painting of a park in which a faceless scarecrow inclines his head toward a newspaper. A man re-enacting the scene in the real park. Verona, Italy. A statue seeming to float on a carpet of water which pours over its pedestal. Low mountains. Peasants. The window pane doesn't flash, but glows for several moments and darkens—headlights. The return of the Tienappels. Piety stands by the curtains watching. The TV is not bright enough to illuminate the room—they will not see him. But it is not the Tienappels. The driver's door opens and two heads bask in the map light's glow. A sandy-haired white man who was driving, a black man in the passenger seat. The two men alight. The driver puts his arm around the black man's shoulder, which is clearly a poor shoulder, dressed shabbily and exhibiting the deference of the country poor. Then the passenger door thumps shut, the light is snuffed, and all Piety can make out is a lump hulking toward the

gloom of the pasture. He strains to keep up, betting on the odds, and when it happens it catches them just before they round the corner, and his retina is burned with the negative image of two toppling men, their arms tight around each other in camaraderie.

He has been a fool. He should never have stopped. He strides back to his bedroom, past the deserted carcass of dinner, and collects his jacket, keys and wallet. Nothing matters but Gayle. He bumps the Black Forest's doorframe on his way out, which only hastens his stumbling escape. Gayle represents the end of marathons, whatever else may befall him. If he is the first to Gayle then all races end. His car crackles down the Tienappel driveway, then hums along the road. It has begun to sprinkle. He is elated with humiliation. To think that he never made the effort to say it in words before. Nothing else matters, nothing—if you run it well it's your final race my boy. He laughs aloud at the prospect, near dawn he reckons, of rushing into the bedroom a joyful supplicant, an exulting supplicant if the combination is possible, a man bursting at the heart to prostrate himself. Success, comfort—trifling pleasures. He sees his life now as if he were entrusted to extract a single still moment of goodness in it. He and Gayle, standing at the alter. He should have asked for her hand months ago.

After timeless fevered driving a rain-streaked sign ignites in his headlights. The freeway is near. He hurtles past another night object, which flares like the sign into momentary existence. It is a boy, rimed with light, humping along the side of the road. The boy is plunged instantly back down the waterspout of darkness. A chaos like a swarm of moths, a whirring screen at the end of Piety's racing mind, acquires mechanism. The boy's stormclouded face comes to him. He pictures the boy's most recent impression, a pair of dwindling pinprick taillights. Something pulls his own eyes to a source of light, the lime-green note on his dashboard, glowing faintly, back-lit by the dials. The thick, black question mark which he has drawn on it seems to grow until it has taken the shape of the road.

Secondo

Motor oil is motor oil *I praise the morning, in refrain* one leg locked straight on the stepladder, the other leg propped like a dog's over the lip of the *roaring happiness* and his torso spills down into the engine.

Ronnie *you cannot ever account for each one of them* the new bottle sure is full of fine concoctions if I say so myself. A fine product.

The activity in the deep well of the *it happens that he is a conversationalist*. The body hangs lifeless for a moment, bent in two. Then the man sighs. His arms push, his torso rises. His leg slides down to the stepladder and he straightens. His jowls look like pepper mixed with salt. Three dark bands of greased hair stripe across his bald head. He gazes down at Ronnie. Motor oil is motor oil, I tell you. Just bring me the cheap stuff.

Ronnie speculates about *the morning I was given these overalls. It strikes me each day. the super handed them over folded, clean-smelling, soft, my name tag on top. They smelled of washing powder. A washerwoman must have toiled and toiled to scrub those stains from black to brown. I received them, my hands pressed into them, and a vision appeared in that same instant. A mirror reflected in a mirror, a thousand pictures of a man, frozen in the act, sitting down to breakfast, looking at the eggs as if he was hungry. And I knew, then, I was sure. That was my future going on forever. The sun is an egg. It is like I am always hungry*. But the man, back in the engine, merely grunts that *an engine is as appealing, from a certain point of view, as a journey. You have your hands in the engine, you have your eyes out there on the road. Your forearms, your elbows, the tops of your knuckles are pressed on by the stony slick steel that is cooling down. Your fingertips play over the delicate issue of the moment, they read the engine surfaces and it is a veritable proclamation of unity. The same way your eyes roll over a ribbon of land. Flick them briefly from the road to a hill, or to a hawk hanging in the sky, and you find in the objects a continuous and unseparated freedom of being. In both cases you are quiet and meditating.*

The memories surface unforced, you're twiddling a loose milk tooth when you're five. The tip of your tongue returns to the old spot with exploratory satisfaction and you watch a childhood scene.

Ronnie does not *walk further down this road.* He drifts back to the garage.

A brown sedan *journeys* to the pump and its motor is cut like a sigh *should be taken for one reason only, compulsion of duty. To travel in self-interest* the two rear doors burst open, a child flying out of each, a girl on the near side of the pump, a boy on the far side. The boy careens around the sedan taunting his sister I'm going to beat you, I'm going to beat you. She ignores him, running headlong for the door of the Mini Mart, but he skips ahead and blocks her way. She dances and feints like a doe separated from the herd. A woman shouts from the car don't forget to shut the doors Stafford and Sarah come back right now and shut the doors, while the man speaks to the attendant, fifty bucks chief *it may look like all the others but it has its own individuality, I mean, even though it's brand-new it has a long, long history. Do you follow? It's a goddamn miracle. Here's my goddamn miracle. After I made the decision, and the next day it's in my garage, I'd go and stare at it for hours. Get up a midnight and go down and sit until two or three. Just looking. This is your history, your dad and mom, your work, all your work, and soon you see that it's your future too, the roads you've been down and the roads you will be down, no joke, and thinking about your history and your future in that garage is almost like prayer* while *make sure he knows you're not nervous* yessir.

The woman heaves out of the sedan, slams Sarah's door, stalks to Stafford's, slams it, and *fucking insolent and insipidly stupid people I could murder him for his face* the Mini Mart.

When she does not immediately emerge the man *here we go* the horn *it debilitates physically, though, by excess, for what man will deny himself his desire, be it for food, or drink, or sweet dark passion, when he is in foreign parts, beyond the frown of disapproval he might encounter at home? As far as your soul is concerned, the certain consequences of travel are far more* with her head down as if pulling something heavy. The children follow, eating chocolate, quiet and *we are the Watusi we're eleven feet tall, we fight the Nairobi*

they're no good at all. The man starts the engine. The woman holds the door for Stafford and Sarah, who crawl inside. She closes the door and says, as she slides into the front seat, I hope you didn't give that man a *truth, then, is that self-love encourages the false belief that individuality exists. The second, less obvious, but still true, is that society adopt the pose. We can only conclude that the result must be an attitude of its us versus* halts to allow a Mercedes to thunder by and *is anyone prepared to claim that contempt and belligerence are useful and just?*

The attendant watches the sedan, then *if he has gone to the men's room I'm prepared to push him around a bit, I believe* advancing querulously around the side of the station.

Ronnie approaches with a can of oil in each hand. The man, tinkering in the engine, doesn't see this. Ronnie stops a few paces before the stepladder and regards the man's lower body and *although I'm not personally in the habit of attending church, my wife goes every Sunday. My wife likes to say that men are interchangeable. They all melt into the soil during the weekends and only surface—like worms—Monday afternoons. This is for a laugh at my expense. I am not interested in church. But of the people I know who go to church, except my wife, none are bothersome, and I think I can spy a reason or two for* the man fails to rear up from the engine, clears his throat and says your oil sir.

Another sedan pulls up to the pump and idles. The man in the engine pushes himself up, wipes his hands on his trousers, and faces Ronnie. Ronnie proffers the cans.

Put them down there, will you? The man indicates the foot of the stepladder. Ronnie places the cans in the gravel, then appraises the man's situation, squinting professionally. Engine trouble?

No, no trouble, just a bit of a mess.

The sedan *oh this is unconscionable.*

Can I help you with the oil?

The other attendant comes running from behind the *what the hell someone needs to learn he's at work* puts his face close to the driver's window, hands on his half-crouched knees.

The man on the stepladder scans the pump, the Mini Mart, the garage. Sure, he says,

I'll need it in just a sec.

But as he is bending back into the engine *revenge* lurches out of the Mini Mart roaring *I thank my wife and the Lord ten times daily that none of her eggs ever hatched, it's bad enough to sit twelve hours from breakfast till dinner with a parade of darkies that never grew up, but can you imagine the absolute damnation of twenty-four seven, three-sixty-five? For eighteen years? Sure enough I'd kick them out after eighteen years. look, young man, young daughter, you have made it to the age of majority and there is the door. Seek and ye shall find. And you can bet the house that I'd run things like in the old-timey days too. Men, women, these black fuckers and kids all know what's coming to them if they don't keep their* get over here! Now! the man points at the ground with his index finger.

His hands thrusting into the engine, his head snaps back over his shoulder. He watches.

Ronnie shuffles to the man from the Mini Mart who continues to shout. Let's get things straight here. What have I told you? When a car pulls up you don't *and the look that bitch gave at me when she paid for her candy as if it was my fault they can't get it into their heads that quick service is what people want. Well I'll tell you what you cruise on out of here and leave your complaint behind and with a tankfull too don't you* do you understand? Or do I have to say it again?

Ronnie *I am a man, I am a man* his feet.

God, the man says. Then he cuffs Ronnie on the head, dislodging his cap, and stamps back into the Mini Mart.

On the stepladder the man watches over his shoulder. Ronnie reclaims his cap from the ground and lists toward the pumps, where the sedan is pulling away. The other attendant, however, avoids Ronnie, himself heading back to the garage. But he stops in his tracks when he *finally* notices *the little bastard* behind *before my eyes of what's about to happen, he either will allow me to scoop him up like a tame rabbit, and I'll have him by the scruff, or he will bolt like a wild rabbit, but I will be able to turn on my heel and call out and point him out. So what does he think is better for him?*

The man descends laboriously from the stepladder as the attendant approaches. He

stoops for his oil, his hand dangling for a can, when he notices *something*, and crouches down to inspect the wheelwell, and then sees for the first *I admit that I thought you weren't real for a moment, that you were something fantastic like an ape, then maybe a dog, but at last I fathomed what you are, a small* near the shell on the other side of *my experience*, shadebathed and peering under the high clearance at the attendant's oncoming legs. The man looks over his shoulder, for a moment in the same attitude as when he watched Ronnie and the manager, then back, and their eyes *I read a lot. On the road, and something of an insomniac, all that coffee. It works out to one book per trip, that's a one-way trip, nearly everytime. I finish on my night off, sleeping up in the truck. The next day, new trip, long haul, new book. I block traffic for about ten minutes—people get murderous—and get a book that either I've heard of before or one the bookseller likes. I cut quite a picture, greasy clothes, greasy cap to hide my hair, fingers all stained holding a fresh book. I get in several hours of reading a day. Two or three days per trip, you can get through most of a book in two or three days, and then there's the night off to polish it off. Those books, and those trips, are like little compartments, like a wall of cubbyholes, and in some of the cubbyholes I've put a book, and others are empty, waiting for their book. Remembering is dipping a hand into a cubbyhole and brining out a book, though I've got to admit that the book is often faded or blurred, especially when we're talking about the regular trips, the ones I do two or three times a month, they're bleached in memory, though the book is different each time. I don't have much in the way of family or friends, but yet I feel I belong to a certain brotherhood, people whose lives are essentially the same. I think the key to this brotherhood—if you live a life that's not made up of plenty of beginnings and endings then you're not part of it. Now when I identify a brother I* says, in a low voice, where you headed son.

To the city says Secondo *I am your brother, don't entertain any fanciful notions I entreat you. I'll undertake the long proof if necessary—we should not spare a thought for ourselves when truth is anything but clear. It's best to begin by asking how a man experiences. What is experience based upon? There are two sources of experience, reality and imagination. But, now, what are thought and imagination if not a combination of words and imprints? And what are imprints if not the ideas of the senses—ideas culled from our*

eyes, our noses, our ears and fingers and tongues. It is plain that experience, whether of imagination or of reality, occurs by the direct touch of the world upon us. What we experience is no more than what we hear, see, smell, taste and feel, immediately or once-removed, and in fact our definition of the concept should run, experience is sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch. I have been touched by everything that has touched you. I touch what you touch. I was greased on every side by the oil in mother's sack. Her heart beating reached forth and gripped my own and the static cavern resonated with sounds, the mother heart, its two echoes, and the antlike rushing of the blood. At last long fingers felt their way around my legs, prodded my stomach, and pinched my soft skull. The air stung my skin. The blanket scratched it raw. Mother's ghoulish cries never ceased to wake my own terror. Time's triumph ceaselessly summoned my own high expectations. We are inseparable as kittens of a litter, as a woman and her son, relationships like these reduce to the single concept of family. Consider the family. A family is several individuals who confirm the reality which imprints the senses with which they perceive one another. The existence of the family proves the existence of experience. The members of the family see in their family several slightly different products of their own experiences. And the family is predicated on granite brotherhood. You and I are brothers. Don't acknowledge such a thing on any other terms but walks past the man.

The man says, softly, want a lift.

The ring of brotherhood must not be yes.

The man stands. Come on over here then he calls loudly.

The attendant, about to turn the corner around the *obstruction* to where *where* crouches *is he calling after me.* Secondo stands. For a moment they make a triangle, Secondo and the man by the wheel and the attendant fixed out in front as if his shoes were glued to the ground. He looks between Secondo and the man.

No not you the man says. The kid. Come over here.

The attendant *it's only that I've been here three years and never seen, well, what's your secret that's all I want to know.* Secondo moves to join the man. The attendant starts and *of no business of mine.*

The man mounts the stepladder. Hand up the oil when I call for it will you. Secondo waits *friendship between men forms out of mental attraction, physical appeal, familiarity of circumstances or identity of interests, or the admixture of these, and nothing here obtains. You will vanish, you will forget who you are. You smarted in the musty light, you lay in the dwelling right alongside and you were touched* reaching back without looking, his head jammed in the engine, I'll take that first can.

Secondo carefully places the open can of oil into the man's backoffered palm, a fat palm covered with a sheen of oil and sweat, and watches the wrist and arm swivel and crane into the engine.

There says the man after a moment. Now for number two. The hand snakes back. Secondo *sacrifice and duty are the holiest forms of work, they verge closest to marriage between earthly and soulful consistency, and if you are going to award anything with your consistent attention and energy you must be sure that it betters your own worth. Brotherhood, true brotherhood, betters the single worth of any one* claps it closed and fastens it. He descends the stepladder where Secondo is waiting. The man *hasn't lived a day unlike* my name is Gil.

Secondo.

What?

Secondo.

Well. *Say Condo.* I'm headed to three cities. But to any one of them is a long trip. You sure you want to *tell me how a book is different from a man, this is my challenge to the world. The bookseller, when he recommends a book, he is nothing more or less than that same book.*

Yes *the will tires, the body submits, the self dies.*

Well up you go then. They are standing on the passenger side. He opens the door and Secondo climbs two steps and seats himself on springy vinyl. He rocks slightly, enjoying the bounce.

Gil says through the window be right back and ambles toward the Mini Mart.

The smell inside *there are two sacred codes in my profession, only one of which I*

violate. Never drink when you're working and smoke until your lungs give out. I don't find any attraction in tobacco. My truck and I, though, consume our weight in other little quantities and if you're peculiarly sensitive you can tell what just by and from the dashboard the sharp report of petroleum and varnish.

Gil returns, hauls himself up to the wheel. Welcome aboard my roadtrain. I reckon it's time to get going. He turns the key, the engine *a perfect moment in the kitchen. You put the soup into your pot, put it on the stove to warm it, set the burner on say 3. Then you're doing something else, maybe slicing some cheese, when all your thoughts are washed suddenly as clean as a sunny hill after rain. It only comes a few moments later that there's a new presence in the kitchen, quietly going about its business, the soup steam of course* and the *true beloved* rolls, wheels crackling and internal processes hooting, to the brink of the *there's the story about the sailor who must sail through a particularly tight place, and the strait is narrow as a virgin's—well. Something of that sea wind blowing in my face too when I set off. There she is, Miss Future, floating lazy in that watercourse, she knows you'll come along. You'll be coming at barrel-riding speed, over a terrain of indefinites, bumping and rolling in the current, which trickles, then trots, then rushes, then stampedes and finally thunders without prejudice right for her What Is To Come, enduring the blows, preparing for who knows, maybe even the knockout punch. It is a feeling, in the roadtrain, hell and monsters to the left, hell and monsters to the right, and nothing at all, really, to stop you from being smashed to* so where do you come from.

Suffolk.

Well you haven't been on the road for long. Nice place. Why you moving on.

I—. I have family in the *lies*.

You do *have never begrudged* were you with in Suffolk.

My *confirm the corruption. Breathing a lie with the first breath in this contorted place. You are already what you are not. An easy lie isn't possible in places where you have lived with* brother.

Mm. Like I said I'm headed to *truth, which is the case with all travellers, they are half truth and half lies* so what's your pleasure.

Excuse me.

I mean, where can I take you.

Oh.

You've got family *anywhere, or is this the end of a life, I'm carrying around an already vanished empty disappearance?*

Yes I have it *the moment that time is made an object. People who travel more quickly have less time to know the land they travel through. And as their sense of place tends more and more to depend upon what is salient, and fails to uncover what prevails in vast and subtler patterns, then their sense of self grows monolithic with their unfamiliarity? When you have little time to know someplace else, you rely on comparison, not reflection. Similarities and differences enforce a notion of the place, and necessarily of yourself, which is mere fancy when you return home. Home becomes, too, a shadow, a container for the qualities about yourself you found distilled abroad. The moment of individuality, it follows, brings with it two consequences, it enables men to plunge in bands as brothers across time and space, as recklessly as their invention allows, and it destroys utterly the brotherhood of man. These consequences are not contradictory. The brotherhood of man, paradise, is possible only when man does not know that he lives in paradise, which is impossible once men travel. This is why time must never be allowed to proceed beyond the call of certain voices, why* what?

Do you want me to drop you any particular place when we get there.

Anywhere.

Well. Make yourself at home then. There's a bunk up top, got a nice view of the road. We'll stop again soon for lunch. Good place I know about forty-five minutes ahead. I never miss it. Yes, go on up, sleep if you like, take in the sights, a pretty little perch isn't it. When I was a boy we used to *run those hills like the descendants of dogs that generations ago breached their fences, like we were on all fours, galloping, and the tall grasses whistled by whipping our senses to houndish joy, our noses yelping at smells which burst like flocks of birds out of the bush, our eyes bounding into the future so that for moments we divided in two and existed in separate, ecstatic forms, which merged and split as we caught up and were left*

behind, our ears animating the land with our heartbeats, the hills throbbing and revolving as we dashed along, the grass a river, our tongues lolling stung by cold water, how we ran and played, a wild pack, until arpeggio, says Jo-Ann. She grins, then sucks on the harmonica, toggling it furiously in her mouth. Then she can draw no more breath and she stops, panting. I first picked this up when I was your age. How old are you? Want to give it a try? She offers the harmonica, it flashes in the sun. Maybe later, then, she says, and pockets it. Show me where you live.

Secondo glides away from her like a noiseless plane. Jo-Ann recedes until she is a tiny figure watching him inscrutably. He flies over the dusty yard, over Mama Kosi's house, which is transparent, he can see through it, she's sitting in her green chair watching TV. He flies over the children, who are looking for him but don't know where he's gone. An insistent force, more pull than push, describes an arc that he follows, helpless to resist. He passes above the shacks and the stable and over the graveyard. He hears a wailing but he cannot identify the source. It seems to come from the blue, because the blotchy land below is mute. Suffolk slips past like a ship. The wailing grows louder when he sights a thin silvery stream, which bends in the ground to take up and mirror his trajectory, but it is not water he sees, it is a road, and being above it he knows now that the wailing is coming from the road. He drifts with the road until he is a man. Soon he is an old man, his sight dimmed, the green and brown of the land faded, the sky gone white. The road is a pattern of narrow smoothness that he knows by some sixth sense, and by its sound. He has accustomed himself to the sound as all old men must accustom themselves to whistling in their ears. He drifts above the road, no longer a plane, but a dropsical drifting balloon. He is drifting with the *purple motionless me lying as attentive as a doll while she crowed, Secondo, and mother sank into rest at last, I am here as quiet as a stone, but busy in my silence, and I can tell you that the people in your life will be left behind, when as true twin brothers we shall meet* which is when the wailing stops.

Secondo opens his eyes. The truck has halted. The long window above the bunk glows phosphorescently. He sits up and peers through it, aware of his swollen tongue. The cramped room is like an oven. Shapes gel outside, Gil has parked among a dozen trucks, set

down like toys on a dusty plot, without thoughtful arrangement, the long, many-wheeled torsos at haphazard angles with the monstrous heads.

Hey, whispers Gill. You awake.

Yes, whispers Secondo.

Do you want a hamburger? It's time for lunch.

OK.

What else?

Water please.

Sure. There's a lot of rigs here today. It may take a little bit. Stretch your legs if you want. There's a toilet at the back of that building too.

OK.

Just *discretion being the operative word* inside *short squat little black.*

OK.

See you.

Gil swings the door open and claps it shut. Secondo watches from the window. The *gentle* driver struts stiffly to uncramp his legs and disappears.

Secondo descends and sits behind the steering wheel *with the hope that he might escape truth. But how, how? You may try to imagine. Men sometimes imagine that they are drivers of roadtrains, zooming through the desert. The cracked brown earth groans at their approach. The thin ribbon of asphalt scarcely holds to its terrestrial lashings. Animals lose their senses at this display of random wrath. They bolt and remain skittish long after the event. Mountains are driven under, lakes are parted, the driver of the roadtrain cruises with the consequence of an emperor. Such thoughts we might find in the minds of men. But if you were to* jumps to the ground. He pushes heavily against the door to close it.

The truck nearest Gil's truck *is merely a prayer in which your beseechment changes every few days. Just the prayers change. The fact of the praying does not change. You never actually stop praying. What types of prayer do you know? The type of prayer that you heed and the type of prayer that you pray. These two types enfold all the possibilities. And yet, can they be very different at all? Is it not the case that you are always participating in a*

prayer? Either as respectful observer or as the actual pray-er, agreed, but still you have come to a prayer, an action by which you show that you are familiar with the conventions of prayer, if not the precise words being prayed. If you come to the prayer, then, in whatever capacity, you partake of the conventions of the prayer. On one hand all the cows of a field herded into a crate and hitched to the gigantic engine.

Moo, says Secondo. The cow nearest him shifts its weight nervously. The other cattle perceive its anxiety and a *trembling* passes through the body of the rig. Several cattle stamp their hooves on the grating. At the top of the fourth column a cow facing Secondo lows and stamps and a shimmer of dust sifts to the row below.

Moo, says Secondo. A cow somewhere in the middle of the other side of the rig *all it would take to shake this cage down, a simple stampede, the rivets would loosen, the bars would fall to pieces, a scramble on top of one another and then off, churning up the ground, out of sight* green and yellow manure slicks down one of the struts and pools near the hind hooves of a cow on the bottom row.

Moo *O emperor who may take his pleasure why* with his arms raised like a hobgoblin, moo he shouts at the cattle. A din arises from the rig, hooves and hide against metal, a clatter which sends the nearby pigeons into the sky and the cattle low their consternation *given to the birds to carry off and sprinkle down like seeds, spread the alarm, the land is fraught, put to flight* runs to the other side of the rig shouting moo, moo, a cow in the third row butts its head against the *herself would show submission, sturdy trees would lose their obstinacy and be felled, the creatures which crouched at first would now reveal themselves and spring away, some to be cut down, their screams for all to hear, beware the kine, beware the kine* the rig's shaking transmits to the cab, which rocks gently as if buffeted by wind. Dust rises among the lower rows of cattle, obscuring them, and their panic intensifies until all the cattle, some facing out, others in, are stamping and butting and lowing *freedom freedom freedom* shakes and thunders like a cathedral toppling in a terrific storm.

Moo shouts Secondo, waving his arms *devil that feeds on fear* has rounded the truck with a roar, charges for *the incarnation of my whole life's sorrows, I can count one for every gleaming tooth, one for each finger and toe, and hundreds and hundreds nesting in those*

disgusting coils of hair is lifted and pinned aloft.

What the fuck the man shouts, shaking Secondo. What the fuck. Others, who have dashed out with the man, skirt on the periphery of his anger. He drops *the sky has always been the most sanctimonious of liars, as you're about to discover, a lofty slanderer, stretched like a flag overhead but thin as an empty eggshell, it will fall on you in shards* a good lesson. He pushes Secondo roughly with his foot. It that what you want you little fuck?

Whoa, says a voice. It is Gil, upside-down, carrying a paper sack. He has stepped into the irregular ring made by the onlookers.

What.

Don't do that. He's just a kid.

Why don't you fuck off. Who the fuck are you anyway.

I'm taking him to his relatives.

I aim to teach him what it means to fuck with another man's property. Then he can teach his relatives and they can hold a school and soon there won't be one of them around that doesn't know the meaning of respect.

He didn't mean any harm.

Fuck you he didn't mean any harm. He could've killed one of those cows. They still could die. Fucking devil.

He's probably never seen anything like it before. He's just a farmer's boy.

Goddammit.

If any of your stock die I'll give you my license number. You can look me up. I'll compensate one hundred percent.

But the man swivels on his left leg, his right boot wheeling round and catching Secondo in the midriff. Secondo rolls, stopping face up. He cannot breathe. The man shoulders past Gil. There's your fucking one hundred percent he says. He carries on out of sight, but Secondo hears him open and slam the door of his cab. The sound of the engine rolls through the air. The cattle *falters from the rear, not by any signal from the leaders's, for the leaders fear trampling by those they lead and continue to run. They are the last to stop* skittish, the truck gains the highway and picks up speed.

Gil helps Secondo up. You all right he says, but Secondo cannot answer. Nailed in the solar plexus. You got the wind knocked out of you. The only thing is to walk it off. Secondo leans on Gill while they tramp in a circle where the cattle were parked *it would be wholly proper to describe you as a passionate man. You see your dedication as beyond conventional. In moments when you are not displaying the grip of your passion you are still reminded, and it pleases you, that you become unconscious when you pray, unconscious of any audience, unconscious even of yourself, the prayer prays you when you pray* puts his hands on his knees and coughs.

How are you doing.

Secondo nods, facing the earth. Presently he straightens.

Are you OK?

He coughs. Yes.

Now you understand that that was stupid. Really stupid.

Secondo nods.

I'm not saying you deserved to be kicked, but don't ever screw with a man's rig, OK?

OK.

Let's get back on the road.

On the other hand, says Gil when they are in the cab together, a haul is a haul, I know it, but that has to be the worst. I never run cattle. Did it once. took all morning to load them on to the truck. Then you bolt them down roll off, but you can only go so fast, according to the law. Everybody ignores that law. Your haul's go to be at the boudoir a day and a half after it's been put on the train, see, which means either you break the law and drive like a maniac or you don't *have that sort of consecrated ability whatsoever. Your urge resides in what might be called decency, as opposed to a cultivated call, though it's doubtful whether the two are different. But that is to get ahead* to pay the rancher. Believe it. It's ridiculous. Far too much risk. A haul is a haul but I don't run cattle. Here. See what you can find.

Gill offers the paper bag, out of which Secondo takes two wrapped sandwiches and two plastic containers of cold drink.

One for each of us. You look like you could use it. Been something of a weary day

for you, I reckon. Oh! You see that?

Secondo looks. Gill is pointing low and ahead to the *which engages in its own sort of prayer in its dips and rises but is best understood as representative of the million prayers of men* dark figure perched on it rapidly approaching them.

That's a kit, says Gil, ten to one that's a kit. The bird flashes past *the bird* he's spying for a snake *beyond even the most tenuous kind of intercourse, it neither touches not is touched by* just beautiful.

Here's to Milly's, says Gil, lifting his sandwich. Best hamburger on the highway. Nice woman too. She puts red onions in the meat, which is why it's *have a story for her when I come back this way won't I. But then I've always got a story. Sometimes I stop over as much as an hour. We sit at one of the picnic benches. I'd lie if I said these weren't some of my happiest times. Just talking. We find our bench and there go the days since we last met. One time she said she would just like to know the truth. I said truth of what. I hope you don't think I've been holding out on you Milly. She said oh no. Just the truth about men and women. I said those are dark secrets you're after. She said I know it* passing through now, I know it like I know the back of my hand. That hill over there, that's called Round House Hill. Used to be a great big house on top of it built in a circle, like a wagon wheel lying flat. They said it was owned by a movie star. They even made a movie there once. Anyway I was driving back the night it burned down. No one was in it and they never determined what caused *your decency from your mother. You observe her and imitate her and do as she instructs, so when it comes time for you to leave the house on your own, for instance to go pray, you are not left unsure of yourself. You prepare yourself properly. You bathe and shave, you don formal clothing. It's quite possible that you are a complete novice when it comes to praying, but already you know how to attend a* movie stars and farmers are about all you get out here. You come from a farm?

Yes.

Did you ever have to harvest anything?

No.

Keep stock?

There were chickens. And four goats.

Well what *attracts you and me, for instance, she said. I'm not being forward. I'm just confused why it is that we should meet, and talk, and decide that we like each other, and do it again, when every day of the year I meet men who run the same route as you as regularly but to whom I've not said over two dozen words in my life, excepting what'll it be and that's five ninety-six and sorry we're out of that brand and see you again. But you come around and I hand things over to Honey and have myself this long break. Why is that? I said* it's mostly wheat. You see that? He points to a bright red grain silo, revolving on the axis of the truck. That is full to the brim with wheat right now. The rains have been perfect, they say, first time in ten years or so. But you can also see that *be to God for His bounty, for keeping our larder, for the fowl and the stock of the brown sea on which he has set us afloat in our Ark, for casting off the hawsers of vice and steering us in his Grace, anchorless in his Care, our table* you like that?

Yes, thank you.

I should have bought another. I could do with another. You?

No.

OK. Here's our plan. We'll be at *when we must ask the question, are differences in intricacy differences of quality or of degree? That is, how is the priest's prayer, which is of the highest order, different from the congregation member's prayer, which may still be divine? Though there may be fewer steps in achieving the attendance of church than in achieving the invested consummation of a divine contract aren't ideals in each case being striven for? You can see that a difference of degree* work, gathering firewood but I bet you're pretty familiar with *I can hardly believe I was a child too. It is almost not a memory. I was happy once. It is an emotion. It comes upon me sometimes as regularly as I place a stick in my bundle. Other times it stays distant while I work in the bleak day, I am aware only that my back aches, and that the shadows are lengthening. I must hurry. I search and gather as swiftly as the land allows, though it never affords an easy step, it catches at my legs and slows me down. When I know I have enough there is usually still light. I will make it back safely. I raise the bundle and set off. Shadows are gaining power. There are meals to*

be cooked, children to put down, and then it comes, like the world has breathed on me, and I must breathe it in, I have no choice, the emotion that I was once a child too. How I tremble inside. My heart asks a question of my head, but my head cannot answer why I don't envy anyone the work they do. Work is work. Everything has its ups and downs. I could be sitting at a desk making more money but then I'd have to worry about the boss coming round and checking on me, I'd have to write reports, I'd have to file, there'd be meetings, all the kinds of hassles I want to avoid in work. I'd rather hassle with *an impossibility. I can't say just what it is exactly makes me enjoy a conversation with you . I just know I do. Maybe you can't say anything about the truth. Maybe the truth can't be talked about, except to say that you know it. I like you, Milly, I know that. No questions asked. She said I like you too but don't take this as an insult I'm curious about why I like you. Is it because you're honest? I don't know you well enough to say if you're honest. Or decent, or kind, and the same goes for you. What do you know about me? I didn't know what to say. I said, I know I like you. She said, is that what we end up with then, I don't know you but I know I like you* had a job?

No.

Well, you've been to school then.

Yes.

Ok, so you know something about it. There's pain and pleasure in all things. It's a fact. The good part is, you can choose your pains and pleasures. You can say *we've agreed that at a prayer there are two types of pray-ers, those who perform the prayer and those who hearken while it's prayed. So what happens after? Does the man who attends unpray his way out? Does he retreat home, undress and sit dully until the next prayer? How absurd, you say. The man who attends the prayer most likely has further plans for the day. He will meet with people, observe social conventions, judge, be judged. I think you will readily perceive that he is doing nothing if he is not praying. Transforming ideas, even dim ones, into action, with the intent of performing skilfully and with grace. But* I'm independent. I haul for big companies but that's just on contract. Today I'm pulling, you won't guess. It's amazing, especially when you think how big the haul is, I'm at full-weight, but also I'm just one truck. They have dozens working for them every day of the year, including holidays.

They call me with the extra work. And I'm hauling for them all the time. Now what could be so important that a company's got to ship every day of the year as often as not with contract drivers like me. The clerks at the warehouse call it, are you ready, gear. But it's just birthday party trimmings. Load that gear, they say *and get going, she said. I shouldn't hold you back with gloomy talk. But I didn't get up. She looked depressed, like she was old all of a sudden and didn't like what she had done for all those years. She looked down. She said, hey you've got a lot of time to think. I said sure. She said, well maybe could you think about it for me then. Think about what it is makes two people who don't know each other decide they like each other. Is it God. Is it the devil. Is it because we're lazy, or stupid, or desperate, or are you good and am I good and do good people* wear party hats, light candles, the kind that stay lit and the kind that blow out in one try, set off little firecrackers, decorate their cakes with all sorts of toys, soldiers you can eat, little trucks and trains, jelly candies and marshmallow building blocks. Then they have to serve the cake on party plates with plastic forks and spoons, which come in all shades, and meanwhile the room's got to be decorated with streamers and everyone's got to have a mask with their best cartoon character on it and the tablecloth *was made by my mother. She used to sell them at the roadside. It was no thing to sew them together for a shawl. I drift out there and sometimes I'm sure I'm the Lamb. I say to the nesting bird, fear not, and to the field mouse, fear not. I compose lists of my deeds. I will never kill a bird. I will never capture a mouse and squeeze it wickedly in my fist. I will fast, and I will not hate the land for spiting me. I will not hate the long wet grass, I will not hate the ugly hills, I will not abhor the hawks, I will pity the cattle and sheep, the sun may blight my eyes without fear of my curse. If I lie in my shawl at night and look upon the whorl of the stars I will not judge that I perceive the fingerprint of evil* unless I've judged wrong. Or unless their figures are off. But I could literally drive into a town, park my rig, and celebrate ten thousand birthdays *a prayer of phenomenal proportions but still fundamentally a prayer. The conclusion is easy to see. Everyone's a person who prays. This being true you can say that everyone shares a pray-er's dream. What is this dream? To pray beautifully. How do you pray beautifully? I can hear your answer, and it is the correct one, by working at the prayer, by praying every day* of the week *verges on this this particle*

with a destiny in a high hotel room I will in a high hotel room he will like this like this it comes into being and passes away and comes into being and passes away leaving behind what has passed away this little out of the ordinary we've seen dozens already only what's that take a look at that particle with a destiny of food in a restaurant this tonight this this the verge of negation fended off by what's this a particle with a destiny that grows like a tree into one thousand years ahead starting tonight in a high hotel room this family this particle with a destiny to negate the moment of this I say *but I'll be God-damned if I haven't given it more than a minute's thought* the question is *given that you're a pray-er, where is the best place for you to pray, where is the place with the most likelihood that your urge will develop into art* of understanding the infinite. Do you see what I'm saying? That's how I see the world. I'm a guy with a truck hauling birthday gear at the moment and there are other guys in other trucks and we never *have a chance of approaching anything like perfection anywhere but home. Where else but home can you anticipate the thoughts of others in such a way that your prayer will go unmolested? Where but home will your artistic instincts flourish into visions and where else may you pursue these visions with adequate intensity? At home you may sniff out the last dark corner of intuition. But abroad you* keep a gun. All the guys I know do. But it just makes them reckless. They sleep on the road, not at truckstops, they start looking for fights. They drive crazy. So it's those things that strike me as a contradiction *but is it the rate I walk or the path I take* a guy with a gun would probably speed up right now, just because. Now that's spite. But I ease up a little. No use making a man's life more difficult. Especially if something went wrong, if another car came up, it would mean his *thoughts are in tune with the road like the road is feeding into my head through my eyes, like my head is a dome of sky. I am motionless but everything under the dome changes rapidly. Ages are passing, hills rising and levelling, the grasses mustering and dispersing eagles and cattle roaming under my dome and flickering away in an instant. The wind roars. I don't have the proper orientation to do the kind of thinking that she wants. My thoughts are the thoughts of the road* doesn't that strike you as funny too. Here we have guys who carry everything under the sun from every point A to every point B on the map. Our lives are affected by every last national issue you can come up with. People have got to have birthdays so it comes back to

us. If there's a strike and the roads are blocked it comes back to us. The word is vicissitudes. It means changes and possibilities. All national vicissitudes come back to us. Can you see that? But we, we, the drivers, we don't change one bit. That's a fact. We are the eye of the storm. Now isn't that *clear that you have sinned against yourself. You have left home. Doomed yourself to the stumble, the shamble* peculiar *prayer* but you'll never meet *my sister, she'll have died before you get the chance, because her eighty years of cooking and washing and raising children are a different eighty years, you will have eclipsed them in a matter of seconds, which is just long enough for me to travel another wheel length on my tractor, and for her to crack open an egg and watch it fall into the bowl, now we're both dead, our lives are lived, we're ghosts who've lost our attachments to the land, our bodies have long since been clutched by the earth and we are sucked like feathers into the vacuum you displace* well of course you can *but even ghosts* go on up *Secondo, because you will be ugly* when we *will find nothing of merit in your prayer* in the city.

Jarvis

Jarvis, this is Jarvis, the man chants under his breath, like a prayer, and eyes the girl's reflection in the window. The whistle blows and the train rolls. The yellow platform sign slides by like a goldfish. JARVIS. It has conjured and fixed the girl as if by photographic process on the plate of the window. She is looking down at the magazine in her lap. Her blonde hair, modishly cut, hangs like silk to her delicate jawbone and frames her face, which he has not yet dared to visit with a direct glance, but which appears best suited to the lighter expressions, as though polite conversation has tested her hunger for life, and little else. She is wearing an admirably-fitted white blouse and a casual, creme suit. She is perhaps twenty-four? But the yellow block which sustains her is left behind by the train and she becomes as clear and ageless as a stream, pouring inscrutably and cold over the city façades.

Jarvis, this is Jarvis, he mutters to himself, leaning over until his forehead touches the window. His lips are there, too, in the glass, murmuring like a penitent's. From this vantage, he feels, he is safe from discovery should he look directly at the girl. His eyes lower. The hemline of her skirt stops short of her knees. Her legs, milk, bare, are crossed. Were she to swing the top leg it would brush playfully into his space, graze the crease of his pants, but it remains sealed to its twin as if glued. She has taken the universal defensive posture of females, which, of course, does not detract from her allure. Or—the warm, gently-rocking train occasions a second possibility—it may be that her pent deportment is a ruse, that her eyes are glossing unfocused over the pictures and, as happens during a period of enforced idleness, a small flame has kindled at the back of her mind. It illuminates the recesses of a certain cavern. Designs on the walls dance in the light, mesmerical. Her legs squeeze around a notion which thrives in moments of exemption from seriousness, thrives inside her. His eyes drop to her feet. A single strap on each tethers her shoes, which match her suit, to her ankles. Her feet descend gracefully from the heels into snub-nosed caps. The top shoe is

pressed tightly to her calf as if, indeed, she is sliding in rapture down a vine of fancy.

She is young and beautiful and, without indicating precisely her state of mind—of defensiveness, or private paralysis, or even honest preoccupation with her magazine—her posture implies that her trip has diverged from the ideal. The source of her annoyance is easily identified. She boarded the train at Claremont. She bears the unmistakable mark of a girl from Claremont, where families endorse public appearances which reflect upon their wealth. Reserve of bearing is desirable, but so too is an acknowledgement of terms of intimacy with *couture*. Not a hair out of place, not an unruly thread. Casting about for a seat she chose one which posed few difficulties, a booth either unoccupied or, better, where an old woman smiled up at her beatifically, charmed by the spectacle of youth. She sat. She composed herself. She produced her magazine and assiduously ignored her booth companion, whose stop arrived a few minutes later. The old woman struggled to her feet and with a kindly but unrewarded glance hobbled to the exit. (A granny taking cookies to her grandson? A visit to a friend in a nursing home?) The booth was blissfully empty, then, for uncounted moments, until an athletic-looking sport with a large briefcase boarded and marched down the aisle on sharp lookout. The girl wished with sudden ferocity that the biddy had stayed. It is incontrovertible truth that men sit near women on trains to leer, and she was completely vulnerable. Out of sheer insidiousness the man sat right next to her. She imagined his odious voice whispering his intentions. The better to smell, my dear, and to taste, to harvest your fresh hair, carry off the scent of your perfume, clasp your knees with the strong arms of my mind. Loathing coursed in her veins.

In truth, he was not unhandsome. She didn't glance up from her magazine—she closed around it with ever more concentration—but the process of montage, working in her peripheral vision, delivered his figure whole. His broad shoulders testified to considerable strength. From them hung a dark pinstripe suitcoat—not as it should, transforming his shoulders into the baseline of a powerful triangle pointing down, but somewhat unrefinedly. The jacket was too big. The corners of the triangle drooped. Though expensive, his suit was cut by a machine, not by the hands of a bespoke tailor. *Nouveau riche*. His thighs, parted

callously, brimmed big under the surface of his pants, which rumpled around a pair of shoes that had perhaps been worn for a week, and would perhaps last four or five more, until a vain urge to replace them overcame him. His hair, stockbroker-short, glistened black and wavy and helmeted his black eyes in their soldierly insouciance. His nose, lips and close-shaven chin, while admirable specimens, lent themselves to a displeasing air of self-satisfaction. A black-and-white man, she thought. I could cut him out of a newspaper.

Her composition lacked an element, however, and the instant this mistake was rectified her picture was given its title. Green Tie. The tie, a flat, silken creature, rested its head near the man's crotch and radiated flame-green against his chest. It was a living, exotic tie, and though its bearer was not unhandsome, as she had remarked—her mother often opined that a man who did not look at himself in every mirror he passed was not worth the trouble, and the girl suspected she could imagine this man, unclothed, ruddy, inspecting himself before a full-length mirror—yet the tie made him completely what he was—it was there in the mirror, slack against his hairy chest—a lizard, a snake, studying her with cold appetite.

They sat in silence for several stops, as still as if they were posing for a portrait. The units of time slipped down the scale—minutes for seconds, hours for minutes. Though she insisted to herself that he be ignored, she squirmed inwardly at his body's prickly closeness. As in the Beginning, Now and Forever—the words, intoned each Sunday by the venerables of her church, which she did not fail to heed so much as fail to hear, along with the rest of the stuffy mass—but she believed in God—were then fulfilled like a prophecy. Preying on her hesitation to reject Green Tie with body and soul, the most ancient of sequences lowered into her trip from Claremont to town. The tie fixed itself in the eye of her thoughts, charged with vile power, and amid the confusion of her inner revolt it beaconed an alternative to which, suddenly, she woke. The seed was planted. The tie slipped down a dark hold. A tempted woman sat next to the man on the train, slow heat in her cheeks.

She crossed her legs familiarly. Green Tie had occasioned a rictus inside her which, in all honesty, was less than unbearable. A pleasant fever bloomed under her skin. The

knife's edge of his nearness had softened, although the sheer fact of his presence had not diminished. In the close environment of the booth Green Tie prevailed as the salient element. Her heart thumped in her ears. It half-seemed that the train was a private carriage delivering her to a tryst. She did not rein in this figment. Her face settled into mendacious calm while a frolic grew like a welt in her imagination. Caressing this welt oceanically Green Tie sat unmoved from the position he had taken upon first choosing his seat.

No sooner had he been awarded tenure among her thoughts, however, than his achievement threatened to pale. Another man, just boarded, slid down the twin bench until he faced the girl. Green Tie did not betray interest in the event. He flicked his eyes once, an automatic gesture which the newcomer returned. The pleasure of the girl's daydream ruptured into exasperation. Another one! Was this to be her lot in life—vexed at every turn by voiceless impositions? She regarded the newcomer. The train was more crowded now than when she had boarded. She tried to discern whether this heightened or lessened the design in his choice of a seat. But the shade of his motivation was dark to her. Part of him, doubtless, craved her, her female essence, which was washing the booth in bright waves. She knew the pathetic desperation of men. Part of him simply wanted to sit and enjoy the rushing vista. Her trip would proceed more bearably, could she weigh his purposes. He was staring out the window. If Green Tie had stepped from the creamy pages of newspaper fashion, the newcomer seemed to have been composed merely with words in mind. She might flip through the back of her magazine or scan the daily classified smalls and lift a perfectly good, two-sentence description of him. A single man in his late twenties, abstains from nightclubs, likes red wine at home. A junior manager in a mid-sized engineering firm. The sentences flitted from her mind and imprinted his person, each modifying his shape, until he seemed to be imperfectly redrawn from instant to instant. Normal guy but no cretin, familiar with chessboard. City clerk with extensive experience of municipal courts. Bachelor, thirty-one, enjoys restaurants. An MA, computer literate, won't say can't. The assessments led quickly to an unexpected, violent conclusion—but who was to say that the last thought which came to her before she looked down again carried less truth than the rest?

A peeping Tom, a masturbator, a dork. A man who masturbates about the women at work. She nearly snorted, astonished at her own imagination.

She returned to her magazine. She hadn't kept track of the stations. Where had the newcomer boarded? Somewhere in the middle suburbs—Rosebank or Linden, places grafted to the city, susceptible to the metastasis of beggars, break-ins, horrible urchins. Claremont was nearly countryside. Slices of land, immaculate, tucked the mansions back into shaded removes. The title to a property in Claremont—to hold the virgin sheet in his very hands!—probably constituted Green Tie's highest hope. A promotion, a well-born wife, and perhaps one child would usher him closer to this dream. A wife and child could be had quite quickly, of course, for the likes of him. Again the tapered reptilian strip appeared in the girl's mind, stirring the morass which had circulated slowly and thickly since Green Tie had chosen her booth. Then the newcomer splayed his legs in the manner of his rival, further cramping her space. She could fairly hear Green Tie hiss. If it was true that the newcomer was watching her along with Green Tie, his surveillance had nothing of the other's implacable proximity, which seemed to press against her and which communicated itself in the outrageous terms of patience and urgency which assumed an inevitable event. She wanted to repudiate them both, their perversions, with a sweeping glare.

But she could not lift her eyes again. The two men, like usurping barbarians, had laid claim to the booth, a claim she could not challenge. She kept perfectly still, attended to her breathing. The pages on her lap lost their vestiges of significance. She stared at them but they seemed blank. First Green Tie had pushed her into a silent swoon, and now the newcomer marked time absorbing her though his pores. She pictured both men, alone, later on, in the executive bathroom, sweating her out through some automatic ritual of gratification. Their voraciousness disquieted her. She felt an odd admonishment to keep her place, nourish them with her closeness, and she began to dread stifling. But at the same time the chaste and demure qualities of her personality intensified, and she girlishly chided herself. Her plight was not so dire. She was flying on rails in the bright sunshine, *en route* to cosmopolitan pleasures. At some point, soon, the train would reach the end of the line. She

would leave her companions to their separate worlds. She need not, before then, slight her own sensibilities by finding a new seat—which would require her, distastefully, to step over the two men. She should merely sit quietly. Events would provide.

Her discomfort eased. Beyond a certain point the men were as weak as kittens. The pictures in her lap returned to the pure semblances which pierced her like stabs of light. Her eyes wove welcome over the glossy sheets. Growing playful, she discovered boldness enough to flip the page. It wavered, thin and upright, then fell theatrically and settled. She reasoned with herself. The two men were offering her a choice, were they not, so why not choose? It might be fun. Behind one she might protect herself against the other. Then it would task her little to cajole and delay until the train adroitly delivered her to freedom. The station would roll up and halt. The doors would part. She would step through them and blink from existence like a fairy.

It but remained to reconsider the men. She withdrew into an accustomed pose—her features smoothed without palpable movement, bearing arch, momentarily impregnable disinterest. Behind newly coy eyes rules were made about the judging of the two men—who would most willingly court the will-o-the-wisp? A brief struggle ensued, in the form of a game. The two men played and tussled under her teacherly supervision until, as happens between teachers and children, one, for ineffable reasons—for children really are all the same—encouraged a measure of bias, and then, through the typical expansions of fortune, stepped into outright preferment. In that moment she made her choice. She moved willingly into the shelter of thralldom. Swift currents which had encountered resistance swept her away.

She lifted a hand from her lap and, without raising her eyes, patted her hair. The luxuriant gesture served its latent function. The senses of the men sharpened. The girl had changed. She was charged with fresh secrecy. They suffered, then, like dogs thrown in with a proud, yearling bitch. Their hopes approached wild joy. Fear assaulted them, foul and wraithlike. They learned the chief lesson of men. Women choose men. Women display themselves like merchandise, to be handled, paid for with money, but upon the final moment

the tables are turned. Endowed with life, women step from their pedestals, pointing and beckoning. The men, ambushed, lament their loss of dominion, but admit, too, that it has always lain at the heart of their desires to be chosen. The girl's companions strained to detect evidence of her affections. Is there any fate for men more dire than inconsequence? They became sensitive to her very breathing. They waited for her to nominate her master. But the hair-pat proved the single indulgence of her newfound security. She had arrived at an equilibrium bordering the sublime. She sat as placid and impenetrable as a doll.

The train slipped into and out of Tracy Street station. The new taxonomy—streets, not suburbs—indicated the verge of the long city, which was rolled like a hundred coppers to the brim of its grey, polluted shore. The train was ten minutes late. In the booth, with the forced graciousness of competitors, the men lived a paradox. Their states of being were fixed, but their destinies guttered. The girl between them was also fixed, pinned to her seat in fact at the pith of desire, but her destiny was dilating like light. Too soon the men would corrupt, fade, and be ungraciously discarded, like her magazine when the new issue arrived. If she would show even the slightest gesture of deference their fierce straits might ease—an arching in the corner of her lips, a covert flick of her pastel eyelids, a change in posture which dismantled into a nudge—but she could not be disturbed from her reverie. Disconsolateness and delirium presided over the speechless trio. The train commenced one of its longer portages. The booth hurtled, a locked box.

They poked through the southern end of the city, advancing toward Great Brown, end of the line. Great Brown! The name was as fresh and livening as a sharp wind which had its birth somewhere far out on the water. Great Brown would cover her and shuffle her and deal her from one of its exits into the arms of an expectant, who would hold her jealously close against any prying by the citizen brothers and sisters of the city. In particular, the girl was to keep a lunch date with her fiancé, who had already made junior partner, and afterwards she would perhaps shop, for a new bag, before returning to Claremont. She would be more careful, then, to avoid a war on two fronts. As it was, this morning's had nearly ended. Her lathery daydream, to which the men, though complicit, had no access, sustained her as if in

amber. Her half-closed eyes did not flutter or bat. Beyond the pale of her entrancement the men, adrift in wretchedness, clenched their jaws. They anticipated the end of the line with cold despair. Great Brown would declare of their ineffectual jockeying a draw, which was a loss. The girl would breeze away without cause to describe her journey as anything but unremarkable.

Green Tie, at last, displayed the wherewithal to disrupt what must surely have terminated in intolerable impotence. The clip of the train slackened and he straightened from his slouch. He gathered his briefcase from the floor and placed it across his knees, bracing his arms against it, stretching his back. His expression did not alter in the least. He showed, as throughout, the barest sneer, a suggestion of contempt for an uninteresting situation. It was now quite clear that he would alight at the next stop, not Great Brown. The game of tenterhooks the girl had invented was up. She had chosen what was better for her and could have it. But he would rob her of her precious counterpoise. Her carapace would suffer a violent wrench. The fantasy which she nurtured would turn on her in croupous inutility. The newcomer, accressant, would brook no delay before the first of his depredations. She hadn't much time. Train and platform were resolute on synchronicity and exchange. Signs iterated in the window. Green Tie stood. He was leaving. The girl turned to him. He showed his broad and pitiless back. She apprehended her escape in the same moment that she uttered it.

Excuse me, she said. The sweetness of her voice checked any hint of temerity. She continued, an innocent—What stop is this?

Green Tie did not whirl, precisely, to address the girl, who had shifted expectantly toward him, but he turned with great speed, his face altered for the first time—not swept with surprise, but configured into the ugly shape of triumph. Green Tie glowed with triumph. The girl gazed up at him with mischievous beatific grace, all but proposing a contract which, for its momentary duration, would bind them in something like love. For the portion of a second during which their eyes met they coupled violently, locked in an antic and murderous collet of excitement. Then it was over. Green Tie studiously directed his attention to the newcomer, whose face offered a sort of stammering defiance. This was crushed by

imperious contempt, coiled in the corners of Green Tie's firm mouth. The girl had openly declared her preference. Green Tie lingered to inculcate the impression of an eternity of failure and shame. Then he turned to the girl and discharged his duty in her armorial code, which the newcomer now perceived had grouped Green Tie and the girl from the start, pervading their very senses of self, affecting their public carriage, so that in their clothes and facial modes they discerned likeness where others beheld chaotic empty urban encounters, a likeness which in its refinements mantled Green Tie and the girl with perpetual auras—a victor and his blushing prize—and relegated the newcomer to a caste so far below them that he wallowed in a slave's identity.

Jarvis, Green Tie replied, this is Jarvis.

The girl almost shuddered with pleasure upon this conclusion of their little deal. She snapped her magazine like a newspaper and pored over it, though it hardly mattered now where she put her eyes. To look at the newcomer was to look at nothing. Humiliation would keep him in his place. She was free. She might read, or watch the city outside, or slip back into the scented room from which she had been called by Green Tie's departure. This she did not witness—Green Tie stepped lightly off the train, the assurance of her partiality borne high by his soul—but on the other hand he had not exactly left. He was available to her at the inly drop of a handkerchief. Her thoughts could follow what course until the train delivered her to Great Brown from Jarvis Street station, where her paramour had passed on, so to speak, to the next stage of incarnation.

That random city name, which Green Tie had spoken in exultation, Jarvis, though associated with the girl's deliverance, would never be cherished in her album of important memories. From time to time for the rest of her life odd minutiae would prompt flashbacks of the block-and-chisel face and the audacious necktie, but the name Jarvis would darken quickly, like the face of a person who had stopped her for the time. How could it hope to compare with the puissance, the resounding vibration, of a name like Great Brown—a name before which, fitful with adoration, the girl would gladly kneel? That name—Great Brown! Insinuated in the manifold literatures of the nation, calling for obligatory pause at its mere

utterance. Great Brown, so many things to so many people that that notion in itself trumps individual tellings as the supreme evocation. Great Brown, buzz, hub, axle, pump, multitudinous bedlam thoroughfare of the multitudes! Jarvis is lamentably not to be thought of, except as a nondescript place where those bound for Great Brown endure another minute of their commute.

Jarvis, this is Jarvis, he mutters. The irony is as sour as vinegar. His own profitless name, mocking him in another's mouth. A glinting high-rise fills the girl's reflection for an instant, then is pushed from sight by the city towers, which spring up and stack higher and higher on either side of the train. Next stop Great Brown. In between the buildings the light is let through at a new angle. It strobes across the window, hurting his eyes. He feels fleetingly moved to set aside his chagrin, engage the girl on the problems of the day, comfort her with friendliness. But the time in which he could address her diminishes. Only an utterance or two remains possible, and now, he finds, next to his natural impulse to show compassion, he cannot, either, deny certain feelings of spite. She sits clothed in cool repose, an ensemble which Green Tie helped her pick out. Her attitude consigns him, Jarvis, to oblivion. Great Brown is seconds away. She might be reading her magazine, she might be holding carnival with herself, or she might be utterly blank, her mind in hiatus. The scenarios become less and less important. Soon, railway passivity will end. The doors will part and she will waltz away. The vividness of her journey's predicaments has been outstripped by this final certainty, that the doors will part and she will waltz away. Her deft side-stepping of molestation, be it only the molestation of light talk with strangers—is that much to begrudge a stranger?—casts the doubt that she was threatened at all. His last inclination to impart to her an observation about her disquieting train ride is drained utterly—the observation that disquiet, malaise, and perversion always mark a people who live bereft of an era, that sometime in the recent past an old era abdicated, released the world from its covenant, that a new era has yet to ascend to the dais, and that the consequence for men and women like themselves is the loss of a sense of communion. He and the girl blow and suck soundlessly like fish out of water. She sits in the only posture available to her during the

interregnum, in silence and with patience. Great Brown will release her soon, but only to further extractions of silence and patience. The train is slowing. The hours that await in the city have been marking her since she gave herself up, blithely, to her lunch date. The carriage-spans of ground covered by the train have accumulated in her pretty body to the point where, though nothing about her can be said to have changed, nevertheless, in her neck and shoulders and joints there has grown a peculiar discomfort, as if she is being unaccountably pinched in some quarter, and, unaccountably, as if she has been pinched like this before. It is the interregnum which pinches her. She is pinched by desire which enwreathes and stirs her. She is pinched by fear, roaring inarticulately at the base of her imagination. She is pinched by cupidity, its craven whines, its petty gratifications. Her constitution is fastened upon, thieved from by the interminable pinches—they will in time cramp her health, cripple her essences. Her spirit, when she dies, will have been pinched to riddlings. It is obvious that he, himself, Jarvis, is one of the pinchers, crabsidling close for a good gouge. She has parried the blow, but that effort in itself has left her pinched. And once she is altogether clear of the threat of his pinch, yet the times will go on pinching her, and the pinches will inevitably tell.

He leaves her alone. The few words, the single phrase he could pronounce would do no good. What could he say that would interest her more than Green Tie's conspiratorial pledge? Were he to entrust her with his last words, were he to summon the range of his powers in the composition of a purest phrase, a phrase that chimed as he spoke it—were he to extinguish his life in the birthing of the phrase—he would see it, as he pitched forward, fall like iron at her feet. He would fall on it himself, a fallen soldier of the interregnum who fell on his sword, his words. He leaves her alone. He says nothing to her. He whispers to himself. Jarvis, he says, this is Jarvis.

The train halts. The commuters lunge for the doors and seethe around the turnstiles. She is already there among them, side-stepping the slower, competing with the quicker, pumping forward with the gaiety and assuredness of a dancer on stage. Perhaps she is a dancer, automatically agile in skipping and feinting. Jarvis can offer the better of two

hypotheses. Joy was restored to the girl upon her release from the carriage. It is the genuine joy that accompanies an illusory freedom. She is moments from making full escape from the dull crushing mundus of the commuters. It is a matter of turning the turnstile. On the other side a magical curtain will veil her from those who seek her with impure hearts. He feels, suddenly, keenly, a desire to go to her, shake her. He stands on tiptoes and catches her blonde hair, the shoulders of her fine suit. There is no magic, he wants to tell her. He hatches a plan to hurry through the turnstile, make sorties, follow at a distance until a moment presents itself , chat about the train, drive home his point about the interregnum, people, him, her. He discards the plan immediately. She wouldn't listen. Weariness threatens to deprive him of the will to continue his day. But after a moment this heartache passes. His head clears. It is after all an unusual day. She twists through the turnstile and is lost. He drops all claim to her.

It is an unusual day. To begin with, it is a day off from work. Normally, he takes a much earlier train and exits with the crush for the buses which shuttle in an oblong loop around the city, distributing the professional crowds. His stop is at the northeast corner of the loop. Untrammelled, latitudinal strips of boulevard dominate the metropolitan grid. The cityfolk glimpse water brimming at the end of each deep wide urban channel. In summer, when the sun is charioteering and the clouds are held at bay the water is like a bright square of tinfoil laid flat at the bottom of the street. He turns into his building after a block and a half. He passes through security, rises with the escalators, picks his way among the cubicles. At his own, which he has preferred to mark with very little—a calendar from his mother, a mug sprouting an enamel rainbow for his pens—he sits and continues yesterday's travails for emporia.

The corporation that employs him owns a supermarket-cum-clothier chain of stores. Internal marketing, supermarket, group two (of two)—thus his designation. His group's project is to improve shop-floor knowledge of the cold chain, a fantastic and obsessive series of events. An apple is plucked by an indifferent farmhand, tossed into a basket, and is never again subjected to handling or natural warmth and light until it is chosen by a customer and

taken home. Jarvis is a force in his group. He understands the psychology of internal marketing. Once the shop-floor people convey, in their small talk with customers, the idea that cold chain fruit is superior, the customers will experience reinforced feelings of superiority. You are what you eat, you think. Jarvis and his colleagues have agreed that a line of penguins serves as a powerful imago of regal wholesome coldness. It is the linchpin of their effort. All memoranda, circulars, notices and educational posters appearing from their corner of the head office depict a photograph of four emperor penguins toddling down an iceberg.

The corporation's executive entirety is housed within the building—the retail people, the shipping people, the quality-control people, the scientists, and the bluebloods, the suits, dictators of general policy, exhorters of respect for the mission statement, the men who write quarterly reports for the business papers. They are arrayed over the deep, spacious floor plans according to a mimicry which nearer approaches perfection than its behemoth archetype. The head office is a city within a city. Work-space is zoned according to a formula of weighted variables into Residential and Industrial zones. The two categories, governed by different ordinances, engender distinct environments. Jarvis works in Retail Borough 6, which borders a shipping borough and a records borough—the typical Residential pattern throughout the head office. In the Industrial zones, laboratories predominate. Intent scientists and quality-control men squeak about in fast-traction shoes. Retail boroughs are phlegmatic, suburban. The executives putter among the cubicles, stop obligingly for one another, lean against the makeshift walls for a chat. Someone suggests a break. The executives retire to a café—one may be found on each floor, centrally located. Employees make visits to the different cafés on their breaks—all classes at least see one another if they don't actually speak. On the first level underground, a boutique of the corporation's products, specially priced, opens at noon. Below that the employees can escape to the country. An artificially-turfed ball field was laid some years back for sports leagues, and next door is a shooting range.

Jarvis signed a contract, when he was hired, which stipulated his responsibilities, his

pay and a promotion schedule, and bound his loyalty to the mission statement. During the perfunctory handshakes which followed, he discovered—or rather a vague apprehension suddenly burned like revelation in the acute circumstances, the closed office, a pair of grinning men who had just become his bosses—that illimitable further constraints also obtained, down to the roots of his being. He was initiate now. He breathed as the initiate should, as the others did, blandly, considerately. His face responded with suspicion or jocularity when his colleagues gossiped, exciting his initiate's sense of taboo. His body language made fine limned distinctions for the initiate corpus to interpret. He soon traced the source of these broad and subtle corporate manners. His fellow executives were cheating the interregnum. A *Zeitgeist* whickered through the circulated air of the head office. The men and women working in their cubicles were primed with it—with the impression of a kind of mosaic progress being made across the sonorous spreads of Residential and Industrial zoning. A thousand people felt they belonged together in the head office, reaped the gentle lift of togetherness. His colleagues were united by a displaced patriotism.

He has been looking for another job since the day he signed his contract. He is well-paid and well-liked, but he rebels against the idea that it's his time to be numbered among refugees, as his colleagues must be. Refugees are people who are withdrawing in body and spirit, people on the lookout for unclaimed ground. They quickly become pioneers. They want a roost where their pasts and futures can be made seamless again, as it was in the time before they became refugees. Jarvis's colleagues are the healthiest specie of refugee—the kind which, endowed with foresight, adopts its status before it applies perforce. The corporation is swelling. Jarvis is a prodigy in the thriving camp, one of the youngest executives. Everyone sees great things for him. He will lead them one day. In less than ten years the bluebloods will start grooming him for their echelon. Before that, when the head office moves, he'll be given directorial powers. The site of the new head office, adjacent to a town an hour's drive from the city, has been settled on. No one is dissatisfied. The day of the great bivouac, two or three years down the line, is eagerly anticipated, the subject of much talk in the cafés. It is refugee talk—the repetitious subject of the time of sanctuary,

drawing nigh.

Jarvis is a swain of the interregnum, no seeker of sanctuary. At Great Brown he pushes through the turnstile with the vulgarity of one fit for gross regimens in the city. The city has always invigorated him. He has plans which do not separate from it—which evolve rapidly in his imagination, sloughing fancies like the attachments of childhood, but never straying from the idea at heart—Jarvis, city dweller. He is visited by lovely flattering visions of aggrandizement amidst the heaped city shapes, as if their radiance, their grandeur, long since ushered past half-life by the interregnum, fattened him on the decay. His plans diverge from the collective plan of the head office. He is a shark among the meek cubicle fishes. He will not remove with the rest when the time comes. He will decamp from the decampers first.

He is due at a job interview at City Hall in just under two hours. It is merely a gambit which may lead him to his prize, steadfast metropolitan fixity. As it is, the gambit probably suffers too much from playfulness. What, after all, can he say to the traffic department officials who, upon review of his education and experience, will straightaway suspect him of charlatanry? They need a hardhead to fill the position, not a youth fled from commerce. They need a man with a bruiser's physique and burnished guts, impervious to the plaints and aspersions which bombard traffic assessors daily. He is unsure of the final duties of the job. The advertisement was vague. Administration plus accounting plus data gathering on site, computer literacy helpful. It seems that tenacity is required above any definite civic trade-skills. He sees himself pacing up and down scorched asphalt during summer rush hour, marking a clipboard, yammering into a two-way radio. It will be his task, at eleven o'clock, to convince the duly-appointed panel of his merit for such work, notwithstanding unusual circumstances. He must stymie his interlocutors with the novelty of his existence—a promising executive who wants less pay for more and rougher toil. Your servant, sirs. If he fails he may take consolation in the proof of his seriousness, now minuted on the public roll. His first gambit, the interview, there in the records for anyone who needs it ascertained. Jarvis intends to leave the head office. Jarvis intends to remain in the city.

It seems to him that he alone responds to the city's hubris, its ceaseless broadcast. He is incited to the twin celebratory acmes of joy and defiance when he spends any period boulevarding its lengths. The change begins as soon as he steps into the main chamber of Great Brown, where stimuli—colporteurs's cant, vendors swearing billingsgate, malingering plainclothesmen, eleemosynary squabble between derelicts and urchins, the raving of mattoids, and behind all the tramp of the dailybread earners—provoke near lycanthropy in his temperament. He becomes as happy as a savage. An ache for self-expression across the landscape intoxicates him. He sets off into the city with his vitality whipped up, his senses hunting.

This morning he walks fast—he lopes—to the bistro he loves most dearly but has few opportunities to frequent. It is a long walk. He could have caught the bus, but the bus is for the meek, those in submission to the workaday routine. To enter the city without immediate obligations is to oppose oneself to routine. He walks—apparently in pursuit, but pursuing nothing more than the giddy sting of his happiness. The wind sings off the lake. The buildings dazzle with sunlight. Part of him spirals heavenward, crazed and mothy. He arrives at the bistro with a mighty appetite. The waitress is pleased to see him. Breakfast, yes, is still being served. He is shown to a table with a view, and when the plates arrive—a bowl of slippery fried eggs, a fagot's worth of sausage, hot covered croissants, cold fruit, all the spices and sauces requisite—he is caught in the great dilemma of having to choose between pleasures. The view stirs him to feelings of worthiness. The sparkling water hails him, the pedestrians display no insolence. But the food requires a rash abandon that brooks no delay. Thus with a peculiar mix of regret and gusto he begins to eat and does not glance up again until coffee is served.

Too soon, the time of his interview is at hand. He finishes his third dark frothy cup—truly a juice for the ages—he leaves ample notes on the table—why should not plenty be shared when one had had a plenteous season?—he parts flirtatiously with the waitress, he emerges to the wind and sunlight with the pleasant stunned feeling of satiety. It will work off in the walk to City Hall. Once more he disdains the bus. He reaches the corner at a brisk

pace and turns inland. Anyone entrusted to follow him would marvel at how he moves. He charges fiercely down the thoroughfares, overtaking left and right, then sidles with cunning into alleyways, where he advances with more direct speed. He dogs and accelerates according to sweetly clear principles. The city is known to him as an immemorial design, in which he constitutes a fine adept delineation.

He mounts the City Hall steps at five-to-eleven. He receives directions from a woman at the information desk, and continues to mount, shunning elevators, up six flights, whereupon he presents himself at an office labelled TRAFFIC. His skin jumps with caffeine. He feels imbued and noble. He is told to wait. The director is behind schedule. After twenty minutes he is permitted through. His interview lasts as long as a trial postponement. The director, a man named Llwellyn, is invincibly cheerful, which is unexpected. Llwellyn says that this is only a preliminary interview, a weeding stage if you liked, and if you didn't make it to stage two then you were a particularly abject specimen of weed. He is joking, of course. He needs to record a few addenda to Jarvis's credentials, sent in weeks ago, garner some small elaboration on a point or two, and Jarvis can be off. Jarvis almost feels threatened by the man's *élan.* For a precarious moment he nearly bristles, losing everything. But, mastering himself, he chooses instead to warm to this being who appears, like him, to thrive in the interregnum. Llwellyn says, winking, to go by this account of your life—he taps Jarvis's file, on which he has just scribbled notes—we'll see you again at least twice. You know we're serious when you come back twice. Jarvis takes the compliment. He thanks the director and departs.

There are another several hours of gambolling in the city. He wanders widely, exploring with a child's enthusiasm and delight. Then the prerogative of satisfaction eases. He allows the commuter eddy to collect him and pawn him off at Great Brown. Despite this quiescence, his secret remains active within him and, like all secrets, strangles mercy. He is a savage among chattel. His brow needs mopping and there is scarlet in his cheeks. The others must think he ran for the train, but the truth is simply that the city has excited him to the point of feverishness. He feels exultant, as if he might obliterate the tired classes around

him with the force of a terrible thought. Across the booth, a small, effeminate man and a woman with plump moles on her neck have fallen into conversation. To his left, another man unfolds the morning's paper, which had been carefully preserved in his briefcase. Jarvis is himself wedged by the window again. He has a good vantage of the rest of the carriage. The train stops and the people pour in, until only standing room is available. It is an anthropological crowd, a jumble of slaves, bilious and resigned after the day's livelong moil. Their blood is denuded of heritage. Their father's and grandfather's gifts for taming the city—biting into the pavement with their brogues, smashing the glass and steel with careless laughter— are lost to them. He alights at his stop happy to have been ignored by the dull herd.

He enters his front door and peers about—it is dim inside. The sun lingers in its last quadrant, its rays being purloined, though not hastily. Light enough remains for sharp difference between exterior and interior and, once the eyes are accustomed, to stay resort to electricity. He lets the image of his rooms come to him. He likes to think of them as rooms, because of the connotations of sumptuousness and impermanence. He spends a good amount on rent. If he lived in a cheaper place his rooms might fare better for furniture, but he would not enjoy the same peace. He appreciates a fine room, its expensiveness. His front room and his bedroom are wainscoted in mahogany, and wallpapered in a white print patterned with faint gold tracery. The mansion in which his rooms—which had been servant's quarters—are situated was once the manor house of an extensive country residence, when the city boasted two paved streets and the country began a stone's throw from the post office. It has been extensively renovated. The floors are of gleaming parquet. The study walls have been rebuilt as inlaid bookshelves, and he keeps in them the only other real object of his salary's attention, his library. The book dealers know his tastes. They send along what comes their way of the city arcana. He keeps almost every volume. He likes to wander barefoot through his rooms at night. He pauses lengthily in his study. The lamp overhead glows in the polished parquetry, the books keep obedient vigil.

In his bedroom Jarvis removes his suit jacket, shirt and tie, and his shoes, dons slippers and a white undershirt which clings comfortably to his skin. He sits on the edge of

his bed rubbing his scalp. He looks forward to the evening. He will prepare his habitual supper, chicken and rice, a salad of greens, eat slowly, set contemplation adrift, then push aside the plates, retrieve a book from his library (a biography of a city mayor, a veritable caudillo in his time) and bow over it half the night, fingering a modest glass of wine. He will sleep in his undershirt with the window cracked—the air promises to be cool. The city will visit him, vaporous. In the morning he will find himself as before—a comfortable man, despite certain lacks, pretensions, and concealments.

He tramps in slippered feet from the bedroom to the kitchen. The parquetry ends at the kitchen doorway, replaced with green and white tiles which lend the kitchen an aquatic cast. But before he crosses the threshold he hesitates, prey, suddenly, to the uncanny impression that a change—perhaps fateful—will soon be effected in his life. He loiters in the doorway until, at last, preternaturally, he infers the presence of a second person, waiting for him in the dark. Jarvis does not own a gun. His thoughts fly to his letter opener, gleaming on his desk in the study. But he is not adept at combat—nor is he particularly strong. He resists, with considerable effort, an urge to crash into the kitchen with a cry. It becomes plain that he lacks the creativity to resolve his predicament, and meanwhile the second presence lurks. The moments of indecision begin to dizzy him. His senses interpret—or fabricate—a soft whirring from the stove's quarter—the other's breathing, patient, serene. Hopelessness hovers over him, preparing to settle. His own breathing has become ragged. The shrewd, steady creature which he always hoped would stir in his breast at the first whiff of excitement has failed him utterly. He feels miserable, reduced to a single course of action, to which he yields, a man in the grip of his own dread. Lightheaded and dangerously out of balance, he steps softly into the darkness and, lungs drawing sharply, claws for the light.

It is the girl from the train. He blinks. Relief temporarily drains him—Thank Christ, he breathes, and blows out an iridescently-hued store of emotion, the lack of which leaves him short as he meets the girl's gaze for the first time. But he inhales deeply. Pink returns to his cheeks. Courage swirls up through his nostrils and sparkles in his brow. He swells perceptibly—in the frightened girl's eyes, at least—as he appraises a singular event, truly, in

the city's long life. While he had been cavorting in the deep heart of downtown, strange, swift processes had been at work, far beyond the scope of his conceiving. For all his devotion to the city, he never once sniffed it out, a trail of occurrences that lies like unwound yarn now all over the floors of his rooms, prompting him, even as he studies the girl—wholly involved with her, a painter studying a dish of fruit—to follow with another part of his mind diverse, fanciful notions to impossible extremes. He studies the girl. So too he leaves her, to live in several different moments and places, pausing briefly in each, flickering before the girl like a deck of cards, shuffling through scenes until he has exhausted them and has arrived back where he started, standing in his kitchen, having just switched on the light. The girl beseeches him wordlessly, doubled over in the pillory, raising her head against the angle of the neck ring. A pair of tortoiseshell sunglasses, which had been tucked away on the train, are planted in her hair atop her brow. Her hands, clamped at the wrists, hang limp and white. She knows Jarvis from the train. Terror and hope vie for expression upon her lips. Losing strength, she drops her eyes, then hangs her head. Her hair rolls in layers toward the floor, swinging freely.

The others—the men and perhaps women who pierce hard city minutes with unfailing clarity, and sojourn among the fragments and echoes of their perception—have disappeared, leapt back into the shadows, their identities veiled. For an instant he suspects Green Tie, searches his memory of the train ride for the smallest evidence of deception—but Green Tie was exactly who he appeared to be, a dull drone headed for his office. It is unthinkable that he could be involved. Jarvis was not meant to know who was involved. Save the corner of his kitchen where, like sculptors, they bent the world to their wills, wrought their work, the intruders, the rogue kidnappers, have left all unmarked. Jarvis notes his breakfast plate, speckled with crumbs, near the sink where he set it down half a day ago, untouched. He has not yet moved from the lightswitch. His mind swings high in the starry night, cinematic, recording at his direction the silver glowing clouds, the dark breezes, the panels of light set into the murky buildings below. His own building looms close, is penetrated, passed through. The light from the kitchen doorway widens, engulfs. Jarvis records the sea-green

panorama. His body stands alert but relaxed, the brightness of his undershirt casting slight shadows on his face. His charcoal pants, beltless, ride low on his hips and taper to his maroon slippers, crumpling around them. From his slippers the green and white mosaic floor spreads to the corners, a smooth, luminous sheet. Vertigo strikes the room. The cupboards and shiny sink and clean white oven spin with the veering tiles. The girl and the device into which she has been locked swoop by. Her clothes have not changed. Her back is forcibly curved like a cat's. Her legs, split to shoulder-width at her shoes, are straight and taut, as if braced at the knees, and smooth and white as ivory. The pillory which confines her has sloughed medieval crudeness for an elegant black lacquered frame, scarcely wider than her body, which reaches to the ceiling and glowers down with severe stateliness. Jarvis identifies the symbol at once. The pillory pays homage to the distant giants, imperial but already cast adrift from the world's advancement, the venerable skyscrapers of the city. Life seized in steel, granite, marble, sand—the girl's perfectly groomed body achieves its highest expression in the half-living sculpture. He wonders, briefly, whether she died in the city after emerging from Great Brown. A vision of youth and beauty, struck as she crossed one of the wide avenues, flung horribly to her rest. Or, perhaps, in a dim, dank place, she ceased at last, cold with panic, to struggle against strong anonymous hands, and submitted to the snuffing of her life. Her spirit has now appeared to him, a ghostly moral. The city is a black coffin. Its shadow crosses souls without warning. But the room withdraws from surreality. Vertigo slows and ceases. Normal light and perspective are restored. The girl and the pillory remain solidly fixed in place. He hears her tremulous breathing. She is shivering slightly—she is real, anything but a figment. Her presence in his home, unlooked for but somehow read as a necessity within the weave of the days, has been staged, he can only guess, as a celebration of fortune and caprice in the city.

She has not spoken, nor stirred again, since he switched on the light. Jarvis, this is Jarvis, he chants quietly, and moves toward her. She flinches at the sound of his slippers slithering over the tiles, but she does not lift her face. He admires her practicality. The pressure to surrender, which she might have felt under different circumstances, has been

obviated, along with any urge on his part to aspire to power over her. There will be no quarrel with the future. It is finding its way briskly now to meet her. *Que sera, sera.* He stands close. Within his reach lies a plunder of textures novel to his bachelor hands. Her hair, weighted like water, her blouse and skirt, delicate as foam, the leather of her shoes, slippery and eggshell-thin, her skin, almonds, her lips, aloe—her flesh. But he refrains from action. His first step, if taken in haste, would surely be a misstep. It is of the utmost importance that he think clearly. He rests a moment. Then following his instincts he bends over the girl and removes, with exquisite care, hardly disturbing a single hair, her tortoiseshell sunglasses. The girl stiffens, gasps. He unfolds the sunglasses and holds them to the light, then refolds them, nestles them in his palm. He is overcome by their sheer weightlessness, their insubstantiality, and seems to fall forward, drunk with possession. Heat from the shackled girl's body curls around him like incense. His own cheeks begin to burn. Having closed so leisurely near to her—and yet she waits for the remaining space between them to be embroidered with his final advance—cupping in his hand her life's glamorous, toyish token, his mind fumes with sensations of infinity.

Before certain ideas, like gossamer threads, connect into the web of a plan, however, he hears familiar, persistent tapping at his front door. It is Wednesday, he remembers. Wednesday evenings his front room opens—a vestigial organ half-stirring to life—to the city's vast circulation, and admits one-pea's-worth of the interregnum's posterity. The boy—young man?—began appearing at his door more than a year ago. Jarvis has attached embryonic feelings to the mercurial face—he styles the boy, knocking softly for his supper, his friend. Their relationship pares easily to basic economics—the boy has nothing, and has succeeded in appealing to Jarvis, who lives in abundance—but it is true, too, that when the boy fails to appear for their weekly bread-breaking Jarvis retires to his bed downcast, concerned. He wishes for a moment that, on this of all nights, the city had kept the boy packed away. The girl's body tenses again. Perhaps she is preparing to scream. Three panes of clouded glass set in the front door allow the kitchen light to reach the boy's eyes. He will know that Jarvis is home. But what harm could the boy do? His visits never stray beyond

the front room, except on the occasions he petitions for use of the toilet, and not always then. Why should tonight be different? Jarvis and the boy will co-produce their usual encounter. Jarvis will make excuses for any noise which escapes from the kitchen, and the boy will nod his head, curious but unwilling to endanger the bond he enjoys with his benefactor. Then the boy will depart. Jarvis and the girl will be alone again. He delights himself with a sudden inspiration for bridling the girl's hopes, ensuring her silence. The boy calls himself Matthew. Jarvis suspects this name is false, suspects that it appears only when the public is disposed to its convenience and simplicity. Nevertheless he shouts it out—the name reverberates through the kitchen, glancing off the varnished cupboards, ringing down the sink drain—Matthew! Hold on! I'm coming!—and he tosses the sunglasses skittering across the counter and strides from the kitchen, leaving the girl to ponder the new twist in her fate involving her keeper's rendezvous with another man.

At the door Matthew is a smudge behind the clouded glass—then is pushing puckishly for entrance. Jarvis blocks the way. Remember this isn't your house? I haven't invited you in? Matthew's face screws into a scowl. He stares over his shoulder into the night, exasperated by the ritual which Jarvis performs at each of their meetings, to remind them both that they are not equals. An unexplained city tremor jostled them together, a second might at any moment shake them apart. They must respect the distance which separates them on each night of the week except Wednesday. Would you like to come in, Jarvis asks finally. Can I make you something to eat?

The smell of the boy soon wafts and swirls, like dust, throughout the room. A sweet pungency untainted by corruption or evil—the boy reeks of unwashed sweat, nothing worse. He has slung the canvas bag which Jarvis gave him into its familiar corner near the door and, with a gush, gracelessly dropped into a chair at the table. His legs splay and close like a resting butterfly's wings. Jarvis is just old enough to be the boy's father. He has seen the boy grow measurably in the past year—thriving on what Jarvis presumes to be the city's ugliest abuse, day upon day. His chest has broadened, his skin shines lustrous and healthy, his wild hair gleams with oil. It has occurred to Jarvis that with a blunt object the boy might

make quick work of his imperfect patron-angel, whose every generosity is subtracted from by stiffness, a failing, somewhat, of the heart. Jarvis remains unafraid. Violence has never once clouded the boy's eyes.

How'you? asks the boy. Hunger probes him, a Promethean torment, binding his face like grief. But Jarvis prefers to retain the initiative. The boy knows to wait for what is proffered.

I'm well, thank you. How are you? How was your week?

OK. The boy frowns at the table.

Can I make you a cheese sandwich?

Yes, please.

Would you like something to drink?

Coffee, please.

Milk and extra sugar, and a glass of water?

Yes.

Wait here—I won't be long.

In the kitchen the girl's hair is swinging. She had lifted her head, strained to catch his conversation with Matthew, then quickly resumed her pose of submissiveness. He contemplates frying an egg, tending the yolk until it wobbled under the slightest skein. He would fondle it with his knife and fork—puncture it. As the egg melted—it would be as if he had punctured the tension between himself and the girl. But he would not trust himself with an egg in his state of excitement. He prays that someday he might make the acquaintance of one of the interlopers who stood, evaluating the pillory and the girl, where he is standing now. Surely their actions were motivated by the same sense of the interregnum as his own! He lays out four slices of bread. From the refrigerator he takes cheese, milk, a tomato, butter, and instant coffee which he keeps specially for Matthew. He starts his electric frying pan. The kitchen begins to smoke and steam. Jarvis works quickly under the spell of the task. The girl, for whom suspense ceased, hours ago, to be a surprising torment, withdraws into spiritlessness. In the outside room the boy's thoughts diffuse over the scant events of the

day. An idea shambles among them, disregarded at first—but because the boy lives his life on luck he rouses himself after a few minutes and floats his voice like an insect to Jarvis's ear. Can I use your toilet? In the kitchen Jarvis sighs, his shoulders sag. He has failed to understand the toilet's rise as the most emotional aspect of his tie to the boy. The boy knows that he mustn't ask to use the toilet—that he may not use the toilet—yet still the question breasts, like a bald challenge. And despite internal protest—even outrage—Jarvis often acquiesces. On the nights when he does not cold gloom congests the front room. The boy bolts his food and slinks out the door, wordless. I suppose, Jarvis calls. As before, he loses the struggle with mysterious, unpleasant assent, a struggle which, sometimes, unaccountably, he also wins. Yes. Go ahead. A city deity leads the boy to the bathroom, hailing his victory.

Yet after Jarvis has set the table—plain pine, clothed in a sheet of heavy, vibrant fabric from Holland—he admits to an epicurean delight in the way his rooms have fleshed out. He has been visited in riddle form with the girl, and has, perhaps, seen the riddle solved with the coming of the boy. Was the boy not part of the plan, too? The girl's perfume and the boy's sweet stench mingle, fill his lungs. He sits down to his plate, weakened by the city's heady ripeness. He closes his eyes. The second hand decays over the face of the kitchen clock. In the bathroom the water runs warmer under the tap. Epiphany strikes Jarvis, perhaps prompted. The three figures distributed evenly across his household—he, the boy, the girl—they represent an instant of perfection in the interregnum. Their circumstances in this crystalline moment are equal. Each is waiting. The boy is waiting like a lost coin. Washed into the city gutters, tarnished, picked up but then dropped again—dropped by the Jarvises, picked up weekly and dropped—menaced by the greatest calamities, effacement into dross, the plunge into the dark sewers. The girl is waiting like a balloon on a stick. Blush-rose, ethereal, helpless to tug toward the heights, to drift over the green parks and the glinting suburbs, unprotected against the quick slit, powerless against slow garrotted collapse. Each has what the other wants. To be free, to be held. It is neither's luxury to act upon their wants. The luxury lies with Jarvis, who is waiting like the city itself. He will open his eyes to boundless design.

The boy sits at the table. He has washed his hands and face and dampened his hair. The roughly-treated towel in the bathroom will bear a dark stain. The boy remains unapologetic about his brazen encroachment, leaving Jarvis to surmise the depth of his feelings of peace and escape during ablution. Concerning all matters else the boy is as courteous and grateful as could be expected. They chew their sandwiches in solidarity. Jarvis wonders, aware of his self-satisfaction, how Green Tie spends his evenings. At the sound of droplets pattering against the windows he and the boy raise their heads. It's raining, says the boy. His voice brushes across a wide canvas, rendering a dim flat swathe of abstractions which elude Jarvis's grasp. Yes, he replies. Then—Do you like your sandwich? It's good, says the boy. On previous evenings their small talk has parted the drapes blocking a view of the boy's life a fraction. Whether he found work in the week, helping to mix concrete, travelling door-to-door with flyers, washing a car. Where he has slept, will sleep, what he has seen on his long foot-bound journeys across the city. The boy's father and mother are dead, he claims. He wants to work as a seaman. He senses the time for him to make something of himself spilling fast into an ocean of wasted promise. He has seen the men, just a few years older, filthy, living in orbit around various sources of liquor. And he has also been seen. Jarvis, rounding a corner once, took sight of the boy's figure at some distance. He hid, watched. The boy peered through the window of a motorcycle dealership, his hands cupped to his temples. Then he started, looked around furtively, walked off. Jarvis strolled to the window and imitated the boy. A woman's bruised gaze confronted him. She stared fiercely past her mascara and rouge, plastered to the wall of the shop. Her breasts lifted to the wind like the snouts of rodents. Her crotchless bikini revealed shaven nubs. He backed away. The boy's hologram replaced him at the window, aged through a flight of years—a toothless vagrant, leering crazily, as much at his own reflection as at the sordid picture. The boy's desperation struck him then, left its mark. The feeling manifests whenever they meet—the breath of ruin, close, on the back of the boy's neck. At the table Jarvis fights a wave of abhorrence.

They finish their sandwiches. The boy gulps his water. Thanks, eh? he says, nodding

toward the plate. He will tarry over the coffee, extracting the last dregs of its warmth. Their strangulated afterdinner conversation may now creep over previously-covered ground—but the boy seems disposed to silence. He searches the depths of his mug. Jarvis thinks of the girl, of her apple-sized heart throbbing painfully, of the catch in her throat which gags back any dislodgment of sound. He wonders how the boy would act if he led him into the kitchen. But he knows nothing of the boy, really—nothing at all. The boy is a stranger, he a stranger to the boy. The stranger drains his coffee and grins shyly. Now there is only the hush of the room—two strangers, like Frankenstein monsters, freaks of the city, regarding each other across a table. The hush of the kitchen barely intrudes. The boy murmurs, rises, stretches. He collects his bag. Jarvis also rises, opens the door. Raindrops begin to wet the parquetry. Take care of yourself, OK? I'll see you next week. OK, says the boy. Then—Thanks, eh? He casts his eyes back to the table. He shoulders his bag, ducks and vanishes like a superhero into the night, leaving Jarvis, whose head has begun to ache slightly, free to return to the episode with the girl.

Jane

I think he thinks I'm like a tune spoiled by over-whistling. I was sweet and airy for a time. When people heard me they felt innocent again. But I was too popular for my own good. I seemed never to vary and the repetitions became tiresome. I faded. I was forgotten on the whole. Now I am here, summoned inexplicably from the afterworld of tunes and melodies. I am a gangly, plaintive thing. I strain for the applause which once met me at every turn. But the emotions which I engender are awkward and wan, for no one matches my efforts. I am deemed boring or frivolous. People simply don't care to listen anymore, though it costs them little. People take happiness most seriously in the pettiest moments.

I cut the shape of a true creature, at any rate, I am sure. It has been my goal from the start to project a certain sunniness, but the clouds have closed over me with the speed of weather in these hills. Today I found the cook after breakfast—he was washing dishes—and asked if it would be much trouble to put squash on the dinner menu. I am not grossly insensitive when it comes to a church's relationship with its bank account, so I offered a few bills for the purchase of the squash. It is plentiful this time of year and I presume he visits a market once every few days or so. I gave him enough for a cartload of the stuff, he can eke it out over the next several weeks. Immediately, however, there was a problem. His arms, up to his elbows, were wallowing in the dishtub. He couldn't take the money. We jerked and stalled in the space between us. Finally I anchored the notes under a saucer. He fixed them, and then me, with a dark stare. I might say that he bristled at my presumption. Who does she think she is, telling me what to cook, loading on more work? But I sense that he was more upset than angry. Perhaps I committed a breach of protocol. I should have approached him in the general terms of mankind before strapping on blinkers and perceiving only a cook, a servant. What a difficult woman he must consider me to be. Fortunately I am also harmless, and so is my request. I will eat my squash, tomorrow most likely, the day after at the latest. At the cost of a lighter purse and a heavier reputation. I can hear it now. This

woman, the squash-eater, what a drag. How she annoys! And the conclusion that I have already made about myself will get around. There is nothing easy about this woman except that she is harmless.

*

I nearly broke down today. Father Bayley may have noticed, no one else. Towards the end of lunch, for a split-second, an inner hold relaxed. My lower lip buckled. Father Bayley may have seen this. If so he decided against pursuing a potentially dreary and embarrassing intimacy. Or, less likely, he may wish to raise the subject of my vulnerabilities in private, in soft sympathy. I was sitting straight as a mast while we ate. My smile was starched into my face. I beamed and tugged hard on the loose tooth of conversation, but it wouldn't give. Has it yet? No. I was ignored. People scooped up their food and soon chairs were scraping back and there was a mass wandering into the TV lounge. Only myself, Father Bayley, and the cook, who was hovering for our plates, remained behind. Father Bayley munched along looking from me to the peas he was chasing with his knife and fork. He grunts and makes little cries of ah! when I speak. I rambled on about graveyards. When people bury their dead, I said, they are speaking to their children. My ostensible hope was to ferret out the interest he showed in my project when we knew each other as names only. Nothing apparently so high-minded and abiding can have wriggled out of sight as quickly. Father Bayley is the type, I'm beginning to see, who is caught up with an idea only to the point when it's taken over by someone else. Once it's no longer his, it's fit only to nurse his irritability.

He chortled ah! and cutlassed about on his plate. When his mouth was full again he raised his eyes to mine and said—Nnh. It was then that the awful sequence jiggled under my breast. Sudden weakness, breathtaking alarm of imminent collapse, and instant recovery to full strength. The trigger inside me that sets me to crying was squeezed halfway. My lower lip buckled, my face beneath my skin felt like a stopped heart. I think that by this time Father Bayley had gone back to his peas. But there's a memory that he looked down too quickly.

He may have seen it, Jane the human, stripped for a moment of her scaffolding.

The old girl's lonely already, perhaps floated at the back of his mind—with a pinch of guilt. It's not true, though certainly he has hoisted sail and left me stranded. Lunch was the first I saw of him since Sunday mass. He did not stay after scraping up the last pea but begged a desk positively buckling with correspondence (his words). This is an excuse I imagine I'll hear again, with variations. And certainly on top of his neglect my status among the—I still can't think of what to call them, the inmates, the inmate women, just the women I suppose, remains low. We hardly interact. We identify one another with eye contact, then return to unshared worlds the moment I begin to speak. Thus I am isolated, I can confirm that. Isolation breaks, however—like the ice in Nordic countries. I am not a seed cast in Father Bayley's sermon, suffering iron neglect until I expire. People inevitably take account of other people. I have been abused by two brands of honesty at this mission—the priest's careless sower's hand, the women's rocky soil—but my situation is no more dire than the new girl's at school. I will figure on these women's checklists soon enough. Father Bayley will appear on the horizon again. Speech will bubble up, isolation will break. This is what happens in all societies. The seed germinates. It will happen here.

No—it was tenderness, I believe—on which loneliness is an occasional looker-in—that nearly ushered me from sensible contact with the world. Yesterday after trawling through the weeds of the old cemetery I returned graced with emotions. It had not been more than a few minutes when I began to tremble, picking among the graves. This remains a puzzlement, for the discoveries I was making are the lightest details on the green Earth. Tombstones, crosses, names, dates—so much litter, judged by general remembrance. There are no paths to the plot. I had to sniff it out. It lies over the mission's western hill, in a small depression near the property line. I went for the exercise as much as from a sense of professionalism. There was little to expect. The survey which Father Bayley gave me when I arrived mentions a Family Cemetery, northwest corner. Three, four tombstones at the most, one would have thought. As I tramped down the grass and dandelion (which kept many secrets—perhaps I can pay the cook to mow the area) an impression of extent crept up and then jumped at me. The so-called Family Cemetery is enormous. Fifteen to twenty graves,

I'd bet. Fifteen to twenty bodies deposited under the topsoil. I imagined them, gruesomely, being tickled by the roots of the weeds among which I was making my little scene. Then, absurdly, I imagined fat brown sea lions, lolling submerged in kelp. The embarrassing thought crossed my mind that I was about to be haunted. My skin tingled. I laughed at myself, aloud, which made things worse, because the sound startled me, appearing and vanishing so quickly. I scratched around, putting on a show—of bravery or rationality I cannot say. The quiet bodies, face up, underfoot. I was trembling. I caved in. I hurried back to the dormitory, almost breaking my ankle in a rodent's hole. When I reached my bed I was out of breath. I was ready to flop back, convert fear into welcome relief. I would sit up feeling fresh, in a newly brightened room. But instead I flopped back and fell asleep, as if I had been stung and my body forced rest to process the poison. I sweated like a cheese all night. The bedclothes were soaked at five o'clock when I woke up. Two hours before my usual time. I was voracious. I had slept half a day. I looked out the window to find ambient darkness. I exchanged morning pleasantries with the district. What on Earth would I do until breakfast, I wondered, because I was not at all sleepy. The slimmest evidence of light at the horizon, like glow from the thinnest moon, seemed an adequate response. Perhaps I'd picked something up from one of the women, an air-borne microbe. If so, my immune system had more than coped with it in the night. My blood cycled through me like water. Sickness can be a cause of emotions, I remembered, simultaneously remembering the cemetery. But I felt unrelated to the episode now, made neither uneasy nor mirthful by my conduct, I simply saw the shapes of events that had passed. My hunger, I saw too, was good, a feeling close to gladness. If I nourished it I would reach a state of small exhilaration. I rose and worked. I made my bed with military zeal, pulling until the sheets would bounce a ball. I ordered my tiny room from the top down, as one dusts. Then I sat to write about this place, the overdue Entry One of my anthropological record, names, observations, notes on structures, directions for research. I worked until after breakfast had begun. I wanted to stave off eating entirely. The spiritual fuel, a low warbling inside me, would fall like a cake if I ate. But I couldn't resist the day. The world beyond my room, where the sun was now shining quite brightly, and where there was a buzzing to and fro, vacuum that it was, sucked me out. I went and ate.

I knew I had dreamed in the night, wonderfully and portentously. I could remember nothing, but the sphere which had lain on my brain, in which the fantasies had whirled, left its imprint, a dent in my wakefulness. I carried the dent around all morning. It subtracted from the vividness of things. I walked on my hesitant zig-zag errands, there was small talk and the business of phone calls, but I was dissatisfied with the faces, voices, the rural elements, the tawdry chapel, the smoky hills. Nothing had been built for my true compassion, I found. Nor had I any substance as a dear thing. I caught myself not paying attention—because I was probing for a connection beyond spatial relationships. By lunchtime I was fascinated by my other-worldly preoccupation. I beamed at everyone, trying to force my way through. I attempted conversation with Father Bayley, hoping he would take an interest in the cemetery on his grounds, and thus an interest in me, and then I might solve two problems at once. My speech had no purchase, however, in his imagination, although cemeteries, when you pause to consider them, are unrivalled sites of human obsession. He merely chortled—Ah! and, chewing, said—Nnh. Looking straight at me. Arrayed at his ugliest at that moment—hunched over a messy plate, moustache hanging with food, jaws working, eyes on me like a dog's whose bark is worse than its bite. His face is pocked. Flecks of scalp are cached in his full black hair. I should have been furious, to have suffered such scandal, this purply-faced figure hurrying his meal to be rid of me. But during the flash of eye contact, it could not have been more than a sparrow's wingbeat, everything changed. The constituents of the room remained the same—myself, Father Bayley, the cook, two long tables, plastic chairs, sunlight from the windows, a tatty poster telling the Lord's Prayer. But the dent had disappeared, been corrected, like a tennis ball unsqueezed. Released emotion clapped through me. I was in a realm of angels for that instant, gifted with angel-sight, angel-love pouring from my heart. The world was made anew. The pain in the beauty of things nearly arrested my breathing. Father Bayley, in particular, was a source of pain, promoting in me the agony-tenderness that mothers feel for their sons. I saw the beauty of creation and the glory of humanity in the poor, slovenly priest. My face twitched, my lip buckled. My heart seemed to fail, my stomach wrenched. The moment passed. I automatically probed myself to detect damage, found none. Had Father Bayley noticed? I was left to speculate. The room

was again the old room and I was my old self, my self of yesterday before the cemetery, the person I am now.

*

When Father Bayley introduced me, he read out my name like a title, Jane-Thompson-P-aitch-D, from which a creative linguist has fashioned the new, pet (I hope) nickname of Peachtree. Sometimes now I am called Peaches.

*

The cook purées his squash. There is a mound of it on my plate, dark orange and heavy, tufted like a cloud. At a certain point during dinner I can ignore it no longer. I have been busying myself with the other things, a thrilling self-punishment, putting off the first bite. I eat the meat and greens and drink my milk. But I never quite finish these. The thought of the squash gets the better of me. My fork strays, hooks a strand of orange. It slides off on my tongue, a buttery sweet filament. The rest of dinner is done. I fill my mouth with squash and hold it there a moment. The juices drip down my gullet. I don't know what spices he uses—sugar, salt, cinnamon, perhaps clove, perhaps black pepper, and something from the tropics, aniseed, cardamom. I chew very slowly, swallow with deliberation. The food has always been very good here. But this squash is divine.

I am one of many in the dining room. Some of the women will skip breakfast or lunch but they all turn out for dinner. When the meal commences, after the blessing (which Father Bayley as often as not is present to give—if not, there is a headwoman, clearly the most elaborately religious and clearly aware of her importance), the room resounds with the day gone by. Everyone has saved their speech for this moment. Stories bluster about like the four winds. Chronic tribulations get their airing out. One hears in patches the news of simple lives—the deaths, the births, the ailments, the unexpected phone calls. One hears talk of distant men. The conversation crescendos, falters, swells, crescendos. I am not excluded

from it, though I seldom pose as anything but a listener. I have taken to sitting by a young woman named Ruth. She is quiet like me but she giggles violently when accused of quietness. I ask about her day, she asks about mine. Occasionally a ritual question booms down the table for my benefit—So what's new, Doctor? There is a respectful lull but I demure. Everyone cackles.

Our meal asserts itself. We settle into it. Chatter drops—words are pushed from sides of mouths. Heads bow, as during the blessing. I notice that Ruth smiles to herself, possessed of some secret happiness at this moment. The dining room tables, viewed from above—a great meditative affair of reaching and pulling. There is no shame in our eating. The food may be compared to good manual work. We work on the ample portions of creamed spinach, sauced chicken, new potatoes, cold beets and the squash. We lose sight of ourselves, somewhat. I am tugged at of course by the delectable question of the squash—Is now the moment of the first bite? Is it now?—but I am not unreceptive to other states of mind. Different scenes open, flicker to life. I fall prey, I suppose, to moments. In a humble banquet hall Our Lord's feast rolls apace, and somewhat incredibly I'm to be found there, victualing with good steam alongside the priest and his two-dozen healthy-sized inmates. In an altogether different room, quite faraway, meanwhile, an agitated young girl is drawing deep breaths, wishing composure upon herself. There is nothing that is not pure sensation to this girl. I see her perfectly. I almost forget that I am eating. She braces against the sill of the window. Her body surges with excitement. On the far side of the window the hard brown trunk of a tree, plunged in grass, is surmounted by a wild green blaze. Beyond, the world scintillates with painful intensity. What is this girl feeling? Oh, she hardly knows. She presses her hands to her breasts and pushes firmly down to her hips. As if in the grip of a mania she repeats the motion. Then her hands slide with purpose. They cup her buttocks. She is taken with the idea that they are not her own hands. She gently walks her fingers until they reach just—there. She stands up quickly on her tiptoes. This mischievous girl! I have to suppress a chuckle at the table. There is not a soul around me, even Ruth, who is not ignoring me, and it would not do to attract attention. Especially now, because the time has come—I place a heap of squash in my mouth—and the act is as secret as the girl's. I tremble

inside, like the girl, with the stuff on my tongue. My tastebuds humble me. I recover the emotional fact that I have been many women. We are all of us there—the girl and I and many others, a ten-year-old sent into transports by a new doll, a girl at fifteen, deeply resentful of her parents, a twenty-six-year-old, beset by self-pity and doubt, a thirty-year-old, a thirty-five-year-old, a forty-year-old, restless, childless, never particularly in love, and me, here at the table next to Ruth—all of us in the spice and fullness of the squash in my mouth. Were I to close my eyes, I feel, I would see patterns unfold like flowers into sumptuously-hued waves of silk. I feed myself more. I know the beautiful consolings of memory. I want to shout, raise a scandal. If you can just find a way to make contact with yourself, I want to call to the people. To give birth to yourself in a thousand acts of inner mothering. The feeling of wholeness (even if induced by your tongue and an urgent swallow) is a true redemption. But of course I don't close my eyes or shout. I sit blinking with the others. I am as docile as they—neither the fool who gets up halfway through a good meal nor the glutton who stays behind for scraps. We finish together. A sense of approval pervades the room, mixed with appreciation for the cook. The meal is like any other here, it may pass without comment. I watch the faces as closely as possible without being rude as we stretch and head for other rooms. My aim is simply to see whether anyone is watching mine. I can't help imagining things said about me. Indeed, some people behave strangely when they eat—there is Peaches over there, who obviously enjoys her squash. But then it is a fine squash. She's doing what comes natural, being good to herself. But I have not detected a single eyebrow raised in my direction. The food and the cook's skill are simply taken for granted.

*

The police were here, I'm told. It was the first thing out of Father Bayley's mouth after I entered his office. The words established our relationship at once. He spoke to me like a captain to a hand on deck.

They left this, he said. He indicated, curtly, both a piece of paper on his desk and that I should sit. An odd gesture, it left a quick, negative impression, as if he had blurted

something. A crude map had been drawn on the paper—point A in the top-right corner, point B in the middle, point C, lower-left. Lines streamed from point A as if it were the sun.

Briefly, he said, C is Suffolk, our little town, B is us, and A is the Waterman prison, up the road about an hour. Last night they had a mass escape. Those lines show how far each one made it until he was caught.

He paused. There was a question in my throat.

They didn't get them all, though, he said. Two are still on the run. The police have a theory. The escapees were members of two gangs which banded together briefly. Once outside, it appears one gang fled north, away from us, and the other south, toward us and Suffolk. The two who have not been caught are members of the second gang. They might easily have reached us by now, or indeed, might have made it to Suffolk. There is no way of telling where they are. The dogs have not picked up any new scents.

We sat in his gloomy office. He wore an expression of expectation, mixed with a business-like stolidity. My bewilderment, I'm sure, could not have been more plain.

There is another factor, he said. Perhaps the officer with whom he had spoken had impressed him, because he sounded now for all the world like a security tough. Prison escapees often seek out their women. One of the two at large is suspected of having a connection with a woman here.

Is she in any danger? I asked.

The police seem to think we are all in danger, he said. Then he leaned toward me and spoke urgently, in tones I haven't heard from him before. The power of a priest—I apprehend it with newfound respect. The police don't have the men, he said, to search a wide area and protect us day in and day out. The two they are looking for have been convicted of crimes of violence. It could mean the worst if we don't protect ourselves. I have sought advice accordingly and it's best if we make several decisions right now. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply through his nostrils, playing the expert, auguring our path through the crisis. Then an explosion of breath, eye contact, rapid speech. We were a likely target regardless of one of the women's possible relationship with the convicts. We were isolated. We were a bevy of women and only two men. Most significant, we had access to

resources, food, water, clothing, money. And there were two cars at the mission, his and my own. The first thing to do was remove these from sight. He would need my keys. The cook would park the cars in the old stable. Afterwards he, Father Bayley, would lock both sets of keys in the office safe. He held out his hand and I acquiesced immediately, my butterfingers as I searched my pocketbook the sole sign of an incoherent protest. The keys jangled in the air between my thumb and forefinger and then disappeared from sight. He hadn't stopped speaking during the exchange. The next thing to do was to make security arrangements. No one should be alone until the danger had passed. He had resolved that everyone, including himself and the cook, be confined to the dormitory, which fortunately housed the kitchen. We would sleep there and eat there and leave, if necessary, in groups, supervised from a window. He would telephone the police every hour. He would use the phrase, Unto Thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul, from Psalm 25, if there was an emergency. Before meals and at 10pm he would conduct roll call in the TV lounge. We were to lock our bedroom doors at night, go to the toilet in twos.

The land is swooning with late summer. The world turned on its meridian months ago, but the heat of the days has not diminished. It is difficult to think without concentration, our senses stammer through the air to render sight and sound. Languid minutes and torpid hours preside in the dormitory amongst the women. But the effects of the heat are not felt in Father Bayley's office. It is wintry there—cold deliberation suffers no hindrance, nor does the chill suggestion of design, creeping up your back. He proceeded to dispossess me of my room, using the logic that it is nearest the toilet to be cordoned off for the men's use. He is reclining on my bed now, the cook most likely relegated to my floor. I only just had time to snatch my journal and a few articles of clothing. I can come back for anything if necessary, he said. I find myself in Ruth and Ilse's room, a double, at their desk, my back to them. I am here for the duration. Time will tell, but I have an ominous feeling. I am afraid of the fugitives, but I am more disconcerted by the ease with which the priest has erected a house of rules to confine me—I, who might just as easily have been advised to leave, drive off in my valuable car, and come back when the danger had passed. And I, the difficult woman, sat silently! I saw neither the policeman nor his vehicle. I will have to live with the question of

the priest's honesty, with the anxiety about ulterior purposes. I have lived here less than half a month. I know nothing about the man. I have been made an inmate. Ruth, Ilse and I drew straws (I had to insist) and I get the floor tonight.

*

Father Bayley enters the room, the TV is switched off. Ten o'clock—the news hour. Now we are prevented from hearing any reports but the priest's own. But the goings-on in the hills of Suffolk do not merit national attention. We would see nothing of our predicament on the screen. My silent accusation reflects, primarily, bitterness at my captivity. Beyond that, I admit that I taste a case of nerves. Where has my spirit gone? I would stalk up to the priest right now and demand my keys—righteousness has been burning in me like enmity, I have several times been moments from confronting him—were it not that I dread, with real fear, the long walk to the stable, which is out of sight and swamped in tall grass. Anything might be hidden there, waiting to pounce.

Father Bayley tells us with a sigh that the police have failed to recapture either fugitive. He thanks us for our patience. He voices the hope that this, the second evening roll call, will be our last. He begins to read from his list. My attention marches off, childishly trekking around the room. I want nothing to do with this man and his plain relish of control. He would shy away from anything so consequential as true power, but petty control satisfies him more, I believe, than sexual release. 'I glance at his ill-lit figure. He is squinting to see the names. My jaundiced imagination paints the scene of his most recent, secretive venal event, and the degree of his mortification afterwards.

At the back of the room where I sit, two normally voluble women slouch in their chairs, sullenly preoccupied. Father Bayley drones on, pausing to examine faces as the women answer to names. The two with me are insufferably bored. They don't hide it. Watching them I am seized, like a child, by wants which oppose one another. I want to leave this room, go running down the road, crash into the tall grass, find my car and escape. I want to stand and denounce the priest. I want, with a child's anguished envy, to be included

in the silent club of the mission women, who are penned and prodded but who nevertheless maintain an impregnable reserve. I want to be as the two sitting near me. I might also slouch down and set my face remorselessly distant. A sign to Father Bayley of one thing and to the women of another. Solidarity! But how unbearably comic. A person from the priest's universe mimicking like an anthropologist. I must remain plain Jane, funny Peaches, the lonely spinster come to spin her tale about this repository for women. I wait swamped with dejection and loneliness for the evening to end.

A fan has been placed in the window at my elbow. I have not noticed it before. Someone threw up the sash, balanced the fan on the sill, then closed the window firmly down on the fan, which fills the open space perfectly. My sarcasm, my final preservation, wearily shows its teeth. The priest permits a ground-level window to gape open, but—. The rejoinders are infinite. I mean merely to say that the priest is a hypocrite. Bone-white, powder-blue and olive-green paint cakes the fan. This detail niggles me. Then I recall that the ugly coat which predominates in most mission rooms—casting its drab pall over our enforced gathering—is the same green as spackled and drizzled in the fan. I slide my eyes over the walls and ceiling. Here and there shallow craters, in shapes like those on a contour map, reveal powder-blue and bone-white coats underneath the green. The fan is a fossil. The window was painted frozen shut over it three times. I feel nauseous, as if I've been publicly shamed.

The fan's cord was clipped indeterminable years ago, its stub a green hump under the sill's paint. The propeller spins listlessly in one direction when air enters the room, and in the opposite direction when air passes back into the district. My name floats casually over the heads of the seated women. Jane. A test of my spirit. I am more easily identified, more obviously present, than anyone. He needn't call out. I do not respond. Jane, Father Bayley repeats, looking directly at me. I say nothing. Jane is here, he mutters, marking his ledger. And I am here, he continues, and cook is here. The cook, who is standing like a guard by the door, nods and utters words that at first I think I haven't heard correctly.

Sí, says the cook. Estoy aqui.

Everyone is present, then, beams the priest, newly animated, forgetting my disrespect.

Let us pray and then you can go to bed. He bows his head. The women do likewise.

Has my helplessness increased? I fear what would happen to me out here, should I become disabled by hallucinations. I stare at the fan during the prayer, thinking with alarm, who are these men, the priest, the cook? The Spanish words buzz in my head like a fever. I watch the propeller spin one way, then the other. For a moment I am susceptible to the impression that the house is breathing.

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Like a nest of rodents we start, as if the lookout bird has cried warning of a snake. The future narrows into a tenuous blind tunnel. Unfamiliar, uncertain footfalls sound outside the dining room. We watch the entry, our horror quickening. Just when Father Bayley begins to rise the awaited shape peeps around the doorway, then fills its frame.

Hell, Father, I thought you had deserted this place, exclaims a policeman. We are momentarily too weak to exhibit reaction. He booms out, Show's over everybody, we caught our prisoners this morning about an hour before dawn. In different places, he adds, pleased. He is travelling to the farms in this area to deliver the word of safety.

But I thought you people had packed up. He grins at us, as one expects a policeman to grin, as if he were outdoors. No cars, no sign of life, and your front door is wide open.

That's probably our cook, says Father Bayley, looking darkly about. But what good news, he continues, recomposed. Where did you catch them?

Relief is being passed around the table with jollity like food. We hear from the policeman that one man was splashing up Eye River, the other following railroad tracks, both several hours' walk from the mission.

We have the best damned dogs, says the policeman. We couldn't sniff the one prisoner out of the river, so they tracked him down with their ears. He stands there marvelling. Father Bayley invites him to stay for breakfast, but he has much ground to cover this morning. He expresses his gladness that we are all safe. He wishes us a good day.

Bedlam, joyous bedlam, erupts. Certain people—especially policeman—draw the air

after them when they leave a room. Not so our policeman, who is fairly tumbled out by the rising ruckus. I alone of the group am not stretching, embracing, kissing, clasping hands across the table, ululating a hosanna. In two days of captivity, I have become envenomed, quick to recriminate, given any chance. I boil at the priest's enthusiasm. He waves down the table to those he cannot reach, calling, Sarah, Rachel, Orpah, We made it, We're free again. I fix him balefully. I prepare to open my mouth. But I haven't learned my lesson. Priests are the mortal voices of God. We stand wholly fathomed before them. He has his answer ready, foreknowledge of my question or not. Before I can speak he reads my intent from the corner of his eye and pauses from the celebration to snap, almost woundedly, I'll return your keys to you right after breakfast, Jane. I am silenced. The party flourishes, superintended by the priest.

Later in the morning my keys are plunked down (I am sitting in the TV lounge, thinking faraway thoughts) and I set off to my car. To my car first, I have resolved, then to my room. I must face a prime anxiety—that the car has broken down, that the engine will mystifiably fail to turn over. The trip will give the men ample time to move out of my room. As I pass the dormitory's threshold the air offers a roasted pungency to my nose. The green in these hills seems blessed by the heat. My shoes crunch over the driveway's gravel, menacing nearby insects. I hear them laboriously reachieve their pitch once I'm safely past. I turn on to the disused track which used to service the stable. The grass bows halfway to the earth in twin swaths, created by the cars when the cook turned them off the road. The stable lies beyond a long hump of meadow. Sweat springs to my brow on the slight uphill—my body under pressure. I press the pace. It is not merely that my arms and legs take pleasure in once more swinging under the sun, but I sense by instinct that, deep within, an electro-generative reserve is filling to capacity and will overflow. It happens. By the time I reach the stable I'm happy. I laugh aloud at the poor structure—a compassionate laugh, like that of a woman who has seen a child fall on its rump. This stable is no stable. It is a fine attempt at a stable, just like the child's was a fine attempt at standing. The low roof, supported by six posts, sags but will take the seasons' punishment for several more years. The back wall, however, has slumped away at one corner, so that I can see right through.

The front gates stand fixedly open. Grass has invaded and grown to a good height. Even when new this stable was rough—made for goats, perhaps, not horses.

The cook parked the cars front-first. Their tail ends jut out into the sunshine. I am reminded of an outing to the circus when I was a girl. A skit was run continuously in a side tent. The Bashful Elephants. Two old elephants, brought for introduction to the audience, would break away and try to hide in a corner. Their huge backsides loomed uproariously. Now the cars are hiding, side-by-side, like the elephants. The fugitives would have snorted at the sight. I nearly wish Father Bayley had accompanied me, to by nettled by the oafish outcome of his plan.

My car is parked tightly against a post, I must enter on the passenger side. I rend a web in doing so, and look briefly for the spider, but it has scuttled off. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, I mutter. Laughter sprouts up from my stomach. I cannot smother it. I have never uttered that phrase in my life and I am beside myself with the absurdity of it. The image of the displaced spider, grimly sheltering, spurs me to laugh the harder. I sob against the wheel. I throw my head back and gasp. I see my wrinkled, happy face in the mirror. I am an old woman retrieving her car from a shack, where it was chauffeured at the will of a possibly guileful priest. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. I have been visited by the muse of this place. She is a muse of ironies. I press the heels of my palms to my eyes, blot tears of laughter. Through the glass I face the dank portion of the stable wall which remains erect. My rearview mirror is ablaze with the meadow behind me. I could stay here for some time, in this haven between the wall and the meadow. Until the mirror turns dark with night. When I have laughed alone I feel most commensurate with myself. But I deserve reproval for foolhardy optimism. The sun's rays would slither back through the weeds. Dejection would catch me, cage me, a bar of doubt for every minute of light lost. I see the chief peril of immobility out here. It tempts the way death tempts. It wears the guise of rest. I pat my car's dashboard and pray. Just start, that's all I ask. Moments later, how pleasing to note the sureness of my motherly touch. I steadily back down the grass to the gravel. I strain into the rearview mirror, judging, correcting. My car finally jounces through the slight roadside ditch and on to the driveway. I take a few breaths, let the engine

idle. The blue of the sky has never seemed more promising than when I sit in my sunbathed car on this empty road. But the private restful feeling is snuffed by a new alertness. I am being watched—I am suddenly certain of it. I think of the men first. The priest—the cook. Or perhaps the cop. I twist in my seat, struggling to bring the watcher in sight. The low hills are spotless, however, like an unfrequented quadrant of ocean. Nothing stirs. I hear only my car and the insects. It is true that confinement has put me on edge. I need to reacquaint myself with freedom, as its equal. I sigh, I slouch against the car seat. From a bird's height a vision of the countryside appears to me. The oddly-shaped buildings of the mission shelter together against the multitude of hills. The outcast stable sinks lower to the earth, the old cemetery yields further to ants and weeds. On the long gravel driveway which connects the mission with the paved road a blue car, polished by the sun, waits and puffs exhaust. I know a small amount of Spanish. ¿Donde esta Jane? I am here in my car. I sit. It dawns on me that I have no desire to return to the dormitory. What would it cost me to put the car into first (for I tumbled out of the grass facing away from the mission) and roll to the neglected asphalt, turn left and disappear? I feel a pang at the loss of some clothing to which I am attached. But already this pang has lifted like a kite and hangs above, for me to note with fond nostalgia when I recall the hour of my escape. These indifferent fields hide no pair of human eyes, I know it with firmness now. I have been watching myself all this while. I watch to see what I will do. What will I do? I am nervous, excited. Several minutes pass before the matter is decided. I grip the wheel. I giddily imagine the speeds which my car is capable of attaining. I think of telephone poles flashing past, of fences galloping alongside to keep up. I am waiting for the divine hand to choose me. I am ready to return to grace, like a fox which has bested the hunt. I eye the road for possibilities. I long for the breachable moment to present itself. But defeat takes hold of me instead, like a decisive clap on the shoulder. I'm going nowhere, I know it. I curse and scream, God Damn It! The car settles into reverse. I am nearly weeping as I escort myself back to the dormitory.

*

I confront the priest before breakfast. It is the second morning since the policeman appeared with his tidings of freedom. (But that word misses its mark. We were simply returned to our previous shadowy state upon receiving the policeman's news. What's more, if life here is lived in something other than freedom, then the fugitives represented something other than death. But I have not the energy to bore beyond this insight.) I spent the intervening day coming to my decision, which seems wonderfully patent now. I seek the priest mindful of a short, rehearsed speech. But when he admits me to his office diffidence congeals like phlegm in my throat. He sees the papers I am carrying. My opening gambit ravels. After a mutual pause, he queries, You are leaving us, Dr. Thompson?

Yes, I reply. I place the papers on his desk. I haven't sorted through these, I report lamely.

It's all right, he says, what a shame things didn't work out. I listen tensely to his tone. He is neither mocking me nor thrusting with sarcasm. Sincere regret could not possibly have moved him either. I stand beetling over the little golem of a man. Perhaps he is telling himself a sophisticated joke. The light in his black eyes glitters back in the vertex of a cone. Perhaps he has already moved on to the future, and is reminiscing about this moment, our last fruitless contact before I vanish down the pike of time. Perhaps he is already breathing air in which I have not breathed. From the thought of my near departure a fresh impulse of impetuousness pinches me. I speak again, to taint the priest's memory with the sound of my voice.

This project was flawed from the start, I say, because it is the last thing your mission needs. I cannot image the role a new armful of papers would play here. If I came to you after weeks of work and presented a report, it would suffer the same fate as this armful. They would be heaped together like so much bureaucratic waste and relegated to a purgatory of papers somewhere. In effect this represents the best report I could have made. I place the thick, greasy folder on his desk. A woman came to the mission, I continue, pleased to have discovered the language with which to dismiss myself. She received deeds, tax statements, clippings, wills and photographs. Now she has given them back. The history of the mission continues perfectly. Whatever I might have come up with would have been less than that.

The priest nods, then speaks slowly. Your convictions—are severely afflicted, he says. Nevertheless, I'm sorry you've not been happy here. Please feel free to stay on for a few days if you need to make arrangements. It's a shame things didn't work out.

Thank you, I say.

Goodbye.

I leave his office. I go to sit on the dormitory's front steps. The sun has shattered an early-morning cloud and I close my eyes for the light that is pouring through. In a moment such as this I am prepared to believe that the day has been a successful one, though I haven't even filled my stomach yet. The priest's rebuke tastes like victory in my mouth. It was his last recourse, employed after the waters had already separated us. A parting shot. From my particular shore I see perfectly where I stand. The priest and his mission have lost their moorings and are drifting away.

*

The eve of my departure. It is seven-thirty. Everything is packed (my small case stands expectantly at the head of the stairs, placed there by an inmate-turned-maid), the tract which I stammered out to the priest has cleared the air (I am no longer an enigmatic figure on this strange campus), the cook's final dinner is supped (I ate almost nothing but the squash) and the time has come for a last walk. The hills here are beautiful toward dusk. I will miss them. I have chosen a path which takes me into their embrace, skirting the bog of graves, arriving at a place where, I presume, a fencepost makes a corner. From there a trespasser need hike only a short distance further (or so the survey has told me) to reach the top of a modestly-high hill. I have seen this hill's sunny crest from odd angles on my walks. I would like to take in the view from its far side. The trek there ought to put much time to bed.

My stay at the mission, I begin to feel, will have proved good for me in the long run. I have been given a glimpse of a different life, living here. Perhaps it is the sort of life which I shall grow into in the coming years. Long periods of tranquillity will visit me. I will grope

in the sediments of my past, gather them, shape them, breathe my spirit into them. I will live the memoirist's life. Hers are the pangs which have caught me off guard in these weeks. The atmosphere in which she steadily works has visited me at times like the gentle shadow of a cloud. She is sustained by a peculiar kind of feeling—the resigned, hopeful love of a mother whose child has left home. She enumerates mistakes and sorrows, successes and joys. She judges herself. These lonely days of mine—this gentle gradient which I am trudging up for my final, superfluous act—are sifting down to join the bottom sediments. They will settle in their own pattern. The further precipitation of time will cover them. But I am already riding in the memoirist's frozen chariot, of no carriage except to their remembrance. I remember these days. I remember the hard ground of this slope and these cooling swirls of air. The mission's peculiar fragrance wreathes my head. I yield to sensations, as if I have been sipping wine. It becomes clear to me that I have been wrong about myself. On the question of love there is so much to take into account. I remember indisputable facts. I have lain prone with a certain flash in my eyes and I have closed them at the behest of strange hands. My body has replied dumbly to tender, filthy whispers. I have covered a man with myself, after a day of hard work, still in my professional clothes, speaking absurdly, giggling, crying, sharing worldly exhaustion. I have confessed and been forgiven. I have confessed and been spurned. My cheeks flush with the hearty feelings of shame and glory. I swish through the grass toward my mountaintop. The fence line, the corner post, is in sight. When you come to know, at last, that you have known love, an ordeal of doubt is over. Love is the least identifiable thing. I grasp it in my hands like a muscular fish. It is impossible that I have not known love. Love is the least permanent thing. It leaves, therefore, the most infinite impression. I will never feel the way I have felt in moments of love again. This assurance nearly secures my happiness.

I huff and puff up to the fence. I hesitate a moment, unsure of whether to surmount it, and risk a topple, or to part the first and second wires and step through, risking scratches and entanglement. I opt to step through. I hold the wires firmly between their barbs and pull them wide. Fences such as this blocked the way to a fairytale when I was a child. I find that my old expertise in foiling them never deserted me. I stand aright in territory which is not

the mission's and brush myself off. I have the rest of my life to count the moments when I have known love. It may not be enough time. This is plainly seen in the kernel of a single moment of love, hard and unbreakable and precious, but so difficult to recover once lost. With much effort I will go to my grave wealthy with them. But some inevitably will be buried with my body like rings and bracelets—unable to follow where I go. As I ascend the hill I weep softly for the moments of love which will not be with me during the long sleep, will not be cherished tightly in my breast of dust and ashes.

I reach the top and look back. Nothing is visible of the dormitory. The sun has just set. I make out the priest's residence through watery eyes. A single window is illuminated. He is at work at his desk. I have heard before that a priest should never be idle, because of all the Devil's mischief. I have discovered an allegiance with idleness, myself, in this moment. The heart moves the blood at a fine, even tempo. Breath comes and goes like the traffic of birds. The day laps at the shoreline of other days. I turn from the priest. It is exhausting to contemplate the activity in his mind. I face the hill's best prospect, in the west. The scene is wondrous. The land stretches to the place where the sun has retired. Hills seem to float, buoyed by translucence. I confirm a truth in their shades—that love has proliferated stealthily into all my days, that each distinct blue and green and red is bruised with a moment of it. I watch the light flicker and change, deepen and brighten. I have arrived at the perfect time. I am remembering it now even as it passes. In that sense I will be abroad on this hill forever, observing the animation of my love.

As it is, darkness begins to sap the strength of the lavish display. I must descend before my path is obscured. I take the first steps reluctantly. I wish I could strike out west instead. How uncomplicated to lose oneself in the leagues of hills. Who knows what adventures might befall me. I give in for a moment to fantasy, then laugh myself free of it. I swing down the hill, an archetypal figure. I am the maiden of the homestead who has shirked her chores. My independence is a scandal. In my bosom lies a treasure which all parties, no matter their antagonism to my interests, eye with jealous avidity—hope. I swing down the hill full of hope. The fence presents no obstacle. I duck under it with hardly a break in stride. Tomorrow I leave the mission, I tell myself. This is my last night at the mission.

Night indeed has closed over the district. In several minutes the very darkest blues will disappear from the sky, and the stars will burn coldly. My hope never wavers. As the ground levels the dormitory comes in view. I wish it no evil. It has no will of its own. I reach it in no time and tromp up the front steps aiming for my room's quiet and the chance to sleep curled up with the wonderful night.

Peaches. A man's voice stops me. I peer into the darkness to my right. It is the cook, sitting on boards, slouched against the house.

You look in fine fig, he says.

Good evening, I say, taken aback for the second time by this man's language. He is casually holding a bottle. A sheath of plastic cups lies nearby.

So you are saying goodbye, he murmurs. I detect the fumes in his voice. Perhaps under different circumstances I would chide him. But on this night I feel anything but ungenerous.

Yes, I reply, tomorrow morning.

Have you been to see the sunset?

Yes. It was extraordinary.

Do you know, Peaches, he says, leaning toward me, his eyes glinting, that I was born here?

Here? In Suffolk?

No. Here, in this house. He raps the siding. Before it was converted.

A silence falls between us. He watches me. I don't speak for so long that he says, finally, It's true.

Did you grow up here?

Me? No. He chuckles, staring out into the inky dark. I grew up elsewhere. I was a ship's cook, he explains.

Things which haven't been said remain between us. They will remain unsaid because I would need a day's preparation to say them. I have a feeling that he could say them for me. But it is not his job. This enterprise of mine, of the mission's, is at its end. I suddenly feel great sorrow, like a rescued sailor for his drowned crew. There is anger, too.

Does Father Bayley know this? I ask with exasperation.

Father Bayley does not want to know about anything, the cook tells me. Except a wife, he adds.

Again silence glides in from the dark, washing at my feet. I mentally erase the faults which I have accused myself of. I have the cook to thank for this.

What is your name, I ask.

He pronounces the syllables as if he is used to people ruining them.

I will miss your cooking. It is excellent.

Thank you.

Good night.

Good luck.

The inertia which impelled me down the hill springs back to life in my breast. I push through the front door and skip up the stairs. I am happy to be leaving. I should get plenty of rest for the trip tomorrow but I wonder, being so excited, like a child waiting for her birthday, how well I will sleep.

*

Now, perhaps, at this very moment, I too am in my garden, turning the soil with a trowel. I was years in getting serious about the little plot. I have roses, of course, of many kinds, and birds of paradise, and beautiful white graceful freesias. I monkey around in the underbrush with pansies and marigolds each summer. My garden lacks only a tree. I would like to see a great blossomy apple or guava. All routes to fortune have been closed to me, however, and the cheap saplings available at the nurseries will never bear fruit in time for me to eat it. I must be content. I am. I live in my garden, more or less. Even come the cold rains of winter—I sit in my chair, with a blanket and tea, and study my little green patch. My visitors are by now quite bored with it. But this is the very picture which I reserved for myself, ages ago, for when I was to be truly, truly old. I am truly, truly old. I will die at home. Perhaps in my garden. I do not shudder, though, at the thought of the shrunken,

sweet-smelling creature, on her side under a fern, like those who find me will shudder. Death, if one thinks carefully enough about it, is best understood as the sun. It will be a radiance.

Notes toward a portrait of the district

Now to pluck out these notes—

—If the old byword of the district still circulates—and is not merely a quaintism bearing a plastic shield in the town square, to the satisfaction of gawkers and sneerers alike—then the debt is owed the ancient folk society which turned the phrase, year after year as it turned the soil. The words entered the land's cycle of life, yielding a splendidly supple harvest. They may be put to any use: included in the most uproarious joke, uttered at times of greatest solemnity. *In Suffolk number all riches.* The sentiment issues from the distant past—this much is accepted. Nevertheless, speculations about its first breathless utterance abound. Among the lettered sorcerers who conjure meaning into shards of antiquity it is vogue to credit an almost imaginary source—a people who lived deep in BC, in a bountiful, far-off land, who carried the words with them during periods of migration. But popular doctrine, at least as credible, breathes more healthily. The locals invoke their proverb with the satisfaction of those who have rendered unto Caesar. Their faithfulness guards the immortality of a figure no less great—

—place the archaeologist's summary, then finish him off with—

—From potsherds we know that this distinct, central culture cleaved a thousand years ago. One complement of pioneers crossed the cordillera and forged through the foothills down into the hills. The people settled, their society (evidenced by later, more cunning potsherds) in the ascendant. According to tree rings and lake cores they were smiled upon from the heavens—the first half of the second millennium AD saw plentiful rains, mild seasons. The people herded and farmed with varying degrees of expertise. They grew, demarcating a wide territory.

Their remarkable queen is to be found—her rightful place—in nearly every snippet connected to this spate of prosperity, from notes inked on parchment by the early men of God

to the songs and celebrations videotaped nowadays by the bright young things from the university. Where she is not regally present as the terrible, fathomless progenitor of action, she is the indignant bider-of-time, voracious for tribute, who swats aside unrelated tales, usurping them with the primacy of her own. The town saying cannot, strictly speaking, be credited to her—the disyllable *suffolk* was never pronounced in her time—but the phrase is chorused at her every appearance in the songs, and it is difficult to imagine a more propitious conjunction of personality and circumstance for the coining of its essence.

The queen's power, which derived from her first husband the king and a certain talent for prophecy, waxed until, the king unexpectedly dying without heir, she forced his inexperienced successor to betroth her as chief wife. Then, presumably, she raped him. (Or, at the very least, after their first tussle she left his bedchamber stinking of her strength; he slept that night with her smell robust in his nostrils.) For a month she would not leave his side, a relentless harridan by day, a relentless succubus by night. Even she could not avoid the customary hiatus of women, however, and she retreated from the king and his court to bleed in silent fury. She had not conceived. The king had failed to plant his seed of life within her. He was still reeling from her nuptial onslaught when she returned from seclusion. She cruelly exposed his impotence during the first council, detailing, in tones which had everyone roaring (an entire poem extant on this speech) each of the 30-or-so acts of coitus, aping his virginal naiveté, probing between his imaginary legs for a penis. She called him a woman, a worse-than-woman, a eunuch. She demanded to know whether the council would be ruled by a sexless effete boy. She herself was her people's vitality incarnate at that moment—proud, painted & feathered, theatrical, indignant, mighty. Her command broke upon them like thunder: Find me another husband!

The weakling king never had a chance. He was deposed by the whipped-up council. His successor (sounding possibly the most tragic note in the roulade of the queen's reign) fared little better. Five "moons" after his induction the young nobleman—a dashing specimen; the nation's pearl; smooth and perfect as a god; celebrated wrestler; precocious hunter; cocksure and eager to rule—was out, humiliated, on his duff. (By all accounts this man a thoroughbred—the queen must have delectated over him. Infinite delights possible,

especially the *schadenfreude* thrill of the female of the species deciding her mate's fate in the throes of passion.) The society's system of rule was turned on its head. It had no mechanism for checking a rampant queen, who might remain queen as long as she was wife to the king. She chewed up & spat out seven more. Consternation seethed in the court, insecurity tormented the peasants. Many prayed for & several plotted the queen's quick death. But the holy men were with her, affirming that a king who could not impregnate his wife could not be divine and therefore could not be king. The future promised splintering, realignment, years of war.

Then—a miracle. King number eleven, imported from over the mountains in last-ditch desperation, does his manly duty by his wife. He produces the royal member without shame or show; his stout blood descends, enters and mixes in it and it grows; and, in the phrase of the Bible, he goes into his wife. After a good sweat is worked up the destiny-child is conceived. For the first time the queen's celestial uterus makes new music. She misses her "moon." A polyp inside her adopts her heartbeat. The mystics of the kingdom, so recently under strain, indulge in weary vindicatory conferences. Their queen balloons. The bristling army of days which stands between her and immortality quails.

A second army of days, meanwhile, is falling before the approach of another time of celebration, the feasts of the harvests. The medicine men, the witch doctors, have in their care all at once the skies & the fields & the stock & a tottering queen big as the world itself—a plague of omens to intercept and rituals to prescribe. The moon rises full and the dark dome glistens with stars on the first night of the feasts, as expected & prayed for. The queen has retired after the opening dance, her womb churning. There is no public word yet, but the inner circle's mandarin smiles, and the disappearance from the crowds of select women—midwives—and from the performers of select men—the high hippocrati—has everyone braced for joy. They believe in the virility of their king, the only man to have pierced, with his hot and accurate spear, the icy grandeur of his wife.

In her chamber the queen calls for a stick. It is placed between her teeth and held there; she grinds her molars against it. She is alternately made to kneel and squat. She bellows like a slaughter animal when the contractions come: a difficult birth. Half a dozen

midwives take turns holding her by the armpits and spreading her thighs. They chatter and laugh, enjoying themselves. By her side several unctuous medicine men incant and contort themselves, competing for proximity to the firstborn. The murmurs and salutations of well-wishers outside flap unheeded around the room. The distant ecstasy of the feasts stirs the dust. A maelstrom of activity, waves of pain—the queen's consciousness threatens to drown. She fights the darkness until the universe is stripped bare of time. Her chamber suddenly crowds with ancestors. Everyone looks on. A club foot drops from her womb. Recovering from the shock, a brave midwife steps forward and yanks it. The queen shrieks. The audience shrinks from her. The baby is born: a boy, midnight-blue, marked by the club foot, dead. The queen glimpses it before it is bundled and whisked off. She initiates no cry of lament for the lost child, she merely shakes her head. With calm understanding of her fate, she mutters a eulogy for her realm, now lost to her. *In Suffolk number all riches.* The moment carries such beautiful resignation and destructive irony that it is never forgotten.

The queen died badly. The power of her perverse magic, which had held the nation in thrall for so long, was such that the most powerful measures were required to expel it. She was trussed up, taken to a lonely spot, impaled, & left to die. According to the stories, the great drought—which lasted 73 years by tree-ring calibration—was foretold in the queen's life and death. Generations down the line the rivers shrank to trickles; the soil turned to gritty wax. Under a drum-tight sky, one looked out across the overabundant, parched hills (with the certain type of eyesight prevailing a half-millennium ago) and, moved to bitter grief, released the words up again to the stony gods: *In Suffolk number all riches—*

—A break. The two *landsleit* who own the B&B invited the journalist to share their supper. Rare steak, re-heated, and nutrition-free salad. A poor feast, but the expense account grows ampler. They told the journalist their story, which was what they wanted. For that it will be left to eddy along the banks. Lechers after fame provoke a certain temperament of the journalist's. A hangman's.

The journalist wonders whether he is past the age of making discoveries about his subject. What he has written will do, likely. He knew it from the start. That is why he wrote

it. And yet. Great sighs and groans. The ivory nut curio, which he acquired at the roadside, seems to encourage his waking estrangement from his profession. It is either a skinny turtle or a pregnant lizard. The journalist was charmed by its crooked grin. He would like to know its secret. (The journalist is good at his job, travels with a packed suitcase of facts. The Lizard: southernmost point of Great Britain.) The journalist has come to Suffolk—. Has *returned* to Suffolk, and is appreciative of the change. In 20 years zero *changes*, plural. The shops, the dainty houses, that Cathedral, its worshippers, daubs of oil fixed on a serene canvas ages ago. But a single great change, quiet as gravity, bending the light in Suffolk, demands his alertness. Because—the change might be in himself. Or not. His tongue slides along the roof of his mouth, restless, unhappy about the gelatinous roselle in tomorrow morning's fruit spread. Strawberry spread on toast. He will eat it because on the road the journalist eats everything. His biggest flaw is also his best asset. He consents to impressions. He does not make one, as a rule—his character is tepid as forgotten tea. He is a watcher, not a doer. His permeability keeps him awake. The sticky, offending roselle, the Jewish bachelors, eyes alight with undying hunger for commemoration, & today, when he was out driving and strolling, bending for a flower & tuning his ears to the sound of machines in a distant quarry, Suffolk—the sheltering landscape brushed against him like a stem full of pollen, and on the very first day he knows, or thinks he knows, that a chrysalis has been crushed under a leaf somewhere, and with it all the land's mystery gone extinguished. It is painful to write down. In Suffolk all riches but mystery—

—The district's chief mystery shares a narrow space in the sleepy minds of the townsmen and women with their cherished motto—that place in consciousness where the lore of the natives slumbers and lolls all day like a big cat behind glass. It is granted that the people of Suffolk "live in a land of numberless riches"—similarly, it is dearly-held that the people of Suffolk "live numberless in the land." One system of counting has not proved superior to the next—

—place the last several census figures—& the mayor's glowing *spiel* about their being the country's most unreliable—then pick up—

—After culture had taken firm root in the district, Suffolk's black valley soil and rich sloping pasturage generated widening admiration. Stories spread like the seed of wildflowers, sprouting up with dewy authenticity leagues distant from last year's meadows. The human menagerie recumbent in far-flung lands—the clans and their totems—stirred to the fragrance; crept from the forests; encroached upon the district; and, though not seamlessly, settled into allegiance with the original hill-dwellers. Mysterious new rituals augmented the established feasts—as did immigrant shibboleths worm into democratic use—until the New itself became a ritual. This is properly regarded as a defensive act. The ruling confederacy of royals and divines, wise to the threat in the momentum of a juggernaut of newcomers, sponsored a prestige event, a celebration of exotica, and offered a token prize, a small gold shield, to the chief whose subjects could display that which was most strange, most contrary to local sense, most repugnant to local sensibilities, in their repertoire of foreign worship. The subsequent trample of outisders for this prize (which promised social *entrée*; these men knew what they were about; the politics of all immigrants are the politics of *entrée*) shook the upstart traditions from the sky. A thousand tribes' worth of memory and rite flowed underground, cooling for a year, to roar like a cataract at the appointed hour, and inevitably to dry up again, some bossling having carried off the tawdry shield.

The Festival of the New evolved smartly (a model of cultural fitness under these conditions) into grand tradition—one of the social congresses by which time was understood. The land buzzed as the year swung around; expectations grew globose; nothing less than the extravagant raking of taboo would suffice to win a judge's nod. (Flirtation with incest was not unknown—nor human sacrifice.) History here perpetrated a sophistication: the *size* of the kingdom became conceptually dependent upon the *outlandishness* of the feast. The king's tribute gatherers sat soberly together while the New unfolded itself in chant and dance; then they retired, adjudged, and decreed the year's taxes. Present-day reckoning of population, by head-count, was infinitely remote from conception. Numberless were the people who thronged in the hills—this was happily evident to anyone with eyes. The question of import was: *how* splendidly numberless? Metaphor rendered the census. The proportions of the nation were finally to be understood by the vacuum which blew hollowly